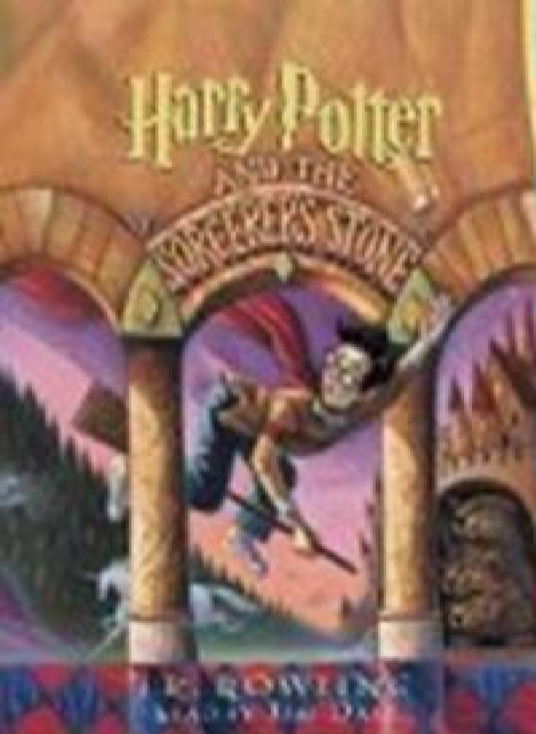
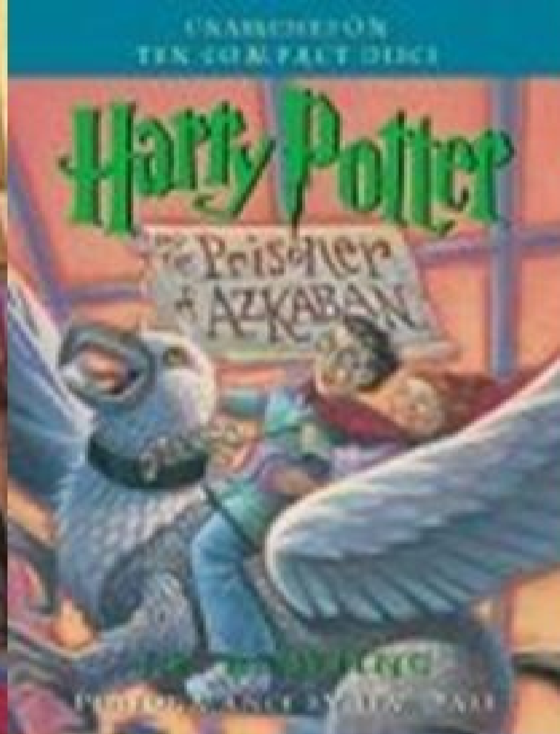
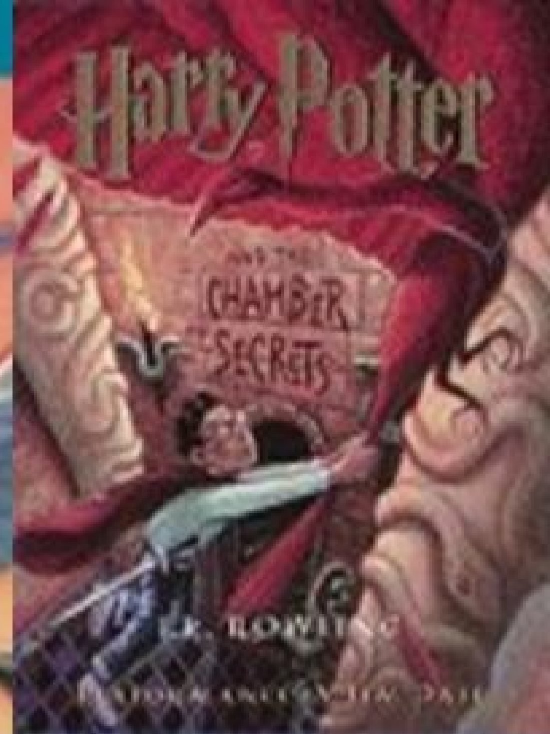
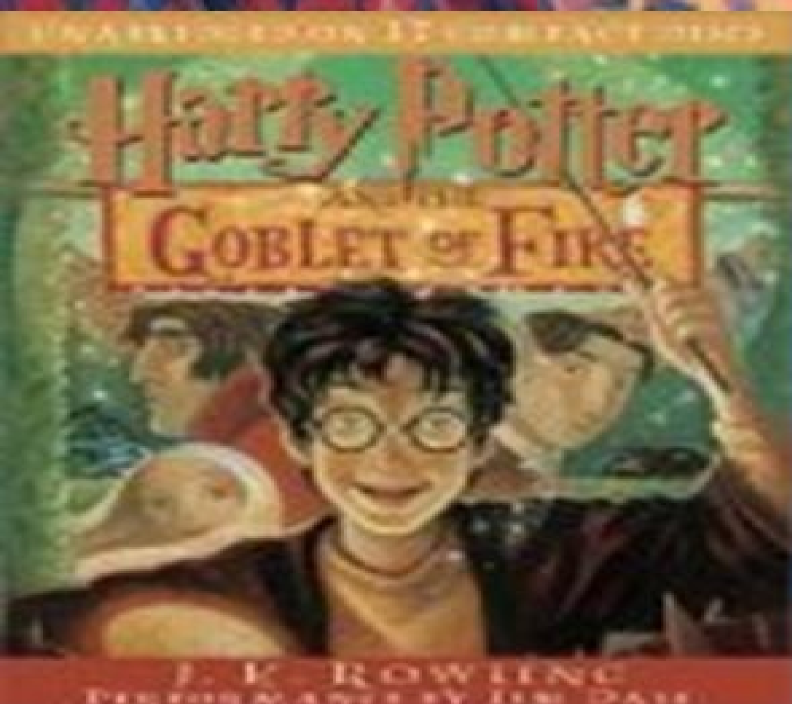
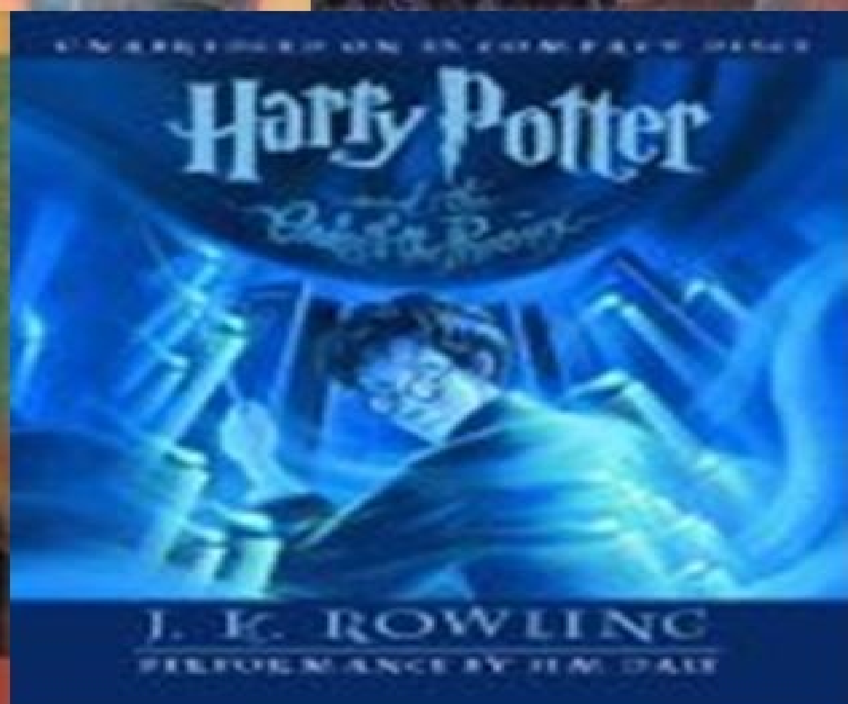
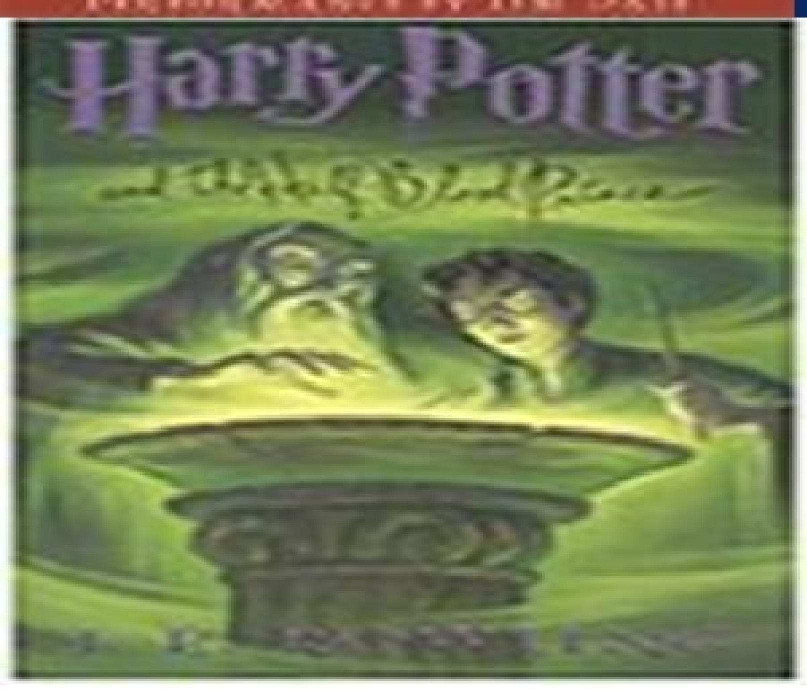

Harry Potter
J. K. ROWLING

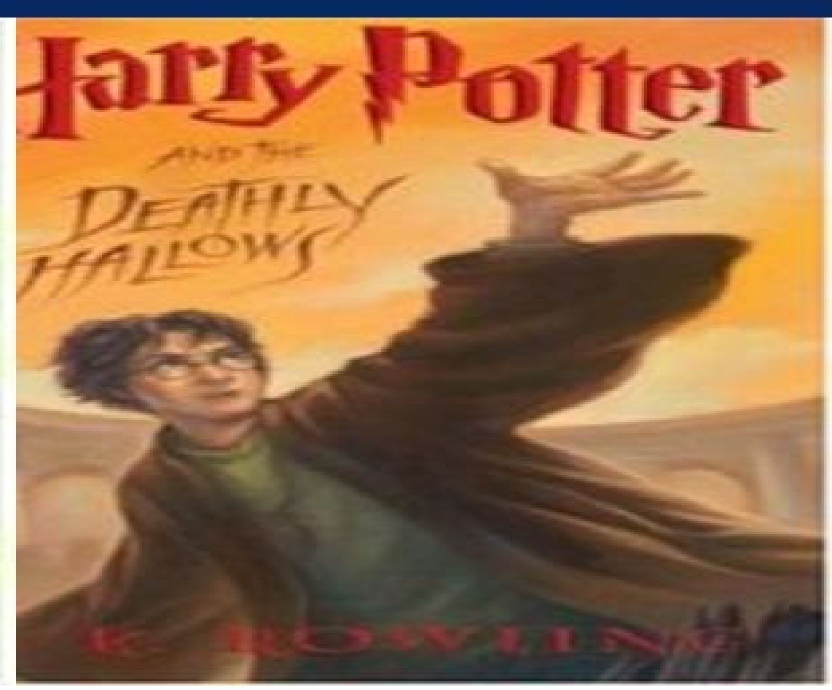

Harry Potter
the Prisoner of Azkaban


Harry Potter
CHAMBER
SECRETS
J. K. ROWLING


Harry Potter
GOBLET OF FIRE
J. K. ROWLING


Harry Potter
J. K. ROWLING
PERFORMANCE BY JIM DALE


Harry Potter


Harry Potter
AND THE
DEATHLY
HALLOWS

VISIT…

LANZAROTE Caliente.com

Main Contents

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

Harry Potter and The Chamber Of Secrets

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

Chapter 1 The Boy Who Lived

Chapter 2 The Vanishing Glass

Chapter 3 The Letters From No One

Chapter 4 The Keeper Of The Keys

Chapter 5 Diagon Alley

Chapter 6 The Journey from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters

Chapter 7 The Sorting Hat

Chapter 8 The Potions Master

Chapter 9 The Midnight Duel

Chapter 10 Halloween

Chapter 11 Quidditch

Chapter 12 The Mirror Of Erised

Chapter 13 Nicholas Flamel

Chapter 14 Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback

Chapter 15 The Forbidden Forest

Chapter 16 Through the Trapdoor

Chapter 17 The Man With Two Faces

Return to the Main Contents

Chapter 1 The Boy Who Lived

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.

Mr. Dursley was the director of a firm called Grunnings, which made drills. He was a big, beefy man with hardly any neck, although he did have a very large mustache. Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors. The Dursleys had a small son called Dudley and in their opinion there was no finer boy anywhere.

The Dursleys had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret, and their greatest fear was that somebody would discover it. They didn't think they could bear it if anyone found out about the Potters. Mrs. Potter was Mrs. Dursley's sister, but they hadn't met for several years; in fact, Mrs. Dursley pretended she didn't have a sister, because her sister and her good-for-nothing husband were as unDursleyish as it was possible to be. The Dursleys shuddered to think what the neighbors would say if the Potters arrived in the street. The Dursleys knew that the Potters had a small son, too, but they had never even seen him. This boy was another good reason for keeping the Potters away; they didn't want Dudley mixing with a child like that.

When Mr. and Mrs. Dursley woke up on the dull, gray Tuesday our story starts, there was nothing about the cloudy sky outside to suggest that strange and mysterious things would soon be happening all over the country. Mr. Dursley hummed as he picked out his most boring tie for work, and Mrs. Dursley gossiped away happily as she wrestled a screaming Dudley into his high chair.

None of them noticed a large, tawny owl flutter past the window.

At half past eight, Mr. Dursley picked up his briefcase, pecked Mrs. Dursley on the cheek, and tried to kiss Dudley good-bye but missed, because Dudley was now having a tantrum and throwing his cereal at the walls. “Little tyke,” chortled Mr. Dursley as he left the house. He got into his car and backed out of number four’s drive.

It was on the corner of the street that he noticed the first sign of something peculiar — a cat reading a map. For a second, Mr. Dursley didn’t realize what he had seen — then he jerked his head around to look again. There was a tabby cat standing on the corner of Privet Drive, but there wasn’t a map in sight. What could he have been thinking of? It must have been a trick of the light. Mr. Dursley blinked and stared at the cat. It stared back. As Mr. Dursley drove around the corner and up the road, he watched the cat in his mirror. It was now reading the sign that said Privet Drive — no, looking at the sign; cats couldn’t read maps or signs. Mr. Dursley gave himself a little shake and put the cat out of his mind. As he drove toward town he thought of nothing except a large order of drills he was hoping to get that day.

But on the edge of town, drills were driven out of his mind by something else. As he sat in the usual morning traffic jam, he couldn’t help noticing that there seemed to be a lot of strangely dressed people about. People in cloaks. Mr. Dursley couldn’t bear people who dressed in funny clothes — the getups you saw on young people! He supposed this was some stupid new fashion. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and his eyes fell on a huddle of these weirdos standing quite close by. They were whispering excitedly together. Mr. Dursley was enraged to see that a couple of them weren’t young at all; why, that man had to be older than he was, and wearing an emerald-green cloak! The nerve of him! But then it struck Mr. Dursley that this was probably some silly stunt — these people were obviously collecting for something … yes, that would be it. The traffic moved on and a few minutes later, Mr. Dursley arrived in the Grunnings parking lot, his mind back on drills.

Mr. Dursley always sat with his back to the window in his office on the ninth floor. If he hadn't, he might have found it harder to concentrate on drills that morning. He didn't see the owls swooping past in broad daylight, though people down in the street did; they pointed and gazed open-mouthed as owl after owl sped overhead. Most of them had never seen an owl even at nighttime. Mr. Dursley, however, had a perfectly normal, owl-free morning. He yelled at five different people. He made several important telephone calls and shouted a bit more. He was in a very good mood until lunchtime, when he thought he'd stretch his legs and walk across the road to buy himself a bun from the bakery.

He'd forgotten all about the people in cloaks until he passed a group of them next to the baker's. He eyed them angrily as he passed. He didn't know why, but they made him uneasy. This bunch were whispering excitedly, too, and he couldn't see a single collecting tin. It was on his way back past them, clutching a large doughnut in a bag, that he caught a few words of what they were saying.

"The Potters, that's right, that's what I heard —"

"— yes, their son, Harry —"

Mr. Dursley stopped dead. Fear flooded him. He looked back at the whisperers as if he wanted to say something to them, but thought better of it.

He dashed back across the road, hurried up to his office, snapped at his secretary not to disturb him, seized his telephone, and had almost finished dialing his home number when he changed his mind. He put the receiver back down and stroked his mustache, thinking … no, he was being stupid. Potter wasn't such an unusual name. He was sure there were lots of people called Pot-ter who had a son called Harry. Come to think of it, he wasn't even sure his nephew was called Harry. He'd never even seen the boy. It might have been Harvey. Or Harold. There was no point in worrying Mrs. Dursley; she always got so upset

at any mention of her sister. He didn't blame her — if he'd had a sister like that … but all the same, those people in cloaks …He found it a lot harder to concentrate on drills that afternoon and when he left the building at five o'clock, he was still so worried that he walked straight into someone just outside the door.

"Sorry," he grunted, as the tiny old man stumbled and almost fell. It was a few seconds before Mr. Dursley realized that the man was wearing a violet cloak. He didn't seem at all upset at being almost knocked to the ground. On the contrary, his face split into a wide smile and he said in a squeaky voice that made passersby stare, "Don't be sorry, my dear sir, for nothing could upset me today! Rejoice, for You-Know-Who has gone at last! Even Muggles like yourself should be celebrating, this happy, happy day!"

And the old man hugged Mr. Dursley around the middle and walked off.

Mr. Dursley stood rooted to the spot. He had been hugged by a complete stranger. He also thought he had been called a Muggle, whatever that was. He was rattled. He hurried to his car and set off for home, hoping he was imagining things, which he had never hoped before, because he didn't approve of imagination.

As he pulled into the driveway of number four, the first thing he saw — and it didn't improve his mood — was the tabby cat he'd spotted that morning. It was now sitting on his garden wall. He was sure it was the same one; it had the same markings around its eyes.

"Shoo!" said Mr. Dursley loudly.

The cat didn't move. It just gave him a stern look. Was this normal cat behavior? Mr. Dursley wondered. Trying to pull himself together, he let himself into the house. He was still determined not to mention anything to his wife.

Mrs. Dursley had had a nice, normal day. She told him over dinner all about Mrs. Next Door's problems with her daughter and how Dudley had learned a new word ("Won't!"). Mr. Dursley tried to act normally. When Dudley had been put to bed, he went into the living room in time to catch the last report on the evening news:"And finally, bird-watchers everywhere have reported that the nation's owls have been behaving very unusually today. Although owls normally hunt at night and are hardly ever seen in daylight, there have been hundreds of sightings of these birds flying in every direction since sunrise. Experts are unable to explain why the owls have suddenly changed their sleeping pattern." The newscaster allowed himself a grin. "Most mysterious. And now, over to Jim McGuffin with the weather. Going to be any more showers of owls tonight, Jim?"

"Well, Ted," said the weatherman, "I don't know about that, but it's not only the owls that have been acting oddly today. Viewers as far apart as Kent, Yorkshire, and Dundee have been phoning in to tell me that instead of the rain I promised yesterday, they've had a downpour of shooting stars! Perhaps people have been celebrating Bonfire Night early — it's not until next week, folks! But I can promise a wet night tonight."

Mr. Dursley sat frozen in his armchair. Shooting stars all over Britain? Owls flying by daylight? Mysterious people in cloaks all over the place? And a whisper, a whisper about the Potters …Mrs. Dursley came into the living room carrying two cups of tea. It was no good. He'd have to say something to her. He cleared his throat nervously. "Er — Petunia, dear — you haven't heard from your sister lately, have you?"

As he had expected, Mrs. Dursley looked shocked and angry. After all, they normally pretended she didn't have a sister.

"No," she said sharply. "Why?"

“Funny stuff on the news,” Mr. Dursley mumbled. “Owls … shooting stars … and there were a lot of funny-looking people in town today …”

“So?” snapped Mrs. Dursley.

“Well, I just thought … maybe … it was something to do with … you know … her crowd.”

Mrs. Dursley sipped her tea through pursed lips. Mr. Dursley wondered whether he dared tell her he’d heard the name “Potter.” He decided he didn’t dare. Instead he said, as casually as he could, “Their son — he’d be about Dudley’s age now, wouldn’t he?”

“I suppose so,” said Mrs. Dursley stiffly.

“What’s his name again? Howard, isn’t it?”

“Harry. Nasty, common name, if you ask me.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mr. Dursley, his heart sinking horribly. “Yes, I quite agree.”

He didn’t say another word on the subject as they went upstairs to bed. While Mrs. Dursley was in the bathroom, Mr. Dursley crept to the bedroom window and peered down into the front garden. The cat was still there. It was staring down Privet Drive as though it were waiting for something.

Was he imagining things? Could all this have anything to do with the Potters? If it did … if it got out that they were related to a pair of — well, he didn’t think he could bear it.

The Dursleys got into bed. Mrs. Dursley fell asleep quickly but Mr. Dursley lay awake, turning it all over in his mind. His last, comforting thought before he fell asleep was that even if the Potters were involved, there was no reason for them to come near him and Mrs.

Dursley. The Potters knew very well what he and Petunia thought about them and their kind. … He couldn't see how he and Petunia could get mixed up in anything that might be going on — he yawned and turned over — it couldn't affect them. …How very wrong he was.

Mr. Dursley might have been drifting into an uneasy sleep, but the cat on the wall outside was showing no sign of sleepiness. It was sitting as still as a statue, its eyes fixed unblinkingly on the far corner of Privet Drive. It didn't so much as quiver when a car door slammed on the next street, nor when two owls swooped overhead. In fact, it was nearly midnight before the cat moved at all.

A man appeared on the corner the cat had been watching, appeared so suddenly and silently you'd have thought he'd just popped out of the ground. The cat's tail twitched and its eyes narrowed.

Nothing like this man had ever been seen on Privet Drive. He was tall, thin, and very old, judging by the silver of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to tuck into his belt. He was wearing long robes, a purple cloak that swept the ground, and high-heeled, buckled boots. His blue eyes were light, bright, and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles and his nose was very long and crooked, as though it had been broken at least twice. This man's name was Albus Dumbledore.

Albus Dumbledore didn't seem to realize that he had just arrived in a street where everything from his name to his boots was unwelcome. He was busy rummaging in his cloak, looking for something. But he did seem to realize he was being watched, because he looked up suddenly at the cat, which was still staring at him from the other end of the street. For some reason, the sight of the cat seemed to amuse him. He chuckled and muttered, "I should have known."

He found what he was looking for in his inside pocket. It seemed to be a silver cigarette lighter. He flicked it open, held it up in the air, and clicked it. The nearest street lamp went out with a little pop. He

clicked it again — the next lamp flickered into darkness. Twelve times he clicked the Put-Outer, until the only lights left on the whole street were two tiny pinpricks in the distance, which were the eyes of the cat watching him. If anyone looked out of their window now, even beady-eyed Mrs. Dursley, they wouldn't be able to see anything that was happening down on the pavement. Dumbledore slipped the Put-Outer back inside his cloak and set off down the street toward number four, where he sat down on the wall next to the cat. He didn't look at it, but after a moment he spoke to it.

"Fancy seeing you here, Professor McGonagall."

He turned to smile at the tabby, but it had gone. Instead he was smiling at a rather severe-looking woman who was wearing square glasses exactly the shape of the markings the cat had had around its eyes. She, too, was wearing a cloak, an emerald one. Her black hair was drawn into a tight bun. She looked distinctly ruffled.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked.

"My dear Professor, I've never seen a cat sit so stiffly."

"You'd be stiff if you'd been sitting on a brick wall all day," said Professor McGonagall.

"All day? When you could have been celebrating? I must have passed a dozen feasts and parties on my way here."

Professor McGonagall sniffed angrily.

"Oh yes, everyone's celebrating, all right," she said impatiently. "You'd think they'd be a bit more careful, but no — even the Muggles have noticed something's going on. It was on their news." She jerked her head back at the Dursleys' dark living-room window. "I heard it. Flocks of owls … shooting stars. … Well, they're not completely stupid. They were bound to notice something. Shooting stars down in Kent — I'll bet that was Dedalus Diggle. He never had much sense."

“You can’t blame them,” said Dumbledore gently. “We’ve had precious little to celebrate for eleven years.”

“I know that,” said Professor McGonagall irritably. “But that’s no reason to lose our heads. People are being downright careless, out on the streets in broad daylight, not even dressed in Muggle clothes, swapping rumors.”

She threw a sharp, sideways glance at Dumbledore here, as though hoping he was going to tell her something, but he didn’t, so she went on. “A fine thing it would be if, on the very day You-Know-Who seems to have disappeared at last, the Muggles found out about us all. I suppose he really has gone, Dumbledore?”

“It certainly seems so,” said Dumbledore. “We have much to be thankful for. Would you care for a lemon drop?”

“A what?”

“A lemon drop. They’re a kind of Muggle sweet I’m rather fond of.”

“No, thank you,” said Professor McGonagall coldly, as though she didn’t think this was the moment for lemon drops. “As I say, even if You-Know-Who has gone —”

“My dear Professor, surely a sensible person like yourself can call him by his name? All this ‘You-Know-Who’ nonsense — for eleven years I have been trying to persuade people to call him by his proper name: Voldemort.” Professor McGonagall flinched, but Dum-bledore, who was unsticking two lemon drops, seemed not to notice. “It all gets so confusing if we keep saying ‘You-Know-Who.’ I have never seen any reason to be frightened of saying Voldemort’s name.”

“I know you haven’t,” said Professor McGonagall, sounding half exasperated, half admiring. “But you’re different. Everyone knows you’re the only one You-Know- oh, all right, Voldemort, was frightened of.”

“You flatter me,” said Dumbledore calmly. “Voldemort had powers I will never have.”

“Only because you’re too — well — noble to use them.”

“It’s lucky it’s dark. I haven’t blushed so much since Madam Pomfrey told me she liked my new earmuffs.”

Professor McGonagall shot a sharp look at Dumbledore and said, “The owls are nothing next to the rumors that are flying around. You know what everyone’s saying? About why he’s disappeared? About what finally stopped him?”

It seemed that Professor McGonagall had reached the point she was most anxious to discuss, the real reason she had been waiting on a cold, hard wall all day, for neither as a cat nor as a woman had she fixed Dumbledore with such a piercing stare as she did now. It was plain that whatever “everyone” was saying, she was not going to believe it until Dumbledore told her it was true. Dumbledore, however, was choosing another lemon drop and did not answer.

“What they’re saying,” she pressed on, “is that last night Voldemort turned up in Godric’s Hollow. He went to find the Potters. The rumor is that Lily and James Potter are — are — that they’re — dead.”

Dumbledore bowed his head. Professor McGonagall gasped.

“Lily and James … I can’t believe it … I didn’t want to believe it … Oh, Albus …”

Dumbledore reached out and patted her on the shoulder. “I know … I know …” he said heavily.

Professor McGonagall’s voice trembled as she went on. “That’s not all. They’re saying he tried to kill the Potters’ son, Harry. But — he couldn’t. He couldn’t kill that little boy. No one knows why, or how, but

they're saying that when he couldn't kill Harry Potter, Voldemort's power somehow broke — and that's why he's gone."

Dumbledore nodded glumly.

"It's — it's true?" faltered Professor McGonagall. "After all he's done … all the people he's killed … he couldn't kill a little boy? It's just astounding … of all the things to stop him … but how in the name of heaven did Harry survive?"

"We can only guess," said Dumbledore. "We may never know."

Professor McGonagall pulled out a lace handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes beneath her spectacles. Dumbledore gave a great sniff as he took a golden watch from his pocket and examined it. It was a very odd watch. It had twelve hands but no numbers; instead, little planets were moving around the edge. It must have made sense to Dumbledore, though, because he put it back in his pocket and said, "Hagrid's late. I suppose it was he who told you I'd be here, by the way?"

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall. "And I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you're here, of all places?"

"I've come to bring Harry to his aunt and uncle. They're the only family he has left now."

"You don't mean — you can't mean the people who live here?" cried Professor McGonagall, jumping to her feet and pointing at number four. "Dumbledore — you can't. I've been watching them all day. You couldn't find two people who are less like us. And they've got this son — I saw him kicking his mother all the way up the street, screaming for sweets. Harry Potter come and live here!"

"It's the best place for him," said Dumbledore firmly. "His aunt and uncle will be able to explain everything to him when he's older. I've written them a letter."

"A letter?" repeated Professor McGonagall faintly, sitting back down on the wall. "Really, Dumbledore, you think you can explain all this in a letter? These people will never understand him! He'll be famous — a legend — I wouldn't be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter Day in the future — there will be books written about Harry — every child in our world will know his name!"

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, looking very seriously over the top of his half-moon glasses. "It would be enough to turn any boy's head. Famous before he can walk and talk! Famous for something he won't even remember! Can't you see how much better off he'll be, growing up away from all that until he's ready to take it?"

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, changed her mind, swallowed, and then said, "Yes — yes, you're right, of course. But how is the boy getting here, Dumbledore?" She eyed his cloak suddenly as though she thought he might be hiding Harry underneath it.

"Hagrid's bringing him."

"You think it — wise — to trust Hagrid with something as im-portant as this?"

"I would trust Hagrid with my life," said Dumbledore.

"I'm not saying his heart isn't in the right place," said Professor McGonagall grudgingly, "but you can't pretend he's not careless. He does tend to — what was that?"

A low rumbling sound had broken the silence around them. It grew steadily louder as they looked up and down the street for some sign of a headlight; it swelled to a roar as they both looked up at the sky — and a huge motorcycle fell out of the air and landed on the road in front of them.

If the motorcycle was huge, it was nothing to the man sitting astride it. He was almost twice as tall as a normal man and at least five times as wide. He looked simply too big to be allowed, and so wild — long tangles of bushy black hair and beard hid most of his face, he had hands the size of trash can lids, and his feet in their leather boots were like baby dolphins. In his vast, muscular arms he was holding a bundle of blankets.

“Hagrid,” said Dumbledore, sounding relieved. “At last. And where did you get that motorcycle?”

“Borrowed it, Professor Dumbledore, sir,” said the giant, climbing carefully off the motorcycle as he spoke. “Young Sirius Black lent it to me. I’ve got him, sir.”

“No problems, were there?”

“No, sir — house was almost destroyed, but I got him out all right before the Muggles started swarmin’ around. He fell asleep as we was flyin’ over Bristol.”

Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall bent forward over the bundle of blankets. Inside, just visible, was a baby boy, fast asleep. Under a tuft of jet-black hair over his forehead they could see a curiously shaped cut, like a bolt of lightning.

“Is that where — ?” whispered Professor McGonagall.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. “He’ll have that scar forever.”

“Couldn’t you do something about it, Dumbledore?”

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t. Scars can come in handy. I have one myself above my left knee that is a perfect map of the London Underground. Well — give him here, Hagrid — we’d better get this over with.”

Dumbledore took Harry in his arms and turned toward the Dursleys' house.

"Could I — could I say good-bye to him, sir?" asked Hagrid. He bent his great, shaggy head over Harry and gave him what must have been a very scratchy, whiskery kiss. Then, suddenly, Hagrid let out a howl like a wounded dog.

"Shhh!" hissed Professor McGonagall, "you'll wake the Muggles!"

"S-s-sorry," sobbed Hagrid, taking out a large, spotted handkerchief and burying his face in it. "But I c-c-can't stand it — Lily an' James dead — an' poor little Harry off ter live with Muggles —"

"Yes, yes, it's all very sad, but get a grip on yourself, Hagrid, or we'll be found," Professor McGonagall whispered, patting Hagrid gingerly on the arm as Dumbledore stepped over the low garden wall and walked to the front door. He laid Harry gently on the doorstep, took a letter out of his cloak, tucked it inside Harry's blankets, and then came back to the other two. For a full minute the three of them stood and looked at the little bundle; Hagrid's shoulders shook, Professor McGonagall blinked furiously, and the twinkling light that usually shone from Dumbledore's eyes seemed to have gone out.

"Well," said Dumbledore finally, "that's that. We've no business staying here. We may as well go and join the celebrations."

"Yeah," said Hagrid in a very muffled voice, "I'd best get this bike away. G'night, Professor McGonagall — Professor Dumbledore, sir."

Wiping his streaming eyes on his jacket sleeve, Hagrid swung himself onto the motorcycle and kicked the engine into life; with a roar it rose into the air and off into the night.

"I shall see you soon, I expect, Professor McGonagall," said Dumbledore, nodding to her. Professor McGonagall blew her nose in reply.

Dumbledore turned and walked back down the street. On the corner he stopped and took out the silver Put-Outer. He clicked it once, and twelve balls of light sped back to their street lamps so that Privet Drive glowed suddenly orange and he could make out a tabby cat slinking around the corner at the other end of the street. He could just see the bundle of blankets on the step of number four.

“Good luck, Harry,” he murmured. He turned on his heel and with a swish of his cloak, he was gone.

A breeze ruffled the neat hedges of Privet Drive, which lay silent and tidy under the inky sky, the very last place you would expect astonishing things to happen. Harry Potter rolled over inside his blankets without waking up. One small hand closed on the letter beside him and he slept on, not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous, not knowing he would be woken in a few hours’ time by Mrs. Dursley’s scream as she opened the front door to put out the milk bottles, nor that he would spend the next few weeks being prodded and pinched by his cousin Dudley. … He couldn’t know that at this very moment, people meeting in secret all over the country were holding up their glasses and saying in hushed voices: “To Harry Potter — the boy who lived!”

Chapter 2 The Vanishing Glass

Nearly ten years had passed since the Dursleys had woken up to find their nephew on the front step, but Privet Drive had hardly changed at all. The sun rose on the same tidy front gardens and lit up the brass number four on the Dursleys' front door; it crept into their living room, which was almost exactly the same as it had been on the night when Mr. Dursley had seen that fateful news report about the owls. Only the photographs on the mantelpiece really showed how much time had passed. Ten years ago, there had been lots of pictures of what looked like a large pink beach ball wearing different-colored bonnets — but Dudley Dursley was no longer a baby, and now the photographs showed a large blond boy riding his first bicycle, on a carousel at the fair, playing a computer game with his father, being hugged and kissed by his mother. The room held no sign at all that another boy lived in the house, too.

Yet Harry Potter was still there, asleep at the moment, but not for long. His Aunt Petunia was awake and it was her shrill voice that made the first noise of the day.

"Up! Get up! Now!"

Harry woke with a start. His aunt rapped on the door again.

"Up!" she screeched. Harry heard her walking toward the kitchen and then the sound of the frying pan being put on the stove. He rolled onto his back and tried to remember the dream he had been having. It had been a good one. There had been a flying motorcycle in it. He had a funny feeling he'd had the same dream before.

His aunt was back outside the door.

"Are you up yet?" she demanded.

"Nearly," said Harry.

“Well, get a move on, I want you to look after the bacon. And don’t you dare let it burn, I want everything perfect on Duddy’s birthday.”

Harry groaned.

“What did you say?” his aunt snapped through the door.

“Nothing, nothing …”

Dudley’s birthday — how could he have forgotten? Harry got slowly out of bed and started looking for socks. He found a pair under his bed and, after pulling a spider off one of them, put them on. Harry was used to spiders, because the cupboard under the stairs was full of them, and that was where he slept.

When he was dressed he went down the hall into the kitchen. The table was almost hidden beneath all Dudley’s birthday presents. It looked as though Dudley had gotten the new computer he wanted, not to mention the second television and the racing bike. Exactly why Dudley wanted a racing bike was a mystery to Harry, as Dudley was very fat and hated exercise — unless of course it involved punching somebody. Dudley’s favorite punching bag was Harry, but he couldn’t often catch him. Harry didn’t look it, but he was very fast.

Perhaps it had something to do with living in a dark cupboard, but Harry had always been small and skinny for his age. He looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was because all he had to wear were old clothes of Dudley’s, and Dudley was about four times bigger than he was. Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose. The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning. He had had it as long as he could remember, and the first question he could ever remember asking his Aunt Petunia was how he had gotten it.

“In the car crash when your parents died,” she had said. “And don’t ask questions.”

Don’t ask questions — that was the first rule for a quiet life with the Dursleys.

Uncle Vernon entered the kitchen as Harry was turning over the bacon.

“Comb your hair!” he barked, by way of a morning greeting.

About once a week, Uncle Vernon looked over the top of his newspaper and shouted that Harry needed a haircut. Harry must have had more haircuts than the rest of the boys in his class put together, but it made no difference, his hair simply grew that way — all over the place.

Harry was frying eggs by the time Dudley arrived in the kitchen with his mother. Dudley looked a lot like Uncle Vernon. He had a large pink face, not much neck, small, watery blue eyes, and thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. Aunt Petunia often said that Dudley looked like a baby angel — Harry often said that Dudley looked like a pig in a wig.

Harry put the plates of egg and bacon on the table, which was difficult as there wasn’t much room. Dudley, meanwhile, was counting his presents. His face fell.

“Thirty-six,” he said, looking up at his mother and father. “That’s two less than last year.”

“Darling, you haven’t counted Auntie Marge’s present, see, it’s here under this big one from Mommy and Daddy.”

“All right, thirty-seven then,” said Dudley, going red in the face. Harry, who could see a huge Dudley tantrum coming on, began wolfing

down his bacon as fast as possible in case Dudley turned the table over.

Aunt Petunia obviously scented danger, too, because she said quickly, “And we’ll buy you another two presents while we’re out today. How’s that, popkin? Two more presents. Is that all right?”

Dudley thought for a moment. It looked like hard work. Finally he said slowly, “So I’ll have thirty … thirty …”

“Thirty-nine, sweetums,” said Aunt Petunia.

“Oh.” Dudley sat down heavily and grabbed the nearest parcel. “All right then.”

Uncle Vernon chuckled.

“Little tyke wants his money’s worth, just like his father. ’Atta boy, Dudley!” He ruffled Dudley’s hair.

At that moment the telephone rang and Aunt Petunia went to answer it while Harry and Uncle Vernon watched Dudley unwrap the racing bike, a video camera, a remote control airplane, sixteen new computer games, and a VCR. He was ripping the paper off a gold wristwatch when Aunt Petunia came back from the telephone looking both angry and worried.

“Bad news, Vernon,” she said. “Mrs. Figg’s broken her leg. She can’t take him.” She jerked her head in Harry’s direction.

Dudley’s mouth fell open in horror, but Harry’s heart gave a leap. Every year on Dudley’s birthday, his parents took him and a friend out for the day, to adventure parks, hamburger restaurants, or the movies. Every year, Harry was left behind with Mrs. Figg, a mad old lady who lived two streets away. Harry hated it there. The whole house smelled of cabbage and Mrs. Figg made him look at photographs of all the cats she’d ever owned.

“Now what?” said Aunt Petunia, looking furiously at Harry as though he’d planned this. Harry knew he ought to feel sorry that Mrs. Figg had broken her leg, but it wasn’t easy when he reminded himself it would be a whole year before he had to look at Tibbies, Snowy, Mr. Paws, and Tufty again.

“We could phone Marge,” Uncle Vernon suggested.

“Don’t be silly, Vernon, she hates the boy.”

The Dursleys often spoke about Harry like this, as though he wasn’t there — or rather, as though he was something very nasty that couldn’t understand them, like a slug.

“What about what’s-her-name, your friend — Yvonne?”

“On vacation in Majorca,” snapped Aunt Petunia.

“You could just leave me here,” Harry put in hopefully (he’d be able to watch what he wanted on television for a change and maybe even have a go on Dudley’s computer).

Aunt Petunia looked as though she’d just swallowed a lemon.

“And come back and find the house in ruins?” she snarled.

“I won’t blow up the house,” said Harry, but they weren’t listening.

“I suppose we could take him to the zoo,” said Aunt Petunia slowly, “… and leave him in the car. …”

“That cars new, he’s not sitting in it alone. …”

Dudley began to cry loudly. In fact, he wasn’t really crying — it had been years since he’d really cried — but he knew that if he screwed up his face and wailed, his mother would give him anything he wanted.

“Dinky Duddydums, don’t cry, Mummy won’t let him spoil your special day!” she cried, flinging her arms around him.

“I … don’t … want … him … t-t-to come!” Dudley yelled between huge, pretend sobs. “He always sp-spoils everything!” He shot Harry a nasty grin through the gap in his mother's arms.

Just then, the doorbell rang — “Oh, good Lord, they’re here!” said Aunt Petunia frantically — and a moment later, Dudley’s best friend, Piers Polkiss, walked in with his mother. Piers was a scrawny boy with a face like a rat. He was usually the one who held people’s arms behind their backs while Dudley hit them. Dudley stopped pretending to cry at once.

Half an hour later, Harry, who couldn’t believe his luck, was sitting in the back of the Dursleys’ car with Piers and Dudley, on the way to the zoo for the first time in his life. His aunt and uncle hadn’t been able to think of anything else to do with him, but before they’d left, Uncle Vernon had taken Harry aside.

“I’m warning you,” he had said, putting his large purple face right up close to Harry’s, “I’m warning you now, boy — any funny business, anything at all — and you’ll be in that cupboard from now until Christmas.”

I’m not going to do anything,” said Harry, “honestly …”

But Uncle Vernon didn’t believe him. No one ever did.

The problem was, strange things often happened around Harry and it was just no good telling the Dursleys he didn’t make them happen.

Once, Aunt Petunia, tired of Harry coming back from the barbers looking as though he hadn’t been at all, had taken a pair of kitchen scissors and cut his hair so short he was almost bald except for his bangs, which she left “to hide that horrible scar.” Dudley had laughed himself silly at Harry, who spent a sleepless night imagining school

the next day, where he was already laughed at for his baggy clothes and taped glasses. Next morning, however, he had gotten up to find his hair exactly as it had been before Aunt Petunia had sheared it off. He had been given a week in his cupboard for this, even though he had tried to explain that he couldn't explain how it had grown back so quickly.

Another time, Aunt Petunia had been trying to force him into a revolting old sweater of Dudley's (brown with orange puff balls). The harder she tried to pull it over his head, the smaller it seemed to become, until finally it might have fitted a hand puppet, but certainly wouldn't fit Harry. Aunt Petunia had decided it must have shrunk in the wash and, to his great relief, Harry wasn't punished.

On the other hand, he'd gotten into terrible trouble for being found on the roof of the school kitchens. Dudley's gang had been chasing him as usual when, as much to Harry's surprise as anyone else's, there he was sitting on the chimney. The Dursleys had received a very angry letter from Harry's headmistress telling them Harry had been climbing school buildings. But all he'd tried to do (as he shouted at Uncle Vernon through the locked door of his cupboard) was jump behind the big trash cans outside the kitchen doors. Harry supposed that the wind must have caught him in mid-jump.

But today, nothing was going to go wrong. It was even worth being with Dudley and Piers to be spending the day somewhere that wasn't school, his cupboard, or Mrs. Figg's cabbage-smelling living room.

While he drove, Uncle Vernon complained to Aunt Petunia. He liked to complain about things: people at work, Harry, the council, Harry, the bank, and Harry were just a few of his favorite subjects. This morning, it was motorcycles.

"… roaring along like maniacs, the young hoodlums," he said, as a motorcycle overtook them.

“I had a dream about a motorcycle,” said Harry, remembering suddenly. “It was flying.”

Uncle Vernon nearly crashed into the car in front. He turned right around in his seat and yelled at Harry, his face like a gigantic beet with a mustache: “MOTORCYCLES DON’T FLY!”

Dudley and Piers sniggered.

“I know they don’t,” said Harry. “It was only a dream.”

But he wished he hadn’t said anything. If there was one thing the Dursleys hated even more than his asking questions, it was his talking about anything acting in a way it shouldn’t, no matter if it was in a dream or even a cartoon — they seemed to think he might get dangerous ideas.

It was a very sunny Saturday and the zoo was crowded with families. The Dursleys bought Dudley and Piers large chocolate ice creams at the entrance and then, because the smiling lady in the van had asked Harry what he wanted before they could hurry him away, they bought him a cheap lemon ice pop. It wasn’t bad, either, Harry thought, licking it as they watched a gorilla scratching its head who looked remarkably like Dudley, except that it wasn’t blond.

Harry had the best morning he’d had in a long time. He was careful to walk a little way apart from the Dursleys so that Dudley and Piers, who were starting to get bored with the animals by lunchtime, wouldn’t fall back on their favorite hobby of hitting him. They ate in the zoo restaurant, and when Dudley had a tantrum because his knickerbocker glory didn’t have enough ice cream on top, Uncle Vernon bought him another one and Harry was allowed to finish the first.

Harry felt, afterward, that he should have known it was all too good to last.

After lunch they went to the reptile house. It was cool and dark in there, with lit windows all along the walls. Behind the glass, all sorts of lizards and snakes were crawling and slithering over bits of wood and stone. Dudley and Piers wanted to see huge, poisonous cobras and thick, man-crushing pythons. Dudley quickly found the largest snake in the place. It could have wrapped its body twice around Uncle Vernon's car and crushed it into a trash can — but at the moment it didn't look in the mood. In fact, it was fast asleep.

Dudley stood with his nose pressed against the glass, staring at the glistening brown coils.

"Make it move," he whined at his father. Uncle Vernon tapped on the glass, but the snake didn't budge.

"Do it again," Dudley ordered. Uncle Vernon rapped the glass smartly with his knuckles, but the snake just snoozed on.

"This is boring," Dudley moaned. He shuffled away.

Harry moved in front of the tank and looked intently at the snake. He wouldn't have been surprised if it had died of boredom itself — no company except stupid people drumming their fingers on the glass trying to disturb it all day long. It was worse than having a cupboard as a bedroom, where the only visitor was Aunt Petu-nia hammering on the door to wake you up; at least he got to visit the rest of the house.

The snake suddenly opened its beady eyes. Slowly, very slowly, it raised its head until its eyes were on a level with Harry's.

It winked.

Harry stared. Then he looked quickly around to see if anyone was watching. They weren't. He looked back at the snake and winked, too.

The snake jerked its head toward Uncle Vernon and Dudley, then raised its eyes to the ceiling. It gave Harry a look that said quite plainly:"I get that all the time."

"I know," Harry murmured through the glass, though he wasn't sure the snake could hear him. "It must be really annoying."

The snake nodded vigorously.

"Where do you come from, anyway?" Harry asked.

The snake jabbed its tail at a little sign next to the glass. Harry peered at it.

Boa Constrictor, Brazil.

"Was it nice there?"

The boa constrictor jabbed its tail at the sign again and Harry read on: This specimen was bred in the zoo. "Oh, I see — so you've never been to Brazil?"

As the snake shook its head, a deafening shout behind Harry made both of them jump. "DUDLEY! MR. DURSLEY! COME AND LOOK AT THIS SNAKE! YOU WON'T BELIEVE WHAT IT'S DOING!"

Dudley came waddling toward them as fast as he could.

"Out of the way, you," he said, punching Harry in the ribs. Caught by surprise, Harry fell hard on the concrete floor. What came next happened so fast no one saw how it happened — one second, Piers and Dudley were leaning right up close to the glass, the next, they had leapt back with howls of horror.

Harry sat up and gasped; the glass front of the boa constrictor's tank had vanished. The great snake was uncoiling itself rapidly, slithering

out onto the floor. People throughout the reptile house screamed and started running for the exits.

As the snake slid swiftly past him, Harry could have sworn a low, hissing voice said, “Brazil, here I come. … Thanksss, amigo.”

The keeper of the reptile house was in shock.

“But the glass,” he kept saying, “where did the glass go?”

The zoo director himself made Aunt Petunia a cup of strong, sweet tea while he apologized over and over again. Piers and Dudley could only gibber. As far as Harry had seen, the snake hadn’t done anything except snap playfully at their heels as it passed, but by the time they were all back in Uncle Vernon’s car, Dudley was telling them how it had nearly bitten off his leg, while Piers was swearing it had tried to squeeze him to death. But worst of all, for Harry at least, was Piers calming down enough to say, “Harry was talking to it, weren’t you, Harry?”

Uncle Vernon waited until Piers was safely out of the house be-fore starting on Harry. He was so angry he could hardly speak. He managed to say, “Go — cupboard — stay — no meals,” before he collapsed into a chair, and Aunt Petunia had to run and get him a large brandy.

Harry lay in his dark cupboard much later, wishing he had a watch. He didn’t know what time it was and he couldn’t be sure the Dursleys were asleep yet. Until they were, he couldn’t risk sneaking to the kitchen for some food.

He’d lived with the Dursleys almost ten years, ten miserable years, as long as he could remember, ever since he’d been a baby and his parents had died in that car crash. He couldn’t remember being in the car when his parents had died. Sometimes, when he strained his memory during long hours in his cupboard, he came up with a strange vision: a blinding flash of green light and a burn-ing pain on

his forehead. This, he supposed, was the crash, though he couldn't imagine where all the green light came from. He couldn't remember his parents at all. His aunt and uncle never spoke about them, and of course he was forbidden to ask questions. There were no photographs of them in the house.

When he had been younger, Harry had dreamed and dreamed of some unknown relation coming to take him away, but it had never happened; the Dursleys were his only family. Yet sometimes he thought (or maybe hoped) that strangers in the street seemed to know him. Very strange strangers they were, too. A tiny man in a violet top hat had bowed to him once while out shopping with Aunt Petunia and Dudley. After asking Harry furiously if he knew the man, Aunt Petunia had rushed them out of the shop without buying anything. A wild-looking old woman dressed all in green had waved merrily at him once on a bus. A bald man in a very long purple coat had actually shaken his hand in the street the other day and then walked away without a word. The weirdest thing about all these people was the way they seemed to vanish the second Harry tried to get a closer look.

At school, Harry had no one. Everybody knew that Dudley's gang hated that odd Harry Potter in his baggy old clothes and broken glasses, and nobody liked to disagree with Dudley's gang.

Chapter 3 The Letters From No One

The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote con-trol airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.

Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.

This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was go-ing there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.

"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"

"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it — it might be sick." Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.

One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let

Harry watch television and gave him a bit of choco-late cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.

That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.

As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

* * *

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.

"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.

"Your new school uniform," she said.

Harry looked in the bowl again.

"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet."

"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished."

Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High — like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.

Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.

They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.

"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.

"Make Harry get it."

"Get the mail, Harry."

"Make Dudley get it."

"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley."

Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown enve-lope that looked like a bill, and — a letter for Harry.

Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives — he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:Mr. H. Potter

The Cupboard under the Stairs

4 Privet Drive

Little Whinging

Surrey

The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.

Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.

"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.

Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.

Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.

"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk …"

"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"

Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.

"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.

"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.

"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.

Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.

“Vernon! Oh my goodness — Vernon!”

They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn’t used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.

“I want to read that letter,” he said loudly.

“I want to read it,” said Harry furiously, “as it’s mine.”

“Get out, both of you,” croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.

Harry didn’t move.

“I WANT MY LETTER!” he shouted.

“Let me see it!” demanded Dudley.

“OUT!” roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.

“Vernon,” Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, “look at the address — how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don’t think they’re watching the house?”

“Watching — spying — might be following us,” muttered Un-cle Vernon wildly.

“But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don’t want —”

Harry could see Uncle Vernon’s shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.

“No,” he said finally. “No, we’ll ignore it. If they don’t get an answer. … Yes, that’s best … we won’t do anything. …”

“But —”

“I’m not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn’t we swear when we took him in we’d stamp out that dangerous nonsense?”

That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he’d never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.

“Where’s my letter?” said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. “Who’s writing to me?”

“No one. It was addressed to you by mistake,” said Uncle Vernon shortly. “I have burned it.”

“It was not a mistake,” said Harry angrily, “it had my cupboard on it.”

“SILENCE!” yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.

“Er — yes, Harry — about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking … you’re really getting a bit big for it … we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley’s second bedroom.”

“Why?” said Harry.

“Don’t ask questions!” snapped his uncle. “Take this stuff upstairs, now.”

The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.

From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, "I don't want him in there … I need that room … make him get out. …"

Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.

Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.

When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive —' "

With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wres-tle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard — I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley — go — just go."

Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.

The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.

He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door —"AAAAARRRGH!"

Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat — something alive!

Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.

“I want —” he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.

Uncle Vernon didn’t go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.

“See,” he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, “if they can’t deliver them they’ll just give up.”

“I’m not sure that’ll work, Vernon.”

“Oh, these people’s minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they’re not like you and me,” said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn’t go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.

Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” as he worked, and jumped at small noises.

On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.

“Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?” Dudley asked Harry in amazement.

* * *

On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.

“No post on Sundays,” he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, “no damn letters today —”

Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one —“Out! OUT!”

Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.

“That does it,” said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. “I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We’re going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!”

He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn’t dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.

“Shake ’em off … shake ’em off,” he would mutter whenever he did this.

They didn’t stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He’d never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he’d missed five television programs he’d wanted to see, and he’d never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.

Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. …They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.

“ ’Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an ’undred of these at the front desk.”

She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:Mr. H. Potter

Room 17

Railview Hotel

Cokeworth

Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.

“I’ll take them,” said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.

* * *

“Wouldn’t it be better just to go home, dear?” Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn’t seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in

the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.

"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.

"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television."

Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday — and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days of the week, because of television — then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun — last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.

Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.

"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"

It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.

"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"

A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.

"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"

It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.

The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.

Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.

"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.

He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.

The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The

lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.

Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.

Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?

One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds … twenty … ten … nine — maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him — three … two … one …BOOM.

The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

Chapter 4 The Keeper Of The Keys

BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.

“Where’s the cannon?” he said stupidly.

There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skid-ding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands — now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.

“Who’s there?” he shouted. “I warn you — I’m armed!”

There was a pause. Then —

SMASH!

The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.

A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was al-most completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.

The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.

“Couldn’t make us a cup o’ tea, could yeh? It’s not been an easy journey. …”

He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.

“Budge up, yeh great lump,” said the stranger.

Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.

"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.

Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.

"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes."

Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.

"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"

"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.

Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.

"Anyway — Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here — I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right."

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.

Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"

The giant chuckled.

“True, I haven’t introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts.”

He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry’s whole arm.

“What about that tea then, eh?” he said, rubbing his hands together. “I’d not say no ter summat stronger if yeh’ve got it, mind.”

His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn’t see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he’d sunk into a hot bath.

The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, “Don’t touch anything he gives you, Dudley.”

The giant chuckled darkly.

“Yer great puddin’ of a son don’ need fattenin’ anymore, Dursley, don’ worry.”

He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn’t take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, “I’m sorry, but I still don’t really know who you are.”

The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts — yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course."

"Er — no," said Harry.

Hagrid looked shocked.

"Sorry," Harry said quickly.

"Sorry?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"

"All what?" asked Harry.

"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"

He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.

"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy — this boy! — knows nothin' abou' — about ANYTHING?"

Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.

"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff."

But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world."

"What world?"

Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.

“DURSLEY!” he boomed.

Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like “Mimblewimble.” Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.

“But yeh must know about yer mom and dad,” he said. “I mean, they’re famous. You’re famous.”

“What? My — my mom and dad weren’t famous, were they?”

“Yeh don’ know … yeh don’ know …” Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.

“Yeh don’ know what yeh are?” he said finally.

Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.

“Stop!” he commanded. “Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!”

A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.

“You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An’ you’ve kept it from him all these years?”

“Kept what from me?” said Harry eagerly.

“STOP! I FORBID YOU!” yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.

Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.

“Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh,” said Hagrid. “Harry — yer a wizard.”

There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.

“I’m a what?” gasped Harry.

“A wizard, o’ course,” said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, “an’ a thumpin’ good’un, I’d say, once yeh’ve been trained up a bit. With a mum an’ dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An’ I reckon it’s abou’ time yeh read yer letter.”

Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:HOGWARTS SCHOOL

of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock,Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall,

Deputy Headmistress

Questions exploded inside Harry’s head like fireworks and he couldn’t decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, “What

does it mean, they await my owl?"

"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl — a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl — a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Given Harry his letter.

Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.

Hagrid

Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.

Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.

"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the fire-light.

"He's not going," he said.

Hagrid grunted.

"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.

"A what?" said Harry, interested.

"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on."

“We swore when we took him in we’d put a stop to that rubbish,” said Uncle Vernon, “swore we’d stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!”

“You knew?” said Harry. “You knew I’m a — a wizard?”

“Knew!” shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. “Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that — that school — and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was — a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!”

She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.

“Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you’d be just the same, just as strange, just as — as — abnormal — and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!”

Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, “Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!”

“CAR CRASH!” roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. “How could a car crash kill Lily an’ James Potter? It’s an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin’ his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!”

“But why? What happened?” Harry asked urgently.

The anger faded from Hagrid’s face. He looked suddenly anxious.

“I never expected this,” he said, in a low, worried voice. “I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin’ hold of yeh, how much yeh didn’t know. Ah, Harry, I don’ know if I’m the right

person ter tell yeh — but someone's gotta — yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'."

He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.

"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh — mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. …"

He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with — with a person called — but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows —"

"Who?"

"Well — I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does."

"Why not?"

"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went … bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was …"

Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.

"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.

"Nah — can't spell it. All right — Voldemort." Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this — this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too — some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches … terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him — an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.

“Now, yer mum an’ dad were as good a witch an’ wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an’ girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst’ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get ’em on his side before … probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin’ ter do with the Dark Side.

“Maybe he thought he could persuade ’em … maybe he just wanted ’em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an’ — an’ —”

Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.

“Sorry,” he said. “But it’s that sad — knew yer mum an’ dad, an’ nicer people yeh couldn’t find — anyway …“You-Know-Who killed ’em. An’ then — an’ this is the real myst’ry of the thing — he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin’ by then. But he couldn’t do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That’s what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh — took care of yer mum an’ dad an’ yer house, even — but it didn’t work on you, an’ that’s why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill ’em, no one except you, an’ he’d killed some o’ the best witches an’ wizards of the age — the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts — an’ you was only a baby, an’ you lived.”

Something very painful was going on in Harry’s mind. As Hagrid’s story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before — and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.

Hagrid was watching him sadly.

“Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore’s orders. Brought yeh ter this lot …”

“Load of old tosh,” said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.

“Now, you listen here, boy,” he snarled, “I accept there’s something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn’t have cured — and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdos, no denying it, and the world’s better off without them in my opinion — asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types — just what I expected, always knew they’d come to a sticky end —”

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, “I’m warning you, Dursley — I’m warning you — one more word …”

In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon’s courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.

“That’s better,” said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.

Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.

“But what happened to Vol-, sorry — I mean, You-Know-Who?”

“Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That’s the biggest myst’ry, see … he was gettin’ more an’ more powerful — why’d he go?

“Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he’s still out there, bidin’ his time, like, but I don’ believe it. People who was on his side came

back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.

"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on — I dunno what it was, no one does — but somethin' about you stumped him, all right."

Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bu-lied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard."

To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.

"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"

Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it … every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry … chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach … dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back … and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?

Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.

"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard — you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts."

But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.

"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish — spell books and wands and —"

"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had, Albus Dumbled—"

"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.

But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER —" he thundered, "— INSULT — ALBUS — DUMBLEDORE — IN — FRONT — OF — ME!"

He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley — there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.

Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.

“Shouldn’ta lost me temper,” he said ruefully, “but it didn’t work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn’t much left ter do.”

He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.

“Be grateful if yeh didn’t mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts,” he said. “I’m — er — not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin’. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an’ get yer letters to yeh an’ stuff — one o’ the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job —”

“Why aren’t you supposed to do magic?” asked Harry.

“Oh, well — I was at Hogwarts meself but I — er — got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an’ everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore.”

“Why were you expelled?”

“It’s gettin’ late and we’ve got lots ter do tomorrow,” said Hagrid loudly. “Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an’ that.”

He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.

“You can kip under that,” he said. “Don’ mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o’ dormice in one o’ the pockets.”

Chapter 5 Diagon Alley

Harry woke early the next morning. Although he could tell it was daylight, he kept his eyes shut tight.

“It was a dream,” he told himself firmly. “I dreamed a giant called Hagrid came to tell me I was going to a school for wizards. When I open my eyes I’ll be at home in my cupboard.”

There was suddenly a loud tapping noise.

And there’s Aunt Petunia knocking on the door, Harry thought, his heart sinking. But he still didn’t open his eyes. It had been such a good dream.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“All right,” Harry mumbled, “I’m getting up.”

He sat up and Hagrid’s heavy coat fell off him. The hut was full of sunlight, the storm was over, Hagrid himself was asleep on the collapsed sofa, and there was an owl rapping its claw on the win-dow, a newspaper held in its beak.

Harry scrambled to his feet, so happy he felt as though a large balloon was swelling inside him. He went straight to the window and jerked it open. The owl swooped in and dropped the newspaper on top of Hagrid, who didn’t wake up. The owl then fluttered onto the floor and began to attack Hagrid’s coat.

“Don’t do that.”

Harry tried to wave the owl out of the way, but it snapped its beak fiercely at him and carried on savaging the coat.

“Hagrid!” said Harry loudly. “There’s an owl —”

“Pay him,” Hagrid grunted into the sofa.

“What?”

“He wants payin’ fer deliverin’ the paper. Look in the pockets.”

Hagrid’s coat seemed to be made of nothing but pockets — bunches of keys, slug pellets, balls of string, peppermint humbugs, teabags … finally, Harry pulled out a handful of strange-looking coins.

“Give him five Knuts,” said Hagrid sleepily.

“Knuts?”

“The little bronze ones.”

Harry counted out five little bronze coins, and the owl held out his leg so Harry could put the money into a small leather pouch tied to it. Then he flew off through the open window.

Hagrid yawned loudly, sat up, and stretched.

“Best be off, Harry, lots ter do today, gotta get up ter London an’ buy all yer stuff fer school.”

Harry was turning over the wizard coins and looking at them. He had just thought of something that made him feel as though the happy balloon inside him had got a puncture.

“Um — Hagrid?”

“Mm?” said Hagrid, who was pulling on his huge boots.

“I haven’t got any money — and you heard Uncle Vernon last night … he won’t pay for me to go and learn magic.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Hagrid, standing up and scratching his head. “D’yeh think yer parents didn’t leave yeh anything?”

“But if their house was destroyed —”

“They didn’ keep their gold in the house, boy! Nah, first stop fer us is Gringotts. Wizards’ bank. Have a sausage, they’re not bad cold — an’ I wouldn’ say no teh a bit o’ yer birthday cake, neither.”

“Wizards have banks?”

“Just the one. Gringotts. Run by goblins.”

Harry dropped the bit of sausage he was holding.

“Goblins?”

“Yeah — so yeh’d be mad ter try an’ rob it, I’ll tell yeh that. Never mess with goblins, Harry. Gringotts is the safest place in the world fer anything yeh want ter keep safe — ’cept maybe Hogwarts. As a matter o’ fact, I gotta visit Gringotts anyway Fer Dumbledore. Hogwarts business.” Hagrid drew himself up proudly. “He usually gets me ter do important stuff fer him. Fetchin’ you — gettin’ things from Gringotts — knows he can trust me, see.

“Got everythin’? Come on, then.”

Harry followed Hagrid out onto the rock. The sky was quite clear now and the sea gleamed in the sunlight. The boat Uncle Vernon had hired was still there, with a lot of water in the bottom after the storm.

“How did you get here?” Harry asked, looking around for another boat.

“Flew,” said Hagrid.

“Flew?”

“Yeah — but we’ll go back in this. Not s’pposed ter use magic now I’ve got yeh.”

They settled down in the boat, Harry still staring at Hagrid, trying to imagine him flying.

"Seems a shame ter row, though," said Hagrid, giving Harry another of his sideways looks. "If I was ter — er — speed things up a bit, would yeh mind not mentionin' it at Hogwarts?"

"Of course not," said Harry, eager to see more magic. Hagrid pulled out the pink umbrella again, tapped it twice on the side of the boat, and they sped off toward land.

"Why would you be mad to try and rob Gringotts?" Harry asked.

"Spells — enchantments," said Hagrid, unfolding his newspaper as he spoke. "They say there's dragons guardin' the high-security vaults. And then yeh gotta find yer way — Gringotts is hundreds of miles under London, see. Deep under the Under-ground. Yeh'd die of hunger tryin' ter get out, even if yeh did manage ter get yer hands on summat."

Harry sat and thought about this while Hagrid read his newspaper, the Daily Prophet. Harry had learned from Uncle Vernon that people liked to be left alone while they did this, but it was very difficult, he'd never had so many questions in his life.

"Ministry o' Magic messin' things up as usual," Hagrid muttered, turning the page.

"There's a Ministry of Magic?" Harry asked, before he could stop himself.

" 'Course," said Hagrid. "They wanted Dumbledore fer Minister, o' course, but he'd never leave Hogwarts, so old Cornelius Fudge got the job. Bungler if ever there was one. So he pelts Dumbledore with owls every morning, askin' fer advice."

"But what does a Ministry of Magic do?"

“Well, their main job is to keep it from the Muggles that there’s still witches an’ wizards up an’ down the country.”

“Why?”

“Why? Blimey, Harry, everyone’d be wantin’ magic solutions to their problems. Nah, we’re best left alone.”

At this moment the boat bumped gently into the harbor wall. Hagrid folded up his newspaper, and they clambered up the stone steps onto the street.

Passersby stared a lot at Hagrid as they walked through the little town to the station. Harry couldn’t blame them. Not only was Hagrid twice as tall as anyone else, he kept pointing at perfectly ordinary things like parking meters and saying loudly, “See that, Harry? Things these Muggles dream up, eh?”

“Hagrid,” said Harry, panting a bit as he ran to keep up, “did you say there are dragons at Gringotts?”

“Well, so they say,” said Hagrid. “Crikey, I’d like a dragon.”

“You’d like one?”

“Wanted one ever since I was a kid — here we go.”

They had reached the station. There was a train to London in five minutes’ time. Hagrid, who didn’t understand “Muggle money,” as he called it, gave the bills to Harry so he could buy their tickets.

People stared more than ever on the train. Hagrid took up two seats and sat knitting what looked like a canary-yellow circus tent.

“Still got yer letter, Harry?” he asked as he counted stitches.

Harry took the parchment envelope out of his pocket.

“Good,” said Hagrid. “There’s a list there of everything yeh need.”

Harry unfolded a second piece of paper he hadn’t noticed the night before, and read:HOGWARTS SCHOOL

of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)Please note that all pupils’ clothes should carry name tagsCOURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1)by Miranda Goshawk

A History of Magic by Bathilda BagshotMagical Theory by Adalbert WafflingA Beginners’ Guide to Transfiguration by Emeric SwitchOne Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungiby Phyllida Spore

Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius JiggerFantastic Beasts and Where to Find Themby Newt Scamander

The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protectionby Quentin Trimble

OTHER EQUIPMENT

1 wand

1 cauldron (pewter, standard size 2)1 set glass or crystal phials

1 telescope

1 set brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toadPARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARSARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS“Can we buy all this in London?” Harry wondered aloud.

“If yeh know where to go,” said Hagrid.

Harry had never been to London before. Although Hagrid seemed to know where he was going, he was obviously not used to getting there in an ordinary way. He got stuck in the ticket barrier on the Underground, and complained loudly that the seats were too small and the trains too slow.

“I don’t know how the Muggles manage without magic,” he said as they climbed a broken-down escalator that led up to a bustling road lined with shops.

Hagrid was so huge that he parted the crowd easily; all Harry had to do was keep close behind him. They passed book shops and music stores, hamburger restaurants and cinemas, but nowhere that looked as if it could sell you a magic wand. This was just an ordinary street full of ordinary people. Could there really be piles of wizard gold buried miles beneath them? Were there really shops that sold spell books and broomsticks? Might this not all be some huge joke that the Dursleys had cooked up? If Harry hadn’t known that the Dursleys had no sense of humor, he might have thought so; yet somehow, even though everything Hagrid had told him so far was unbelievable, Harry couldn’t help trusting him.

“This is it,” said Hagrid, coming to a halt, “the Leaky Cauldron. It’s a famous place.”

It was a tiny, grubby-looking pub. If Hagrid hadn’t pointed it out, Harry wouldn’t have noticed it was there. The people hurrying by didn’t glance at it. Their eyes slid from the big book shop on one side to the record shop on the other as if they couldn’t see the Leaky Cauldron at all. In fact, Harry had the most peculiar feeling that only he and

Hagrid could see it. Before he could mention this, Ha-grid had steered him inside.

For a famous place, it was very dark and shabby. A few old women were sitting in a corner, drinking tiny glasses of sherry. One of them was smoking a long pipe. A little man in a top hat was talking to the old bartender, who was quite bald and looked like a toothless walnut. The low buzz of chatter stopped when they walked in. Everyone seemed to know Hagrid; they waved and smiled at him, and the bartender reached for a glass, saying, “The usual, Hagrid?”

“Can’t, Tom, I’m on Hogwarts business,” said Hagrid, clapping his great hand on Harry’s shoulder and making Harry’s knees buckle.

“Good Lord,” said the bartender, peering at Harry, “is this — can this be — ?”

The Leaky Cauldron had suddenly gone completely still and silent.

“Bless my soul,” whispered the old bartender, “Harry Potter … what an honor.”

He hurried out from behind the bar, rushed toward Harry and seized his hand, tears in his eyes.

“Welcome back, Mr. Potter, welcome back.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. Everyone was looking at him. The old woman with the pipe was puffing on it without realizing it had gone out. Hagrid was beaming.

Then there was a great scraping of chairs and the next moment, Harry found himself shaking hands with everyone in the Leaky Cauldron.

“Doris Crockford, Mr. Potter, can’t believe I’m meeting you at last.”

“So proud, Mr. Potter, I’m just so proud.”

“Always wanted to shake your hand — I’m all of a flutter.”

“Delighted, Mr. Potter, just can’t tell you, Diggle’s the name, Dedalus Diggle.”

“I’ve seen you before!” said Harry, as Dedalus Diggle’s top hat fell off in his excitement. “You bowed to me once in a shop.”

“He remembers!” cried Dedalus Diggle, looking around at everyone. “Did you hear that? He remembers me!”

Harry shook hands again and again — Doris Crockford kept coming back for more.

A pale young man made his way forward, very nervously. One of his eyes was twitching.

“Professor Quirrell!” said Hagrid. “Harry, Professor Quirrell will be one of your teachers at Hogwarts.”

“P-P-Potter,” stammered Professor Quirrell, grasping Harry’s hand, “c-can’t t-tell you how p-pleased I am to meet you.”

“What sort of magic do you teach, Professor Quirrell?”

“D-Defense Against the D-D-Dark Arts,” muttered Professor Quirrell, as though he’d rather not think about it. “N-not that you n-need it, eh, P-P-Potter?” He laughed nervously. “You’ll be g-getting all your equipment, I suppose? I’ve g-got to p-pick up a new b-book on vampires, m-myself.” He looked terrified at the very thought.

But the others wouldn’t let Professor Quirrell keep Harry to himself. It took almost ten minutes to get away from them all. At last, Hagrid managed to make himself heard over the babble.

“Must get on — lots ter buy. Come on, Harry.”

Doris Crockford shook Harry's hand one last time, and Hagrid led them through the bar and out into a small, walled courtyard, where there was nothing but a trash can and a few weeds.

Hagrid grinned at Harry.

"Told yeh, didn't I? Told yeh you was famous. Even Professor Quirrell was tremblin' ter meet yeh — mind you, he's usually tremblin'."

"Is he always that nervous?"

"Oh, yeah. Poor bloke. Brilliant mind. He was fine while he was studyin' outta books but then he took a year off ter get some firsthand experience. … They say he met vampires in the Black Forest, and there was a nasty bit o' trouble with a hag — never been the same since. Scared of the students, scared of his own subject — now, where's me umbrella?"

Vampires? Hags? Harry's head was swimming. Hagrid, meanwhile, was counting bricks in the wall above the trash can.

"Three up … two across …" he muttered. "Right, stand back, Harry."

He tapped the wall three times with the point of his umbrella.

The brick he had touched quivered — it wriggled — in the middle, a small hole appeared — it grew wider and wider — a second later they were facing an archway large enough even for Hagrid, an archway onto a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight.

"Welcome," said Hagrid, "to Diagon Alley."

He grinned at Harry's amazement. They stepped through the archway. Harry looked quickly over his shoulder and saw the archway shrink instantly back into solid wall.

The sun shone brightly on a stack of cauldrons outside the near-est shop. Cauldrons — All Sizes — Copper, Brass, Pewter, Silver — Self-Stirring — Collapsible, said a sign hanging over them.

“Yeah, you’ll be needin’ one,” said Hagrid, “but we gotta get yer money first.”

Harry wished he had about eight more eyes. He turned his head in every direction as they walked up the street, trying to look at everything at once: the shops, the things outside them, the people doing their shopping. A plump woman outside an Apothecary was shaking her head as they passed, saying, “Dragon liver, sixteen Sickles an ounce, they’re mad.

A low, soft hooting came from a dark shop with a sign saying Eeylops Owl Emporium — Tawny, Screech, Barn, Brown, and Snowy. Several boys of about Harry’s age had their noses pressed against a window with broomsticks in it. “Look,” Harry heard one of them say, “the new Nimbus Two Thousand — fastest ever —” There were shops selling robes, shops selling telescopes and strange silver instruments Harry had never seen before, windows stacked with barrels of bat spleens and eels’ eyes, tottering piles of spell books, quills, and rolls of parchment, potion bottles, globes of the moon. …“Gringotts,” said Hagrid.

They had reached a snowy white building that towered over the other little shops. Standing beside its burnished bronze doors, wearing a uniform of scarlet and gold, was —“Yeah, that’s a goblin,” said Hagrid quietly as they walked up the white stone steps toward him. The goblin was about a head shorter than Harry. He had a swarthy, clever face, a pointed beard and, Harry noticed, very long fingers and feet. He bowed as they walked inside. Now they were facing a second pair of doors, silver this time, with words engraved upon them:Enter, stranger, but take heedOf what awaits the sin of greed,For those who take, but do not earn,Must pay most dearly in their turn.

So if you seek beneath our floorsA treasure that was never yours,Thief, you have been warned, bewareOf finding more than treasure there.

“Like I said, yeh’d be mad ter try an’ rob it,” said Hagrid.

A pair of goblins bowed them through the silver doors and they were in a vast marble hall. About a hundred more goblins were sit-ting on high stools behind a long counter, scribbling in large ledgers, weighing coins in brass scales, examining precious stones through eyeglasses. There were too many doors to count leading off the hall, and yet more goblins were showing people in and out of these. Hagrid and Harry made for the counter.

“Morning,” said Hagrid to a free goblin. “We’ve come ter take some money outta Mr. Harry Potter’s safe.”

“You have his key, sir?”

“Got it here somewhere,” said Hagrid, and he started emptying his pockets onto the counter, scattering a handful of moldy dog biscuits over the goblins book of numbers. The goblin wrinkled his nose. Harry watched the goblin on their right weighing a pile of ru-bies as big as glowing coals.

“Got it,” said Hagrid at last, holding up a tiny golden key.

The goblin looked at it closely.

“That seems to be in order.”

“An’ I’ve also got a letter here from Professor Dumbledore,” said Hagrid importantly, throwing out his chest. “It’s about the You-Know-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen.”

The goblin read the letter carefully.

“Very well,” he said, handing it back to Hagrid, “I will have someone take you down to both vaults. Griphook!”

Griphook was yet another goblin. Once Hagrid had crammed all the dog biscuits back inside his pockets, he and Harry followed Griphook toward one of the doors leading off the hall.

“What’s the You-Know-What in vault seven hundred and thir-teen?” Harry asked.

“Can’t tell yeh that,” said Hagrid mysteriously. “Very secret. Hogwarts business. Dumbledore’s trusted me. More’n my job’s worth ter tell yeh that.”

Griphook held the door open for them. Harry, who had ex-pected more marble, was surprised. They were in a narrow stone passageway lit with flaming torches. It sloped steeply down-ward and there were little railway tracks on the floor. Griphook whistled and a small cart came hurtling up the tracks toward them. They climbed in — Hagrid with some difficulty — and were off.

At first they just hurtled through a maze of twisting passages. Harry tried to remember, left, right, right, left, middle fork, right, left, but it was impossible. The rattling cart seemed to know its own way, because Griphook wasn’t steering.

Harry’s eyes stung as the cold air rushed past them, but he kept them wide open. Once, he thought he saw a burst of fire at the end of a passage and twisted around to see if it was a dragon, but too late — they plunged even deeper, passing an underground lake where huge stalactites and stalagmites grew from the ceiling and floor.

“I never know,” Harry called to Hagrid over the noise of the cart, “what’s the difference between a stalagmite and a stalactite?”

“Stalagmite’s got an ‘m’ in it,” said Hagrid. “An’ don’ ask me questions just now, I think I’m gonna be sick.”

He did look very green, and when the cart stopped at last beside a small door in the passage wall, Hagrid got out and had to lean against the wall to stop his knees from trembling.

Griphook unlocked the door. A lot of green smoke came billowing out, and as it cleared, Harry gasped. Inside were mounds of gold coins. Columns of silver. Heaps of little bronze Knuts.

“All yours,” smiled Hagrid.

All Harry’s — it was incredible. The Dursleys couldn’t have known about this or they’d have had it from him faster than blink-ing. How often had they complained how much Harry cost them to keep? And all the time there had been a small fortune belonging to him, buried deep under London.

Hagrid helped Harry pile some of it into a bag.

“The gold ones are Galleons,” he explained. “Seventeen silver Sickles to a Galleon and twenty-nine Knuts to a Sickle, it’s easy enough. Right, that should be enough fer a couple o’ terms, we’ll keep the rest safe for yeh.” He turned to Griphook. “Vault seven hundred and thirteen now, please, and can we go more slowly?”

“One speed only,” said Griphook.

They were going even deeper now and gathering speed. The air became colder and colder as they hurtled round tight corners. They went rattling over an underground ravine, and Harry leaned over the side to try to see what was down at the dark bottom, but Ha-grid groaned and pulled him back by the scruff of his neck.

Vault seven hundred and thirteen had no keyhole.

“Stand back,” said Griphook importantly. He stroked the door gently with one of his long fingers and it simply melted away.

"If anyone but a Gringotts goblin tried that, they'd be sucked through the door and trapped in there," said Griphook.

"How often do you check to see if anyone's inside?" Harry asked.

"About once every ten years," said Griphook with a rather nasty grin.

Something really extraordinary had to be inside this top security vault, Harry was sure, and he leaned forward eagerly, expecting to see fabulous jewels at the very least — but at first he thought it was empty. Then he noticed a grubby little package wrapped up in brown paper lying on the floor. Hagrid picked it up and tucked it deep inside his coat. Harry longed to know what it was, but knew better than to ask.

"Come on, back in this infernal cart, and don't talk to me on the way back, it's best if I keep me mouth shut," said Hagrid.

One wild cart ride later they stood blinking in the sunlight outside Gringotts. Harry didn't know where to run first now that he had a bag full of money. He didn't have to know how many Galleons there were to a pound to know that he was holding more money than he'd had in his whole life — more money than even Dudley had ever had.

"Might as well get yer uniform," said Hagrid, nodding toward Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. "Listen, Harry, would yeh mind if I slipped off fer a pick-me-up in the Leaky Cauldron? I hate them Gringotts carts." He did still look a bit sick, so Harry entered Madam Malkin's shop alone, feeling nervous.

Madam Malkin was a squat, smiling witch dressed all in mauve.

"Hogwarts, dear?" she said, when Harry started to speak. "Got the lot here — another young man being fitted up just now, in fact."

In the back of the shop, a boy with a pale, pointed face was standing on a footstool while a second witch pinned up his long black robes.

Madam Malkin stood Harry on a stool next to him, slipped a long robe over his head, and began to pin it to the right length.

“Hello,” said the boy, “Hogwarts, too?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

“My father’s next door buying my books and mother’s up the street looking at wands,” said the boy. He had a bored, drawling voice. “Then I’m going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don’t see why first years can’t have their own. I think I’ll bully fa-ther into getting me one and I’ll smuggle it in somehow.”

Harry was strongly reminded of Dudley.

“Have you got your own broom?” the boy went on.

“No,” said Harry.

“Play Quidditch at all?”

“No,” Harry said again, wondering what on earth Quidditch could be.

“I do — Father says it’s a crime if I’m not picked to play for my House, and I must say, I agree. Know what House you’ll be in yet?”

“No,” said Harry, feeling more stupid by the minute.

“Well, no one really knows until they get there, do they, but I know I’ll be in Slytherin, all our family have been — imagine be-ing in Hufflepuff, I think I’d leave, wouldn’t you?”

“Mmm,” said Harry, wishing he could say something a bit more interesting.

“I say, look at that man!” said the boy suddenly, nodding toward the front window. Hagrid was standing there, grinning at Harry and pointing at two large ice creams to show he couldn’t come in.

"That's Hagrid," said Harry, pleased to know something the boy didn't. "He works at Hogwarts."

"Oh," said the boy, "I've heard of him. He's a sort of servant, isn't he?"

"He's the gamekeeper," said Harry. He was liking the boy less and less every second.

"Yes, exactly. I heard he's a sort of savage — lives in a hut on the school grounds and every now and then he gets drunk, tries to do magic, and ends up setting fire to his bed."

"I think he's brilliant," said Harry coldly.

"Do you?" said the boy, with a slight sneer. "Why is he with you? Where are your parents?"

"They're dead," said Harry shortly. He didn't feel much like go-ing into the matter with this boy.

"Oh, sorry," said the other, not sounding sorry at all. "But they were our kind, weren't they?"

"They were a witch and wizard, if that's what you mean."

"I really don't think they should let the other sort in, do you? They're just not the same, they've never been brought up to know our ways. Some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts until they get the letter, imagine. I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families. What's your surname, anyway?"

But before Harry could answer, Madam Malkin said, "That's you done, my dear," and Harry, not sorry for an excuse to stop talk-ing to the boy, hopped down from the footstool.

"Well, I'll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose," said the drawling boy.

Harry was rather quiet as he ate the ice cream Hagrid had bought him (chocolate and raspberry with chopped nuts).

“What’s up?” said Hagrid.

“Nothing,” Harry lied. They stopped to buy parchment and quills. Harry cheered up a bit when he found a bottle of ink that changed color as you wrote. When they had left the shop, he said, “Hagrid, what’s Quidditch?”

“Blimey, Harry, I keep forgettin’ how little yeh know — not knowin’ about Quidditch!”

“Don’t make me feel worse,” said Harry. He told Hagrid about the pale boy in Madam Malkin’s.

“— and he said people from Muggle families shouldn’t even be allowed in —”

“Yer not from a Muggle family. If he’d known who yeh were — he’s grown up knowin’ yer name if his parents are wizardin’ folk. You saw what everyone in the Leaky Cauldron was like when they saw yeh. Anyway, what does he know about it, some o’ the best I ever saw were the only ones with magic in ’em in a long line o’ Muggles — look at yer mum! Look what she had fer a sister!”

“So what is Quidditch?”

“It’s our sport. Wizard sport. It’s like — like soccer in the Muggle world — everyone follows Quidditch — played up in the air on broomsticks and there’s four balls — sorta hard ter explain the rules.”

“And what are Slytherin and Hufflepuff?”

“School Houses. There’s four. Everyone says Hufflepuff are a lot o’ duffers, but —”

“I bet I’m in Hufflepuff,” said Harry gloomily.

“Better Hufflepuff than Slytherin,” said Hagrid darkly. “There’s not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn’t in Slytherin. You-Know-Who was one.”

“Vol-, sorry — You-Know-Who was at Hogwarts?”

“Years an’ years ago,” said Hagrid.

They bought Harry’s school books in a shop called Flourish and Blotts where the shelves were stacked to the ceiling with books as large as paving stones bound in leather; books the size of postage stamps in covers of silk; books full of peculiar symbols and a few books with nothing in them at all. Even Dudley, who never read anything, would have been wild to get his hands on some of these. Hagrid almost had to drag Harry away from Curses and Counter-curses (Bewitch Your Friends and Befuddle Your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue-Tying and Much, Much More) by Professor Vindictus Viridian.

“I was trying to find out how to curse Dudley.”

“I’m not sayin’ that’s not a good idea, but yer not ter use magic in the Muggle world except in very special circumstances,” said Hagrid. “An’ anyway, yeh couldn’ work any of them curses yet, yeh’ll need a lot more study before yeh get ter that level.”

Hagrid wouldn’t let Harry buy a solid gold cauldron, either (“It says pewter on yer list”), but they got a nice set of scales for weigh-ing potion ingredients and a collapsible brass telescope. Then they visited the Apothecary, which was fascinating enough to make up for its horrible smell, a mixture of bad eggs and rotted cabbages. Barrels of slimy stuff stood on the floor; jars of herbs, dried roots, and bright powders lined the walls; bundles of feathers, strings of fangs, and snarled claws hung from the ceiling. While Hagrid asked the man behind the counter for a supply of some basic po-tion ingredients for

Harry, Harry himself examined silver unicorn horns at twenty-one Galleons each and minuscule, glittery-black beetle eyes (five Knuts a scoop).

Outside the Apothecary, Hagrid checked Harry's list again.

"Just yer wand left — oh yeah, an' I still haven't got yeh a birth-day present."

Harry felt himself go red.

"You don't have to —"

"I know I don't have to. Tell yeh what, I'll get yer animal. Not a toad, toads went outta fashion years ago, yeh'd be laughed at — an' I don' like cats, they make me sneeze. I'll get yer an owl. All the kids want owls, they're dead useful, carry yer mail an' everythin'."

Twenty minutes later, they left Eeylops Owl Emporium, which had been dark and full of rustling and flickering, jewel-bright eyes. Harry now carried a large cage that held a beautiful snowy owl, fast asleep with her head under her wing. He couldn't stop stammering his thanks, sounding just like Professor Quirrell.

"Don' mention it," said Hagrid gruffly. "Don' expect you've had a lotta presents from them Dursleys. Just Ollivanders left now — only place fer wands, Ollivanders, and yeh gotta have the best wand."

A magic wand … this was what Harry had been really looking forward to.

The last shop was narrow and shabby. Peeling gold letters over the door read Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382b.c. A single wand lay on a faded purple cushion in the dusty window.

A tinkling bell rang somewhere in the depths of the shop as they stepped inside. It was a tiny place, empty except for a single, spindly

chair that Hagrid sat on to wait. Harry felt strangely as though he had entered a very strict library; he swallowed a lot of new questions that had just occurred to him and looked instead at the thousands of narrow boxes piled neatly right up to the ceiling. For some reason, the back of his neck prickled. The very dust and silence in here seemed to tingle with some secret magic.

“Good afternoon,” said a soft voice. Harry jumped. Hagrid must have jumped, too, because there was a loud crunching noise and he got quickly off the spindly chair.

An old man was standing before them, his wide, pale eyes shin-ing like moons through the gloom of the shop.

“Hello,” said Harry awkwardly.

“Ah yes,” said the man. “Yes, yes. I thought I’d be seeing you soon. Harry Potter.” It wasn’t a question. “You have your mother’s eyes. It seems only yesterday she was in here herself, buying her first wand. Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Nice wand for charm work.”

Mr. Ollivander moved closer to Harry. Harry wished he would blink. Those silvery eyes were a bit creepy.

“Your father, on the other hand, favored a mahogany wand. Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for trans-figuration. Well, I say your father favored it — it’s really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course.”

Mr. Ollivander had come so close that he and Harry were almost nose to nose. Harry could see himself reflected in those misty eyes.

“And that’s where …”

Mr. Ollivander touched the lightning scar on Harry’s forehead with a long, white finger.

“I’m sorry to say I sold the wand that did it,” he said softly. “Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands … well, if I’d known what that wand was going out into the world to do. …”

He shook his head and then, to Harry’s relief, spotted Hagrid.

“Rubeus! Rubeus Hagrid! How nice to see you again. … Oak, sixteen inches, rather bendy, wasn’t it?”

“It was, sir, yes,” said Hagrid.

“Good wand, that one. But I suppose they snapped it in half when you got expelled?” said Mr. Ollivander, suddenly stern.

“Er — yes, they did, yes,” said Hagrid, shuffling his feet. “I’ve still got the pieces, though,” he added brightly.

“But you don’t use them?” said Mr. Ollivander sharply.

“Oh, no, sir,” said Hagrid quickly. Harry noticed he gripped his pink umbrella very tightly as he spoke.

“Hmmm,” said Mr. Ollivander, giving Hagrid a piercing look. “Well, now — Mr. Potter. Let me see.” He pulled a long tape mea-sure with silver markings out of his pocket. “Which is your wand arm?”

“Er — well, I’m right-handed,” said Harry.

“Hold out your arm. That’s it.” He measured Harry from shoul-der to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round his head. As he measured, he said, “Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Mr. Potter. We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard’s wand.”

Harry suddenly realized that the tape measure, which was measuring between his nostrils, was doing this on its own. Mr. Olli-vander was flitting around the shelves, taking down boxes.

"That will do," he said, and the tape measure crumpled into a heap on the floor. "Right then, Mr. Potter. Try this one. Beech-wood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. Just take it and give it a wave."

Harry took the wand and (feeling foolish) waved it around a bit, but Mr. Ollivander snatched it out of his hand almost at once.

"Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try —"

Harry tried — but he had hardly raised the wand when it, too, was snatched back by Mr. Ollivander.

"No, no — here, ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy. Go on, go on, try it out."

Harry tried. And tried. He had no idea what Mr. Ollivander was waiting for. The pile of tried wands was mounting higher and higher on the spindly chair, but the more wands Mr. Ollivander pulled from the shelves, the happier he seemed to become.

"Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here somewhere — I wonder, now — yes, why not — unusual combination — holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

Harry took the wand. He felt a sudden warmth in his fingers. He raised the wand above his head, brought it swishing down through the dusty air and a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light on to the walls. Hagrid whooped and clapped and Mr. Ollivander cried, "Oh, bravo! Yes, indeed, oh, very good. Well, well, well … how curious … how very curious …"

He put Harry's wand back into its box and wrapped it in brown paper, still muttering, "Curious … curious …"

"Sorry," said Harry, "but what's curious?"

Mr. Ollivander fixed Harry with his pale stare.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather — just one other. It is very curious in-deed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother — why, its brother gave you that scar."

Harry swallowed.

"Yes, thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember. … I think we must expect great things from you, Mr. Potter. … After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things — terrible, yes, but great."

Harry shivered. He wasn't sure he liked Mr. Ollivander too much. He paid seven gold Galleons for his wand, and Mr. Olli-vander bowed them from his shop.

The late afternoon sun hung low in the sky as Harry and Hagrid made their way back down Diagon Alley, back through the wall, back through the Leaky Cauldron, now empty. Harry didn't speak at all as they walked down the road; he didn't even notice how much people were gawking at them on the Underground, laden as they were with all their funny-shaped packages, with the snowy owl asleep in its cage on Harry's lap. Up another escalator, out into Paddington station; Harry only realized where they were when Ha-grid tapped him on the shoulder.

"Got time fer a bite to eat before yer train leaves," he said.

He bought Harry a hamburger and they sat down on plastic seats to eat them. Harry kept looking around. Everything looked so strange, somehow.

“You all right, Harry? Yer very quiet,” said Hagrid.

Harry wasn’t sure he could explain. He’d just had the best birth-day of his life — and yet — he chewed his hamburger, trying to find the words.

“Everyone thinks I’m special,” he said at last. “All those people in the Leaky Cauldron, Professor Quirrell, Mr. Ollivander … but I don’t know anything about magic at all. How can they expect great things? I’m famous and I can’t even remember what I’m famous for. I don’t know what happened when Vol-, sorry — I mean, the night my parents died.”

Hagrid leaned across the table. Behind the wild beard and eye-brows he wore a very kind smile.

“Don’ you worry, Harry. You’ll learn fast enough. Everyone starts at the beginning at Hogwarts, you’ll be just fine. Just be yer-self. I know it’s hard. Yeh’ve been singled out, an’ that’s always hard. But yeh’ll have a great time at Hogwarts — I did — still do, ’smat-ter of fact.”

Hagrid helped Harry on to the train that would take him back to the Dursleys, then handed him an envelope.

“Yer ticket fer Hogwarts,” he said. “First o’ September — King’s Cross — it’s all on yer ticket. Any problems with the Dursleys, send me a letter with yer owl, she’ll know where to find me. … See yeh soon, Harry.”

The train pulled out of the station. Harry wanted to watch Ha-grid until he was out of sight; he rose in his seat and pressed his nose against the window, but he blinked and Hagrid had gone.

Chapter 6 The Journey from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters

Harry's last month with the Dursleys wasn't fun. True, Dudley was now so scared of Harry he wouldn't stay in the same room, while Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon didn't shut Harry in his cupboard, force him to do anything, or shout at him — in fact, they didn't speak to him at all. Half terrified, half furious, they acted as though any chair with Harry in it were empty. Although this was an improvement in many ways, it did be-come a bit depressing after a while.

Harry kept to his room, with his new owl for company. He had decided to call her Hedwig, a name he had found in A History of Magic. His school books were very interesting. He lay on his bed reading late into the night, Hedwig swooping in and out of the open window as she pleased. It was lucky that Aunt Petunia didn't come in to vacuum anymore, because Hedwig kept bringing back dead mice. Every night before he went to sleep, Harry ticked off another day on the piece of paper he had pinned to the wall, count-ing down to September the first.

On the last day of August he thought he'd better speak to his aunt and uncle about getting to King's Cross station the next day, so he went down to the living room where they were watching a quiz show on television. He cleared his throat to let them know he was there, and Dudley screamed and ran from the room.

"Er — Uncle Vernon?"

Uncle Vernon grunted to show he was listening.

"Er — I need to be at King's Cross tomorrow to — to go to Hogwarts."

Uncle Vernon grunted again.

"Would it be all right if you gave me a lift?"

Grunt. Harry supposed that meant yes.

“Thank you.”

He was about to go back upstairs when Uncle Vernon actually spoke.

“Funny way to get to a wizards’ school, the train. Magic carpets all got punctures, have they?”

Harry didn’t say anything.

“Where is this school, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry, realizing this for the first time. He pulled the ticket Hagrid had given him out of his pocket.

“I just take the train from platform nine and three-quarters at eleven o’clock,” he read.

His aunt and uncle stared.

“Platform what?”

“Nine and three-quarters.”

“Don’t talk rubbish,” said Uncle Vernon. “There is no platform nine and three-quarters.”

“It’s on my ticket.”

“Barking,” said Uncle Vernon, “howling mad, the lot of them. You’ll see. You just wait. All right, we’ll take you to King’s Cross. We’re going up to London tomorrow anyway, or I wouldn’t bother.”

“Why are you going to London?” Harry asked, trying to keep things friendly.

“Taking Dudley to the hospital,” growled Uncle Vernon. “Got to have that ruddy tail removed before he goes to Smeltings.”

Harry woke at five o’clock the next morning and was too excited and nervous to go back to sleep. He got up and pulled on his jeans because he didn’t want to walk into the station in his wizard’s robes — he’d change on the train. He checked his Hogwarts list yet again to make sure he had everything he needed, saw that Hedwig was shut safely in her cage, and then paced the room, waiting for the Dursleys to get up. Two hours later, Harry’s huge, heavy trunk had been loaded into the Dursleys’ car, Aunt Petunia had talked Dudley into sitting next to Harry, and they had set off.

They reached King’s Cross at half past ten. Uncle Vernon dumped Harry’s trunk onto a cart and wheeled it into the station for him. Harry thought this was strangely kind until Uncle Vernon stopped dead, facing the platforms with a nasty grin on his face.

“Well, there you are, boy. Platform nine — platform ten. Your platform should be somewhere in the middle, but they don’t seem to have built it yet, do they?”

He was quite right, of course. There was a big plastic number nine over one platform and a big plastic number ten over the one next to it, and in the middle, nothing at all.

“Have a good term,” said Uncle Vernon with an even nastier smile. He left without another word. Harry turned and saw the Dursleys drive away. All three of them were laughing. Harry’s mouth went rather dry. What on earth was he going to do? He was starting to attract a lot of funny looks, because of Hedwig. He’d have to ask someone.

He stopped a passing guard, but didn’t dare mention platform nine and three-quarters. The guard had never heard of Hogwarts and when Harry couldn’t even tell him what part of the country it was in, he started to get annoyed, as though Harry was being stu-pid on purpose. Getting desperate, Harry asked for the train that left at

eleven o'clock, but the guard said there wasn't one. In the end the guard strode away, muttering about time wasters. Harry was now trying hard not to panic. According to the large clock over the arrivals board, he had ten minutes left to get on the train to Hog-warts and he had no idea how to do it; he was stranded in the mid-dle of a station with a trunk he could hardly lift, a pocket full of wizard money, and a large owl.

Hagrid must have forgotten to tell him something you had to do, like tapping the third brick on the left to get into Diagon Alley. He wondered if he should get out his wand and start tapping the ticket inspector's stand between platforms nine and ten.

At that moment a group of people passed just behind him and he caught a few words of what they were saying.

"— packed with Muggles, of course —"

Harry swung round. The speaker was a plump woman who was talking to four boys, all with flaming red hair. Each of them was pushing a trunk like Harry's in front of him — and they had an owl.

Heart hammering, Harry pushed his cart after them. They stopped and so did he, just near enough to hear what they were say-ing.

"Now, what's the platform number?" said the boys' mother.

"Nine and three-quarters!" piped a small girl, also red-headed, who was holding her hand, "Mom, can't I go …"

"You're not old enough, Ginny, now be quiet. All right, Percy, you go first."

What looked like the oldest boy marched toward platforms nine and ten. Harry watched, careful not to blink in case he missed it — but just as the boy reached the dividing barrier between the two platforms, a

large crowd of tourists came swarming in front of him and by the time the last backpack had cleared away, the boy had vanished.

“Fred, you next,” the plump woman said.

“I’m not Fred, I’m George,” said the boy. “Honestly, woman, you call yourself our mother? Can’t you tell I’m George?”

“Sorry, George, dear.”

“Only joking, I am Fred,” said the boy, and off he went. His twin called after him to hurry up, and he must have done so, be-cause a second later, he had gone — but how had he done it?

Now the third brother was walking briskly toward the barrier — he was almost there — and then, quite suddenly, he wasn’t any-where.

There was nothing else for it.

“Excuse me,” Harry said to the plump woman.

“Hello, dear,” she said. “First time at Hogwarts? Ron’s new, too.”

She pointed at the last and youngest of her sons. He was tall, thin, and gangling, with freckles, big hands and feet, and a long nose.

“Yes,” said Harry. “The thing is — the thing is, I don’t know how to —”

“How to get onto the platform?” she said kindly, and Harry nodded.

“Not to worry,” she said. “All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don’t stop and don’t be scared you’ll crash into it, that’s very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you’re nervous. Go on, go now before Ron.”

“Er — okay,” said Harry.

He pushed his trolley around and stared at the barrier. It looked very solid.

He started to walk toward it. People jostled him on their way to platforms nine and ten. Harry walked more quickly. He was going to smash right into that barrier and then he'd be in trouble — lean-ing forward on his cart, he broke into a heavy run — the barrier was coming nearer and nearer — he wouldn't be able to stop — the cart was out of control — he was a foot away — he closed his eyes ready for the crash —It didn't come … he kept on running … he opened his eyes.

A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people. A sign overhead said Hogwarts Express, eleven o'clock. Harry looked behind him and saw a wrought-iron archway where the barrier had been, with the words Platform Nine and Three-Quarters on it. He had done it.

Smoke from the engine drifted over the heads of the chattering crowd, while cats of every color wound here and there between their legs. Owls hooted to one another in a disgruntled sort of way over the babble and the scraping of heavy trunks.

The first few carriages were already packed with students, some hanging out of the window to talk to their families, some fighting over seats. Harry pushed his cart off down the platform in search of an empty seat. He passed a round-faced boy who was saying, "Gran, I've lost my toad again."

"Oh, Neville," he heard the old woman sigh.

A boy with dreadlocks was surrounded by a small crowd.

"Give us a look, Lee, go on."

The boy lifted the lid of a box in his arms, and the people around him shrieked and yelled as something inside poked out a long, hairy leg.

Harry pressed on through the crowd until he found an empty compartment near the end of the train. He put Hedwig inside first and then started to shove and heave his trunk toward the train door. He tried to lift it up the steps but could hardly raise one end and twice he dropped it painfully on his foot.

“Want a hand?” It was one of the red-haired twins he’d followed through the barrier.

“Yes, please,” Harry panted.

“Oy, Fred! C’mere and help!”

With the twins’ help, Harry’s trunk was at last tucked away in a corner of the compartment.

“Thanks,” said Harry, pushing his sweaty hair out of his eyes.

“What’s that?” said one of the twins suddenly, pointing at Harry’s lightning scar.

“Blimey,” said the other twin. “Are you — ?”

“He is,” said the first twin. “Aren’t you?” he added to Harry.

“What?” said Harry.

“Harry Potter,” chorused the twins.

“Oh, him,” said Harry. “I mean, yes, I am.”

The two boys gawked at him, and Harry felt himself turning red. Then, to his relief, a voice came floating in through the train’s open door.

“Fred? George? Are you there?”

“Coming, Mom.”

With a last look at Harry, the twins hopped off the train.

Harry sat down next to the window where, half hidden, he could watch the red-haired family on the platform and hear what they were saying. Their mother had just taken out her handker-chief.

“Ron, you’ve got something on your nose.”

The youngest boy tried to jerk out of the way, but she grabbed him and began rubbing the end of his nose.

“Mom — geroff.” He wriggled free.

“Aaah, has ickle Ronnie got somefink on his nosie?” said one of the twins.

“Shut up,” said Ron.

“Where’s Percy?” said their mother.

“He’s coming now.”

The oldest boy came striding into sight. He had already changed into his billowing black Hogwarts robes, and Harry noticed a shiny red and gold badge on his chest with the letter P on it.

“Can’t stay long, Mother,” he said. “I’m up front, the prefects have got two compartments to themselves —”

“Oh, are you a prefect, Percy?” said one of the twins, with an air of great surprise. “You should have said something, we had no idea.”

“Hang on, I think I remember him saying something about it,” said the other twin. “Once —”

“Or twice —”

“A minute —”

"All summer —"

"Oh, shut up," said Percy the Prefect.

"How come Percy gets new robes, anyway?" said one of the twins.

"Because he's a prefect," said their mother fondly. "All right, dear, well, have a good term — send me an owl when you get there."

She kissed Percy on the cheek and he left. Then she turned to the twins.

"Now, you two — this year, you behave yourselves. If I get one more owl telling me you've — you've blown up a toilet or —"

"Blown up a toilet? We've never blown up a toilet."

"Great idea though, thanks, Mom."

"It's not funny. And look after Ron."

"Don't worry, ickle Ronniekins is safe with us."

"Shut up," said Ron again. He was almost as tall as the twins al-ready and his nose was still pink where his mother had rubbed it.

"Hey, Mom, guess what? Guess who we just met on the train?"

Harry leaned back quickly so they couldn't see him looking.

"You know that black-haired boy who was near us in the station? Know who he is?"

"Who?"

"Harry Potter!"

Harry heard the little girl's voice.

“Oh, Mom, can I go on the train and see him, Mom, oh please. …”

“You’ve already seen him, Ginny, and the poor boy isn’t some-thing you goggle at in a zoo. Is he really, Fred? How do you know?”

“Asked him. Saw his scar. It’s really there — like lightning.”

“Poor dear — no wonder he was alone, I wondered. He was ever so polite when he asked how to get onto the platform.”

“Never mind that, do you think he remembers what You-Know-Who looks like?”

Their mother suddenly became very stern.

“I forbid you to ask him, Fred. No, don’t you dare. As though he needs reminding of that on his first day at school.”

“All right, keep your hair on.”

A whistle sounded.

“Hurry up!” their mother said, and the three boys clambered onto the train. They leaned out of the window for her to kiss them good-bye, and their younger sister began to cry.

“Don’t, Ginny, we’ll send you loads of owls.”

“We’ll send you a Hogwarts toilet seat.”

“George!”

“Only joking, Mom.”

The train began to move. Harry saw the boys’ mother waving and their sister, half laughing, half crying, running to keep up with the train until it gathered too much speed, then she fell back and waved.

Harry watched the girl and her mother disappear as the train rounded the corner. Houses flashed past the window. Harry felt a great leap of excitement. He didn't know what he was going to — but it had to be better than what he was leaving behind.

The door of the compartment slid open and the youngest red-headed boy came in.

"Anyone sitting there?" he asked, pointing at the seat opposite Harry. "Everywhere else is full."

Harry shook his head and the boy sat down. He glanced at Harry and then looked quickly out of the window, pretending he hadn't looked. Harry saw he still had a black mark on his nose.

"Hey, Ron."

The twins were back.

"Listen, we're going down the middle of the train — Lee Jor-dan's got a giant tarantula down there."

"Right," mumbled Ron.

"Harry," said the other twin, "did we introduce ourselves? Fred and George Weasley. And this is Ron, our brother. See you later, then."

"Bye," said Harry and Ron. The twins slid the compartment door shut behind them.

"Are you really Harry Potter?" Ron blurted out.

Harry nodded.

"Oh — well, I thought it might be one of Fred and George's jokes," said Ron. "And have you really got — you know …"

He pointed at Harry's forehead.

Harry pulled back his bangs to show the lightning scar. Ron stared.

“So that’s where You-Know-Who — ?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “but I can’t remember it.”

“Nothing?” said Ron eagerly.

“Well — I remember a lot of green light, but nothing else.”

“Wow,” said Ron. He sat and stared at Harry for a few moments, then, as though he had suddenly realized what he was doing, he looked quickly out of the window again.

“Are all your family wizards?” asked Harry, who found Ron just as interesting as Ron found him.

“Er — yes, I think so,” said Ron. “I think Mom’s got a second cousin who’s an accountant, but we never talk about him.”

“So you must know loads of magic already.”

The Weasleys were clearly one of those old wizarding families the pale boy in Diagon Alley had talked about.

“I heard you went to live with Muggles,” said Ron. “What are they like?”

“Horrible — well, not all of them. My aunt and uncle and cousin are, though. Wish I’d had three wizard brothers.”

“Five,” said Ron. For some reason, he was looking gloomy. “I’m the sixth in our family to go to Hogwarts. You could say I’ve got a lot to live up to. Bill and Charlie have already left — Bill was head boy and Charlie was captain of Quidditch. Now Percy’s a prefect. Fred and George mess around a lot, but they still get really good marks and everyone thinks they’re really funny. Everyone expects me to do as well as the others, but if I do, it’s no big deal, because they did it first.

You never get anything new, either, with five broth-ers. I've got Bill's old robes, Charlie's old wand, and Percy's old rat."

Ron reached inside his jacket and pulled out a fat gray rat, which was asleep.

"His name's Scabbers and he's useless, he hardly ever wakes up. Percy got an owl from my dad for being made a prefect, but they couldn't aff— I mean, I got Scabbers instead."

Ron's ears went pink. He seemed to think he'd said too much, because he went back to staring out of the window.

Harry didn't think there was anything wrong with not being able to afford an owl. After all, he'd never had any money in his life until a month ago, and he told Ron so, all about having to wear Dudley's old clothes and never getting proper birthday presents. This seemed to cheer Ron up.

"… and until Hagrid told me, I didn't know anything about be-ing a wizard or about my parents or Voldemort —"

Ron gasped.

"What?" said Harry.

"You said You-Know-Who's name!" said Ron, sounding both shocked and impressed. "I'd have thought you, of all people —"

"I'm not trying to be brave or anything, saying the name," said Harry, "I just never knew you shouldn't. See what I mean? I've got loads to learn. … I bet," he added, voicing for the first time some-thing that had been worrying him a lot lately, "I bet I'm the worst in the class."

"You won't be. There's loads of people who come from Muggle families and they learn quick enough."

While they had been talking, the train had carried them out of London. Now they were speeding past fields full of cows and sheep. They were quiet for a time, watching the fields and lanes flick past.

Around half past twelve there was a great clattering outside in the corridor and a smiling, dimpled woman slid back their door and said, “Anything off the cart, dears?”

Harry, who hadn’t had any breakfast, leapt to his feet, but Ron’s ears went pink again and he muttered that he’d brought sand-wiches. Harry went out into the corridor.

He had never had any money for candy with the Dursleys, and now that he had pockets rattling with gold and silver he was ready to buy as many Mars Bars as he could carry — but the woman didn’t have Mars Bars. What she did have were Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans, Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs, Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Licorice Wands, and a number of other strange things Harry had never seen in his life. Not want-ing to miss anything, he got some of everything and paid the woman eleven silver Sickles and seven bronze Knuts.

Ron stared as Harry brought it all back in to the compartment and tipped it onto an empty seat.

“Hungry, are you?”

“Starving,” said Harry, taking a large bite out of a pumpkin pasty.

Ron had taken out a lumpy package and unwrapped it. There were four sandwiches inside. He pulled one of them apart and said, “She always forgets I don’t like corned beef.”

“Swap you for one of these,” said Harry, holding up a pasty. “Go on —”

“You don’t want this, it’s all dry,” said Ron. “She hasn’t got much time,” he added quickly, “you know, with five of us.”

“Go on, have a pasty,” said Harry, who had never had any-thing to share before or, indeed, anyone to share it with. It was a nice feeling, sitting there with Ron, eating their way through all Harry’s pasties, cakes, and candies (the sandwiches lay for-gotten).

“What are these?” Harry asked Ron, holding up a pack of Chocolate Frogs. “They’re not really frogs, are they?” He was start-ing to feel that nothing would surprise him.

“No,” said Ron. “But see what the card is. I’m missing Agrippa.”

“What?”

“Oh, of course, you wouldn’t know — Chocolate Frogs have cards inside them, you know, to collect — famous witches and wizards. I’ve got about five hundred, but I haven’t got Agrippa or Ptolemy.”

Harry unwrapped his Chocolate Frog and picked up the card. It showed a man’s face. He wore half-moon glasses, had a long, crooked nose, and flowing silver hair, beard, and mustache. Under-neath the picture was the name Albus Dumbledore.

“So this is Dumbledore!” said Harry.

“Don’t tell me you’d never heard of Dumbledore!” said Ron. “Can I have a frog? I might get Agrippa — thanks —”

Harry turned over his card and read:ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

CURRENTLY HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTSConsidered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the Dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon’s blood, and his work on

alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.

Harry turned the card back over and saw, to his astonishment, that Dumbledore's face had disappeared.

"He's gone!"

"Well, you can't expect him to hang around all day," said Ron. "He'll be back. No, I've got Morgana again and I've got about six of her … do you want it? You can start collecting."

Ron's eyes strayed to the pile of Chocolate Frogs waiting to be unwrapped.

"Help yourself," said Harry. "But in, you know, the Muggle world, people just stay put in photos."

"Do they? What, they don't move at all?" Ron sounded amazed. "Weird!"

Harry stared as Dumbledore sidled back into the picture on his card and gave him a small smile. Ron was more interested in eating the frogs than looking at the Famous Witches and Wizards cards, but Harry couldn't keep his eyes off them. Soon he had not only Dumbledore and Morgana, but Hengist of Woodcraft, Alberic Grunnion, Circe, Paracelsus, and Merlin. He finally tore his eyes away from the druidess Cliodna, who was scratching her nose, to open a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans.

"You want to be careful with those," Ron warned Harry. "When they say every flavor, they mean every flavor — you know, you get all the ordinary ones like chocolate and peppermint and marmalade, but then you can get spinach and liver and tripe. George reckons he had a booger-flavored one once."

Ron picked up a green bean, looked at it carefully, and bit into a corner.

"Bleaaargh — see? Sprouts."

They had a good time eating the Every Flavor Beans. Harry got toast, coconut, baked bean, strawberry, curry, grass, coffee, sardine, and was even brave enough to nibble the end off a funny gray one Ron wouldn't touch, which turned out to be pepper.

The countryside now flying past the window was becoming wilder. The neat fields had gone. Now there were woods, twisting rivers, and dark green hills.

There was a knock on the door of their compartment and the round-faced boy Harry had passed on platform nine and three-quarters came in. He looked tearful.

"Sorry," he said, "but have you seen a toad at all?"

When they shook their heads, he wailed, "I've lost him! He keeps getting away from me!"

"He'll turn up," said Harry.

"Yes," said the boy miserably. "Well, if you see him …"

He left.

"Don't know why he's so bothered," said Ron. "If I'd brought a toad I'd lose it as quick as I could. Mind you, I brought Scabbers, so I can't talk."

The rat was still snoozing on Ron's lap.

"He might have died and you wouldn't know the difference," said Ron in disgust. "I tried to turn him yellow yesterday to make him more interesting, but the spell didn't work. I'll show you, look …"

He rummaged around in his trunk and pulled out a very battered-looking wand. It was chipped in places and something white was glinting at the end.

“Unicorn hair’s nearly poking out. Anyway —”

He had just raised his wand when the compartment door slid open again. The toadless boy was back, but this time he had a girl with him. She was already wearing her new Hogwarts robes.

“Has anyone seen a toad? Neville’s lost one,” she said. She had a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth.

“We’ve already told him we haven’t seen it,” said Ron, but the girl wasn’t listening, she was looking at the wand in his hand.

“Oh, are you doing magic? Let’s see it, then.”

She sat down. Ron looked taken aback.

“Er — all right.”

He cleared his throat.

“Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow,Turn this stupid, fat rat yellow.”

He waved his wand, but nothing happened. Scabbers stayed gray and fast asleep.

“Are you sure that’s a real spell?” said the girl. “Well, it’s not very good, is it? I’ve tried a few simple spells just for practice and it’s all worked for me. Nobody in my family’s magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, it’s the very best school of witchcraft there is, I’ve heard — I’ve learned all our course books by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough — I’m Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you?”

She said all this very fast.

Harry looked at Ron, and was relieved to see by his stunned face that he hadn't learned all the course books by heart either.

"I'm Ron Weasley," Ron muttered.

"Harry Potter," said Harry.

"Are you really?" said Hermione. "I know all about you, of course — I got a few extra books for background reading, and you're in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century."

"Am I?" said Harry, feeling dazed.

"Goodness, didn't you know, I'd have found out everything I could if it was me," said Hermione. "Do either of you know what House you'll be in? I've been asking around, and I hope I'm in Gryffindor, it sounds by far the best; I hear Dumbledore himself was in it, but I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad. … Any-way, we'd better go and look for Neville's toad. You two had better change, you know, I expect we'll be there soon."

And she left, taking the toadless boy with her.

"Whatever House I'm in, I hope she's not in it," said Ron. He threw his wand back into his trunk. "Stupid spell — George gave it to me, bet he knew it was a dud."

"What House are your brothers in?" asked Harry.

"Gryffindor," said Ron. Gloom seemed to be settling on him again. "Mom and Dad were in it, too. I don't know what they'll say if I'm not. I don't suppose Ravenclaw would be too bad, but imag-ine if they put me in Slytherin."

“That’s the House Vol-, I mean, You-Know-Who was in?”

“Yeah,” said Ron. He flopped back into his seat, looking de-pressed.

“You know, I think the ends of Scabbers’ whiskers are a bit lighter,” said Harry, trying to take Ron’s mind off Houses. “So what do your oldest brothers do now that they’ve left, anyway?”

Harry was wondering what a wizard did once he’d finished school.

“Charlie’s in Romania studying dragons, and Bill’s in Africa do-ing something for Gringotts,” said Ron. “Did you hear about Gringotts? It’s been all over the Daily Prophet, but I don’t suppose you get that with the Muggles — someone tried to rob a high se-curity vault.”

Harry stared.

“Really? What happened to them?”

“Nothing, that’s why it’s such big news. They haven’t been caught. My dad says it must’ve been a powerful Dark wizard to get round Gringotts, but they don’t think they took anything, that’s what’s odd. ’Course, everyone gets scared when something like this happens in case You-Know-Who’s behind it.”

Harry turned this news over in his mind. He was starting to get a prickle of fear every time You-Know-Who was mentioned. He supposed this was all part of entering the magical world, but it had been a lot more comfortable saying “Voldemort” without worrying.

“What’s your Quidditch team?” Ron asked.

“Er — I don’t know any,” Harry confessed.

“What!” Ron looked dumbfounded. “Oh, you wait, it’s the best game in the world —” And he was off, explaining all about the four balls and the positions of the seven players, describing famous games he’d

been to with his brothers and the broomstick he'd like to get if he had the money. He was just taking Harry through the finer points of the game when the compartment door slid open yet again, but it wasn't Neville the toadless boy, or Hermione Granger this time.

Three boys entered, and Harry recognized the middle one at once: It was the pale boy from Madam Malkin's robe shop. He was looking at Harry with a lot more interest than he'd shown back in Diagon Alley.

"Is it true?" he said. "They're saying all down the train that Harry Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, is it?"

"Yes," said Harry. He was looking at the other boys. Both of them were thickset and looked extremely mean. Standing on either side of the pale boy, they looked like bodyguards.

"Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle," said the pale boy care-lessly, noticing where Harry was looking. "And my names Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."

Ron gave a slight cough, which might have been hiding a snig-ger. Draco Malfoy looked at him.

"Think my name's funny, do you? No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford."

He turned back to Harry. "You'll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

He held out his hand to shake Harry's, but Harry didn't take it.

"I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks," he said coolly.

Draco Malfoy didn't go red, but a pink tinge appeared in his pale cheeks.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter," he said slowly. "Unless you're a bit politer you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them, either. You hang around with riffraff like the Weasleys and that Hagrid, and it'll rub off on you."

Both Harry and Ron stood up.

"Say that again," Ron said, his face as red as his hair.

"Oh, you're going to fight us, are you?" Malfoy sneered.

"Unless you get out now," said Harry, more bravely than he felt, because Crabbe and Goyle were a lot bigger than him or Ron.

"But we don't feel like leaving, do we, boys? We've eaten all our food and you still seem to have some."

Goyle reached toward the Chocolate Frogs next to Ron — Ron leapt forward, but before he'd so much as touched Goyle, Goyle let out a horrible yell.

Scabbers the rat was hanging off his finger, sharp little teeth sunk deep into Goyle's knuckle — Crabbe and Malfoy backed away as Goyle swung Scabbers round and round, howling, and when Scab-bers finally flew off and hit the window, all three of them disap-peared at once. Perhaps they thought there were more rats lurking among the sweets, or perhaps they'd heard footsteps, because a sec-ond later, Hermione Granger had come in.

"What has been going on?" she said, looking at the sweets all over the floor and Ron picking up Scabbers by his tail.

"I think he's been knocked out," Ron said to Harry. He looked closer at Scabbers. "No — I don't believe it — he's gone back to sleep."

And so he had.

“You’ve met Malfoy before?”

Harry explained about their meeting in Diagon Alley.

“I’ve heard of his family,” said Ron darkly. “They were some of the first to come back to our side after You-Know-Who disap-peared. Said they’d been bewitched. My dad doesn’t believe it. He says Malfoy’s father didn’t need an excuse to go over to the Dark Side.” He turned to Hermione. “Can we help you with some-thing?”

“You’d better hurry up and put your robes on, I’ve just been up to the front to ask the conductor, and he says we’re nearly there. You haven’t been fighting, have you? You’ll be in trouble before we even get there!”

“Scabbers has been fighting, not us,” said Ron, scowling at her. “Would you mind leaving while we change?”

“All right — I only came in here because people outside are be-having very childishly, racing up and down the corridors,” said Hermione in a sniffy voice. “And you’ve got dirt on your nose, by the way, did you know?”

Ron glared at her as she left. Harry peered out of the window. It was getting dark. He could see mountains and forests under a deep purple sky. The train did seem to be slowing down.

He and Ron took off their jackets and pulled on their long black robes. Ron’s were a bit short for him, you could see his sneakers un-derneath them.

A voice echoed through the train: “We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes’ time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately.”

Harry's stomach lurched with nerves and Ron, he saw, looked pale under his freckles. They crammed their pockets with the last of the sweets and joined the crowd thronging the corridor.

The train slowed right down and finally stopped. People pushed their way toward the door and out on to a tiny, dark platform. Harry shivered in the cold night air. Then a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students, and Harry heard a familiar voice: "Firs' years! Firs' years over here! All right there, Harry?"

Hagrid's big hairy face beamed over the sea of heads.

"C'mon, follow me — any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

Slipping and stumbling, they followed Hagrid down what seemed to be a steep, narrow path. It was so dark on either side of them that Harry thought there must be thick trees there. Nobody spoke much. Neville, the boy who kept losing his toad, sniffed once or twice.

"Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec," Hagrid called over his shoulder, "jus' round this bend here."

There was a loud "Oooooh!"

The narrow path had opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid called, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore. Harry and Ron were followed into their boat by Neville and Hermione.

"Everyone in?" shouted Hagrid, who had a boat to himself. "Right then — FORWARD!"

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood.

“Heads down!” yelled Hagrid as the first boats reached the cliff; they all bent their heads and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbor, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

“Oy, you there! Is this your toad?” said Hagrid, who was check-ing the boats as people climbed out of them.

“Trevor!” cried Neville blissfully, holding out his hands. Then they clambered up a passageway in the rock after Hagrid’s lamp, coming out at last onto smooth, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle.

They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge, oak front door.

“Everyone here? You there, still got yer toad?”

Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

Chapter 7 The Sorting Hat

The door swung open at once. A tall, black-haired witch in emerald-green robes stood there. She had a very stern face and Harry's first thought was that this was not someone to cross.

"The firs' years, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

She pulled the door wide. The entrance hall was so big you could have fit the whole of the Dursleys' house in it. The stone walls were lit with flaming torches like the ones at Gringotts, the ceiling was too high to make out, and a magnificent marble stair-case facing them led to the upper floors.

They followed Professor McGonagall across the flagged stone floor. Harry could hear the drone of hundreds of voices from a doorway to the right — the rest of the school must already be here — but Professor McGonagall showed the first years into a small, empty chamber off the hall. They crowded in, standing rather closer together than they would usually have done, peering about nervously.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your Houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your House will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your House, sleep in your House dormitory, and spend free time in your House common room.

"The four Houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each House has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hog-warts, your triumphs will earn your House points, while any rule-breaking will lose House points. At the end of the year, the House

with the most points is awarded the House cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever House becomes yours.

“The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting.”

Her eyes lingered for a moment on Neville’s cloak, which was fastened under his left ear, and on Ron’s smudged nose. Harry nervously tried to flatten his hair.

“I shall return when we are ready for you,” said Professor McGonagall. “Please wait quietly.”

She left the chamber. Harry swallowed.

“How exactly do they sort us into Houses?” he asked Ron.

“Some sort of test, I think. Fred said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking.”

Harry’s heart gave a horrible jolt. A test? In front of the whole school? But he didn’t know any magic yet — what on earth would he have to do? He hadn’t expected something like this the moment they arrived. He looked around anxiously and saw that everyone else looked terrified, too. No one was talking much except Hermione Granger, who was whispering very fast about all the spells she’d learned and wondering which one she’d need. Harry tried hard not to listen to her. He’d never been more nervous, never, not even when he’d had to take a school report home to the Dursleys saying that he’d somehow turned his teachers wig blue. He kept his eyes fixed on the door. Any second now, Professor McGonagall would come back and lead him to his doom.

Then something happened that made him jump about a foot in the air — several people behind him screamed.

"What the — ?"

He gasped. So did the people around him. About twenty ghosts had just streamed through the back wall. Pearly-white and slightly transparent, they glided across the room talking to one another and hardly glancing at the first years. They seemed to be arguing. What looked like a fat little monk was saying: "Forgive and forget, I say, we ought to give him a second chance —"

"My dear Friar, haven't we given Peeves all the chances he deserves? He gives us all a bad name and you know, he's not really even a ghost — I say, what are you all doing here?"

A ghost wearing a ruff and tights had suddenly noticed the first years.

Nobody answered.

"New students!" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them. "About to be Sorted, I suppose?"

A few people nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old House, you know."

"Move along now," said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

Professor McGonagall had returned. One by one, the ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.

"Now, form a line," Professor McGonagall told the first years, "and follow me."

Feeling oddly as though his legs had turned to lead, Harry got into line behind a boy with sandy hair, with Ron behind him, and they

walked out of the chamber, back across the hall, and through a pair of double doors into the Great Hall.

Harry had never even imagined such a strange and splendid place. It was lit by thousands and thousands of candles that were floating in midair over four long tables, where the rest of the stu-dents were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the top of the hall was another long table where the teachers were sitting. Professor McGonagall led the first years up here, so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them. The hundreds of faces staring at them looked like pale lanterns in the flickering candle-light. Dotted here and there among the students, the ghosts shone misty silver. Mainly to avoid all the staring eyes, Harry looked up-ward and saw a velvety black ceiling dotted with stars. He heard Hermione whisper, “It’s bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in Hogwarts, A History.”

It was hard to believe there was a ceiling there at all, and that the Great Hall didn’t simply open on to the heavens.

Harry quickly looked down again as Professor McGonagall silently placed a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the stool she put a pointed wizard’s hat. This hat was patched and frayed and extremely dirty. Aunt Petunia wouldn’t have let it in the house.

Maybe they had to try and get a rabbit out of it, Harry thought wildly, that seemed the sort of thing — noticing that everyone in the hall was now staring at the hat, he stared at it, too. For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth — and the hat began to sing:“Oh, you may not think I’m pretty,But don’t judge on what you see,I’ll eat myself if you can findA smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,Your top hats sleek and tall,

For I’m the Hogwarts Sorting HatAnd I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your headThe Sorting Hat can't see,

So try me on and I will tell youWhere you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,Where dwell the brave at heart,Their daring, nerve, and chivalrySet Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,Where they are just and loyal,Those patient Hufflepuffs are trueAnd unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,

If you've a ready mind,

Where those of wit and learning,Will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin

You'll make your real friends,Those cunning folk use any meansTo achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid!

And don't get in a flap!

You're in safe hands (though I have none)For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The whole hall burst into applause as the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quite still again.

"So we've just got to try on the hat!" Ron whispered to Harry. "I'll kill Fred, he was going on about wrestling a troll."

Harry smiled weakly. Yes, trying on the hat was a lot better than having to do a spell, but he did wish they could have tried it on without everyone watching. The hat seemed to be asking rather a lot; Harry didn't feel brave or quick-witted or any of it at the mo-ment. If only the

hat had mentioned a House for people who felt a bit queasy, that would have been the one for him.

Professor McGonagall now stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment.

“When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted,” she said. “Abbott, Hannah!”

A pink-faced girl with blonde pigtails stumbled out of line, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes, and sat down. A moment’s pause —“HUFFLEPUFF!” shouted the hat.

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. Harry saw the ghost of the Fat Friar waving merrily at her.

“Bones, Susan!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!” shouted the hat again, and Susan scuttled off to sit next to Hannah.

“Boot, Terry!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

The table second from the left clapped this time; several Raven-claws stood up to shake hands with Terry as he joined them.

“Brocklehurst, Mandy” went to Ravenclaw too, but “Brown, Lavender” became the first new Gryffindor, and the table on the far left exploded with cheers; Harry could see Ron’s twin brothers cat-calling.

“Bulstrode, Millicent” then became a Slytherin. Perhaps it was Harry’s imagination, after all he’d heard about Slytherin, but he thought they looked like an unpleasant lot.

He was starting to feel definitely sick now. He remembered be-ing picked for teams during gym at his old school. He had always been last to be chosen, not because he was no good, but because no one wanted Dudley to think they liked him.

“Finch-Fletchley, Justin!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

Sometimes, Harry noticed, the hat shouted out the House at once, but at others it took a little while to decide. “Finnigan, Sea-mus,” the sandy-haired boy next to Harry in the line, sat on the stool for almost a whole minute before the hat declared him a Gryffindor.

“Granger, Hermione!”

Hermione almost ran to the stool and jammed the hat eagerly on her head.

“GRYFFINDOR!” shouted the hat. Ron groaned.

A horrible thought struck Harry, as horrible thoughts always do when you’re very nervous. What if he wasn’t chosen at all? What if he just sat there with the hat over his eyes for ages, until Professor McGonagall jerked it off his head and said there had obviously been a mistake and he’d better get back on the train?

When Neville Longbottom, the boy who kept losing his toad, was called, he fell over on his way to the stool. The hat took a long time to decide with Neville. When it finally shouted, “GRYFFINDOR,” Neville ran off still wearing it, and had to jog back amid gales of laughter to give it to “MacDougal, Morag.”

Malfoy swaggered forward when his name was called and got his wish at once: the hat had barely touched his head when it screamed, “SLYTHERIN!”

Malfoy went to join his friends Crabbe and Goyle, looking pleased with himself.

There weren't many people left now.

"Moon" … , "Nott" … , "Parkinson" … , then a pair of twin girls, "Patil" and "Patil" … , then "Perks, Sally-Anne" … , and then, at last —"Potter, Harry!"

As Harry stepped forward, whispers suddenly broke out like lit-tle hissing fires all over the hall.

"Potter, did she say?"

"The Harry Potter?"

The last thing Harry saw before the hat dropped over his eyes was the hall full of people craning to get a good look at him. Next second he was looking at the black inside of the hat. He waited.

"Hmm," said a small voice in his ear. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes — and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting. … So where shall I put you?"

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought, Not Slytherin, not Slytherin.

"Not Slytherin, eh?" said the small voice. "Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that — no? Well, if you're sure — better be GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry heard the hat shout the last word to the whole hall. He took off the hat and walked shakily toward the Gryffindor table. He was so relieved to have been chosen and not put in Slytherin, he hardly noticed that he was getting the loudest cheer yet. Percy the Prefect

got up and shook his hand vigorously, while the Weasley twins yelled, “We got Potter! We got Potter!” Harry sat down op-posite the ghost in the ruff he’d seen earlier. The ghost patted his arm, giving Harry the sudden, horrible feeling he’d just plunged it into a bucket of ice-cold water.

He could see the High Table properly now. At the end nearest him sat Hagrid, who caught his eye and gave him the thumbs up. Harry grinned back. And there, in the center of the High Table, in a large gold chair, sat Albus Dumbledore. Harry recognized him at once from the card he’d gotten out of the Chocolate Frog on the train. Dumbledore’s silver hair was the only thing in the whole hall that shone as brightly as the ghosts. Harry spotted Professor Quir-rell, too, the nervous young man from the Leaky Cauldron. He was looking very peculiar in a large purple turban.

And now there were only four people left to be sorted. “Thomas, Dean,” a Black boy even taller than Ron, joined Harry at the Gryffindor table. “Turpin, Lisa,” became a Ravenclaw and then it was Ron’s turn. He was pale green by now. Harry crossed his fin-gers under the table and a second later the hat had shouted, “GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry clapped loudly with the rest as Ron collapsed into the chair next to him.

“Well done, Ron, excellent,” said Percy Weasley pompously across Harry as “Zabini, Blaise,” was made a Slytherin. Professor McGonagall rolled up her scroll and took the Sorting Hat away.

Harry looked down at his empty gold plate. He had only just realized how hungry he was. The pumpkin pasties seemed ages ago.

Albus Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was beaming at the students, his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there.

“Welcome!” he said. “Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Be-fore we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!

“Thank you!”

He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Harry didn’t know whether to laugh or not.

“Is he — a bit mad?” he asked Percy uncertainly.

“Mad?” said Percy airily. “He’s a genius! Best wizard in the world! But he is a bit mad, yes. Potatoes, Harry?”

Harry’s mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were now piled with food. He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, fries, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup, and, for some strange reason, peppermint humbugs.

The Dursleys had never exactly starved Harry, but he’d never been allowed to eat as much as he liked. Dudley had always taken anything that Harry really wanted, even if it made him sick. Harry piled his plate with a bit of everything except the peppermints and began to eat. It was all delicious.

“That does look good,” said the ghost in the ruff sadly, watching Harry cut up his steak.

“Can’t you — ?”

“I haven’t eaten for nearly five hundred years,” said the ghost. “I don’t need to, of course, but one does miss it. I don’t think I’ve introduced myself? Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington at your ser-vice. Resident ghost of Gryffindor Tower.”

“I know who you are!” said Ron suddenly. “My brothers told me about you — you’re Nearly Headless Nick!”

“I would prefer you to call me Sir Nicholas de Mimsy —” the ghost began stiffly, but sandy-haired Seamus Finnigan interrupted.

“Nearly Headless? How can you be nearly headless?”

Sir Nicholas looked extremely miffed, as if their little chat wasn’t going at all the way he wanted.

“Like this,” he said irritably. He seized his left ear and pulled. His whole head swung off his neck and fell onto his shoulder as if it was on a hinge. Someone had obviously tried to behead him, but not done it properly. Looking pleased at the stunned looks on their faces, Nearly Headless Nick flipped his head back onto his neck, coughed, and said, “So — new Gryffindors! I hope you’re going to help us win the House Championship this year? Gryffindors have never gone so long without winning. Slytherins have got the cup six years in a row! The Bloody Baron’s becoming almost unbear-able — he’s the Slytherin ghost.”

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and saw a horrible ghost sitting there, with blank staring eyes, a gaunt face, and robes stained with silver blood. He was right next to Malfoy who, Harry was pleased to see, didn’t look too pleased with the seating arrangements.

“How did he get covered in blood?” asked Seamus with great in-terest.

“I’ve never asked,” said Nearly Headless Nick delicately.

When everyone had eaten as much as they could, the remains of the food faded from the plates, leaving them sparkling clean as before. A moment later the desserts appeared. Blocks of ice cream in every flavor you could think of, apple pies, treacle tarts, chocolate éclairs

and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, Jell-O, rice pud-ding …As Harry helped himself to a treacle tart, the talk turned to their families.

“I’m half-and-half,” said Seamus. “Me dad’s a Muggle. Mom didn’t tell him she was a witch ’til after they were married. Bit of a nasty shock for him.”

The others laughed.

“What about you, Neville?” said Ron.

“Well, my gran brought me up and she’s a witch,” said Neville, “but the family thought I was all-Muggle for ages. My Great Uncle Algie kept trying to catch me off my guard and force some magic out of me — he pushed me off the end of Blackpool pier once, I nearly drowned — but nothing happened until I was eight. Great Uncle Algie came round for dinner, and he was hanging me out of an upstairs window by the ankles when my Great Auntie Enid of-fered him a meringue and he accidentally let go. But I bounced — all the way down the garden and into the road. They were all really pleased, Gran was crying, she was so happy. And you should have seen their faces when I got in here — they thought I might not be magic enough to come, you see. Great Uncle Algie was so pleased he bought me my toad.”

On Harry’s other side, Percy Weasley and Hermione were talk-ing about lessons (“I do hope they start right away, there’s so much to learn, I’m particularly interested in Transfiguration, you know, turning something into something else, of course, it’s supposed to be very difficult —”; “You’ll be starting small, just matches into needles and that sort of thing —”).

Harry, who was starting to feel warm and sleepy, looked up at the High Table again. Hagrid was drinking deeply from his goblet. Professor McGonagall was talking to Professor Dumbledore. Professor Quirrell, in his absurd turban, was talking to a teacher with greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin.

It happened very suddenly. The hook-nosed teacher looked past Quirrell's turban straight into Harry's eyes — and a sharp, hot pain shot across the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Ouch!" Harry clapped a hand to his head.

"What is it?" asked Percy.

"N-nothing."

The pain had gone as quickly as it had come. Harder to shake off was the feeling Harry had gotten from the teachers look — a feel-ing that he didn't like Harry at all.

"Who's that teacher talking to Professor Quirrell?" he asked Percy.

"Oh, you know Quirrell already, do you? No wonder he's look-ing so nervous, that's Professor Snape. He teaches Potions, but he doesn't want to — everyone knows he's after Quirrell's job. Knows an awful lot about the Dark Arts, Snape."

Harry watched Snape for a while, but Snape didn't look at him again.

At last, the desserts too disappeared, and Professor Dumbledore got to his feet again. The hall fell silent.

"Ahem — just a few more words now that we are all fed and wa-tered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you.

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbid-den to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well."

Dumbledore's twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Weasley twins.

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corri-dors.

“Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their House teams should contact Madam Hooch.

“And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corri-dor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death.”

Harry laughed, but he was one of the few who did.

“He’s not serious?” he muttered to Percy.

“Must be,” said Percy, frowning at Dumbledore. “It’s odd, because he usually gives us a reason why we’re not allowed to go somewhere — the forest’s full of dangerous beasts, everyone knows that. I do think he might have told us prefects, at least.”

“And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!” cried Dumbledore. Harry noticed that the other teachers’ smiles had become rather fixed.

Dumbledore gave his wand a little flick, as if he was trying to get a fly off the end, and a long golden ribbon flew out of it, which rose high above the tables and twisted itself, snakelike, into words.

“Everyone pick their favorite tune,” said Dumbledore, “and off we go!”

And the school bellowed:

“Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,Teach us something please,

Whether we be old and bald

Or young with scabby knees,

Our heads could do with fillingWith some interesting stuff,

For now they're bare and full of air,Dead flies and bits of fluff,

So teach us things worth knowing,Bring back what we've forgot,Just do your best, we'll do the rest,And learn until our brains all rot."

Everybody finished the song at different times. At last, only the Weasley twins were left singing along to a very slow funeral march. Dumbledore conducted their last few lines with his wand and when they had finished, he was one of those who clapped loudest.

"Ah, music," he said, wiping his eyes. "A magic beyond all we do here! And now, bedtime. Off you trot!"

The Gryffindor first years followed Percy through the chattering crowds, out of the Great Hall, and up the marble staircase. Harry's legs were like lead again, but only because he was so tired and full of food. He was too sleepy even to be surprised that the people in the portraits along the corridors whispered and pointed as they passed, or that twice Percy led them through doorways hidden be-hind sliding panels and hanging tapestries. They climbed more staircases, yawning and dragging their feet, and Harry was just wondering how much farther they had to go when they came to a sudden halt.

A bundle of walking sticks was floating in midair ahead of them, and as Percy took a step toward them they started throwing them-selves at him.

"Peeves," Percy whispered to the first years. "A poltergeist." He raised his voice, "Peeves — show yourself."

A loud, rude sound, like the air being let out of a balloon, an-swered.

"Do you want me to go to the Bloody Baron?"

There was a pop, and a little man with wicked, dark eyes and a wide mouth appeared, floating cross-legged in the air, clutching the walking sticks.

"Oooooooh!" he said, with an evil cackle. "Ickle Firsties! What fun!"

He swooped suddenly at them. They all ducked.

"Go away, Peeves, or the Baron'll hear about this, I mean it!" barked Percy.

Peeves stuck out his tongue and vanished, dropping the walking sticks on Neville's head. They heard him zooming away, rattling coats of armor as he passed.

"You want to watch out for Peeves," said Percy, as they set off again. "The Bloody Baron's the only one who can control him, he won't even listen to us prefects. Here we are."

At the very end of the corridor hung a portrait of a very fat woman in a pink silk dress.

"Password?" she said.

"Caput Draconis," said Percy, and the portrait swung forward to reveal a round hole in the wall. They all scrambled through it — Neville needed a leg up — and found themselves in the Gryffindor common room, a cozy, round room full of squashy armchairs.

Percy directed the girls through one door to their dormitory and the boys through another. At the top of a spiral staircase — they were obviously in one of the towers — they found their beds at last: five four-posters hung with deep red, velvet curtains. Their trunks had already been brought up. Too tired to talk much, they pulled on their pajamas and fell into bed.

"Great food, isn't it?" Ron muttered to Harry through the hang-ings. "Get off, Scabbers! He's chewing my sheets."

Harry was going to ask Ron if he'd had any of the treacle tart, but he fell asleep almost at once.

Perhaps Harry had eaten a bit too much, because he had a very strange dream. He was wearing Professor Quirrell's turban, which kept talking to him, telling him he must transfer to Slytherin at once, because it was his destiny. Harry told the turban he didn't want to be in Slytherin; it got heavier and heavier; he tried to pull it off but it tightened painfully — and there was Malfoy, laughing at him as he struggled with it — then Malfoy turned into the hook-nosed teacher, Snape, whose laugh became high and cold — there was a burst of green light and Harry woke, sweating and shaking.

He rolled over and fell asleep again, and when he woke next day, he didn't remember the dream at all.

Chapter 8 The Potions Master

“There, look.”

“Where?”

“Next to the tall kid with the red hair.”

“Wearing the glasses?”

“Did you see his face?”

“Did you see his scar?”

Whispers followed Harry from the moment he left his dormi-tory the next day. People lining up outside classrooms stood on tip-toe to get a look at him, or doubled back to pass him in the corridors again, staring. Harry wished they wouldn’t, because he was trying to concentrate on finding his way to classes.

There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led some-where different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. Then there were doors that wouldn’t open unless you asked politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place, and doors that weren’t really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending. It was also very hard to remember where any-thing was, because it all seemed to move around a lot. The people in the portraits kept going to visit each other, and Harry was sure the coats of armor could walk.

The ghosts didn’t help, either. It was always a nasty shock when one of them glided suddenly through a door you were trying to open. Nearly Headless Nick was always happy to point new Gryffindors in the right direction, but Peeves the Poltergeist was worth two locked doors and a trick staircase if you met him when you were late for

class. He would drop wastepaper baskets on your head, pull rugs from under your feet, pelt you with bits of chalk, or sneak up behind you, invisible, grab your nose, and screech, “GOT YOUR CONK!”

Even worse than Peeves, if that was possible, was the caretaker, Argus Filch. Harry and Ron managed to get on the wrong side of him on their very first morning. Filch found them trying to force their way through a door that unluckily turned out to be the en-trance to the out-of-bounds corridor on the third floor. He wouldn’t believe they were lost, was sure they were trying to break into it on purpose, and was threatening to lock them in the dungeons when they were rescued by Professor Quirrell, who was passing.

Filch owned a cat called Mrs. Norris, a scrawny, dust-colored creature with bulging, lamplike eyes just like Filch’s. She patrolled the corridors alone. Break a rule in front of her, put just one toe out of line, and she’d whisk off for Filch, who’d appear, wheezing, two seconds later. Filch knew the secret passageways of the school bet-ter than anyone (except perhaps the Weasley twins) and could pop up as suddenly as any of the ghosts. The students all hated him, and it was the dearest ambition of many to give Mrs. Norris a good kick.

And then, once you had managed to find them, there were the classes themselves. There was a lot more to magic, as Harry quickly found out, than waving your wand and saying a few funny words.

They had to study the night skies through their telescopes every Wednesday at midnight and learn the names of different stars and the movements of the planets. Three times a week they went out to the greenhouses behind the castle to study Herbology, with a dumpy little witch called Professor Sprout, where they learned how to take care of all the strange plants and fungi, and found out what they were used for.

Easily the most boring class was History of Magic, which was the only one taught by a ghost. Professor Binns had been very old indeed

when he had fallen asleep in front of the staff room fire and got up next morning to teach, leaving his body behind him. Binns droned on and on while they scribbled down names and dates, and got Emeric the Evil and Uric the Oddball mixed up.

Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was a tiny little wizard who had to stand on a pile of books to see over his desk. At the start of their first class he took the roll call, and when he reached Harry's name he gave an excited squeak and toppled out of sight.

Professor McGonagall was again different. Harry had been quite right to think she wasn't a teacher to cross. Strict and clever, she gave them a talking-to the moment they sat down in her first class.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," she said. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Then she changed her desk into a pig and back again. They were all very impressed and couldn't wait to get started, but soon realized they weren't going to be changing the furniture into animals for a long time. After taking a lot of complicated notes, they were each given a match and started trying to turn it into a needle. By the end of the lesson, only Hermione Granger had made any difference to her match; Professor McGonagall showed the class how it had gone all silver and pointy and gave Hermione a rare smile.

The class everyone had really been looking forward to was De-fense Against the Dark Arts, but Quirrell's lessons turned out to be a bit of a joke. His classroom smelled strongly of garlic, which everyone said was to ward off a vampire he'd met in Romania and was afraid would be coming back to get him one of these days. His turban, he told them, had been given to him by an African prince as a thank-you for getting rid of a troublesome zombie, but they weren't sure they believed this story. For one thing, when Seamus Finnigan asked eagerly to hear how Quirrell had fought off the zombie, Quirrell went

pink and started talking about the weather; for another, they had noticed that a funny smell hung around the turban, and the Weasley twins insisted that it was stuffed full of garlic as well, so that Quirrell was protected wherever he went.

Harry was very relieved to find out that he wasn't miles behind everyone else. Lots of people had come from Muggle families and, like him, hadn't had any idea that they were witches and wizards. There was so much to learn that even people like Ron didn't have much of a head start.

Friday was an important day for Harry and Ron. They finally managed to find their way down to the Great Hall for breakfast without getting lost once.

"What have we got today?" Harry asked Ron as he poured sugar on his porridge.

"Double Potions with the Slytherins," said Ron. "Snape's Head of Slytherin House. They say he always favors them — we'll be able to see if it's true."

"Wish McGonagall favored us," said Harry. Professor McGona-gall was head of Gryffindor House, but it hadn't stopped her from giving them a huge pile of homework the day before.

Just then, the mail arrived. Harry had gotten used to this by now, but it had given him a bit of a shock on the first morning, when about a hundred owls had suddenly streamed into the Great Hall during breakfast, circling the tables until they saw their own-ers, and dropping letters and packages onto their laps.

Hedwig hadn't brought Harry anything so far. She sometimes flew in to nibble his ear and have a bit of toast before going off to sleep in the owlery with the other school owls. This morning, how-ever, she fluttered down between the marmalade and the sugar bowl and

dropped a note onto Harry's plate. Harry tore it open at once. It said, in a very untidy scrawl:Dear Harry,

I know you get Friday afternoons off so would you like to come and have a cup of tea with me around three?

I want to hear all about your first week. Send us an answer back with Hedwig.

Hagrid

Harry borrowed Ron's quill, scribbled Yes, please, see you later on the back of the note, and sent Hedwig off again.

It was lucky that Harry had tea with Hagrid to look forward to, because the Potions lesson turned out to be the worst thing that had happened to him so far.

At the start-of-term banquet, Harry had gotten the idea that Professor Snape disliked him. By the end of the first Potions lesson, he knew he'd been wrong. Snape didn't dislike Harry — he hated him.

Potions lessons took place down in one of the dungeons. It was colder here than up in the main castle, and would have been quite creepy enough without the pickled animals floating in glass jars all around the walls.

Snape, like Flitwick, started the class by taking the roll call, and like Flitwick, he paused at Harry's name.

"Ah, yes," he said softly, "Harry Potter. Our new — celebrity."

Draco Malfoy and his friends Crabbe and Goyle sniggered be-hind their hands. Snape finished calling the names and looked up at the class. His eyes were black like Hagrid's, but they had none of Hagrid's warmth. They were cold and empty and made you think of dark tunnels.

“You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making,” he began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word — like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort. “As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don’t expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses. … I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death — if you aren’t as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach.”

More silence followed this little speech. Harry and Ron ex-changed looks with raised eyebrows. Hermione Granger was on the edge of her seat and looked desperate to start proving that she wasn’t a dunderhead.

“Potter!” said Snape suddenly. “What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

Powdered root of what to an infusion of what? Harry glanced at Ron, who looked as stumped as he was; Hermione’s hand had shot into the air.

“I don’t know, sir,” said Harry.

Snape’s lips curled into a sneer.

“Tut, tut — fame clearly isn’t everything.”

He ignored Hermione’s hand.

“Let’s try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?”

Hermione stretched her hand as high into the air as it would go without her leaving her seat, but Harry didn’t have the faintest idea

what a bezoar was. He tried not to look at Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were shaking with laughter.

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Thought you wouldn’t open a book before coming, eh, Potter?”

Harry forced himself to keep looking straight into those cold eyes. He had looked through his books at the Dursleys’, but did Snape expect him to remember everything in One Thousand Mag-ical Herbs and Fungi?

Snape was still ignoring Hermione’s quivering hand.

“What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfs-bane?”

At this, Hermione stood up, her hand stretching toward the dungeon ceiling.

“I don’t know,” said Harry quietly. “I think Hermione does, though, why don’t you try her?”

A few people laughed; Harry caught Seamus’s eye, and Seamus winked. Snape, however, was not pleased.

“Sit down,” he snapped at Hermione. “For your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so power-ful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons. As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite. Well? Why aren’t you all copying that down?”

There was a sudden rummaging for quills and parchment. Over the noise, Snape said, “And a point will be taken from Gryffindor House for your cheek, Potter.”

Things didn't improve for the Gryffindors as the Potions lesson continued. Snape put them all into pairs and set them to mixing up a simple potion to cure boils. He swept around in his long black cloak, watching them weigh dried nettles and crush snake fangs, criticizing almost everyone except Malfoy, whom he seemed to like. He was just telling everyone to look at the perfect way Malfoy had stewed his horned slugs when clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. Neville had somehow managed to melt Seamus's cauldron into a twisted blob, and their potion was seeping across the stone floor, burning holes in people's shoes. Within seconds, the whole class was standing on their stools while Neville, who had been drenched in the potion when the cauldron collapsed, moaned in pain as angry red boils sprang up all over his arms and legs.

"Idiot boy!" snarled Snape, clearing the spilled potion away with one wave of his wand. "I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?"

Neville whimpered as boils started to pop up all over his nose.

"Take him up to the hospital wing," Snape spat at Seamus. Then he rounded on Harry and Ron, who had been working next to Neville.

"You — Potter — why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Gryffindor."

This was so unfair that Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Ron kicked him behind their cauldron.

"Don't push it," he muttered, "I've heard Snape can turn very nasty."

As they climbed the steps out of the dungeon an hour later, Harry's mind was racing and his spirits were low. He'd lost two points for Gryffindor in his very first week — why did Snape hate him so much?

“Cheer up,” said Ron, “Snape’s always taking points off Fred and George. Can I come and meet Hagrid with you?”

At five to three they left the castle and made their way across the grounds. Hagrid lived in a small wooden house on the edge of the forbidden forest. A crossbow and a pair of galoshes were outside the front door.

When Harry knocked they heard a frantic scrabbling from in-side and several booming barks. Then Hagrid’s voice rang out, say-ing, “Back, Fang — back.”

Hagrid’s big, hairy face appeared in the crack as he pulled the door open.

“Hang on,” he said. “Back, Fang.”

He let them in, struggling to keep a hold on the collar of an enormous black boarhound.

There was only one room inside. Hams and pheasants were hanging from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire, and in the corner stood a massive bed with a patchwork quilt over it.

“Make yerselves at home,” said Hagrid, letting go of Fang, who bounded straight at Ron and started licking his ears. Like Hagrid, Fang was clearly not as fierce as he looked.

“This is Ron,” Harry told Hagrid, who was pouring boiling wa-ter into a large teapot and putting rock cakes onto a plate.

“Another Weasley, eh?” said Hagrid, glancing at Ron’s freckles. “I spent half me life chasin’ yer twin brothers away from the forest.”

The rock cakes were shapeless lumps with raisins that almost broke their teeth, but Harry and Ron pretended to be enjoying them as they

told Hagrid all about their first lessons. Fang rested his head on Harry's knee and drooled all over his robes.

Harry and Ron were delighted to hear Hagrid call Filch "that old git""An' as fer that cat, Mrs. Norris, I'd like ter introduce her to Fang sometime. D'yeh know, every time I go up ter the school, she follows me everywhere? Can't get rid of her — Filch puts her up to it."

Harry told Hagrid about Snape's lesson. Hagrid, like Ron, told Harry not to worry about it, that Snape liked hardly any of the stu-dents.

"But he seemed to really hate me."

"Rubbish!" said Hagrid. "Why should he?"

Yet Harry couldn't help thinking that Hagrid didn't quite meet his eyes when he said that.

"How's yer brother Charlie?" Hagrid asked Ron. "I liked him a lot — great with animals."

Harry wondered if Hagrid had changed the subject on purpose. While Ron told Hagrid all about Charlie's work with dragons, Harry picked up a piece of paper that was lying on the table under the tea cozy. It was a cutting from the Daily Prophet:GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on 31 July, widely believed to be the work of Dark wizards or witches unknown.

Gringotts goblins today insisted that nothing had been taken. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied the same day.

"But we're not telling you what was in there, so keep your noses out if you know what's good for you," said a Gringotts spokesgoblin this after-noon.

Harry remembered Ron telling him on the train that someone had tried to rob Gringotts, but Ron hadn't mentioned the date.

"Hagrid!" said Harry, "that Gringotts break-in happened on my birthday! It might've been happening while we were there!"

There was no doubt about it, Hagrid definitely didn't meet Harry's eyes this time. He grunted and offered him another rock cake. Harry read the story again. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied earlier that same day. Hagrid had emptied vault seven hundred and thirteen, if you could call it emptying, taking out that grubby little package. Had that been what the thieves were looking for?

As Harry and Ron walked back to the castle for dinner, their pockets weighed down with rock cakes they'd been too polite to refuse, Harry thought that none of the lessons he'd had so far had given him as much to think about as tea with Hagrid. Had Hagrid collected that package just in time? Where was it now? And did Hagrid know something about Snape that he didn't want to tell Harry?

Chapter 9 The Midnight Duel

Harry had never believed he would meet a boy he hated more than Dudley, but that was before he met Draco Malfoy. Still, first-year Gryffindors only had Potions with the Slytherins, so they didn't have to put up with Malfoy much. Or at least, they didn't until they spotted a notice pinned up in the Gryffindor common room that made them all groan. Flying lessons would be starting on Thursday — and Gryffindor and Slytherin would be learning together.

"Typical," said Harry darkly. "Just what I always wanted. To make a fool of myself on a broomstick in front of Malfoy."

He had been looking forward to learning to fly more than any-thing else.

"You don't know that you'll make a fool of yourself," said Ron reasonably. "Anyway, I know Malfoy's always going on about how good he is at Quidditch, but I bet that's all talk."

Malfoy certainly did talk about flying a lot. He complained loudly about first years never getting on the House Quidditch teams and told long, boastful stories that always seemed to end with him narrowly escaping Muggles in helicopters. He wasn't the only one, though: the way Seamus Finnigan told it, he'd spent most of his childhood zooming around the countryside on his broom-stick. Even Ron would tell anyone who'd listen about the time he'd almost hit a hang glider on Charlie's old broom. Everyone from wizarding families talked about Quidditch constantly. Ron had al-ready had a big argument with Dean Thomas, who shared their dormitory, about soccer. Ron couldn't see what was exciting about a game with only one ball where no one was allowed to fly. Harry had caught Ron prodding Dean's poster of West Ham soccer team, trying to make the players move.

Neville had never been on a broomstick in his life, because his grandmother had never let him near one. Privately, Harry felt she'd had good reason, because Neville managed to have an extraordinary number of accidents even with both feet on the ground.

Hermione Granger was almost as nervous about flying as Neville was. This was something you couldn't learn by heart out of a book — not that she hadn't tried. At breakfast on Thursday she bored them all stupid with flying tips she'd gotten out of a library book called Quidditch Through the Ages. Neville was hanging on to her every word, desperate for anything that might help him hang on to his broomstick later, but everybody else was very pleased when Hermione's lecture was interrupted by the arrival of the mail.

Harry hadn't had a single letter since Hagrid's note, something that Malfoy had been quick to notice, of course. Malfoy's eagle owl was always bringing him packages of sweets from home, which he opened gloatingly at the Slytherin table.

A barn owl brought Neville a small package from his grand-mother. He opened it excitedly and showed them a glass ball the size of a large marble, which seemed to be full of white smoke.

"It's a Remembrall!" he explained. "Gran knows I forget things — this tells you if there's something you've forgotten to do. Look, you hold it tight like this and if it turns red — oh …" His face fell, because the Remembrall had suddenly glowed scarlet, "… you've forgotten something …"

Neville was trying to remember what he'd forgotten when Draco Malfoy, who was passing the Gryffindor table, snatched the Remembrall out of his hand.

Harry and Ron jumped to their feet. They were half hoping for a reason to fight Malfoy, but Professor McGonagall, who could spot trouble quicker than any teacher in the school, was there in a flash.

"What's going on?"

"Malfoy's got my Remembrall, Professor."

Scowling, Malfoy quickly dropped the Remembrall back on the table.

"Just looking," he said, and he sloped away with Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

At three-thirty that afternoon, Harry, Ron, and the other Gryffin-dors hurried down the front steps onto the grounds for their first flying lesson. It was a clear, breezy day, and the grass rippled under their feet as they marched down the sloping lawns toward a smooth, flat lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the for-bidden forest, whose trees were swaying darkly in the distance.

The Slytherins were already there, and so were twenty broom-sticks lying in neat lines on the ground. Harry had heard Fred and George Weasley complain about the school brooms, saying that some of them started to vibrate if you flew too high, or always flew slightly to the left.

Their teacher, Madam Hooch, arrived. She had short, gray hair, and yellow eyes like a hawk.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she barked. "Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

Harry glanced down at his broom. It was old and some of the twigs stuck out at odd angles.

"Stick out your right hand over your broom," called Madam Hooch at the front, "and say 'Up!' "

"UP!" everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once, but it was one of the few that did. Hermione Granger's had simply rolled over on the ground, and Neville's hadn't moved at all. Perhaps brooms, like horses, could tell when you were afraid, thought Harry; there was a quaver in Neville's voice that said only too clearly that he wanted to keep his feet on the ground.

Madam Hooch then showed them how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, and walked up and down the rows cor-recting their grips. Harry and Ron were delighted when she told Malfoy he'd been doing it wrong for years.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," said Madam Hooch. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle — three — two —"

But Neville, nervous and jumpy and frightened of being left on the ground, pushed off hard before the whistle had touched Madam Hooch's lips.

"Come back, boy!" she shouted, but Neville was rising straight up like a cork shot out of a bottle — twelve feet — twenty feet. Harry saw his scared white face look down at the ground falling away, saw him gasp, slip sideways off the broom and —WHAM — a thud and a nasty crack and Neville lay facedown on the grass in a heap. His broomstick was still rising higher and higher, and started to drift lazily toward the forbidden forest and out of sight.

Madam Hooch was bending over Neville, her face as white as his.

"Broken wrist," Harry heard her mutter. "Come on, boy — it's all right, up you get."

She turned to the rest of the class.

“None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you’ll be out of Hogwarts before you can say ‘Quidditch.’ Come on, dear.”

Neville, his face tear-streaked, clutching his wrist, hobbled off with Madam Hooch, who had her arm around him.

No sooner were they out of earshot than Malfoy burst into laughter.

“Did you see his face, the great lump?”

The other Slytherins joined in.

“Shut up, Malfoy,” snapped Parvati Patil.

“Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?” said Pansy Parkinson, a hard-faced Slytherin girl. “Never thought you’d like fat little cry-babies, Parvati.”

“Look!” said Malfoy, darting forward and snatching something out of the grass. “It’s that stupid thing Longbottom’s gran sent him.”

The Remembrall glittered in the sun as he held it up.

“Give that here, Malfoy,” said Harry quietly. Everyone stopped talking to watch.

Malfoy smiled nastily.

“I think I’ll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find — how about — up a tree?”

“Give it here!” Harry yelled, but Malfoy had leapt onto his broomstick and taken off. He hadn’t been lying, he could fly well. Hovering level with the topmost branches of an oak he called, “Come and get it, Potter!”

Harry grabbed his broom.

“No!” shouted Hermione Granger. “Madam Hooch told us not to move — you’ll get us all into trouble.”

Harry ignored her. Blood was pounding in his ears. He mounted the broom and kicked hard against the ground and up, up he soared; air rushed through his hair, and his robes whipped out be-hind him — and in a rush of fierce joy he realized he’d found something he could do without being taught — this was easy, this was wonderful. He pulled his broomstick up a little to take it even higher, and heard screams and gasps of girls back on the ground and an admiring whoop from Ron.

He turned his broomstick sharply to face Malfoy in midair. Mal-foy looked stunned.

“Give it here,” Harry called, “or I’ll knock you off that broom!”

“Oh, yeah?” said Malfoy, trying to sneer, but looking worried.

Harry knew, somehow, what to do. He leaned forward and grasped the broom tightly in both hands, and it shot toward Mal-foy like a javelin. Malfoy only just got out of the way in time; Harry made a sharp about-face and held the broom steady. A few people below were clapping.

“No Crabbe and Goyle up here to save your neck, Malfoy,” Harry called.

The same thought seemed to have struck Malfoy.

“Catch it if you can, then!” he shouted, and he threw the glass ball high into the air and streaked back toward the ground.

Harry saw, as though in slow motion, the ball rise up in the air and then start to fall. He leaned forward and pointed his broom handle down — next second he was gathering speed in a steep dive, racing the ball — wind whistled in his ears, mingled with the screams of

people watching — he stretched out his hand — a foot from the ground he caught it, just in time to pull his broom straight, and he toppled gently onto the grass with the Remembrall clutched safely in his fist.

"HARRY POTTER!"

His heart sank faster than he'd just dived. Professor McGonagall was running toward them. He got to his feet, trembling.

"Never — in all my time at Hogwarts —"

Professor McGonagall was almost speechless with shock, and her glasses flashed furiously, "— how dare you — might have bro-ken your neck —"

"It wasn't his fault, Professor —"

"Be quiet, Miss Patil —"

"But Malfoy —"

"That's enough, Mr. Weasley. Potter, follow me, now."

Harry caught sight of Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle's triumphant faces as he left, walking numbly in Professor McGonagall's wake as she strode toward the castle. He was going to be expelled, he just knew it. He wanted to say something to defend himself, but there seemed to be something wrong with his voice. Professor McGona-gall was sweeping along without even looking at him; he had to jog to keep up. Now he'd done it. He hadn't even lasted two weeks. He'd be packing his bags in ten minutes. What would the Dursleys say when he turned up on the doorstep?

Up the front steps, up the marble staircase inside, and still Pro-fessor McGonagall didn't say a word to him. She wrenched open doors and marched along corridors with Harry trotting miserably behind her.

Maybe she was taking him to Dumbledore. He thought of Hagrid, expelled but allowed to stay on as gamekeeper. Perhaps he could be Hagrid's assistant. His stomach twisted as he imagined it, watching Ron and the others becoming wizards while he stumped around the grounds carrying Hagrid's bag.

Professor McGonagall stopped outside a classroom. She opened the door and poked her head inside.

"Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, could I borrow Wood for a mo-ment?"

Wood? thought Harry, bewildered; was Wood a cane she was go-ing to use on him?

But Wood turned out to be a person, a burly fifth-year boy who came out of Flitwick's class looking confused.

"Follow me, you two," said Professor McGonagall, and they marched on up the corridor, Wood looking curiously at Harry.

"In here."

Professor McGonagall pointed them into a classroom that was empty except for Peeves, who was busy writing rude words on the blackboard.

"Out, Peeves!" she barked. Peeves threw the chalk into a bin, which clanged loudly, and he swooped out cursing. Professor McGonagall slammed the door behind him and turned to face the two boys.

"Potter, this is Oliver Wood. Wood — I've found you a Seeker."

Wood's expression changed from puzzlement to delight.

"Are you serious, Professor?"

"Absolutely," said Professor McGonagall crisply. "The boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it. Was that your first time on a

broomstick, Potter?"

Harry nodded silently. He didn't have a clue what was going on, but he didn't seem to be being expelled, and some of the feeling started coming back to his legs.

"He caught that thing in his hand after a fifty-foot dive," Profes-sor McGonagall told Wood. "Didn't even scratch himself. Charlie Weasley couldn't have done it."

Wood was now looking as though all his dreams had come true at once.

"Ever seen a game of Quidditch, Potter?" he asked excitedly.

"Wood's captain of the Gryffindor team," Professor McGonagall explained.

"He's just the build for a Seeker, too," said Wood, now walking around Harry and staring at him. "Light — speedy — we'll have to get him a decent broom, Professor — a Nimbus Two Thousand or a Cleansweep Seven, I'd say."

"I shall speak to Professor Dumbledore and see if we can't bend the first-year rule. Heaven knows, we need a better team than last year. Flattened in that last match by Slytherin, I couldn't look Severus Snape in the face for weeks. …"

Professor McGonagall peered sternly over her glasses at Harry.

"I want to hear you're training hard, Potter, or I may change my mind about punishing you."

Then she suddenly smiled.

"Your father would have been proud," she said. "He was an ex-cellent Quidditch player himself."

"You're joking."

It was dinnertime. Harry had just finished telling Ron what had happened when he'd left the grounds with Professor McGonagall. Ron had a piece of steak and kidney pie halfway to his mouth, but he'd forgotten all about it.

"Seeker?" he said. "But first years never — you must be the youngest House player in about —"

"— a century," said Harry, shoveling pie into his mouth. He felt particularly hungry after the excitement of the afternoon. "Wood told me."

Ron was so amazed, so impressed, he just sat and gaped at Harry.

"I start training next week," said Harry. "Only don't tell anyone, Wood wants to keep it a secret."

Fred and George Weasley now came into the hall, spotted Harry, and hurried over.

"Well done," said George in a low voice. "Wood told us. We're on the team too — Beaters."

"I tell you, we're going to win that Quidditch Cup for sure this year," said Fred. "We haven't won since Charlie left, but this year's team is going to be brilliant. You must be good, Harry, Wood was almost skipping when he told us."

"Anyway, we've got to go, Lee Jordan reckons he's found a new secret passageway out of the school."

"Bet it's that one behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy that we found in our first week. See you."

Fred and George had hardly disappeared when someone far less welcome turned up: Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Having a last meal, Potter? When are you getting the train back to the Muggles?"

"You're a lot braver now that you're back on the ground and you've got your little friends with you," said Harry coolly. There was of course nothing at all little about Crabbe and Goyle, but as the High Table was full of teachers, neither of them could do more than crack their knuckles and scowl.

"I'd take you on anytime on my own," said Malfoy. "Tonight, if you want. Wizard's duel. Wands only — no contact. What's the matter? Never heard of a wizard's duel before, I suppose?"

"Of course he has," said Ron, wheeling around. "I'm his second, who's yours?"

Malfoy looked at Crabbe and Goyle, sizing them up.

"Crabbe," he said. "Midnight all right? We'll meet you in the trophy room; that's always unlocked."

When Malfoy had gone, Ron and Harry looked at each other.

"What is a wizard's duel?" said Harry. "And what do you mean, you're my second?"

"Well, a second's there to take over if you die," said Ron casually, getting started at last on his cold pie. Catching the look on Harry's face, he added quickly, "But people only die in proper duels, you know, with real wizards. The most you and Malfoy'll be able to do is send sparks at each other. Neither of you knows enough magic to do any real damage. I bet he expected you to refuse, anyway."

"And what if I wave my wand and nothing happens?"

“Throw it away and punch him on the nose,” Ron suggested.

“Excuse me.

They both looked up. It was Hermione Granger.

“Can’t a person eat in peace in this place?” said Ron.

Hermione ignored him and spoke to Harry.

“I couldn’t help overhearing what you and Malfoy were saying —”

“Bet you could,” Ron muttered.

“— and you mustn’t go wandering around the school at night, think of the points you’ll lose Gryffindor if you’re caught, and you’re bound to be. It’s really very selfish of you.”

“And it’s really none of your business,” said Harry.

“Good-bye,” said Ron.

All the same, it wasn’t what you’d call the perfect end to the day, Harry thought, as he lay awake much later listening to Dean and Seamus falling asleep (Neville wasn’t back from the hospital wing). Ron had spent all evening giving him advice such as “If he tries to curse you, you’d better dodge it, because I can’t remember how to block them.” There was a very good chance they were going to get caught by Filch or Mrs. Norris, and Harry felt he was pushing his luck, breaking another school rule today. On the other hand, Mal-foy’s sneering face kept looming up out of the darkness — this was his big chance to beat Malfoy face-to-face. He couldn’t miss it.

“Half-past eleven,” Ron muttered at last, “we’d better go.”

They pulled on their bathrobes, picked up their wands, and crept across the tower room, down the spiral staircase, and into the Gryffindor common room. A few embers were still glowing in the

fireplace, turning all the armchairs into hunched black shadows. They had almost reached the portrait hole when a voice spoke from the chair nearest them, “I can’t believe you’re going to do this, Harry.”

A lamp flickered on. It was Hermione Granger, wearing a pink bathrobe and a frown.

“You!” said Ron furiously. “Go back to bed!”

“I almost told your brother,” Hermione snapped, “Percy — he’s a prefect, he’d put a stop to this.”

Harry couldn’t believe anyone could be so interfering.

“Come on,” he said to Ron. He pushed open the portrait of the Fat Lady and climbed through the hole.

Hermione wasn’t going to give up that easily. She followed Ron through the portrait hole, hissing at them like an angry goose.

“Don’t you care about Gryffindor, do you only care about your-selves, I don’t want Slytherin to win the House Cup, and you’ll lose all the points I got from Professor McGonagall for knowing about Switching Spells.”

“Go away.”

“All right, but I warned you, you just remember what I said when you’re on the train home tomorrow, you’re so —”

But what they were, they didn’t find out. Hermione had turned to the portrait of the Fat Lady to get back inside and found herself facing an empty painting. The Fat Lady had gone on a nighttime visit and Hermione was locked out of Gryffindor Tower.

“Now what am I going to do?” she asked shrilly.

“That’s your problem,” said Ron. “We’ve got to go, we’re going to be late.”

They hadn’t even reached the end of the corridor when Hermione caught up with them.

“I’m coming with you,” she said.

“You are not.”

“D’you think I’m going to stand out here and wait for Filch to catch me? If he finds all three of us I’ll tell him the truth, that I was trying to stop you, and you can back me up.”

“You’ve got some nerve —” said Ron loudly.

“Shut up, both of you!” said Harry sharply. “I heard something.”

It was a sort of snuffling.

“Mrs. Norris?” breathed Ron, squinting through the dark.

It wasn’t Mrs. Norris. It was Neville. He was curled up on the floor, fast asleep, but jerked suddenly awake as they crept nearer.

“Thank goodness you found me! I’ve been out here for hours, I couldn’t remember the new password to get in to bed.”

“Keep your voice down, Neville. The password’s ‘Pig snout’ but it won’t help you now, the Fat Lady’s gone off somewhere.”

“How’s your arm?” said Harry.

“Fine,” said Neville, showing them. “Madam Pomfrey mended it in about a minute.”

“Good — well, look, Neville, we’ve got to be somewhere, we’ll see you later —”

“Don’t leave me!” said Neville, scrambling to his feet, “I don’t want to stay here alone, the Bloody Baron’s been past twice al-ready.”

Ron looked at his watch and then glared furiously at Hermione and Neville.

“If either of you get us caught, I’ll never rest until I’ve learned that Curse of the Bogies Quirrell told us about, and used it on you.

Hermione opened her mouth, perhaps to tell Ron exactly how to use the Curse of the Bogies, but Harry hissed at her to be quiet and beckoned them all forward.

They flitted along corridors striped with bars of moonlight from the high windows. At every turn Harry expected to run into Filch or Mrs. Norris, but they were lucky. They sped up a staircase to the third floor and tiptoed toward the trophy room.

Malfoy and Crabbe weren’t there yet. The crystal trophy cases glimmered where the moonlight caught them. Cups, shields, plates, and statues winked silver and gold in the darkness. They edged along the walls, keeping their eyes on the doors at either end of the room. Harry took out his wand in case Malfoy leapt in and started at once. The minutes crept by.

“He’s late, maybe he’s chickened out,” Ron whispered.

Then a noise in the next room made them jump. Harry had only just raised his wand when they heard someone speak — and it wasn’t Malfoy.

“Sniff around, my sweet, they might be lurking in a corner.”

It was Filch speaking to Mrs. Norris. Horror-struck, Harry waved madly at the other three to follow him as quickly as possible; they scurried silently toward the door, away from Filch’s voice. Neville’s

robes had barely whipped round the corner when they heard Filch enter the trophy room.

“They’re in here somewhere,” they heard him mutter, “probably hiding.”

“This way!” Harry mouthed to the others and, petrified, they began to creep down a long gallery full of suits of armor. They could hear Filch getting nearer. Neville suddenly let out a fright-ened squeak and broke into a run — he tripped, grabbed Ron around the waist, and the pair of them toppled right into a suit of armor.

The clanging and crashing were enough to wake the whole castle.

“RUN!” Harry yelled, and the four of them sprinted down the gallery, not looking back to see whether Filch was following — they swung around the doorpost and galloped down one corridor then another, Harry in the lead, without any idea where they were or where they were going — they ripped through a tapestry and found themselves in a hidden passageway, hurtled along it and came out near their Charms classroom, which they knew was miles from the trophy room.

“I think we’ve lost him,” Harry panted, leaning against the cold wall and wiping his forehead. Neville was bent double, wheezing and spluttering.

“I — told — you,” Hermione gasped, clutching at the stitch in her chest, “I — told — you.”

“We’ve got to get back to Gryffindor Tower,” said Ron, “quickly as possible.”

“Malfoy tricked you,” Hermione said to Harry. “You realize that, don’t you? He was never going to meet you — Filch knew someone was going to be in the trophy room, Malfoy must have tipped him off.”

Harry thought she was probably right, but he wasn't going to tell her that.

"Let's go."

It wasn't going to be that simple. They hadn't gone more than a dozen paces when a doorknob rattled and something came shoot-ing out of a classroom in front of them.

It was Peeves. He caught sight of them and gave a squeal of de-light.

"Shut up, Peeves — please — you'll get us thrown out."

Peeves cackled.

"Wandering around at midnight, Ickle Firsties? Tut, tut, tut. Naughty, naughty, you'll get caughty."

"Not if you don't give us away, Peeves, please."

"Should tell Filch, I should," said Peeves in a sanity voice, but his eyes glittered wickedly. "It's for your own good, you know."

"Get out of the way," snapped Ron, taking a swipe at Peeves — this was a big mistake.

"STUDENTS OUT OF BED!" Peeves bellowed, "STU-DENTS OUT OF BED DOWN THE CHARMS CORRI-DOR!"

Ducking under Peeves, they ran for their lives, right to the end of the corridor where they slammed into a door — and it was locked.

"This is it!" Ron moaned, as they pushed helplessly at the door, "We're done for! This is the end!"

They could hear footsteps, Filch running as fast as he could toward Peeves's shouts.

“Oh, move over,” Hermione snarled. She grabbed Harry’s wand, tapped the lock, and whispered, “Alohomora!”

The lock clicked and the door swung open — they piled through it, shut it quickly, and pressed their ears against it, listening.

“Which way did they go, Peeves?” Filch was saying. “Quick, tell me.”

“Say ‘please.’ ”

“Don’t mess with me, Peeves, now where did they go?”

“Shan’t say nothing if you don’t say please,” said Peeves in his annoying singsong voice.

“All right — please.”

“NOTHING! Ha haaa! Told you I wouldn’t say nothing if you didn’t say please! Ha ha! Haaaaaa!” And they heard the sound of Peeves whooshing away and Filch cursing in rage.

“He thinks this door is locked,” Harry whispered. “I think we’ll be okay — get off, Neville!” For Neville had been tugging on the sleeve of Harry’s bathrobe for the last minute. “What?”

Harry turned around — and saw, quite clearly, what. For a mo-ment, he was sure he’d walked into a nightmare — this was too much, on top of everything that had happened so far.

They weren’t in a room, as he had supposed. They were in a corridor. The forbidden corridor on the third floor. And now they knew why it was forbidden.

They were looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog that filled the whole space between ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes; three noses, twitching and

quivering in their direction; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs.

It was standing quite still, all six eyes staring at them, and Harry knew that the only reason they weren't already dead was that their sudden appearance had taken it by surprise, but it was quickly get-ting over that, there was no mistaking what those thunderous growls meant.

Harry groped for the doorknob — between Filch and death, he'd take Filch.

They fell backward — Harry slammed the door shut, and they ran, they almost flew, back down the corridor. Filch must have hur-ried off to look for them somewhere else, because they didn't see him anywhere, but they hardly cared — all they wanted to do was put as much space as possible between them and that monster. They didn't stop running until they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady on the seventh floor.

"Where on earth have you all been?" she asked, looking at their bathrobes hanging off their shoulders and their flushed, sweaty faces.

"Never mind that — pig snout, pig snout," panted Harry, and the portrait swung forward. They scrambled into the common room and collapsed, trembling, into armchairs.

It was a while before any of them said anything. Neville, indeed, looked as if he'd never speak again.

"What do they think they're doing, keeping a thing like that locked up in a school?" said Ron finally. "If any dog needs exercise, that one does."

Hermione had got both her breath and her bad temper back again.

"You don't use your eyes, any of you, do you?" she snapped. "Didn't you see what it was standing on?"

“The floor?” Harry suggested. “I wasn’t looking at its feet, I was too busy with its heads.”

“No, not the floor. It was standing on a trapdoor. It’s obviously guarding something.”

She stood up, glaring at them.

“I hope you’re pleased with yourselves. We could all have been killed — or worse, expelled. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to bed.”

Ron stared after her, his mouth open.

“No, we don’t mind,” he said. “You’d think we dragged her along, wouldn’t you?”

But Hermione had given Harry something else to think about as he climbed back into bed. The dog was guarding something. … What had Hagrid said? Gringotts was the safest place in the world for something you wanted to hide — except perhaps Hog-warts.

It looked as though Harry had found out where the grubby lit-tle package from vault seven hundred and thirteen was.

Chapter 10 Halloween

Malfoy couldn't believe his eyes when he saw that Harry and Ron were still at Hogwarts the next day, looking tired but perfectly cheerful. Indeed, by the next morning Harry and Ron thought that meeting the three-headed dog had been an excellent adventure, and they were quite keen to have another one. In the meantime, Harry filled Ron in about the package that seemed to have been moved from Gringotts to Hogwarts, and they spent a lot of time wondering what could possibly need such heavy protection.

"It's either really valuable or really dangerous," said Ron.

"Or both," said Harry.

But as all they knew for sure about the mysterious object was that it was about two inches long, they didn't have much chance of guessing what it was without further clues.

Neither Neville nor Hermione showed the slightest interest in what lay underneath the dog and the trapdoor. All Neville cared about was never going near the dog again.

Hermione was now refusing to speak to Harry and Ron, but she was such a bossy know-it-all that they saw this as an added bonus. All they really wanted now was a way of getting back at Malfoy, and to their great delight, just such a thing arrived in the mail about a week later.

As the owls flooded into the Great Hall as usual, everyone's at-tention was caught at once by a long, thin package carried by six large screech owls. Harry was just as interested as everyone else to see what was in this large parcel, and was amazed when the owls soared down and dropped it right in front of him, knocking his ba-con to the floor. They had hardly fluttered out of the way when an-other owl dropped a letter on top of the parcel.

Harry ripped open the letter first, which was lucky, because it said:DO NOT OPEN THE PARCEL AT THE TABLE.

It contains your new Nimbus Two Thousand, but I don't want everybody knowing you've got a broomstick or they'll all want one. Oliver Wood will meet you tonight on the Quidditch field at seven o'clock for your first training ses-sion.

Professor M. McGonagall

Harry had difficulty hiding his glee as he handed the note to Ron to read.

"A Nimbus Two Thousand!" Ron moaned enviously. "I've never even touched one."

They left the hall quickly, wanting to unwrap the broomstick in private before their first class, but halfway across the entrance hall they found the way upstairs barred by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy seized the package from Harry and felt it.

"That's a broomstick," he said, throwing it back to Harry with a mixture of jealousy and spite on his face. "You'll be in for it this time, Potter, first years aren't allowed them."

Ron couldn't resist it.

"It's not any old broomstick," he said, "it's a Nimbus Two Thou-sand. What did you say you've got at home, Malfoy, a Comet Two Sixty?" Ron grinned at Harry. "Comets look flashy, but they're not in the same league as the Nimbus."

"What would you know about it, Weasley, you couldn't afford half the handle," Malfoy snapped back. "I suppose you and your brothers have to save up twig by twig."

Before Ron could answer, Professor Flitwick appeared at Mal-foy's elbow.

"Not arguing, I hope, boys?" he squeaked.

"Potters been sent a broomstick, Professor," said Malfoy quickly.

"Yes, yes, that's right," said Professor Flitwick, beaming at Harry. "Professor McGonagall told me all about the special circumstances, Potter. And what model is it?"

"A Nimbus Two Thousand, sir," said Harry, fighting not to laugh at the look of horror on Malfoy's face. "And it's really thanks to Malfoy here that I've got it," he added.

Harry and Ron headed upstairs, smothering their laughter at Malfoy's obvious rage and confusion.

"Well, it's true," Harry chortled as they reached the top of the marble staircase, "If he hadn't stolen Neville's Remembrall I wouldn't be on the team. …"

"So I suppose you think that's a reward for breaking rules?" came an angry voice from just behind them. Hermione was stomping up the stairs, looking disapprovingly at the package in Harry's hand.

"I thought you weren't speaking to us?" said Harry.

"Yes, don't stop now," said Ron, "it's doing us so much good."

Hermione marched away with her nose in the air.

Harry had a lot of trouble keeping his mind on his lessons that day. It kept wandering up to the dormitory where his new broom-stick was lying under his bed, or straying off to the Quidditch field where he'd be learning to play that night. He bolted his din-ner that evening

without noticing what he was eating, and then rushed upstairs with Ron to unwrap the Nimbus Two Thousand at last.

“Wow,” Ron sighed, as the broomstick rolled onto Harry’s bed-spread.

Even Harry, who knew nothing about the different brooms, thought it looked wonderful. Sleek and shiny, with a mahogany handle, it had a long tail of neat, straight twigs and Nimbus Two Thousand written in gold near the top.

As seven o’clock drew nearer, Harry left the castle and set off in the dusk toward the Quidditch field. He’d never been inside the stadium before. Hundreds of seats were raised in stands around the field so that the spectators were high enough to see what was going on. At either end of the field were three golden poles with hoops on the end. They reminded Harry of the little plastic sticks Muggle children blew bubbles through, except that they were fifty feet high.

Too eager to fly again to wait for Wood, Harry mounted his broomstick and kicked off from the ground. What a feeling — he swooped in and out of the goal posts and then sped up and down the field. The Nimbus Two Thousand turned wherever he wanted at his lightest touch.

“Hey, Potter, come down!”

Oliver Wood had arrived. He was carrying a large wooden crate under his arm. Harry landed next to him.

“Very nice,” said Wood, his eyes glinting. “I see what McGona-gall meant … you really are a natural. I’m just going to teach you the rules this evening, then you’ll be joining team practice three times a week.”

He opened the crate. Inside were four different-sized balls.

“Right,” said Wood. “Now, Quidditch is easy enough to under-stand, even if it’s not too easy to play. There are seven players on each side.

Three of them are called Chasers."

"Three Chasers," Harry repeated, as Wood took out a bright red ball about the size of a soccer ball.

"This ball's called the Quaffle," said Wood. "The Chasers throw the Quaffle to each other and try and get it through one of the hoops to score a goal. Ten points every time the Quaffle goes through one of the hoops. Follow me?"

"The Chasers throw the Quaffle and put it through the hoops to score," Harry recited. "So — that's sort of like basketball on broomsticks with six hoops, isn't it?"

"What's basketball?" said Wood curiously.

"Never mind," said Harry quickly.

"Now, there's another player on each side who's called the Keeper — I'm Keeper for Gryffindor. I have to fly around our hoops and stop the other team from scoring."

"Three Chasers, one Keeper," said Harry, who was determined to remember it all. "And they play with the Quaffle. Okay, got that. So what are they for?" He pointed at the three balls left inside the box.

"I'll show you now," said Wood. "Take this."

He handed Harry a small club, a bit like a short baseball bat.

"I'm going to show you what the Bludgers do," Wood said. "These two are the Bludgers."

He showed Harry two identical balls, jet black and slightly smaller than the red Quaffle. Harry noticed that they seemed to be straining to escape the straps holding them inside the box.

“Stand back,” Wood warned Harry. He bent down and freed one of the Bludgers.

At once, the black ball rose high in the air and then pelted straight at Harry’s face. Harry swung at it with the bat to stop it from breaking his nose, and sent it zigzagging away into the air — it zoomed around their heads and then shot at Wood, who dived on top of it and managed to pin it to the ground.

“See?” Wood panted, forcing the struggling Bludger back into the crate and strapping it down safely. “The Bludgers rocket around, trying to knock players off their brooms. That’s why you have two Beaters on each team — the Weasley twins are ours — it’s their job to protect their side from the Bludgers and try and knock them toward the other team. So — think you’ve got all that?”

“Three Chasers try and score with the Quaffle; the Keeper guards the goal posts; the Beaters keep the Bludgers away from their team,” Harry reeled off.

“Very good,” said Wood.

“Er — have the Bludgers ever killed anyone?” Harry asked, hop-ing he sounded offhand.

“Never at Hogwarts. We’ve had a couple of broken jaws but nothing worse than that. Now, the last member of the team is the Seeker. That’s you. And you don’t have to worry about the Quaffle or the Bludgers —”

“— unless they crack my head open.”

“Don’t worry, the Weasleys are more than a match for the Bludgers — I mean, they’re like a pair of human Bludgers them-selves.”

Wood reached into the crate and took out the fourth and last ball. Compared with the Quaffle and the Bludgers, it was tiny, about the

size of a large walnut. It was bright gold and had little fluttering silver wings.

“This,” said Wood, “is the Golden Snitch, and it’s the most im-portant ball of the lot. It’s very hard to catch because it’s so fast and difficult to see. It’s the Seeker’s job to catch it. You’ve got to weave in and out of the Chasers, Beaters, Bludgers, and Quaffle to get it before the other team’s Seeker, because whichever Seeker catches the Snitch wins his team an extra hundred and fifty points, so they nearly always win. That’s why Seekers get fouled so much. A game of Quidditch only ends when the Snitch is caught, so it can go on for ages — I think the record is three months, they had to keep bringing on substitutes so the players could get some sleep.

“Well, that’s it — any questions?”

Harry shook his head. He understood what he had to do all right, it was doing it that was going to be the problem.

“We won’t practice with the Snitch yet,” said Wood, carefully shutting it back inside the crate, “it’s too dark, we might lose it. Let’s try you out with a few of these.”

He pulled a bag of ordinary golf balls out of his pocket and a few minutes later, he and Harry were up in the air, Wood throwing the golf balls as hard as he could in every direction for Harry to catch.

Harry didn’t miss a single one, and Wood was delighted. After half an hour, night had really fallen and they couldn’t carry on.

“That Quidditch Cup’ll have our name on it this year,” said Wood happily as they trudged back up to the castle. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you turn out better than Charlie Weasley, and he could have played for England if he hadn’t gone off chasing dragons.”

Perhaps it was because he was now so busy, what with Quidditch practice three evenings a week on top of all his homework, but Harry

could hardly believe it when he realized that he'd already been at Hogwarts two months. The castle felt more like home than Privet Drive ever had. His lessons, too, were becoming more and more interesting now that they had mastered the basics.

On Halloween morning they woke to the delicious smell of bak-ing pumpkin wafting through the corridors. Even better, Professor Flitwick announced in Charms that he thought they were ready to start making objects fly, something they had all been dying to try since they'd seen him make Neville's toad zoom around the class-room. Professor Flitwick put the class into pairs to practice. Harry's partner was Seamus Finnigan (which was a relief, because Neville had been trying to catch his eye). Ron, however, was to be working with Hermione Granger. It was hard to tell whether Ron or Hermione was angrier about this. She hadn't spoken to either of them since the day Harry's broomstick had arrived.

"Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practic-ing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of his pile of books as usual. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too — never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest."

It was very difficult. Harry and Seamus swished and flicked, but the feather they were supposed to be sending skyward just lay on the desktop. Seamus got so impatient that he prodded it with his wand and set fire to it — Harry had to put it out with his hat.

Ron, at the next table, wasn't having much more luck.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" he shouted, waving his long arms like a windmill.

"You're saying it wrong," Harry heard Hermione snap. "It's Wing-gar-dium Levi-o-sa, make the 'gar' nice and long."

“You do it, then, if you’re so clever,” Ron snarled.

Hermione rolled up the sleeves of her gown, flicked her wand, and said, “Wingardium Leviosa!”

Their feather rose off the desk and hovered about four feet above their heads.

“Oh, well done!” cried Professor Flitwick, clapping. “Everyone see here, Miss Granger’s done it!”

Ron was in a very bad mood by the end of the class.

“It’s no wonder no one can stand her,” he said to Harry as they pushed their way into the crowded corridor, “she’s a nightmare, honestly.”

Someone knocked into Harry as they hurried past him. It was Hermione. Harry caught a glimpse of her face — and was startled to see that she was in tears.

“I think she heard you.”

“So?” said Ron, but he looked a bit uncomfortable. “She must’ve noticed she’s got no friends.”

Hermione didn’t turn up for the next class and wasn’t seen all afternoon. On their way down to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast, Harry and Ron overheard Parvati Patil telling her friend Lavender that Hermione was crying in the girls’ bathroom and wanted to be left alone. Ron looked still more awkward at this, but a moment later they had entered the Great Hall, where the Hal-loween decorations put Hermione out of their minds.

A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceiling while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, mak-ing

the candles in the pumpkins stutter. The feast appeared sud-denly on the golden plates, as it had at the start-of-term banquet.

Harry was just helping himself to a baked potato when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore's chair, slumped against the table, and gasped, "Troll — in the dungeons — thought you ought to know."

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

There was an uproar. It took several purple firecrackers explod-ing from the end of Professor Dumbledore's wand to bring silence.

"Prefects," he rumbled, "lead your Houses back to the dormito-ries immediately!"

Percy was in his element.

"Follow me! Stick together, first years! No need to fear the troll if you follow my orders! Stay close behind me, now. Make way, first years coming through! Excuse me, I'm a prefect!"

"How could a troll get in?" Harry asked as they climbed the stairs.

"Don't ask me, they're supposed to be really stupid," said Ron. "Maybe Peeves let it in for a Halloween joke."

They passed different groups of people hurrying in different directions. As they jostled their way through a crowd of confused Hufflepuffs, Harry suddenly grabbed Ron's arm.

"I've just thought — Hermione."

"What about her?"

"She doesn't know about the troll."

Ron bit his lip.

"Oh, all right," he snapped. "But Percy'd better not see us."

Ducking down, they joined the Hufflepuffs going the other way, slipped down a deserted side corridor, and hurried off toward the girls' bathroom. They had just turned the corner when they heard quick footsteps behind them.

"Percy!" hissed Ron, pulling Harry behind a large stone griffin.

Peering around it, however, they saw not Percy but Snape. He crossed the corridor and disappeared from view.

"What's he doing?" Harry whispered. "Why isn't he down in the dungeons with the rest of the teachers?"

"Search me."

Quietly as possible, they crept along the next corridor after Snape's fading footsteps.

"He's heading for the third floor," Harry said, but Ron held up his hand.

"Can you smell something?"

Harry sniffed and a foul stench reached his nostrils, a mixture of old socks and the kind of public toilet no one seems to clean.

And then they heard it — a low grunting, and the shuffling footfalls of gigantic feet. Ron pointed — at the end of a passage to the left, something huge was moving toward them. They shrank into the shadows and watched as it emerged into a patch of moon-light.

It was a horrible sight. Twelve feet tall, its skin was a dull, gran-ite gray, its great lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched on top like a coconut. It had short legs thick as tree trunks

with flat, horny feet. The smell coming from it was incredible. It was holding a huge wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.

The troll stopped next to a doorway and peered inside. It wag-gled its long ears, making up its tiny mind, then slouched slowly into the room.

“The key’s in the lock,” Harry muttered. “We could lock it in.”

“Good idea,” said Ron nervously.

They edged toward the open door, mouths dry, praying the troll wasn’t about to come out of it. With one great leap, Harry man-aged to grab the key, slam the door, and lock it.

“Yes!”

Flushed with their victory, they started to run back up the passage, but as they reached the corner they heard something that made their hearts stop — a high, petrified scream — and it was coming from the chamber they’d just chained up.

“Oh, no,” said Ron, pale as the Bloody Baron.

“It’s the girls’ bathroom!” Harry gasped.

“Hermione!” they said together.

It was the last thing they wanted to do, but what choice did they have? Wheeling around, they sprinted back to the door and turned the key, fumbling in their panic. Harry pulled the door open and they ran inside.

Hermione Granger was shrinking against the wall opposite, looking as if she was about to faint. The troll was advancing on her, knocking the sinks off the walls as it went.

“Confuse it!” Harry said desperately to Ron, and, seizing a tap, he threw it as hard as he could against the wall.

The troll stopped a few feet from Hermione. It lumbered around, blinking stupidly, to see what had made the noise. Its mean little eyes saw Harry. It hesitated, then made for him instead, lifting its club as it went.

“Oy, pea-brain!” yelled Ron from the other side of the chamber, and he threw a metal pipe at it. The troll didn’t even seem to notice the pipe hitting its shoulder, but it heard the yell and paused again, turning its ugly snout toward Ron instead, giving Harry time to run around it.

“Come on, run, run!” Harry yelled at Hermione, trying to pull her toward the door, but she couldn’t move, she was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror.

The shouting and the echoes seemed to be driving the troll berserk. It roared again and started toward Ron, who was nearest and had no way to escape.

Harry then did something that was both very brave and very stu-pid: He took a great running jump and managed to fasten his arms around the troll’s neck from behind. The troll couldn’t feel Harry hanging there, but even a troll will notice if you stick a long bit of wood up its nose, and Harry’s wand had still been in his hand when he’d jumped — it had gone straight up one of the troll’s nostrils.

Howling with pain, the troll twisted and flailed its club, with Harry clinging on for dear life; any second, the troll was going to rip him off or catch him a terrible blow with the club.

Hermione had sunk to the floor in fright; Ron pulled out his own wand — not knowing what he was going to do he heard him-self cry the first spell that came into his head: “Wingardium Leviosa!”

The club flew suddenly out of the troll's hand, rose high, high up into the air, turned slowly over — and dropped, with a sicken-ing crack, onto its owner's head. The troll swayed on the spot and then fell flat on its face, with a thud that made the whole room tremble.

Harry got to his feet. He was shaking and out of breath. Ron was standing there with his wand still raised, staring at what he had done.

It was Hermione who spoke first.

"Is it — dead?"

"I don't think so," said Harry, "I think it's just been knocked out."

He bent down and pulled his wand out of the troll's nose. It was covered in what looked like lumpy gray glue.

"Urgh — troll boogers."

He wiped it on the troll's trousers.

A sudden slamming and loud footsteps made the three of them look up. They hadn't realized what a racket they had been making, but of course, someone downstairs must have heard the crashes and the troll's roars. A moment later, Professor McGonagall had come bursting into the room, closely followed by Snape, with Quirrell bringing up the rear. Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper, and sat quickly down on a toilet, clutching his heart.

Snape bent over the troll. Professor McGonagall was looking at Ron and Harry. Harry had never seen her look so angry. Her lips were white. Hopes of winning fifty points for Gryffindor faded quickly from Harry's mind.

"What on earth were you thinking of?" said Professor McGonagall, with cold fury in her voice. Harry looked at Ron, who was still standing

with his wand in the air. "You're lucky you weren't killed. Why aren't you in your dormitory?"

Snape gave Harry a swift, piercing look. Harry looked at the floor. He wished Ron would put his wand down.

Then a small voice came out of the shadows.

"Please, Professor McGonagall — they were looking for me."

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione had managed to get to her feet at last.

"I went looking for the troll because I — I thought I could deal with it on my own — you know, because I've read all about them."

Ron dropped his wand. Hermione Granger, telling a downright lie to a teacher?

"If they hadn't found me, I'd be dead now. Harry stuck his wand up its nose and Ron knocked it out with its own club. They didn't have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they arrived."

Harry and Ron tried to look as though this story wasn't new to them.

"Well — in that case …" said Professor McGonagall, staring at the three of them, "Miss Granger, you foolish girl, how could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?"

Hermione hung her head. Harry was speechless. Hermione was the last person to do anything against the rules, and here she was, pretending she had, to get them out of trouble. It was as if Snape had started handing out sweets.

"Miss Granger, five points will be taken from Gryffindor for this," said Professor McGonagall. "I'm very disappointed in you. If you're not

hurt at all, you'd better get off to Gryffindor Tower. Stu-dents are finishing the feast in their Houses."

Hermione left.

Professor McGonagall turned to Harry and Ron.

"Well, I still say you were lucky, but not many first years could have taken on a full-grown mountain troll. You each win Gryffindor five points. Professor Dumbledore will be informed of this. You may go."

They hurried out of the chamber and didn't speak at all until they had climbed two floors up. It was a relief to be away from the smell of the troll, quite apart from anything else.

"We should have gotten more than ten points," Ron grumbled.

"Five, you mean, once she's taken off Hermione's."

"Good of her to get us out of trouble like that," Ron admitted. "Mind you, we did save her."

"She might not have needed saving if we hadn't locked the thing in with her," Harry reminded him.

They had reached the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Pig snout," they said and entered.

The common room was packed and noisy. Everyone was eating the food that had been sent up. Hermione, however, stood alone by the door, waiting for them. There was a very embarrassed pause. Then, none of them looking at each other, they all said "Thanks," and hurried off to get plates.

But from that moment on, Hermione Granger became their friend. There are some things you can't share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them.

Chapter 11 Quidditch

As they entered November, the weather turned very cold. The mountains around the school became icy gray and the lake like chilled steel. Every morning the ground was covered in frost. Hagrid could be seen from the upstairs windows defrost-ing broomsticks on the Quidditch field, bundled up in a long moleskin overcoat, rabbit fur gloves, and enormous beaverskin boots.

The Quidditch season had begun. On Saturday, Harry would be playing in his first match after weeks of training: Gryffindor versus Slytherin. If Gryffindor won, they would move up into second place in the House Championship.

Hardly anyone had seen Harry play because Wood had decided that, as their secret weapon, Harry should be kept, well, secret. But the news that he was playing Seeker had leaked out somehow, and Harry didn't know which was worse — people telling him he'd be brilliant or people telling him they'd be running around under-neath him holding a mattress.

It was really lucky that Harry now had Hermione as a friend. He didn't know how he'd have gotten through all his homework with-out her, what with all the last-minute Quidditch practice Wood was making them do. She had also lent him Quidditch Through the Ages, which turned out to be a very interesting read.

Harry learned that there were seven hundred ways of commit-ting a Quidditch foul and that all of them had happened during a World Cup match in 1473; that Seekers were usually the smallest and fastest players, and that most serious Quidditch accidents seemed to happen to them; that although people rarely died play-ing Quidditch, referees had been known to vanish and turn up months later in the Sahara Desert.

Hermione had become a bit more relaxed about breaking rules since Harry and Ron had saved her from the mountain troll, and she was much nicer for it. The day before Harry's first Quidditch match the three of them were out in the freezing courtyard during break, and she had conjured them up a bright blue fire that could be carried around in a jam jar. They were standing with their backs to it, getting warm, when Snape crossed the yard. Harry noticed at once that Snape was limping. Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved closer together to block the fire from view; they were sure it wouldn't be allowed. Unfortunately, something about their guilty faces caught Snape's eye. He limped over. He hadn't seen the fire, but he seemed to be looking for a reason to tell them off anyway.

"What's that you've got there, Potter?"

It was Quidditch Through the Ages. Harry showed him.

"Library books are not to be taken outside the school," said Snape. "Give it to me. Five points from Gryffindor."

"He's just made that rule up," Harry muttered angrily as Snape limped away. "Wonder what's wrong with his leg?"

"Dunno, but I hope it's really hurting him," said Ron bitterly.

The Gryffindor common room was very noisy that evening. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat together next to a window. Hermione was checking Harry and Ron's Charms homework for them. She would never let them copy ("How will you learn?"), but by asking her to read it through, they got the right answers anyway.

Harry felt restless. He wanted Quidditch Through the Ages back, to take his mind off his nerves about tomorrow. Why should he be afraid of Snape? Getting up, he told Ron and Hermione he was go-ing to ask Snape if he could have it.

"Better you than me," they said together, but Harry had an idea that Snape wouldn't refuse if there were other teachers listening.

He made his way down to the staffroom and knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again. Nothing.

Perhaps Snape had left the book in there? It was worth a try. He pushed the door ajar and peered inside — and a horrible scene met his eyes.

Snape and Filch were inside, alone. Snape was holding his robes above his knees. One of his legs was bloody and mangled. Filch was handing Snape bandages.

"Blasted thing," Snape was saying. "How are you supposed to keep your eyes on all three heads at once?"

Harry tried to shut the door quietly, but —"POTTER!"

Snape's face was twisted with fury as he dropped his robes quickly to hide his leg. Harry gulped.

"I just wondered if I could have my book back."

"GET OUT! OUT!"

Harry left, before Snape could take any more points from Gryffindor. He sprinted back upstairs.

"Did you get it?" Ron asked as Harry joined them. "What's the matter?"

In a low whisper, Harry told them what he'd seen.

"You know what this means?" he finished breathlessly. "He tried to get past that three-headed dog at Halloween! That's where he was going when we saw him — he's after whatever it's guarding! And I'd bet my broomstick he let that troll in, to make a diversion!"

Hermione's eyes were wide.

"No — he wouldn't," she said. "I know he's not very nice, but he wouldn't try and steal something Dumbledore was keeping safe."

"Honestly, Hermione, you think all teachers are saints or some-thing," snapped Ron. "I'm with Harry. I wouldn't put anything past Snape. But what's he after? What's that dog guarding?"

Harry went to bed with his head buzzing with the same ques-tion. Neville was snoring loudly, but Harry couldn't sleep. He tried to empty his mind — he needed to sleep, he had to, he had his first Quidditch match in a few hours — but the expression on Snape's face when Harry had seen his leg wasn't easy to forget.

The next morning dawned very bright and cold. The Great Hall was full of the delicious smell of fried sausages and the cheerful chatter of everyone looking forward to a good Quidditch match.

"You've got to eat some breakfast."

"I don't want anything."

"Just a bit of toast," wheedled Hermione.

"I'm not hungry."

Harry felt terrible. In an hour's time he'd be walking onto the field.

"Harry, you need your strength," said Seamus Finnigan. "Seek-ers are always the ones who get clobbered by the other team."

"Thanks, Seamus," said Harry, watching Seamus pile ketchup on his sausages.

By eleven o'clock the whole school seemed to be out in the stands around the Quidditch pitch. Many students had binoculars. The seats

might be raised high in the air, but it was still difficult to see what was going on sometimes.

Ron and Hermione joined Neville, Seamus, and Dean the West Ham fan up in the top row. As a surprise for Harry, they had painted a large banner on one of the sheets Scabbers had ruined. It said Potter for President, and Dean, who was good at drawing, had done a large Gryffindor lion underneath. Then Hermione had performed a tricky little charm so that the paint flashed different colors.

Meanwhile, in the locker room, Harry and the rest of the team were changing into their scarlet Quidditch robes (Slytherin would be playing in green).

Wood cleared his throat for silence.

“Okay, men,” he said.

“And women,” said Chaser Angelina Johnson.

“And women,” Wood agreed. “This is it.”

“The big one,” said Fred Weasley.

“The one we’ve all been waiting for,” said George.

“We know Oliver’s speech by heart,” Fred told Harry, “we were on the team last year.”

“Shut up, you two,” said Wood. “This is the best team Gryf-findor’s had in years. We’re going to win. I know it.”

He glared at them all as if to say, “Or else.”

“Right. It’s time. Good luck, all of you.”

Harry followed Fred and George out of the locker room and, hoping his knees weren’t going to give way, walked onto the field to loud

cheers.

Madam Hooch was refereeing. She stood in the middle of the field waiting for the two teams, her broom in her hand.

"Now, I want a nice fair game, all of you," she said, once they were all gathered around her. Harry noticed that she seemed to be speaking particularly to the Slytherin Captain, Marcus Flint, a fifth year. Harry thought Flint looked as if he had some troll blood in him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the fluttering banner high above, flashing Potter for President over the crowd. His heart skipped. He felt braver.

"Mount your brooms, please."

Harry clambered onto his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Madam Hooch gave a loud blast on her silver whistle.

Fifteen brooms rose up, high, high into the air. They were off.

"And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor — what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too —"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor."

The Weasley twins' friend, Lee Jordan, was doing the commen-tary for the match, closely watched by Professor McGonagall.

"And she's really belting along up there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood's, last year only a reserve — back to Johnson and — no, the Slytherins have taken the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes — Flint flying like an eagle up there — he's going to sc- no, stopped by an excellent move by Gryffindor Keeper Wood and the Gryffindors take the

Quaffle — that's Chaser Katie Bell of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field and — OUCH — that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a Bludger — Quaffle taken by the Slytherins — that's Adrian Pucey speeding off toward the goal posts, but he's blocked by a second Bludger — sent his way by Fred or George Weasley, can't tell which — nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, anyway, and Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead and off she goes — she's really flying — dodges a speeding Bludger — the goal posts are ahead — come on, now, Angelina — Keeper Bletch-ley dives — misses — GRYFFINDORS SCORE!"

Gryffindor cheers filled the cold air, with howls and moans from the Slytherins.

"Budge up there, move along."

"Hagrid!"

Ron and Hermione squeezed together to give Hagrid enough space to join them.

"Bin watchin' from me hut," said Hagrid, patting a large pair of binoculars around his neck, "But it isn't the same as bein' in the crowd. No sign of the Snitch yet, eh?"

"Nope," said Ron. "Harry hasn't had much to do yet."

"Kept outta trouble, though, that's somethin'," said Hagrid, rais-ing his binoculars and peering skyward at the speck that was Harry.

Way up above them, Harry was gliding over the game, squinting about for some sign of the Snitch. This was part of his and Wood's game plan.

"Keep out of the way until you catch sight of the Snitch," Wood had said. "We don't want you attacked before you have to be."

When Angelina had scored, Harry had done a couple of loop-the-loops to let off his feelings. Now he was back to staring around for the Snitch. Once he caught sight of a flash of gold, but it was just a reflection from one of the Weasleys' wristwatches, and once a Bludger decided to come pelting his way, more like a cannonball than anything, but Harry dodged it and Fred Weasley came chas-ing after it.

"All right there, Harry?" he had time to yell, as he beat the Bludger furiously toward Marcus Flint.

"Slytherin in possession," Lee Jordan was saying, "Chaser Pucey ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys, and Chaser Bell, and speeds toward the — wait a moment — was that the Snitch?"

A murmur ran through the crowd as Adrian Pucey dropped the Quaffle, too busy looking over his shoulder at the flash of gold that had passed his left ear.

Harry saw it. In a great rush of excitement he dived downward after the streak of gold. Slytherin Seeker Terence Higgs had seen it, too. Neck and neck they hurtled toward the Snitch — all the Chasers seemed to have forgotten what they were supposed to be doing as they hung in midair to watch.

Harry was faster than Higgs — he could see the little round ball, wings fluttering, darting up ahead — he put on an extra spurt of speed —WHAM! A roar of rage echoed from the Gryffindors below — Marcus Flint had blocked Harry on purpose, and Harry's broom spun off course, Harry holding on for dear life.

"Foul!" screamed the Gryffindors.

Madam Hooch spoke angrily to Flint and then ordered a free shot at the goal posts for Gryffindor. But in all the confusion, of course, the Golden Snitch had disappeared from sight again.

Down in the stands, Dean Thomas was yelling, “Send him off, ref! Red card!”

“What are you talking about, Dean?” said Ron.

“Red card!” said Dean furiously. “In soccer you get shown the red card and you’re out of the game!”

“But this isn’t soccer, Dean,” Ron reminded him.

Hagrid, however, was on Dean’s side.

“They oughta change the rules. Flint coulda knocked Harry outta the air.”

Lee Jordan was finding it difficult not to take sides.

“So — after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating —”

“Jordan!” growled Professor McGonagall.

“I mean, after that open and revolting foul —”

“Jordan, I’m warning you —”

“All right, all right. Flint nearly kills the Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone, I’m sure, so a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinnet, who puts it away, no trouble, and we continue play, Gryffindor still in possession.”

It was as Harry dodged another Bludger, which went spinning dangerously past his head, that it happened. His broom gave a sudden, frightening lurch. For a split second, he thought he was going to fall. He gripped the broom tightly with both his hands and knees. He’d never felt anything like that.

It happened again. It was as though the broom was trying to buck him off. But Nimbus Two Thousands did not suddenly de-cide to buck

their riders off. Harry tried to turn back toward the Gryffindor goal posts — he had half a mind to ask Wood to call time-out — and then he realized that his broom was completely out of his control. He couldn't turn it. He couldn't direct it at all. It was zigzagging through the air, and every now and then making vi-olent swishing movements that almost unseated him.

Lee was still commentating.

"Slytherin in possession — Flint with the Quaffle — passes Spinnet — passes Bell — hit hard in the face by a Bludger, hope it broke his nose — only joking, Professor — Slytherins score — oh no …"

The Slytherins were cheering. No one seemed to have noticed that Harry's broom was behaving strangely It was carrying him slowly higher, away from the game, jerking and twitching as it went.

"Dunno what Harry thinks he's doing," Hagrid mumbled. He stared through his binoculars. "If I didn' know better, I'd say he'd lost control of his broom … but he can't have. …"

Suddenly, people were pointing up at Harry all over the stands. His broom had started to roll over and over, with him only just managing to hold on. Then the whole crowd gasped. Harry's broom had given a wild jerk and Harry swung off it. He was now dangling from it, holding on with only one hand.

"Did something happen to it when Flint blocked him?" Seamus whispered.

"Can't have," Hagrid said, his voice shaking. "Can't nothing in-terfere with a broomstick except powerful Dark magic — no kid could do that to a Nimbus Two Thousand."

At these words, Hermione seized Hagrid's binoculars, but in-stead of looking up at Harry, she started looking frantically at the crowd.

“What are you doing?” moaned Ron, gray-faced.

“I knew it,” Hermione gasped, “Snape — look.”

Ron grabbed the binoculars. Snape was in the middle of the stands opposite them. He had his eyes fixed on Harry and was mut-tering nonstop under his breath.

“He’s doing something — jinxing the broom,” said Hermione.

“What should we do?”

“Leave it to me.”

Before Ron could say another word, Hermione had disappeared. Ron turned the binoculars back on Harry. His broom was vibrat-ing so hard, it was almost impossible for him to hang on much longer. The whole crowd was on its feet, watching, terrified, as the Weasleys flew up to try and pull Harry safely onto one of their brooms, but it was no good — every time they got near him, the broom would jump higher still. They dropped lower and cir-cled beneath him, obviously hoping to catch him if he fell. Marcus Flint seized the Quaffle and scored five times without anyone noticing.

“Come on, Hermione,” Ron muttered desperately.

Hermione had fought her way across to the stand where Snape stood, and was now racing along the row behind him; she didn’t even stop to say sorry as she knocked Professor Quirrell headfirst into the row in front. Reaching Snape, she crouched down, pulled out her wand, and whispered a few, well-chosen words. Bright blue flames shot from her wand onto the hem of Snape’s robes.

It took perhaps thirty seconds for Snape to realize that he was on fire. A sudden yelp told her she had done her job. Scooping the fire off him into a little jar in her pocket, she scrambled back along the row — Snape would never know what had happened.

It was enough. Up in the air, Harry was suddenly able to clam-ber back on to his broom.

“Neville, you can look!” Ron said. Neville had been sobbing into Hagrid’s jacket for the last five minutes.

Harry was speeding toward the ground when the crowd saw him clap his hand to his mouth as though he was about to be sick — he hit the field on all fours — coughed — and something gold fell into his hand.

“I’ve got the Snitch!” he shouted, waving it above his head, and the game ended in complete confusion.

“He didn’t catch it, he nearly swallowed it,” Flint was still howl-ing twenty minutes later, but it made no difference — Harry hadn’t broken any rules and Lee Jordan was still happily shouting the results — Gryffindor had won by one hundred and seventy points to sixty. Harry heard none of this, though. He was being made a cup of strong tea back in Hagrid’s hut, with Ron and Hermione.

“It was Snape,” Ron was explaining, “Hermione and I saw him. He was cursing your broomstick, muttering, he wouldn’t take his eyes off you.”

“Rubbish,” said Hagrid, who hadn’t heard a word of what had gone on next to him in the stands. “Why would Snape do some-thin’ like that?”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another, wondering what to tell him. Harry decided on the truth.

“I found out something about him,” he told Hagrid. “He tried to get past that three-headed dog on Halloween. It bit him. We think he was trying to steal whatever it’s guarding.”

Hagrid dropped the teapot.

“How do you know about Fluffy?” he said.

"Fluffy?"

"Yeah — he's mine — bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year — I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the —"

"Yes?" said Harry eagerly.

"Now, don't ask me anymore," said Hagrid gruffly. "That's top secret, that is."

"But Snape's trying to steal it."

"Rubbish," said Hagrid again. "Snape's a Hogwarts teacher, he'd do nothin' of the sort."

"So why did he just try and kill Harry?" cried Hermione.

The afternoon's events certainly seemed to have changed her mind about Snape.

"I know a jinx when I see one, Hagrid, I've read all about them! You've got to keep eye contact, and Snape wasn't blinking at all, I saw him!"

"I'm tellin' yeh, yer wrong!" said Hagrid hotly. "I don' know why Harry's broom acted like that, but Snape wouldn' try an' kill a stu-dent! Now, listen to me, all three of yeh — yer meddlin' in things that don' concern yeh. It's dangerous. You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guardin', that's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel —"

"Aha!" said Harry, "so there's someone called Nicolas Flamel involved, is there?"

Hagrid looked furious with himself.

Chapter 12 The Mirror Of Erised

Christmas was coming. One morning in mid-December, Hogwarts woke to find itself covered in several feet of snow. The lake froze solid and the Weasley twins were punished for be-witching several snowballs so that they followed Quirrell around, bouncing off the back of his turban. The few owls that managed to battle their way through the stormy sky to deliver mail had to be nursed back to health by Hagrid before they could fly off again.

No one could wait for the holidays to start. While the Gryf-findor common room and the Great Hall had roaring fires, the drafty corridors had become icy and a bitter wind rattled the windows in the classrooms. Worst of all were Professor Snape's classes down in the dungeons, where their breath rose in a mist before them and they kept as close as possible to their hot caul-drons.

"I do feel so sorry," said Draco Malfoy, one Potions class, "for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they're not wanted at home."

He was looking over at Harry as he spoke. Crabbe and Goyle chuckled. Harry, who was measuring out powdered spine of lion-fish, ignored them. Malfoy had been even more unpleasant than usual since the Quidditch match. Disgusted that the Slytherins had lost, he had tried to get everyone laughing at how a wide-mouthed tree frog would be replacing Harry as Seeker next. Then he'd real-ized that nobody found this funny, because they were all so im-pressed at the way Harry had managed to stay on his bucking broomstick. So Malfoy, jealous and angry, had gone back to taunt-ing Harry about having no proper family.

It was true that Harry wasn't going back to Privet Drive for Christmas. Professor McGonagall had come around the week be-fore, making a list of students who would be staying for the holi-days, and Harry had

signed up at once. He didn't feel sorry for himself at all; this would probably be the best Christmas he'd ever had. Ron and his brothers were staying, too, because Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were going to Romania to visit Charlie.

When they left the dungeons at the end of Potions, they found a large fir tree blocking the corridor ahead. Two enormous feet sticking out at the bottom and a loud puffing sound told them that Hagrid was behind it.

"Hi, Hagrid, want any help?" Ron asked, sticking his head through the branches.

"Nah, I'm all right, thanks, Ron."

"Would you mind moving out of the way?" came Malfoy's cold drawl from behind them. "Are you trying to earn some extra money, Weasley? Hoping to be gamekeeper yourself when you leave Hogwarts, I suppose — that hut of Hagrid's must seem like a palace compared to what your family's used to."

Ron dived at Malfoy just as Snape came up the stairs.

"WEASLEY!"

Ron let go of the front of Malfoy's robes.

"He was provoked, Professor Snape," said Hagrid, sticking his huge hairy face out from behind the tree. "Malfoy was insultin' his family."

"Be that as it may, fighting is against Hogwarts rules, Hagrid," said Snape silkily. "Five points from Gryffindor, Weasley, and be grateful it isn't more. Move along, all of you."

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle pushed roughly past the tree, scat-tering needles everywhere and smirking.

“I’ll get him,” said Ron, grinding his teeth at Malfoy’s back, “one of these days, I’ll get him —”

“I hate them both,” said Harry, “Malfoy and Snape.”

“Come on, cheer up, it’s nearly Christmas,” said Hagrid. “Tell yeh what, come with me an’ see the Great Hall, looks a treat.”

So the three of them followed Hagrid and his tree off to the Great Hall, where Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick were busy with the Christmas decorations.

“Ah, Hagrid, the last tree — put it in the far corner, would you?”

The hall looked spectacular. Festoons of holly and mistletoe hung all around the walls, and no less than twelve towering Christ-mas trees stood around the room, some sparkling with tiny icicles, some glittering with hundreds of candles.

“How many days you got left until yer holidays?” Hagrid asked.

“Just one,” said Hermione. “And that reminds me — Harry, Ron, we’ve got half an hour before lunch, we should be in the li-brary.”

“Oh yeah, you’re right,” said Ron, tearing his eyes away from Professor Flitwick, who had golden bubbles blossoming out of his wand and was trailing them over the branches of the new tree.

“The library?” said Hagrid, following them out of the hall. “Just before the holidays? Bit keen, aren’t yeh?”

“Oh, we’re not working,” Harry told him brightly. “Ever since you mentioned Nicolas Flamel we’ve been trying to find out who he is.”

“You what?” Hagrid looked shocked. “Listen here — I’ve told yeh — drop it. It’s nothin’ to you what that dog’s guardin’.”

“We just want to know who Nicolas Flamel is, that’s all,” said Hermione.

“Unless you’d like to tell us and save us the trouble?”Harry added. “We must’ve been through hundreds of books already and we can’t find him anywhere — just give us a hint — I know I’ve read his name somewhere.”

“I’m sayin’ nothin’,” said Hagrid flatly.

“Just have to find out for ourselves, then,” said Ron, and they left Hagrid looking disgruntled and hurried off to the library.

They had indeed been searching books for Flamel’s name ever since Hagrid had let it slip, because how else were they going to find out what Snape was trying to steal? The trouble was, it was very hard to know where to begin, not knowing what Flamel might have done to get himself into a book. He wasn’t in Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century, or Notable Magical Names of Our Time; he was missing, too, from Important Modern Magical Discoveries, and A Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry. And then, of course, there was the sheer size of the library; tens of thousands of books; thousands of shelves; hundreds of narrow rows.

Hermione took out a list of subjects and titles she had decided to search while Ron strode off down a row of books and started pulling them off the shelves at random. Harry wandered over to the Restricted Section. He had been wondering for a while if Flamel wasn’t somewhere in there. Unfortunately, you needed a specially signed note from one of the teachers to look in any of the restricted books, and he knew he’d never get one. These were the books containing powerful Dark Magic never taught at Hogwarts, and only read by older students studying advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts.

“What are you looking for, boy?”

"Nothing," said Harry.

Madam Pince the librarian brandished a feather duster at him.

"You'd better get out, then. Go on — out!"

Wishing he'd been a bit quicker at thinking up some story, Harry left the library. He, Ron, and Hermione had already agreed they'd better not ask Madam Pince where they could find Flamel. They were sure she'd be able to tell them, but they couldn't risk Snape hearing what they were up to.

Harry waited outside in the corridor to see if the other two had found anything, but he wasn't very hopeful. They had been look-ing for two weeks, after all, but as they only had odd moments be-tween lessons it wasn't surprising they'd found nothing. What they really needed was a nice long search without Madam Pince breath-ing down their necks.

Five minutes later, Ron and Hermione joined him, shaking their heads. They went off to lunch.

"You will keep looking while I'm away, won't you?" said Hermione. "And send me an owl if you find anything."

"And you could ask your parents if they know who Flamel is," said Ron. "It'd be safe to ask them."

"Very safe, as they're both dentists," said Hermione.

Once the holidays had started, Ron and Harry were having too good a time to think much about Flamel. They had the dormitory to themselves and the common room was far emptier than usual, so they were able to get the good armchairs by the fire. They sat by the hour eating anything they could spear on a toasting fork — bread, English muffins, marshmallows — and plotting ways of get-ting

Malfoy expelled, which were fun to talk about even if they wouldn't work.

Ron also started teaching Harry wizard chess. This was exactly like Muggle chess except that the figures were alive, which made it a lot like directing troops in battle. Ron's set was very old and battered. Like everything else he owned, it had once belonged to someone else in his family — in this case, his grandfather. However, old chessmen weren't a drawback at all. Ron knew them so well he never had trouble getting them to do what he wanted.

Harry played with chessmen Seamus Finnigan had lent him, and they didn't trust him at all. He wasn't a very good player yet and they kept shouting different bits of advice at him, which was confusing. "Don't send me there, can't you see his knight? Send him, we can afford to lose him."

On Christmas Eve, Harry went to bed looking forward to the next day for the food and the fun, but not expecting any presents at all. When he woke early in the morning, however, the first thing he saw was a small pile of packages at the foot of his bed.

"Merry Christmas," said Ron sleepily as Harry scrambled out of bed and pulled on his bathrobe.

"You, too," said Harry. "Will you look at this? I've got some pre-sents!"

"What did you expect, turnips?" said Ron, turning to his own pile, which was a lot bigger than Harry's.

Harry picked up the top parcel. It was wrapped in thick brown paper and scrawled across it was To Harry, from Hagrid. Inside was a roughly cut wooden flute. Hagrid had obviously whittled it him-self. Harry blew it — it sounded a bit like an owl.

A second, very small parcel contained a note.

We received your message and enclose your Christmas present. From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. Taped to the note was a fifty-pence piece.

“That’s friendly,” said Harry.

Ron was fascinated by the fifty pence.

“Weird!” he said, “What a shape! This is money?”

“You can keep it,” said Harry, laughing at how pleased Ron was. “Hagrid and my aunt and uncle — so who sent these?”

“I think I know who that one’s from,” said Ron, turning a bit pink and pointing to a very lumpy parcel. “My mom. I told her you didn’t expect any presents and — oh, no,” he groaned, “she’s made you a Weasley sweater.”

Harry had torn open the parcel to find a thick, hand-knitted sweater in emerald green and a large box of homemade fudge.

“Every year she makes us a sweater,” said Ron, unwrapping his own, “and mine’s always maroon.”

“That’s really nice of her,” said Harry, trying the fudge, which was very tasty.

His next present also contained candy — a large box of Choco-late Frogs from Hermione.

This only left one parcel. Harry picked it up and felt it. It was very light. He unwrapped it.

Something fluid and silvery gray went slithering to the floor where it lay in gleaming folds. Ron gasped.

“I’ve heard of those,” he said in a hushed voice, dropping the box of Every Flavor Beans he’d gotten from Hermione. “If that’s what I think

it is — they're really rare, and really valuable."

"What is it?"

Harry picked the shining, silvery cloth off the floor. It was strange to the touch, like water woven into material.

"It's an Invisibility Cloak," said Ron, a look of awe on his face. "I'm sure it is — try it on."

Harry threw the cloak around his shoulders and Ron gave a yell.

"It is! Look down!"

Harry looked down at his feet, but they were gone. He dashed to the mirror. Sure enough, his reflection looked back at him, just his head suspended in midair, his body completely invisible. He pulled the cloak over his head and his reflection vanished com-pletely.

"There's a note!" said Ron suddenly. "A note fell out of it!"

Harry pulled off the cloak and seized the letter. Written in nar-row, loopy writing he had never seen before were the following words:Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you.

Use it well.

A Very Merry Christmas to you.

There was no signature. Harry stared at the note. Ron was admir-ing the cloak.

"I'd give anything for one of these," he said. "Anything. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Harry. He felt very strange. Who had sent the cloak? Had it really once belonged to his father?

Before he could say or think anything else, the dormitory door was flung open and Fred and George Weasley bounded in. Harry stuffed the cloak quickly out of sight. He didn't feel like sharing it with anyone else yet.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Hey, look — Harry's got a Weasley sweater, too!"

Fred and George were wearing blue sweaters, one with a large yellow F on it, the other a G.

"Harry's is better than ours, though," said Fred, holding up Harry's sweater. "She obviously makes more of an effort if you're not family."

"Why aren't you wearing yours, Ron?" George demanded. "Come on, get it on, they're lovely and warm."

"I hate maroon," Ron moaned halfheartedly as he pulled it over his head.

"You haven't got a letter on yours," George observed. "I suppose she thinks you don't forget your name. But we're not stupid — we know we're called Gred and Forge."

"What's all this noise?"

Percy Weasley stuck his head through the door, looking disapproving. He had clearly gotten halfway through unwrapping his presents as he, too, carried a lumpy sweater over his arm, which Fred seized.

"P for prefect! Get it on, Percy, come on, we're all wearing ours, even Harry got one."

"I — don't — want —" said Percy thickly, as the twins forced the sweater over his head, knocking his glasses askew.

"And you're not sitting with the prefects today, either," said George. "Christmas is a time for family."

They frog-marched Percy from the room, his arms pinned to his side by his sweater.

Harry had never in all his life had such a Christmas dinner. A hundred fat, roast turkeys; mountains of roast and boiled potatoes; platters of chipolatas; tureens of buttered peas, silver boats of thick, rich gravy and cranberry sauce — and stacks of wizard crackers every few feet along the table. These fantastic party favors were nothing like the feeble Muggle ones the Dursleys usually bought, with their little plastic toys and their flimsy paper hats inside. Harry pulled a wizard cracker with Fred and it didn't just bang, it went off with a blast like a cannon and engulfed them all in a cloud of blue smoke, while from the inside exploded a rear admiral's hat and several live, white mice. Up at the High Table, Dumbledore had swapped his pointed wizard's hat for a flowered bonnet, and was chuckling merrily at a joke Professor Flitwick had just read him.

Flaming Christmas puddings followed the turkey. Percy nearly broke his teeth on a silver Sickle embedded in his slice. Harry watched Hagrid getting redder and redder in the face as he called for more wine, finally kissing Professor McGonagall on the cheek, who, to Harry's amazement, giggled and blushed, her top hat lop-sided.

When Harry finally left the table, he was laden down with a stack of things out of the crackers, including a pack of non-explodable, luminous balloons, a Grow-Your-Own-Warts kit, and his own new wizard chess set. The white mice had disappeared and Harry had a nasty feeling they were going to end up as Mrs. Nor-ris's Christmas dinner.

Harry and the Weasleys spent a happy afternoon having a furi-ous snowball fight on the grounds. Then, cold, wet, and gasping for breath, they returned to the fire in the Gryffindor common room,

where Harry broke in his new chess set by losing spectacu-larly to Ron. He suspected he wouldn't have lost so badly if Percy hadn't tried to help him so much.

After a meal of turkey sandwiches, crumpets, trifle, and Christ-mas cake, everyone felt too full and sleepy to do much before bed except sit and watch Percy chase Fred and George all over Gryffindor Tower because they'd stolen his prefect badge.

It had been Harry's best Christmas day ever. Yet something had been nagging at the back of his mind all day. Not until he climbed into bed was he free to think about it: the Invisibility Cloak and whoever had sent it.

Ron, full of turkey and cake and with nothing mysterious to bother him, fell asleep almost as soon as he'd drawn the curtains of his four-poster. Harry leaned over the side of his own bed and pulled the cloak out from under it.

His father's … this had been his father's. He let the material flow over his hands, smoother than silk, light as air. Use it well, the note had said.

He had to try it, now. He slipped out of bed and wrapped the cloak around himself. Looking down at his legs, he saw only moon-light and shadows. It was a very funny feeling.

Use it well.

Suddenly, Harry felt wide-awake. The whole of Hogwarts was open to him in this cloak. Excitement flooded through him as he stood there in the dark and silence. He could go anywhere in this, anywhere, and Filch would never know.

Ron grunted in his sleep. Should Harry wake him? Something held him back — his father's cloak — he felt that this time — the first time — he wanted to use it alone.

He crept out of the dormitory, down the stairs, across the com-mon room, and climbed through the portrait hole.

"Who's there?" squawked the Fat Lady. Harry said nothing. He walked quickly down the corridor.

Where should he go? He stopped, his heart racing, and thought. And then it came to him. The Restricted Section in the library. He'd be able to read as long as he liked, as long as it took to find out who Flamel was. He set off, drawing the Invisibility Cloak tight around him as he walked.

The library was pitch-black and very eerie. Harry lit a lamp to see his way along the rows of books. The lamp looked as if it was floating along in midair, and even though Harry could feel his arm supporting it, the sight gave him the creeps.

The Restricted Section was right at the back of the library. Stepping carefully over the rope that separated these books from the rest of the library, he held up his lamp to read the titles.

They didn't tell him much. Their peeling, faded gold letters spelled words in languages Harry couldn't understand. Some had no title at all. One book had a dark stain on it that looked horribly like blood. The hairs on the back of Harry's neck prickled. Maybe he was imagining it, maybe not, but he thought a faint whispering was coming from the books, as though they knew someone was there who shouldn't be.

He had to start somewhere. Setting the lamp down carefully on the floor, he looked along the bottom shelf for an interesting-looking book. A large black and silver volume caught his eye. He pulled it out with difficulty, because it was very heavy, and, balanc-ing it on his knee, let it fall open.

A piercing, bloodcurdling shriek split the silence — the book was screaming! Harry snapped it shut, but the shriek went on and on, one high, unbroken, earsplitting note. He stumbled backward and

knocked over his lamp, which went out at once. Panicking, he heard footsteps coming down the corridor outside — stuffing the shrieking book back on the shelf, he ran for it. He passed Filch in the doorway; Filch's pale, wild eyes looked straight through him, and Harry slipped under Filch's outstretched arm and streaked off up the corridor, the book's shrieks still ringing in his ears.

He came to a sudden halt in front of a tall suit of armor. He had been so busy getting away from the library, he hadn't paid attention to where he was going. Perhaps because it was dark, he didn't recognize where he was at all. There was a suit of armor near the kitchens, he knew, but he must be five floors above there.

"You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night, and somebody's been in the library — Restricted Section."

Harry felt the blood drain out of his face. Wherever he was, Filch must know a shortcut, because his soft, greasy voice was get-ting nearer, and to his horror, it was Snape who replied, "The Re-stricted Section? Well, they can't be far, we'll catch them."

Harry stood rooted to the spot as Filch and Snape came around the corner ahead. They couldn't see him, of course, but it was a nar-row corridor and if they came much nearer they'd knock right into him — the cloak didn't stop him from being solid.

He backed away as quietly as he could. A door stood ajar to his left. It was his only hope. He squeezed through it, holding his breath, trying not to move it, and to his relief he managed to get in-side the room without their noticing anything. They walked straight past, and Harry leaned against the wall, breathing deeply, listening to their footsteps dying away. That had been close, very close. It was a few seconds before he noticed anything about the room he had hidden in.

It looked like an unused classroom. The dark shapes of desks and chairs were piled against the walls, and there was an upturned

wastepaper basket — but propped against the wall facing him was something that didn't look as if it belonged there, something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way.

It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

His panic fading now that there was no sound of Filch and Snape, Harry moved nearer to the mirror, wanting to look at him-self but see no reflection again. He stepped in front of it.

He had to clap his hands to his mouth to stop himself from screaming. He whirled around. His heart was pounding far more furiously than when the book had screamed — for he had seen not only himself in the mirror, but a whole crowd of people standing right behind him.

But the room was empty. Breathing very fast, he turned slowly back to the mirror.

There he was, reflected in it, white and scared-looking, and there, reflected behind him, were at least ten others. Harry looked over his shoulder — but still, no one was there. Or were they all in-visible, too? Was he in fact in a room full of invisible people and this mirrors trick was that it reflected them, invisible or not?

He looked in the mirror again. A woman standing right behind his reflection was smiling at him and waving. He reached out a hand and felt the air behind him. If she was really there, he'd touch her, their reflections were so close together, but he felt only air — she and the others existed only in the mirror.

She was a very pretty woman. She had dark red hair and her eyes — her eyes are just like mine, Harry thought, edging a little closer to the glass. Bright green — exactly the same shape, but then he noticed that she was crying; smiling, but crying at the same time. The tall, thin, black-haired man standing next to her put his arm around her.

He wore glasses, and his hair was very untidy. It stuck up at the back, just as Harry's did.

Harry was so close to the mirror now that his nose was nearly touching that of his reflection.

"Mom?" he whispered. "Dad?"

They just looked at him, smiling. And slowly, Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror, and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry's knobbly knees — Harry was looking at his family, for the first time in his life.

The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a pow-erful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.

How long he stood there, he didn't know. The reflections did not fade and he looked and looked until a distant noise brought him back to his senses. He couldn't stay here, he had to find his way back to bed. He tore his eyes away from his mother's face, whis-pered, "I'll come back," and hurried from the room.

"You could have woken me up," said Ron, crossly.

"You can come tonight, I'm going back, I want to show you the mirror."

"I'd like to see your mom and dad," Ron said eagerly.

"And I want to see all your family, all the Weasleys, you'll be able to show me your other brothers and everyone."

"You can see them any old time," said Ron. "Just come round my house this summer. Anyway, maybe it only shows dead people.

Shame about not finding Flamel, though. Have some bacon or something, why aren't you eating anything?"

Harry couldn't eat. He had seen his parents and would be seeing them again tonight. He had almost forgotten about Flamel. It didn't seem very important anymore. Who cared what the three-headed dog was guarding? What did it matter if Snape stole it, really?

"Are you all right?" said Ron. "You look odd."

What Harry feared most was that he might not be able to find the mirror room again. With Ron covered in the cloak, too, they had to walk much more slowly the next night. They tried retracing Harry's route from the library, wandering around the dark passage-ways for nearly an hour.

"I'm freezing," said Ron. "Let's forget it and go back."

"No!" Harry hissed. "I know it's here somewhere."

They passed the ghost of a tall witch gliding in the opposite di-rection, but saw no one else. Just as Ron started moaning that his feet were dead with cold, Harry spotted the suit of armor.

"It's here — just here — yes!"

They pushed the door open. Harry dropped the cloak from around his shoulders and ran to the mirror.

There they were. His mother and father beamed at the sight of him.

"See?" Harry whispered.

"I can't see anything."

"Look! Look at them all … there are loads of them. …"

"I can only see you."

"Look in it properly, go on, stand where I am."

Harry stepped aside, but with Ron in front of the mirror, he couldn't see his family anymore, just Ron in his paisley pajamas.

Ron, though, was staring transfixed at his image.

"Look at me!" he said.

"Can you see all your family standing around you?"

"No — I'm alone — but I'm different — I look older — and I'm Head Boy!"

"What?"

"I am — I'm wearing the badge like Bill used to — and I'm holding the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup — I'm Quidditch captain, too!"

Ron tore his eyes away from this splendid sight to look excitedly at Harry.

"Do you think this mirror shows the future?"

"How can it? All my family are dead — let me have another look —"

"You had it to yourself all last night, give me a bit more time."

"You're only holding the Quidditch Cup, what's interesting about that? I want to see my parents."

"Don't push me —"

A sudden noise outside in the corridor put an end to their dis-cussion. They hadn't realized how loudly they had been talking.

"Quick!"

Ron threw the cloak back over them as the luminous eyes of Mrs. Norris came round the door. Ron and Harry stood quite still, both thinking the same thing — did the cloak work on cats? After what seemed an age, she turned and left.

“This isn’t safe — she might have gone for Filch, I bet she heard us. Come on.”

And Ron pulled Harry out of the room.

The snow still hadn’t melted the next morning.

“Want to play chess, Harry?” said Ron.

“No.”

“Why don’t we go down and visit Hagrid?”

“No … you go …”

“I know what you’re thinking about, Harry, that mirror. Don’t go back tonight.”

“Why not?”

“I dunno, I’ve just got a bad feeling about it — and anyway, you’ve had too many close shaves already. Filch, Snape, and Mrs. Norris are wandering around. So what if they can’t see you? What if they walk into you? What if you knock something over?”

“You sound like Hermione.”

“I’m serious, Harry, don’t go.”

But Harry only had one thought in his head, which was to get back in front of the mirror, and Ron wasn’t going to stop him.

That third night he found his way more quickly than before. He was walking so fast he knew he was making more noise than was wise, but he didn't meet anyone.

And there were his mother and father smiling at him again, and one of his grandfathers nodding happily. Harry sank down to sit on the floor in front of the mirror. There was nothing to stop him from staying here all night with his family. Nothing at all.

Except —

"So — back again, Harry?"

Harry felt as though his insides had turned to ice. He looked be-hind him. Sitting on one of the desks by the wall was none other than Albus Dumbledore. Harry must have walked straight past him, so desperate to get to the mirror he hadn't noticed him.

"I — I didn't see you, sir."

"Strange how nearsighted being invisible can make you," said Dumbledore, and Harry was relieved to see that he was smiling.

"So," said Dumbledore, slipping off the desk to sit on the floor with Harry, "you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

"I didn't know it was called that, sir."

"But I expect you've realized by now what it does?"

"It — well — it shows me my family —"

"And it showed your friend Ron himself as Head Boy."

"How did you know — ?"

“I don’t need a cloak to become invisible,” said Dumbledore gently. “Now, can you think what the Mirror of Erised shows us all?”

Harry shook his head.

“Let me explain. The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Does that help?”

Harry thought. Then he said slowly, “It shows us what we want … whatever we want …”

“Yes and no,” said Dumbledore quietly. “It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you. Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.

“The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Harry, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. If you ever do run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, why don’t you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed?”

Harry stood up.

“Sir — Professor Dumbledore? Can I ask you something?”

“Obviously, you’ve just done so,” Dumbledore smiled. “You may ask me one more thing, however.”

“What do you see when you look in the mirror?”

“I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks.”

Harry stared.

“One can never have enough socks,” said Dumbledore. “An-other Christmas has come and gone and I didn’t get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books.”

It was only when he was back in bed that it struck Harry that Dumbledore might not have been quite truthful. But then, he thought, as he shoved Scabbers off his pillow, it had been quite a personal question.

Chapter 13 Nicholas Flamel

Dumbledore had convinced Harry not to go looking for the Mirror of Erised again, and for the rest of the Christmas holidays the Invisibility Cloak stayed folded at the bottom of his trunk. Harry wished he could forget what he'd seen in the mirror as easily, but he couldn't. He started having nightmares. Over and over again he dreamed about his parents disappearing in a flash of green light, while a high voice cackled with laughter.

"You see, Dumbledore was right, that mirror could drive you mad," said Ron, when Harry told him about these dreams.

Hermione, who came back the day before term started, took a different view of things. She was torn between horror at the idea of Harry being out of bed, roaming the school three nights in a row ("If Filch had caught you!"), and disappointment that he hadn't at least found out who Nicolas Flamel was.

They had almost given up hope of ever finding Flamel in a library book, even though Harry was still sure he'd read the name somewhere. Once term had started, they were back to skimming through books for ten minutes during their breaks. Harry had even less time than the other two, because Quidditch practice had started again.

Wood was working the team harder than ever. Even the endless rain that had replaced the snow couldn't dampen his spirits. The Weasleys complained that Wood was becoming a fanatic, but Harry was on Wood's side. If they won their next match, against Hufflepuff, they would overtake Slytherin in the House Champi-onship for the first time in seven years. Quite apart from wanting to win, Harry found that he had fewer nightmares when he was tired out after training.

Then, during one particularly wet and muddy practice session, Wood gave the team a bit of bad news. He'd just gotten very angry with the Weasleys, who kept dive-bombing each other and pre-tending to fall off their brooms.

"Will you stop messing around!" he yelled. "That's exactly the sort of thing that'll lose us the match! Snape's refereeing this time, and he'll be looking for any excuse to knock points off Gryffindor!"

George Weasley really did fall off his broom at these words.

"Snape's refereeing?" he spluttered through a mouthful of mud. "When's he ever refereed a Quidditch match? He's not going to be fair if we might overtake Slytherin."

The rest of the team landed next to George to complain, too.

"It's not my fault," said Wood. "We've just got to make sure we play a clean game, so Snape hasn't got an excuse to pick on us."

Which was all very well, thought Harry, but he had another rea-son for not wanting Snape near him while he was playing Quid-ditch. … The rest of the team hung back to talk to one another as usual at the end of practice, but Harry headed straight back to the Gryf-findor common room, where he found Ron and Hermione playing chess. Chess was the only thing Hermione ever lost at, something Harry and Ron thought was very good for her.

"Don't talk to me for a moment," said Ron when Harry sat down next to him, "I need to concen-" He caught sight of Harry's face. "What's the matter with you? You look terrible."

Speaking quietly so that no one else would hear, Harry told the other two about Snape's sudden, sinister desire to be a Quidditch referee.

"Don't play," said Hermione at once.

“Say you’re ill,” said Ron.

“Pretend to break your leg,” Hermione suggested.

“Really break your leg,” said Ron.

“I can’t,” said Harry. “There isn’t a reserve Seeker. If I back out, Gryffindor can’t play at all.”

At that moment Neville toppled into the common room. How he had managed to climb through the portrait hole was anyone’s guess, because his legs had been stuck together with what they recognized at once as the Leg-Locker Curse. He must have had to bunny hop all the way up to Gryffindor Tower.

Everyone fell over laughing except Hermione, who leapt up and performed the countercurse. Neville’s legs sprang apart and he got to his feet, trembling.

“What happened?” Hermione asked him, leading him over to sit with Harry and Ron.

“Malfoy,” said Neville shakily. “I met him outside the library. He said he’d been looking for someone to practice that on.”

“Go to Professor McGonagall!” Hermione urged Neville. “Re-port him!”

Neville shook his head.

“I don’t want more trouble,” he mumbled.

“You’ve got to stand up to him, Neville!” said Ron. “He’s used to walking all over people, but that’s no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier.”

“There’s no need to tell me I’m not brave enough to be in Gryffindor, Malfoy’s already done that,” Neville choked out.

Harry felt in the pocket of his robes and pulled out a Chocolate Frog, the very last one from the box Hermione had given him for Christmas. He gave it to Neville, who looked as though he might cry.

"You're worth twelve of Malfoy," Harry said. "The Sorting Hat chose you for Gryffindor, didn't it? And where's Malfoy? In stink-ing Slytherin."

Neville's lips twitched in a weak smile as he unwrapped the frog.

"Thanks, Harry … I think I'll go to bed. … D'you want the card, you collect them, don't you?"

As Neville walked away, Harry looked at the Famous Wizard card.

"Dumbledore again," he said, "He was the first one I ever —"

He gasped. He stared at the back of the card. Then he looked up at Ron and Hermione.

"I've found him!" he whispered. "I've found Flamel! I told you I'd read the name somewhere before, I read it on the train coming here — listen to this: 'Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the Dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel'!"

Hermione jumped to her feet. She hadn't looked so excited since they'd gotten back the marks for their very first piece of homework.

"Stay there!" she said, and she sprinted up the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Harry and Ron barely had time to exchange mystified looks before she was dashing back, an enormous old book in her arms.

"I never thought to look in here!" she whispered excitedly. "I got this out of the library weeks ago for a bit of light reading."

“Light?” said Ron, but Hermione told him to be quiet until she’d looked something up, and started flicking frantically through the pages, muttering to herself.

At last she found what she was looking for.

“I knew it! I knew it!”

“Are we allowed to speak yet?” said Ron grumpily. Hermione ig-nored him.

“Nicolas Flamel,” she whispered dramatically, “is the only known maker of the Sorcerer’s Stone!”

This didn’t have quite the effect she’d expected.

“The what?” said Harry and Ron.

“Oh, honestly, don’t you two read? Look — read that, there.”

She pushed the book toward them, and Harry and Ron read:The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with mak-ing the Sorcerer’s Stone, a legendary substance with as-tonishing powers. The Stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Sorcerer’s Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who cele-brated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

“See?” said Hermione, when Harry and Ron had finished. “The dog must be guarding Flamel’s Sorcerer’s Stone! I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him, because they’re friends and he

knew someone was after it, that's why he wanted the Stone moved out of Gringotts!"

"A stone that makes gold and stops you from ever dying!" said Harry. "No wonder Snape's after it! Anyone would want it."

"And no wonder we couldn't find Flamel in that Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry," said Ron. "He's not exactly recent if he's six hundred and sixty-five, is he?"

The next morning in Defense Against the Dark Arts, while copy-ing down different ways of treating werewolf bites, Harry and Ron were still discussing what they'd do with a Sorcerer's Stone if they had one. It wasn't until Ron said he'd buy his own Quidditch team that Harry remembered about Snape and the coming match.

"I'm going to play," he told Ron and Hermione. "If I don't, all the Slytherins will think I'm just too scared to face Snape. I'll show them … it'll really wipe the smiles off their faces if we win."

"Just as long as we're not wiping you off the field," said Her-mione.

As the match drew nearer, however, Harry became more and more nervous, whatever he told Ron and Hermione. The rest of the team wasn't too calm, either. The idea of overtaking Slytherin in the House Championship was wonderful, no one had done it for seven years, but would they be allowed to, with such a biased referee?

Harry didn't know whether he was imagining it or not, but he seemed to keep running into Snape wherever he went. At times, he even wondered whether Snape was following him, trying to catch him on his own. Potions lessons were turning into a sort of weekly torture, Snape was so horrible to Harry. Could Snape possibly know they'd found out about the Sorcerer's Stone? Harry didn't see how he could — yet he sometimes had the horrible feeling that Snape could read minds.

Harry knew, when they wished him good luck outside the locker rooms the next afternoon, that Ron and Hermione were wonder-ing whether they'd ever see him alive again. This wasn't what you'd call comforting. Harry hardly heard a word of Wood's pep talk as he pulled on his Quidditch robes and picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Ron and Hermione, meanwhile, had found a place in the stands next to Neville, who couldn't understand why they looked so grim and worried, or why they had both brought their wands to the match. Little did Harry know that Ron and Hermione had been secretly practicing the Leg-Locker Curse. They'd gotten the idea from Malfoy using it on Neville, and were ready to use it on Snape if he showed any sign of wanting to hurt Harry.

"Now, don't forget, it's Locomotor Mortis," Hermione muttered as Ron slipped his wand up his sleeve.

"I know," Ron snapped. "Don't nag."

Back in the locker room, Wood had taken Harry aside.

"Don't want to pressure you, Potter, but if we ever need an early capture of the Snitch it's now. Finish the game before Snape can fa-vor Hufflepuff too much."

"The whole school's out there!" said Fred Weasley, peering out of the door. "Even — blimey — Dumbledore's come to watch!"

Harry's heart did a somersault.

"Dumbledore?" he said, dashing to the door to make sure. Fred was right. There was no mistaking that silver beard.

Harry could have laughed out loud with relief. He was safe. There was simply no way that Snape would dare to try to hurt him if Dumbledore was watching.

Perhaps that was why Snape was looking so angry as the teams marched onto the field, something that Ron noticed, too.

“I’ve never seen Snape look so mean,” he told Hermione. “Look — they’re off. Ouch!”

Someone had poked Ron in the back of the head. It was Malfoy.

“Oh, sorry, Weasley, didn’t see you there.”

Malfoy grinned broadly at Crabbe and Goyle.

“Wonder how long Potter’s going to stay on his broom this time? Anyone want a bet? What about you, Weasley?”

Ron didn’t answer; Snape had just awarded Hufflepuff a penalty because George Weasley had hit a Bludger at him. Hermione, who had all her fingers crossed in her lap, was squinting fixedly at Harry, who was circling the game like a hawk, looking for the Snitch.

“You know how I think they choose people for the Gryffindor team?” said Malfoy loudly a few minutes later, as Snape awarded Hufflepuff another penalty for no reason at all. “It’s people they feel sorry for. See, there’s Potter, who’s got no parents, then there’s the Weasleys, who’ve got no money — you should be on the team, Longbottom, you’ve got no brains.”

Neville went bright red but turned in his seat to face Malfoy.

“I’m worth twelve of you, Malfoy,” he stammered.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle howled with laughter, but Ron, still not daring to take his eyes from the game, said, “You tell him, Neville.”

“Longbottom, if brains were gold you’d be poorer than Weasley, and that’s saying something.”

Ron's nerves were already stretched to the breaking point with anxiety about Harry.

"I'm warning you, Malfoy — one more word —"

"Ron!" said Hermione suddenly, "Harry — !"

"What? Where?"

Harry had suddenly gone into a spectacular dive, which drew gasps and cheers from the crowd. Hermione stood up, her crossed fingers in her mouth, as Harry streaked toward the ground like a bullet.

"You're in luck, Weasley, Potter's obviously spotted some money on the ground!" said Malfoy.

Ron snapped. Before Malfoy knew what was happening, Ron was on top of him, wrestling him to the ground. Neville hesitated, then clambered over the back of his seat to help.

"Come on, Harry!" Hermione screamed, leaping onto her seat to watch as Harry sped straight at Snape — she didn't even notice Malfoy and Ron rolling around under her seat, or the scuffles and yelps coming from the whirl of fists that was Neville, Crabbe, and Goyle.

Up in the air, Snape turned on his broomstick just in time to see something scarlet shoot past him, missing him by inches — the next second, Harry had pulled out of the dive, his arm raised in tri-umph, the Snitch clasped in his hand.

The stands erupted; it had to be a record, no one could ever re-member the Snitch being caught so quickly.

"Ron! Ron! Where are you? The game's over! Harry's won! We've won! Gryffindor is in the lead!" shrieked Hermione, dancing up and down on her seat and hugging Parvati Patil in the row in front.

Harry jumped off his broom, a foot from the ground. He couldn't believe it. He'd done it — the game was over; it had barely lasted five minutes. As Gryffindors came spilling onto the field, he saw Snape land nearby, white-faced and tight-lipped — then Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up into Dumble-dore's smiling face.

"Well done," said Dumbledore quietly, so that only Harry could hear. "Nice to see you haven't been brooding about that mirror … been keeping busy … excellent …"

Snape spat bitterly on the ground.

* * *

Harry left the locker room alone some time later, to take his Nim-bus Two Thousand back to the broomshed. He couldn't ever re-member feeling happier. He'd really done something to be proud of now — no one could say he was just a famous name any more. The evening air had never smelled so sweet. He walked over the damp grass, reliving the last hour in his head, which was a happy blur: Gryffindors running to lift him onto their shoulders; Ron and Hermione in the distance, jumping up and down, Ron cheering through a heavy nosebleed.

Harry had reached the shed. He leaned against the wooden door and looked up at Hogwarts, with its windows glowing red in the setting sun. Gryffindor in the lead. He'd done it, he'd shown Snape. …And speaking of Snape …

A hooded figure came swiftly down the front steps of the castle. Clearly not wanting to be seen, it walked as fast as possible toward the forbidden forest. Harry's victory faded from his mind as he watched. He recognized the figure's prowling walk. Snape, sneak-ing into the forest while everyone else was at dinner — what was going on?

Harry jumped back on his Nimbus Two Thousand and took off. Gliding silently over the castle he saw Snape enter the forest at a run.

He followed.

The trees were so thick he couldn't see where Snape had gone. He flew in circles, lower and lower, brushing the top branches of trees until he heard voices. He glided toward them and landed noiselessly in a towering beech tree.

He climbed carefully along one of the branches, holding tight to his broomstick, trying to see through the leaves.

Below, in a shadowy clearing, stood Snape, but he wasn't alone. Quirrell was there, too. Harry couldn't make out the look on his face, but he was stuttering worse than ever. Harry strained to catch what they were saying.

"… d-don't know why you wanted t-t-to meet here of all p-places, Severus …"

"Oh, I thought we'd keep this private," said Snape, his voice icy. "Students aren't supposed to know about the Sorcerer's Stone, after all."

Harry leaned forward. Quirrell was mumbling something. Snape interrupted him.

"Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid's yet?"

"B-b-but Severus, I —"

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell," said Snape, taking a step toward him.

"I-I don't know what you —"

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

An owl hooted loudly, and Harry nearly fell out of the tree. He steadied himself in time to hear Snape say, "— your little bit of hocus-

pocus. I'm waiting."

"B-but I d-d-don't —"

"Very well," Snape cut in. "We'll have another little chat soon, when you've had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie."

He threw his cloak over his head and strode out of the clearing. It was almost dark now, but Harry could see Quirrell, standing quite still as though he was petrified.

* * *

"Harry, where have you been?" Hermione squeaked.

"We won! You won! We won!" shouted Ron, thumping Harry on the back. "And I gave Malfoy a black eye, and Neville tried to take on Crabbe and Goyle single-handed! He's still out cold but Madam Pomfrey says he'll be all right — talk about showing Slytherin! Everyone's waiting for you in the common room, we're having a party, Fred and George stole some cakes and stuff from the kitchens."

"Never mind that now," said Harry breathlessly. "Let's find an empty room, you wait 'til you hear this. …"

He made sure Peeves wasn't inside before shutting the door be-hind them, then he told them what he'd seen and heard.

"So we were right, it is the Sorcerer's Stone, and Snape's trying to force Quirrell to help him get it. He asked if he knew how to get past Fluffy — and he said something about Quirrell's 'hocus-pocus' — I reckon there are other things guarding the stone apart from Fluffy, loads of enchantments, probably, and Quirrell would have done some anti-Dark Arts spell that Snape needs to break through —"

“So you mean the Stone’s only safe as long as Quirrell stands up to Snape?” said Hermione in alarm.

“It’ll be gone by next Tuesday,” said Ron.

Chapter 14 Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback

Quirrell, however, must have been braver than they'd thought. In the weeks that followed he did seem to be get-ting paler and thinner, but it didn't look as though he'd cracked yet.

Every time they passed the third-floor corridor, Harry, Ron, and Hermione would press their ears to the door to check that Fluffy was still growling inside. Snape was sweeping about in his usual bad temper, which surely meant that the Stone was still safe. Whenever Harry passed Quirrell these days he gave him an en-couraging sort of smile, and Ron had started telling people off for laughing at Quirrell's stutter.

Hermione, however, had more on her mind than the Sorcerer's Stone. She had started drawing up study schedules and color-coding all her notes. Harry and Ron wouldn't have minded, but she kept nagging them to do the same.

"Hermione, the exams are ages away."

"Ten weeks," Hermione snapped. "That's not ages, that's like a second to Nicolas Flamel."

"But we're not six hundred years old," Ron reminded her. "Any-way, what are you studying for, you already know it all."

"What am I studying for? Are you crazy? You realize we need to pass these exams to get into the second year? They're very impor-tant, I should have started studying a month ago, I don't know what's gotten into me.

Unfortunately, the teachers seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Hermione. They piled so much homework on them that the Easter holidays weren't nearly as much fun as the Christ-mas ones. It was hard to relax with Hermione next to you reciting the twelve uses

of dragon's blood or practicing wand movements. Moan-ing and yawning, Harry and Ron spent most of their free time in the library with her, trying to get through all their extra work.

"I'll never remember this," Ron burst out one afternoon, throw-ing down his quill and looking longingly out of the library win-dow. It was the first really fine day they'd had in months. The sky was a clear, forget-me-not blue, and there was a feeling in the air of summer coming.

Harry, who was looking up "Dittany" in One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi, didn't look up until he heard Ron say, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?"

Hagrid shuffled into view, hiding something behind his back. He looked very out of place in his moleskin overcoat.

"Jus' lookin'," he said, in a shifty voice that got their interest at once. "An' what're you lot up ter?" He looked suddenly suspicious. "Yer not still lookin' fer Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?"

"Oh, we found out who he is ages ago," said Ron impressively. "And we know what that dog's guarding, it's a Sorcerer's St —"

"Shhhh!" Hagrid looked around quickly to see if anyone was lis-tening. "Don' go shoutin' about it, what's the matter with yeh?"

"There are a few things we wanted to ask you, as a matter of fact," said Harry, "about what's guarding the Stone apart from Fluffy —"

"SHHHH!" said Hagrid again. "Listen — come an' see me later, I'm not promisin' I'll tell yeh anythin', mind, but don' go rabbitin' about it in here, students aren' s'pposed ter know. They'll think I've told yeh —"

"See you later, then," said Harry.

Hagrid shuffled off.

“What was he hiding behind his back?” said Hermione thought-fully.

“Do you think it had anything to do with the Stone?”

“I’m going to see what section he was in,” said Ron, who’d had enough of working. He came back a minute later with a pile of books in his arms and slammed them down on the table.

“Dragons!” he whispered. “Hagrid was looking up stuff about dragons! Look at these: Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland; From Egg to Inferno, A Dragon Keeper’s Guide.”

“Hagrid’s always wanted a dragon, he told me so the first time I ever met him,” said Harry.

“But it’s against our laws,” said Ron. “Dragon breeding was out-lawed by the Warlocks’ Convention of 1709, everyone knows that. It’s hard to stop Muggles from noticing us if we’re keeping dragons in the back garden — anyway, you can’t tame dragons, it’s dangerous. You should see the burns Charlie’s got off wild ones in Ro-mania.”

“But there aren’t wild dragons in Britain?” said Harry.

“Of course there are,” said Ron. “Common Welsh Green and Hebridean Blacks. The Ministry of Magic has a job hushing them up, I can tell you. Our kind have to keep putting spells on Muggles who’ve spotted them, to make them forget.”

“So what on earth’s Hagrid up to?” said Hermione.

When they knocked on the door of the gamekeeper’s hut an hour later, they were surprised to see that all the curtains were closed. Hagrid called “Who is it?” before he let them in, and then shut the door quickly behind them.

It was stifling hot inside. Even though it was such a warm day, there was a blazing fire in the grate. Hagrid made them tea and of-fered

them stoat sandwiches, which they refused.

“So — yeh wanted to ask me somethin’?”

“Yes,” said Harry. There was no point beating around the bush. “We were wondering if you could tell us what’s guarding the Sorcerer’s Stone apart from Fluffy.”

Hagrid frowned at him.

“O’ course I can’t,” he said. “Number one, I don’ know meself. Number two, yeh know too much already, so I wouldn’ tell yeh if I could. That Stone’s here fer a good reason. It was almost stolen outta Gringotts — I s’ppose yeh’ve worked that out an’ all? Beats me how yeh even know abou’ Fluffy.”

“Oh, come on, Hagrid, you might not want to tell us, but you do know, you know everything that goes on round here,” said Hermione in a warm, flattering voice. Hagrid’s beard twitched and they could tell he was smiling. “We only wondered who had done the guarding, really.” Hermione went on. “We wondered who Dumbledore had trusted enough to help him, apart from you.”

Hagrid’s chest swelled at these last words. Harry and Ron beamed at Hermione.

“Well, I don’ s’pose it could hurt ter tell yeh that … let’s see … he borrowed Fluffy from me … then some o’ the teachers did enchantments … Professor Sprout — Professor Flitwick — Professor McGonagall —” he ticked them off on his fingers, “Profes-sor Quirrell — an’ Dumbledore himself did somethin’, o’ course. Hang on, I’ve forgotten someone. Oh yeah, Professor Snape.”

“Snape?”

“Yeah — yer not still on abou’ that, are yeh? Look, Snape helped protect the Stone, he’s not about ter steal it.”

Harry knew Ron and Hermione were thinking the same as he was. If Snape had been in on protecting the Stone, it must have been easy to find out how the other teachers had guarded it. He probably knew everything — except, it seemed, Quirrell's spell and how to get past Fluffy.

"You're the only one who knows how to get past Fluffy, aren't you, Hagrid?" said Harry anxiously. "And you wouldn't tell any-one, would you? Not even one of the teachers?"

"Not a soul knows except me an' Dumbledore," said Hagrid proudly.

"Well, that's something," Harry muttered to the others. "Ha-grid, can we have a window open? I'm boiling."

"Can't, Harry, sorry," said Hagrid. Harry noticed him glance at the fire. Harry looked at it, too.

"Hagrid — what's that?"

But he already knew what it was. In the very heart of the fire, un-derneath the kettle, was a huge, black egg.

"Ah," said Hagrid, fiddling nervously with his beard, "That's — er …"

"Where did you get it, Hagrid?" said Ron, crouching over the fire to get a closer look at the egg. "It must've cost you a for-tune."

"Won it," said Hagrid. "Las' night. I was down in the village havin' a few drinks an' got into a game o' cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest."

"But what are you going to do with it when it's hatched?" said Hermione.

"Well, I've bin doin' some readin'," said Hagrid, pulling a large book from under his pillow. "Got this outta the library — Dragon Breeding

for Pleasure and Profit — it's a bit outta date, o' course, but it's all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mothers breathe on 'em, see, an' when it hatches, feed it on a bucket o' brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An' see here — how ter recognize diff'rent eggs — what I got there's a Norwegian Ridge-back. They're rare, them."

He looked very pleased with himself, but Hermione didn't.

"Hagrid, you live in a wooden house," she said.

But Hagrid wasn't listening. He was humming merrily as he stoked the fire.

So now they had something else to worry about: what might hap-pen to Hagrid if anyone found out he was hiding an illegal dragon in his hut.

"Wonder what it's like to have a peaceful life," Ron sighed, as evening after evening they struggled through all the extra home-work they were getting. Hermione had now started making study schedules for Harry and Ron, too. It was driving them nuts.

Then, one breakfast time, Hedwig brought Harry another note from Hagrid. He had written only two words: It's hatching.

Ron wanted to skip Herbology and go straight down to the hut. Hermione wouldn't hear of it.

"Hermione, how many times in our lives are we going to see a dragon hatching?"

"We've got lessons, we'll get into trouble, and that's nothing to what Hagrid's going to be in when someone finds out what he's do-ing —"

"Shut up!" Harry whispered.

Malfoy was only a few feet away and he had stopped dead to lis-ten. How much had he heard? Harry didn't like the look on Mal-foy's face at all.

Ron and Hermione argued all the way to Herbology and in the end, Hermione agreed to run down to Hagrid's with the other two during morning break. When the bell sounded from the castle at the end of their lesson, the three of them dropped their trowels at once and hurried through the grounds to the edge of the forest. Hagrid greeted them, looking flushed and excited.

"It's nearly out." He ushered them inside.

The egg was lying on the table. There were deep cracks in it. Some-thing was moving inside; a funny clicking noise was coming from it.

They all drew their chairs up to the table and watched with bated breath.

All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn't exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body, it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes.

It sneezed. A couple of sparks flew out of its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmured. He reached out a hand to stroke the dragon's head. It snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs.

"Bless him, look, he knows his mommy!" said Hagrid.

"Hagrid," said Hermione, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?"

Hagrid was about to answer when the color suddenly drained from his face — he leapt to his feet and ran to the window.

“What’s the matter?”

“Someone was lookin’ through the gap in the curtains — it’s a kid — he’s runnin’ back up ter the school.”

Harry bolted to the door and looked out. Even at a distance there was no mistaking him.

Malfoy had seen the dragon.

Something about the smile lurking on Malfoy’s face during the next week made Harry, Ron, and Hermione very nervous. They spent most of their free time in Hagrid’s darkened hut, trying to reason with him.

“Just let him go,” Harry urged. “Set him free.”

“I can’t,” said Hagrid. “He’s too little. He’d die.”

They looked at the dragon. It had grown three times in length in just a week. Smoke kept furling out of its nostrils. Hagrid hadn’t been doing his gamekeeping duties because the dragon was keep-ing him so busy. There were empty brandy bottles and chicken feathers all over the floor.

“I’ve decided to call him Norbert,” said Hagrid, looking at the dragon with misty eyes. “He really knows me now, watch. Norbert! Norbert! Where’s Mommy?”

“He’s lost his marbles,” Ron muttered in Harry’s ear.

“Hagrid,” said Harry loudly, “give it two weeks and Norbert’s going to be as long as your house. Malfoy could go to Dumbledore at any moment.”

Hagrid bit his lip.

"I — I know I can't keep him forever, but I can't jus' dump him, can't."

Harry suddenly turned to Ron.

"Charlie," he said.

"You're losing it, too," said Ron. "I'm Ron, remember?"

"No — Charlie — your brother, Charlie. In Romania. Studying dragons. We could send Norbert to him. Charlie can take care of him and then put him back in the wild!"

"Brilliant!" said Ron. "How about it, Hagrid?"

And in the end, Hagrid agreed that they could send an owl to Charlie to ask him.

The following week dragged by. Wednesday night found Her-mione and Harry sitting alone in the common room, long after everyone else had gone to bed. The clock on the wall had just chimed midnight when the portrait hole burst open. Ron appeared out of nowhere as he pulled off Harry's Invisibility Cloak. He had been down at Hagrid's hut, helping him feed Norbert, who was now eating dead rats by the crate.

"It bit me!" he said, showing them his hand, which was wrapped in a bloody handkerchief. "I'm not going to be able to hold a quill for a week. I tell you, that dragon's the most horrible animal I've ever met, but the way Hagrid goes on about it, you'd think it was a fluffy little bunny rabbit. When it bit me he told me off for fright-ening it. And when I left, he was singing it a lullaby."

There was a tap on the dark window.

“It’s Hedwig!” said Harry, hurrying to let her in. “She’ll have Charlie’s answer!”

The three of them put their heads together to read the note.

Dear Ron,

How are you? Thanks for the letter — I’d be glad to take the Norwegian Ridgeback, but it won’t be easy getting him here. I think the best thing will be to send him over with some friends of mine who are coming to visit me next week. Trouble is, they mustn’t be seen carrying an illegal dragon.

Could you get the Ridgeback up the tallest tower at mid-night on Saturday? They can meet you there and take him away while it’s still dark.

Send me an answer as soon as possible.

Love,

Charlie

They looked at one another.

“We’ve got the Invisibility Cloak,” said Harry. “It shouldn’t be too difficult — I think the cloak’s big enough to cover two of us and Norbert.”

It was a mark of how bad the last week had been that the other two agreed with him. Anything to get rid of Norbert — and Malfoy.

There was a hitch. By the next morning, Ron’s bitten hand had swollen to twice its usual size. He didn’t know whether it was safe to go to Madam Pomfrey — would she recognize a dragon bite? By the afternoon, though, he had no choice. The cut had turned a nasty shade of green. It looked as if Norbert’s fangs were poisonous.

Harry and Hermione rushed up to the hospital wing at the end of the day to find Ron in a terrible state in bed.

“It’s not just my hand,” he whispered, “although that feels like it’s about to fall off. Malfoy told Madam Pomfrey he wanted to borrow one of my books so he could come and have a good laugh at me. He kept threatening to tell her what really bit me — I’ve told her it was a dog, but I don’t think she believes me — I shouldn’t have hit him at the Quidditch match, that’s why he’s do-ing this.”

Harry and Hermione tried to calm Ron down.

“It’ll all be over at midnight on Saturday,” said Hermione, but this didn’t soothe Ron at all. On the contrary, he sat bolt upright and broke into a sweat.

“Midnight on Saturday!” he said in a hoarse voice. “Oh no — oh no — I’ve just remembered — Charlie’s letter was in that book Malfoy took, he’s going to know we’re getting rid of Norbert.”

Harry and Hermione didn’t get a chance to answer. Madam Pomfrey came over at that moment and made them leave, saying Ron needed sleep.

“It’s too late to change the plan now,” Harry told Hermione. “We haven’t got time to send Charlie another owl, and this could be our only chance to get rid of Norbert. We’ll have to risk it. And we have got the Invisibility Cloak, Malfoy doesn’t know about that.”

They found Fang the boarhound sitting outside with a ban-daged tail when they went to tell Hagrid, who opened a window to talk to them.

“I won’t let you in,” he puffed. “Norbert’s at a tricky stage — nothin’ I can’t handle.”

When they told him about Charlie’s letter, his eyes filled with tears, although that might have been because Norbert had just bit-ten him

on the leg.

“Aargh! It’s all right, he only got my boot — jus’ playin’ — he’s only a baby, after all.”

The baby banged its tail on the wall, making the windows rattle. Harry and Hermione walked back to the castle feeling Saturday couldn’t come quickly enough.

They would have felt sorry for Hagrid when the time came for him to say good-bye to Norbert if they hadn’t been so worried about what they had to do. It was a very dark, cloudy night, and they were a bit late arriving at Hagrid’s hut because they’d had to wait for Peeves to get out of their way in the entrance hall, where he’d been playing tennis against the wall.

Hagrid had Norbert packed and ready in a large crate.

“He’s got lots o’ rats an’ some brandy fer the journey,” said Ha-grid in a muffled voice. “An’ I’ve packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely.”

From inside the crate came ripping noises that sounded to Harry as though the teddy was having his head torn off.

“Bye-bye, Norbert!” Hagrid sobbed, as Harry and Hermione covered the crate with the Invisibility Cloak and stepped under-neath it themselves. “Mommy will never forget you!”

How they managed to get the crate back up to the castle, they never knew. Midnight ticked nearer as they heaved Norbert up the marble staircase in the entrance hall and along the dark corridors. Up another staircase, then another — even one of Harry’s short-cuts didn’t make the work much easier.

“Nearly there!” Harry panted as they reached the corridor be-neath the tallest tower.

Then a sudden movement ahead of them made them almost drop the crate. Forgetting that they were already invisible, they shrank into the shadows, staring at the dark outlines of two people grappling with each other ten feet away. A lamp flared.

Professor McGonagall, in a tartan bathrobe and a hair net, had Malfoy by the ear.

“Detention!” she shouted. “And twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how dare you —”

“You don’t understand, Professor. Harry Potter’s coming — he’s got a dragon!”

“What utter rubbish! How dare you tell such lies! Come on — I shall see Professor Snape about you, Malfoy!”

The steep spiral staircase up to the top of the tower seemed the easiest thing in the world after that. Not until they’d stepped out into the cold night air did they throw off the cloak, glad to be able to breathe properly again. Hermione did a sort of jig.

“Malfoy’s got detention! I could sing!”

“Don’t,” Harry advised her.

Chuckling about Malfoy, they waited, Norbert thrashing about in his crate. About ten minutes later, four broomsticks came swoop-ing down out of the darkness.

Charlie’s friends were a cheery lot. They showed Harry and Hermione the harness they’d rigged up, so they could suspend Norbert between them. They all helped buckle Norbert safely into it and then Harry and Hermione shook hands with the others and thanked them very much.

At last, Norbert was going … going … gone.

They slipped back down the spiral staircase, their hearts as light as their hands, now that Norbert was off them. No more dragon — Malfoy in detention — what could spoil their happiness?

The answer to that was waiting at the foot of the stairs. As they stepped into the corridor, Filch's face loomed suddenly out of the darkness.

"Well, well, well," he whispered, "we are in trouble."

They'd left the Invisibility Cloak on top of the tower.

Chapter 15 The Forbidden Forest

Things couldn't have been worse.

Filch took them down to Professor McGonagall's study on the first floor, where they sat and waited without saying a word to each other. Hermione was trembling. Excuses, alibis, and wild cover-up stories chased each other around Harry's brain, each more feeble than the last. He couldn't see how they were going to get out of trouble this time. They were cornered. How could they have been so stupid as to forget the cloak? There was no reason on earth that Professor McGonagall would accept for their being out of bed and creeping around the school in the dead of night, let alone be-ing up the tallest Astronomy Tower, which was out-of-bounds ex-cept for classes. Add Norbert and the Invisibility Cloak, and they might as well be packing their bags already.

Had Harry thought that things couldn't have been worse? He was wrong. When Professor McGonagall appeared, she was leading Neville.

"Harry!" Neville burst out, the moment he saw the other two. "I was trying to find you to warn you, I heard Malfoy saying he was going to catch you, he said you had a drag —"

Harry shook his head violently to shut Neville up, but Professor McGonagall had seen. She looked more likely to breathe fire than Norbert as she towered over the three of them.

"I would never have believed it of any of you. Mr. Filch says you were up in the Astronomy Tower. It's one o'clock in the morning. Explain yourselves."

It was the first time Hermione had ever failed to answer a teacher's question. She was staring at her slippers, as still as a statue.

“I think I’ve got a good idea of what’s been going on,” said Pro-fessor McGonagall. “It doesn’t take a genius to work it out. You fed Draco Malfoy some cock-and-bull story about a dragon, trying to get him out of bed and into trouble. I’ve already caught him. I sup-pose you think it’s funny that Longbottom here heard the story and believed it, too?”

Harry caught Neville’s eye and tried to tell him without words that this wasn’t true, because Neville was looking stunned and hurt. Poor, blundering Neville — Harry knew what it must have cost him to try and find them in the dark, to warn them.

“I’m disgusted,” said Professor McGonagall. “Four students out of bed in one night! I’ve never heard of such a thing before! You, Miss Granger, I thought you had more sense. As for you, Mr. Pot-ter, I thought Gryffindor meant more to you than this. All three of you will receive detentions — yes, you too, Mr. Longbottom, nothing gives you the right to walk around school at night, espe-cially these days, it’s very dangerous — and fifty points will be taken from Gryffindor.”

“Fifty?” Harry gasped — they would lose the lead, the lead he’d won in the last Quidditch match.

“Fifty points each,” said Professor McGonagall, breathing heav-ily through her long, pointed nose.

“Professor — please —”

“You can’t —”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do, Potter. Now get back to bed, all of you. I’ve never been more ashamed of Gryffindor stu-dents.”

A hundred and fifty points lost. That put Gryffindor in last place. In one night, they’d ruined any chance Gryffindor had had for the House Cup. Harry felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach. How could they ever make up for this?

Harry didn’t sleep all night. He could hear Neville sobbing into his pillow for what seemed like hours. Harry couldn’t think of any-thing to say to comfort him. He knew Neville, like himself, was dreading the dawn. What would happen when the rest of Gryf-findor found out what they’d done?

At first, Gryffindors passing the giant hourglasses that recorded the House points the next day thought there’d been a mistake. How could they suddenly have a hundred and fifty points fewer than yesterday? And then the story started to spread: Harry Potter, the famous Harry Potter, their hero of two Quidditch matches, had lost them all those points, him and a couple of other stupid first years.

From being one of the most popular and admired people at the school, Harry was suddenly the most hated. Even Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs turned on him, because everyone had been longing to see Slytherin lose the House Cup. Everywhere Harry went, people pointed and didn’t trouble to lower their voices as they insulted him. Slytherins, on the other hand, clapped as he walked past them, whistling and cheering, “Thanks Potter, we owe you one!”

Only Ron stood by him.

“They’ll all forget this in a few weeks. Fred and George have lost loads of points in all the time they’ve been here, and people still like them.”

“They’ve never lost a hundred and fifty points in one go, though, have they?” said Harry miserably.

“Well — no,” Ron admitted.

It was a bit late to repair the damage, but Harry swore to himself not to meddle in things that weren’t his business from now on. He’d had it with sneaking around and spying. He felt so ashamed of himself that he went to Wood and offered to resign from the Quidditch team.

“Resign?” Wood thundered. “What good’ll that do? How are we going to get any points back if we can’t win at Quidditch?”

But even Quidditch had lost its fun. The rest of the team wouldn’t speak to Harry during practice, and if they had to speak about him, they called him “the Seeker.”

Hermione and Neville were suffering, too. They didn’t have as bad a time as Harry, because they weren’t as well-known, but no-body would speak to them, either. Hermione had stopped drawing attention to herself in class, keeping her head down and working in silence.

Harry was almost glad that the exams weren’t far away. All the studying he had to do kept his mind off his misery. He, Ron, and Hermione kept to themselves, working late into the night, trying to remember the ingredients in complicated potions, learn charms and spells by heart, memorize the dates of magical discoveries and goblin rebellions. …Then, about a week before the exams were due to start, Harry’s new resolution not to interfere in anything that didn’t concern him was put to an unexpected test. Walking back from the library on his own one afternoon, he heard somebody whimpering from a classroom up ahead. As he drew closer, he heard Quirrell’s voice.

“No — no — not again, please —”

It sounded as though someone was threatening him. Harry moved closer.

“All right — all right —” he heard Quirrell sob.

Next second, Quirrell came hurrying out of the classroom straightening his turban. He was pale and looked as though he was about to cry. He strode out of sight; Harry didn’t think Quirrell had even noticed him. He waited until Quirrell’s footsteps had dis-appeared, then peered into the classroom. It was empty, but a door stood ajar at the other end. Harry was halfway toward it before he remembered what he’d promised himself about not meddling.

All the same, he'd have gambled twelve Sorcerer's Stones that Snape had just left the room, and from what Harry had just heard, Snape would be walking with a new spring in his step — Quirrell seemed to have given in at last.

Harry went back to the library, where Hermione was testing Ron on Astronomy. Harry told them what he'd heard.

"Snape's done it, then!" said Ron. "If Quirrell's told him how to break his Anti-Dark Force spell —"

"There's still Fluffy, though," said Hermione.

"Maybe Snape's found out how to get past him without asking Hagrid," said Ron, looking up at the thousands of books sur-rounding them. "I bet there's a book somewhere in here telling you how to get past a giant three-headed dog. So what do we do, Harry?"

The light of adventure was kindling again in Ron's eyes, but Hermione answered before Harry could.

"Go to Dumbledore. That's what we should have done ages ago. If we try anything ourselves we'll be thrown out for sure."

"But we've got no proof!" said Harry. "Quirrell's too scared to back us up. Snape's only got to say he doesn't know how the troll got in at Halloween and that he was nowhere near the third floor — who do you think they'll believe, him or us? It's not exactly a secret we hate him, Dumbledore'll think we made it up to get him sacked. Filch wouldn't help us if his life depended on it, he's too friendly with Snape, and the more students get thrown out, the better, he'll think. And don't forget, we're not supposed to know about the Stone or Fluffy. That'll take a lot of explaining."

Hermione looked convinced, but Ron didn't.

"If we just do a bit of poking around —"

“No,” said Harry flatly, “we’ve done enough poking around.”

He pulled a map of Jupiter toward him and started to learn the names of its moons.

The following morning, notes were delivered to Harry, Hermione, and Neville at the breakfast table. They were all the same:Your detention will take place at eleven o’clock tonight.

Meet Mr. Filch in the entrance hall.

Professor M. McGonagall

Harry had forgotten they still had detentions to do in the furor over the points they’d lost. He half expected Hermione to complain that this was a whole night of studying lost, but she didn’t say a word. Like Harry, she felt they deserved what they’d got.

At eleven o’clock that night, they said good-bye to Ron in the common room and went down to the entrance hall with Neville. Filch was already there — and so was Malfoy. Harry had also for-gotten that Malfoy had gotten a detention, too.

“Follow me,” said Filch, lighting a lamp and leading them out-side.

“I bet you’ll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won’t you, eh?” he said, leering at them. “Oh yes … hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me. … It’s just a pity they let the old punishments die out … hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I’ve got the chains still in my office, keep ’em well oiled in case they’re ever needed. … Right, off we go, and don’t think of running off, now, it’ll be worse for you if you do.”

They marched off across the dark grounds. Neville kept sniffing. Harry wondered what their punishment was going to be. It must be something really horrible, or Filch wouldn’t be sounding so de-lighted.

The moon was bright, but clouds scudding across it kept throw-ing them into darkness. Ahead, Harry could see the lighted win-dows of Hagrid's hut. Then they heard a distant shout.

"Is that you, Filch? Hurry up, I want ter get started."

Harry's heart rose; if they were going to be working with Hagrid it wouldn't be so bad. His relief must have showed in his face, be-cause Filch said, "I suppose you think you'll be enjoying yourself with that oaf? Well, think again, boy — it's into the forest you're going and I'm much mistaken if you'll all come out in one piece."

At this, Neville let out a little moan, and Malfoy stopped dead in his tracks.

"The forest?" he repeated, and he didn't sound quite as cool as usual. "We can't go in there at night — there's all sorts of things in there — werewolves, I heard."

Neville clutched the sleeve of Harry's robe and made a choking noise.

"That's your problem, isn't it?" said Filch, his voice cracking with glee. "Should've thought of them werewolves before you got in trouble, shouldn't you?"

Hagrid came striding toward them out of the dark, Fang at his heel. He was carrying his large crossbow, and a quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder.

"Abou' time," he said. "I bin waitin' fer half an hour already. All right, Harry, Hermione?"

"I shouldn't be too friendly to them, Hagrid," said Filch coldly, "they're here to be punished, after all."

“That’s why yer late, is it?” said Hagrid, frowning at Filch. “Bin lecturin’ them, eh? ’Snot your place ter do that. Yeh’ve done yer bit, I’ll take over from here.”

“I’ll be back at dawn,” said Filch, “for what’s left of them,” he added nastily, and he turned and started back toward the castle, his lamp bobbing away in the darkness.

Malfoy now turned to Hagrid.

“I’m not going in that forest,” he said, and Harry was pleased to hear the note of panic in his voice.

“Yeh are if yeh want ter stay at Hogwarts,” said Hagrid fiercely. “Yeh’ve done wrong an’ now yeh’ve got ter pay fer it.”

“But this is servant stuff, it’s not for students to do. I thought we’d be copying lines or something, if my father knew I was doing this, he’d —”

“— tell yer that’s how it is at Hogwarts,” Hagrid growled. “Copyin’ lines! What good’s that ter anyone? Yeh’ll do summat use-ful or yeh’ll get out. If yeh think yer father’d rather you were ex-pelled, then get back off ter the castle an’ pack. Go on!”

Malfoy didn’t move. He looked at Hagrid furiously, but then dropped his gaze.

“Right then,” said Hagrid, “now, listen carefully, ’cause it’s dan-gerous what we’re gonna do tonight, an’ I don’ want no one takin’ risks. Follow me over here a moment.”

He led them to the very edge of the forest. Holding his lamp up high, he pointed down a narrow, winding earth track that disap-peared into the thick black trees. A light breeze lifted their hair as they looked into the forest.

“Look there,” said Hagrid, “see that stuff shinin’ on the ground? Silvery stuff? That’s unicorn blood. There’s a unicorn in there bin hurt badly by summat. This is the second time in a week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We’re gonna try an’ find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery.”

“And what if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?” said Malfoy, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

“There’s nothin’ that lives in the forest that’ll hurt yeh if yer with me or Fang,” said Hagrid. “An’ keep ter the path. Right, now, we’re gonna split inter two parties an’ follow the trail in diff’rent directions. There’s blood all over the place, it must’ve bin staggerin’ around since last night at least.”

“I want Fang,” said Malfoy quickly, looking at Fang’s long teeth.

“All right, but I warn yeh, he’s a coward,” said Hagrid. “So me, Harry, an’ Hermione’ll go one way an’ Draco, Neville, an’ Fang’ll go the other. Now, if any of us finds the unicorn, we’ll send up green sparks, right? Get yer wands out an’ practice now — that’s it — an’ if anyone gets in trouble, send up red sparks, an’ we’ll all come an’ find yeh — so, be careful — let’s go.”

The forest was black and silent. A little way into it they reached a fork in the earth path, and Harry, Hermione, and Hagrid took the left path while Malfoy, Neville, and Fang took the right.

They walked in silence, their eyes on the ground. Every now and then a ray of moonlight through the branches above lit a spot of silver-blue blood on the fallen leaves.

Harry saw that Hagrid looked very worried.

“Could a werewolf be killing the unicorns?” Harry asked.

“Not fast enough,” said Hagrid. “It’s not easy ter catch a uni-corn, they’re powerful magic creatures. I never knew one ter be hurt before.”

They walked past a mossy tree stump. Harry could hear running water; there must be a stream somewhere close by. There were still spots of unicorn blood here and there along the winding path.

“You all right, Hermione?” Hagrid whispered. “Don’ worry, it can’t’ve gone far if it’s this badly hurt, an’ then we’ll be able ter — GET BEHIND THAT TREE!”

Hagrid seized Harry and Hermione and hoisted them off the path behind a towering oak. He pulled out an arrow and fitted it into his crossbow, raising it, ready to fire. The three of them lis-tened. Something was slithering over dead leaves nearby: it sounded like a cloak trailing along the ground. Hagrid was squint-ing up the dark path, but after a few seconds, the sound faded away.

“I knew it,” he murmured. “There’s summat in here that shouldn’ be.”

“A werewolf?” Harry suggested.

“That wasn’ no werewolf an’ it wasn’ no unicorn, neither,” said Hagrid grimly. “Right, follow me, but careful, now.”

They walked more slowly, ears straining for the faintest sound. Suddenly, in a clearing ahead, something definitely moved.

“Who’s there?” Hagrid called. “Show yerself — I’m armed!”

And into the clearing came — was it a man, or a horse? To the waist, a man, with red hair and beard, but below that was a horse’s gleaming chestnut body with a long, reddish tail. Harry and Hermione’s jaws dropped.

“Oh, it’s you, Ronan,” said Hagrid in relief. “How are yeh?”

He walked forward and shook the centaur's hand.

"Good evening to you, Hagrid," said Ronan. He had a deep, sorrowful voice. "Were you going to shoot me?"

"Can't be too careful, Ronan," said Hagrid, patting his crossbow. "There's summat bad loose in this forest. This is Harry Potter an' Hermione Granger, by the way. Students up at the school. An' this is Ronan, you two. He's a centaur."

"We'd noticed," said Hermione faintly.

"Good evening," said Ronan. "Students, are you? And do you learn much, up at the school?"

"Erm —"

"A bit," said Hermione timidly.

"A bit. Well, that's something." Ronan sighed. He flung back his head and stared at the sky. "Mars is bright tonight."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, glancing up, too. "Listen, I'm glad we've run inter yeh, Ronan, 'cause there's a unicorn bin hurt — you seen anythin'?"

Ronan didn't answer immediately. He stared unblinkingly up-ward, then sighed again.

"Always the innocent are the first victims," he said. "So it has been for ages past, so it is now."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, "but have yeh seen anythin', Ronan? Any-thin' unusual?"

"Mars is bright tonight," Ronan repeated, while Hagrid watched him impatiently. "Unusually bright."

“Yeah, but I was meanin’ anythin’ unusual a bit nearer home,” said Hagrid. “So yeh haven’t noticed anythin’ strange?”

Yet again, Ronan took a while to answer. At last, he said, “The forest hides many secrets.”

A movement in the trees behind Ronan made Hagrid raise his bow again, but it was only a second centaur, black-haired and -bodied and wilder-looking than Ronan.

“Hullo, Bane,” said Hagrid. “All right?”

“Good evening, Hagrid, I hope you are well?”

“Well enough. Look, I’ve jus’ bin askin’ Ronan, you seen any-thin’ odd in here lately? There’s a unicorn bin injured — would yeh know anythin’ about it?”

Bane walked over to stand next to Ronan. He looked skyward.

“Mars is bright tonight,” he said simply.

“We’ve heard,” said Hagrid grumpily. “Well, if either of you do see anythin’, let me know, won’t yeh? We’ll be off, then.”

Harry and Hermione followed him out of the clearing, staring over their shoulders at Ronan and Bane until the trees blocked their view.

“Never,” said Hagrid irritably, “try an’ get a straight answer out of a centaur. Ruddy stargazers. Not interested in anythin’ closer’n the moon.”

“Are there many of them in here?” asked Hermione.

“Oh, a fair few. … Keep themselves to themselves mostly, but they’re good enough about turnin’ up if ever I want a word. They’re deep, mind, centaurs … they know things … jus’ don’ let on much.”

"D'you think that was a centaur we heard earlier?" said Harry.

"Did that sound like hooves to you? Nah, if yeh ask me, that was what's bin killin' the unicorns — never heard anythin' like it be-fore."

They walked on through the dense, dark trees. Harry kept look-ing nervously over his shoulder. He had the nasty feeling they were being watched. He was very glad they had Hagrid and his crossbow with them. They had just passed a bend in the path when Her-mione grabbed Hagrid's arm.

"Hagrid! Look! Red sparks, the others are in trouble!"

"You two wait here!" Hagrid shouted. "Stay on the path, I'll come back for yeh!"

They heard him crashing away through the undergrowth and stood looking at each other, very scared, until they couldn't hear anything but the rustling of leaves around them.

"You don't think they've been hurt, do you?" whispered Hermione.

"I don't care if Malfoy has, but if something's got Neville … it's our fault he's here in the first place."

The minutes dragged by. Their ears seemed sharper than usual. Harry's seemed to be picking up every sigh of the wind, every cracking twig. What was going on? Where were the others?

At last, a great crunching noise announced Hagrid's return. Mal-foy, Neville, and Fang were with him. Hagrid was fuming. Malfoy, it seemed, had sneaked up behind Neville and grabbed him as a joke. Neville had panicked and sent up the sparks.

"We'll be lucky ter catch anythin' now, with the racket you two were makin'. Right, we're changin' groups — Neville, you stay with me an' Hermione, Harry, you go with Fang an' this idiot. I'm sorry," Hagrid

added in a whisper to Harry, “but he’ll have a harder time frightenin’ you, an’ we’ve gotta get this done.”

So Harry set off into the heart of the forest with Malfoy and Fang. They walked for nearly half an hour, deeper and deeper into the forest, until the path became almost impossible to follow be-cause the trees were so thick. Harry thought the blood seemed to be getting thicker. There were splashes on the roots of a tree, as though the poor creature had been thrashing around in pain close by. Harry could see a clearing ahead, through the tangled branches of an ancient oak.

“Look —” he murmured, holding out his arm to stop Malfoy.

Something bright white was gleaming on the ground. They inched closer.

It was the unicorn all right, and it was dead. Harry had never seen anything so beautiful and sad. Its long, slender legs were stuck out at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane was spread pearly-white on the dark leaves.

Harry had taken one step toward it when a slithering sound made him freeze where he stood. A bush on the edge of the clear-ing quivered. … Then, out of the shadows, a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast. Harry, Malfoy, and Fang stood transfixed. The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, lowered its head over the wound in the animals side, and began to drink its blood.

“AAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

Malfoy let out a terrible scream and bolted — so did Fang. The hooded figure raised its head and looked right at Harry — unicorn blood was dribbling down its front. It got to its feet and came swiftly toward Harry — he couldn’t move for fear.

Then a pain like he'd never felt before pierced his head; it was as though his scar were on fire. Half blinded, he staggered backward. He heard hooves behind him, galloping, and something jumped clean over Harry, charging at the figure.

The pain in Harry's head was so bad he fell to his knees. It took a minute or two to pass. When he looked up, the figure had gone. A centaur was standing over him, not Ronan or Bane; this one looked younger; he had white-blond hair and a palomino body.

"Are you all right?" said the centaur, pulling Harry to his feet.

"Yes — thank you — what was that?"

The centaur didn't answer. He had astonishingly blue eyes, like pale sapphires. He looked carefully at Harry, his eyes lingering on the scar that stood out, livid, on Harry's forehead.

"You are the Potter boy," he said. "You had better get back to Hagrid. The forest is not safe at this time — especially for you. Can you ride? It will be quicker this way.

"My name is Firenze," he added, as he lowered himself on to his front legs so that Harry could clamber onto his back.

There was suddenly a sound of more galloping from the other side of the clearing. Ronan and Bane came bursting through the trees, their flanks heaving and sweaty.

"Firenze!" Bane thundered. "What are you doing? You have a hu-man on your back! Have you no shame? Are you a common mule?"

"Do you realize who this is?" said Firenze. "This is the Potter boy. The quicker he leaves this forest, the better."

"What have you been telling him?" growled Bane. "Remember, Firenze, we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens.

Have we not read what is to come in the movements of the planets?"

Ronan pawed the ground nervously. "I'm sure Firenze thought he was acting for the best," he said in his gloomy voice.

Bane kicked his back legs in anger.

"For the best! What is that to do with us? Centaurs are con-cerned with what has been foretold! It is not our business to run around like donkeys after stray humans in our forest!"

Firenze suddenly reared on to his hind legs in anger, so that Harry had to grab his shoulders to stay on.

"Do you not see that unicorn?" Firenze bellowed at Bane. "Do you not understand why it was killed? Or have the planets not let you in on that secret? I set myself against what is lurking in this for-est, Bane, yes, with humans alongside me if I must."

And Firenze whisked around; with Harry clutching on as best he could, they plunged off into the trees, leaving Ronan and Bane be-hind them.

Harry didn't have a clue what was going on.

"Why's Bane so angry?" he asked. "What was that thing you saved me from, anyway?"

Firenze slowed to a walk, warned Harry to keep his head bowed in case of low-hanging branches, but did not answer Harry's ques-tion. They made their way through the trees in silence for so long that Harry thought Firenze didn't want to talk to him anymore. They were passing through a particularly dense patch of trees, how-ever, when Firenze suddenly stopped.

"Harry Potter, do you know what unicorn blood is used for?"

“No,” said Harry, startled by the odd question. “We’ve only used the horn and tail hair in Potions.”

“That is because it is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn,” said Firenze. “Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips.”

Harry stared at the back of Firenze’s head, which was dappled silver in the moonlight.

“But who’d be that desperate?” he wondered aloud. “If you’re go-ing to be cursed forever, death’s better, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Firenze agreed, “unless all you need is to stay alive long enough to drink something else — something that will bring you back to full strength and power — something that will mean you can never die. Mr. Potter, do you know what is hidden in the school at this very moment?”

“The Sorcerer’s Stone! Of course — the Elixir of Life! But I don’t understand who —”

“Can you think of nobody who has waited many years to return to power, who has clung to life, awaiting their chance?”

It was as though an iron fist had clenched suddenly around Harry’s heart. Over the rustling of the trees, he seemed to hear once more what Hagrid had told him on the night they had met: “Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die.”

“Do you mean,” Harry croaked, “that was Vol —”

“Harry! Harry, are you all right?”

Hermione was running toward them down the path, Hagrid puffing along behind her.

“I’m fine,” said Harry, hardly knowing what he was saying. “The unicorns dead, Hagrid, it’s in that clearing back there.”

“This is where I leave you,” Firenze murmured as Hagrid hur-ried off to examine the unicorn. “You are safe now.”

Harry slid off his back.

“Good luck, Harry Potter,” said Firenze. “The planets have been read wrongly before now, even by centaurs. I hope this is one of those times.”

He turned and cantered back into the depths of the forest, leav-ing Harry shivering behind him.

Ron had fallen asleep in the dark common room, waiting for them to return. He shouted something about Quidditch fouls when Harry roughly shook him awake. In a matter of seconds, though, he was wide-eyed as Harry began to tell him and Hermione what had happened in the forest.

Harry couldn’t sit down. He paced up and down in front of the fire. He was still shaking.

“Snape wants the Stone for Voldemort … and Voldemort’s wait-ing in the forest … and all this time we thought Snape just wanted to get rich. …”

“Stop saying the name!” said Ron in a terrified whisper, as if he thought Voldemort could hear them.

Harry wasn’t listening.

“Firenze saved me, but he shouldn’t have done so. … Bane was furious … he was talking about interfering with what the planets say is going to happen. … They must show that Voldemort’s com-ing back. … Bane thinks Firenze should have let Voldemort kill me. … I suppose that’s written in the stars as well.”

“Will you stop saying the name!” Ron hissed.

“So all I’ve got to wait for now is Snape to steal the Stone,” Harry went on feverishly, “then Voldemort will be able to come and finish me off. … Well, I suppose Bane’ll be happy.”

Hermione looked very frightened, but she had a word of com-fort.

“Harry, everyone says Dumbledore’s the only one You-Know-Who was ever afraid of. With Dumbledore around, You-Know-Who won’t touch you. Anyway, who says the centaurs are right? It sounds like fortune-telling to me, and Professor McGonagall says that’s a very imprecise branch of magic.”

The sky had turned light before they stopped talking. They went to bed exhausted, their throats sore. But the night’s surprises weren’t over.

When Harry pulled back his sheets, he found his Invisibility Cloak folded neatly underneath them. There was a note pinned to it:Just in case.

Chapter 16 Through the Trapdoor

In years to come, Harry would never quite remember how he had managed to get through his exams when he half expected Voldemort to come bursting through the door at any moment. Yet the days crept by, and there could be no doubt that Fluffy was still alive and well behind the locked door.

It was sweltering hot, especially in the large classroom where they did their written papers. They had been given special, new quills for the exams, which had been bewitched with an Anti-Cheating spell.

They had practical exams as well. Professor Flitwick called them one by one into his class to see if they could make a pineapple tap-dance across a desk. Professor McGonagall watched them turn a mouse into a snuffbox — points were given for how pretty the snuffbox was, but taken away if it had whiskers. Snape made them all nervous, breathing down their necks while they tried to remem-ber how to make a Forgetfulness potion.

Harry did the best he could, trying to ignore the stabbing pains in his forehead, which had been bothering him ever since his trip into the forest. Neville thought Harry had a bad case of exam nerves because Harry couldn't sleep, but the truth was that Harry kept being woken by his old nightmare, except that it was now worse than ever because there was a hooded figure dripping blood in it.

Maybe it was because they hadn't seen what Harry had seen in the forest, or because they didn't have scars burning on their fore-heads, but Ron and Hermione didn't seem as worried about the Stone as Harry. The idea of Voldemort certainly scared them, but he didn't keep visiting them in dreams, and they were so busy with their studying they didn't have much time to fret about what Snape or anyone else might be up to.

Their very last exam was History of Magic. One hour of an-swering questions about batty old wizards who'd invented self-stirring cauldrons and they'd be free, free for a whole wonderful week until their exam results came out. When the ghost of Profes-sor Binns told them to put down their quills and roll up their parchment, Harry couldn't help cheering with the rest.

“That was far easier than I thought it would be,” said Hermione as they joined the crowds flocking out onto the sunny grounds. “I needn't have learned about the 1637 Werewolf Code of Conduct or the uprising of Elfric the Eager.”

Hermione always liked to go through their exam papers after-ward, but Ron said this made him feel ill, so they wandered down to the lake and flopped under a tree. The Weasley twins and Lee Jordan were tickling the tentacles of a giant squid, which was bask-ing in the warm shallows.

“No more studying,” Ron sighed happily, stretching out on the grass. “You could look more cheerful, Harry, we've got a week be-fore we find out how badly we've done, there's no need to worry yet.”

Harry was rubbing his forehead.

“I wish I knew what this means!” he burst out angrily. “My scar keeps hurting — it's happened before, but never as often as this.”

“Go to Madam Pomfrey,” Hermione suggested.

“I'm not ill,” said Harry. “I think it's a warning … it means danger's coming. …”

Ron couldn't get worked up, it was too hot.

“Harry, relax, Hermione's right, the Stone's safe as long as Dum-bledore's around. Anyway, we've never had any proof Snape found out how to get past Fluffy. He nearly had his leg ripped off once, he's

not going to try it again in a hurry. And Neville will play Quid-ditch for England before Hagrid lets Dumbledore down.”

Harry nodded, but he couldn’t shake off a lurking feeling that there was something he’d forgotten to do, something important. When he tried to explain this, Hermione said, “That’s just the ex-ams. I woke up last night and was halfway through my Transfigu-ration notes before I remembered we’d done that one.”

Harry was quite sure the unsettled feeling didn’t have anything to do with work, though. He watched an owl flutter toward the school across the bright blue sky, a note clamped in its mouth. Ha-grid was the only one who ever sent him letters. Hagrid would never betray Dumbledore. Hagrid would never tell anyone how to get past Fluffy … never … but —Harry suddenly jumped to his feet.

“Where’re you going?” said Ron sleepily.

“I’ve just thought of something,” said Harry. He had turned white. “We’ve got to go and see Hagrid, now.”

“Why?” panted Hermione, hurrying to keep up.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit odd,” said Harry, scrambling up the grassy slope, “that what Hagrid wants more than anything else is a dragon, and a stranger turns up who just happens to have an egg in his pocket? How many people wander around with dragon eggs if it’s against wizard law? Lucky they found Hagrid, don’t you think? Why didn’t I see it before?”

“What are you talking about?” said Ron, but Harry, sprinting across the grounds toward the forest, didn’t answer.

Hagrid was sitting in an armchair outside his house; his trousers and sleeves were rolled up, and he was shelling peas into a large bowl.

“Hullo,” he said, smiling. “Finished yer exams? Got time fer a drink?”

“Yes, please,” said Ron, but Harry cut him off.

“No, we’re in a hurry. Hagrid, I’ve got to ask you something. You know that night you won Norbert? What did the stranger you were playing cards with look like?”

“Dunno,” said Hagrid casually, “he wouldn’ take his cloak off.”

He saw the three of them look stunned and raised his eye-brows.

“It’s not that unusual, yeh get a lot o’ funny folk in the Hog’s Head — that’s one o’ the pubs down in the village. Mighta bin a dragon dealer, mightn’ he? I never saw his face, he kept his hood up.”

Harry sank down next to the bowl of peas.

“What did you talk to him about, Hagrid? Did you mention Hogwarts at all?”

“Mighta come up,” said Hagrid, frowning as he tried to remem-ber. “Yeah … he asked what I did, an’ I told him I was gamekeeper here. … He asked a bit about the sorta creatures I look after … so I told him … an’ I said what I’d always really wanted was a dragon … an’ then … I can’ remember too well, ’cause he kept buyin’ me drinks. … Let’s see … yeah, then he said he had the dragon egg an’ we could play cards fer it if I wanted … but he had ter be sure I could handle it, he didn’ want it ter go ter any old home. … So I told him, after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy. …”

“And did he — did he seem interested in Fluffy?” Harry asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

“Well — yeah — how many three-headed dogs d’yeh meet, even around Hogwarts? So I told him, Fluffy’s a piece o’ cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus’ play him a bit o’ music an’ he’ll go straight off ter sleep —”

Hagrid suddenly looked horrified.

“I shouldn’ta told yeh that!” he blurted out. “Forget I said it! Hey — where’re yeh goin’?”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione didn’t speak to each other at all un-til they came to a halt in the entrance hall, which seemed very cold and gloomy after the grounds.

“We’ve got to go to Dumbledore,” said Harry. “Hagrid told that stranger how to get past Fluffy, and it was either Snape or Volde-mort under that cloak — it must’ve been easy, once he’d got Ha-grid drunk. I just hope Dumbledore believes us. Firenze might back us up if Bane doesn’t stop him. Where’s Dumbledore’s office?”

They looked around, as if hoping to see a sign pointing them in the right direction. They had never been told where Dumbledore lived, nor did they know anyone who had been sent to see him.

“We’ll just have to —” Harry began, but a voice suddenly rang across the hall.

“What are you three doing inside?”

It was Professor McGonagall, carrying a large pile of books.

“We want to see Professor Dumbledore,” said Hermione, rather bravely, Harry and Ron thought.

“See Professor Dumbledore?” Professor McGonagall repeated, as though this was a very fishy thing to want to do. “Why?”

Harry swallowed — now what?

“It’s sort of secret,” he said, but he wished at once he hadn’t, be-cause Professor McGonagall’s nostrils flared.

“Professor Dumbledore left ten minutes ago,” she said coldly. “He received an urgent owl from the Ministry of Magic and flew off for London at once.”

“He’s gone?” said Harry frantically. “Now?”

“Professor Dumbledore is a very great wizard, Potter, he has many demands on his time —”

“But this is important.”

“Something you have to say is more important than the Min-istry of Magic, Potter?”

“Look,” said Harry, throwing caution to the winds, “Pro-fessor — it’s about the Sorcerer’s Stone —”

Whatever Professor McGonagall had expected, it wasn’t that. The books she was carrying tumbled out of her arms, but she didn’t pick them up.

“How do you know — ?” she spluttered.

“Professor, I think — I know — that Sn— that someone’s going to try and steal the Stone. I’ve got to talk to Professor Dumble-dore.”

She eyed him with a mixture of shock and suspicion.

“Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow,” she said finally. “I don’t know how you found out about the Stone, but rest assured, no one can possibly steal it, it’s too well protected.”

“But Professor —”

“Potter, I know what I’m talking about,” she said shortly. She bent down and gathered up the fallen books. “I suggest you all go back outside and enjoy the sunshine.”

But they didn't.

"It's tonight," said Harry, once he was sure Professor McGona-gall was out of earshot. "Snape's going through the trapdoor tonight. He's found out everything he needs, and now he's got Dumbledore out of the way. He sent that note, I bet the Ministry of Magic will get a real shock when Dumbledore turns up."

"But what can we —"

Hermione gasped. Harry and Ron wheeled round.

Snape was standing there.

"Good afternoon," he said smoothly.

They stared at him.

"You shouldn't be inside on a day like this," he said, with an odd, twisted smile.

"We were —" Harry began, without any idea what he was going to say.

"You want to be more careful," said Snape. "Hanging around like this, people will think you're up to something. And Gryffindor really can't afford to lose any more points, can it?"

Harry flushed. They turned to go outside, but Snape called them back.

"Be warned, Potter — any more nighttime wanderings and I will personally make sure you are expelled. Good day to you."

He strode off in the direction of the staffroom.

Out on the stone steps, Harry turned to the others.

“Right, here’s what we’ve got to do,” he whispered urgently. “One of us has got to keep an eye on Snape — wait outside the staffroom and follow him if he leaves it. Hermione, you’d better do that.”

“Why me?”

“It’s obvious,” said Ron. “You can pretend to be waiting for Professor Flitwick, you know.” He put on a high voice, “ ‘Oh Profes-sor Flitwick, I’m so worried, I think I got question fourteen b wrong. …’ ”

“Oh, shut up,” said Hermione, but she agreed to go and watch out for Snape.

“And we’d better stay outside the third-floor corridor,” Harry told Ron. “Come on.”

But that part of the plan didn’t work. No sooner had they reached the door separating Fluffy from the rest of the school than Professor McGonagall turned up again and this time, she lost her temper.

“I suppose you think you’re harder to get past than a pack of enchantments!” she stormed. “Enough of this nonsense! If I hear you’ve come anywhere near here again, I’ll take another fifty points from Gryffindor! Yes, Weasley, from my own House!”

Harry and Ron went back to the common room. Harry had just said, “At least Hermione’s on Snape’s tail,” when the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and Hermione came in.

“I’m sorry, Harry!” she wailed. “Snape came out and asked me what I was doing, so I said I was waiting for Flitwick, and Snape went to get him, and I’ve only just got away, I don’t know where Snape went.”

“Well, that’s it then, isn’t it?” Harry said.

The other two stared at him. He was pale and his eyes were glittering.

“I’m going out of here tonight and I’m going to try and get to the Stone first.”

“You’re mad!” said Ron.

“You can’t!” said Hermione. “After what McGonagall and Snape have said? You’ll be expelled!”

“SO WHAT?” Harry shouted. “Don’t you understand? If Snape gets hold of the Stone, Voldemort’s coming back! Haven’t you heard what it was like when he was trying to take over? There won’t be any Hogwarts to get expelled from! He’ll flatten it, or turn it into a school for the Dark Arts! Losing points doesn’t matter any-more, can’t you see? D’you think he’ll leave you and your families alone if Gryffindor wins the House Cup? If I get caught before I can get to the Stone, well, I’ll have to go back to the Dursleys and wait for Voldemort to find me there, it’s only dying a bit later than I would have, because I’m never going over to the Dark Side! I’m going through that trapdoor tonight and nothing you two say is going to stop me! Voldemort killed my parents, remember?”

He glared at them.

“You’re right, Harry,” said Hermione in a small voice.

“I’ll use the Invisibility Cloak,” said Harry. “It’s just lucky I got it back.”

“But will it cover all three of us?” said Ron.

“All — all three of us?”

“Oh, come off it, you don’t think we’d let you go alone?”

“Of course not,” said Hermione briskly. “How do you think you’d get to the Stone without us? I’d better go and look through my books, there might be something useful. …”

“But if we get caught, you two will be expelled, too.”

“Not if I can help it,” said Hermione grimly. “Flitwick told me in secret that I got a hundred and twelve percent on his exam. They’re not throwing me out after that.”

After dinner the three of them sat nervously apart in the common room. Nobody bothered them; none of the Gryffindors had any-thing to say to Harry any more, after all. This was the first night he hadn’t been upset by it. Hermione was skimming through all her notes, hoping to come across one of the enchantments they were about to try to break. Harry and Ron didn’t talk much. Both of them were thinking about what they were about to do.

Slowly, the room emptied as people drifted off to bed.

“Better get the cloak,” Ron muttered, as Lee Jordan finally left, stretching and yawning. Harry ran upstairs to their dark dormi-tory. He pulled out the cloak and then his eyes fell on the flute Ha-grid had given him for Christmas. He pocketed it to use on Fluffy — he didn’t feel much like singing.

He ran back down to the common room.

“We’d better put the cloak on here, and make sure it covers all three of us — if Filch spots one of our feet wandering along on its own —”

“What are you doing?” said a voice from the corner of the room. Neville appeared from behind an armchair, clutching Trevor the toad, who looked as though he’d been making another bid for free-dom.

“Nothing, Neville, nothing,” said Harry, hurriedly putting the cloak behind his back.

Neville stared at their guilty faces.

“You’re going out again,” he said.

“No, no, no,” said Hermione. “No, we’re not. Why don’t you go to bed, Neville?”

Harry looked at the grandfather clock by the door. They couldn’t afford to waste any more time, Snape might even now be playing Fluffy to sleep.

“You can’t go out,” said Neville, “you’ll be caught again. Gryffindor will be in even more trouble.”

“You don’t understand,” said Harry, “this is important.”

But Neville was clearly steeling himself to do something desper-ate.

“I won’t let you do it,” he said, hurrying to stand in front of the portrait hole. “I’ll — I’ll fight you!”

“Neville,” Ron exploded, “get away from that hole and don’t be an idiot —”

“Don’t you call me an idiot!” said Neville. “I don’t think you should be breaking any more rules! And you were the one who told me to stand up to people!”

“Yes, but not to us,” said Ron in exasperation. “Neville, you don’t know what you’re doing.”

He took a step forward and Neville dropped Trevor the toad, who leapt out of sight.

“Go on then, try and hit me!” said Neville, raising his fists. “I’m ready!”

Harry turned to Hermione.

“Do something,” he said desperately.

Hermione stepped forward.

“Neville,” she said, “I’m really, really sorry about this.”

She raised her wand.

“Petrificus Totalus!” she cried, pointing it at Neville.

Neville’s arms snapped to his sides. His legs sprang together. His whole body rigid, he swayed where he stood and then fell flat on his face, stiff as a board.

Hermione ran to turn him over. Neville’s jaws were jammed to-gether so he couldn’t speak. Only his eyes were moving, looking at them in horror.

“What’ve you done to him?” Harry whispered.

“It’s the full Body-Bind,” said Hermione miserably. “Oh, Neville, I’m so sorry.”

“We had to, Neville, no time to explain,” said Harry.

“You’ll understand later, Neville,” said Ron as they stepped over him and pulled on the Invisibility Cloak.

But leaving Neville lying motionless on the floor didn’t feel like a very good omen. In their nervous state, every statue’s shadow looked like Filch, every distant breath of wind sounded like Peeves swooping down on them.

At the foot of the first set of stairs, they spotted Mrs. Norris skulking near the top.

“Oh, let’s kick her, just this once,” Ron whispered in Harry’s ear, but Harry shook his head. As they climbed carefully around her, Mrs. Norris turned her lamplike eyes on them, but didn’t do any-thing.

They didn’t meet anyone else until they reached the staircase up to the third floor. Peeves was bobbing halfway up, loosening the carpet

so that people would trip.

“Who’s there?” he said suddenly as they climbed toward him. He narrowed his wicked black eyes. “Know you’re there, even if I can’t see you. Are you ghoulie or ghostie or wee student beastie?”

He rose up in the air and floated there, squinting at them.

“Should call Filch, I should, if something’s a-creeping around unseen.”

Harry had a sudden idea.

“Peeves,” he said, in a hoarse whisper, “the Bloody Baron has his own reasons for being invisible.”

Peeves almost fell out of the air in shock. He caught himself in time and hovered about a foot off the stairs.

“So sorry, your bloodiness, Mr. Baron, sir,” he said greasily. “My mistake, my mistake — I didn’t see you — of course I didn’t, you’re invisible — forgive old Peevsie his little joke, sir.”

“I have business here, Peeves,” croaked Harry. “Stay away from this place tonight.”

“I will, sir, I most certainly will,” said Peeves, rising up in the air again. “Hope your business goes well, Baron, I’ll not bother you.”

And he scooted off.

“Brilliant, Harry!” whispered Ron.

A few seconds later, they were there, outside the third-floor cor-ridor — and the door was already ajar.

“Well, there you are,” Harry said quietly, “Snape’s already got past Fluffy.”

Seeing the open door somehow seemed to impress upon all three of them what was facing them. Underneath the cloak, Harry turned to the other two.

“If you want to go back, I won’t blame you,” he said. “You can take the cloak, I won’t need it now.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Ron.

“We’re coming,” said Hermione.

Harry pushed the door open.

As the door creaked, low, rumbling growls met their ears. All three of the dog’s noses sniffed madly in their direction, even though it couldn’t see them.

“What’s that at its feet?” Hermione whispered.

“Looks like a harp,” said Ron. “Snape must have left it there.”

“It must wake up the moment you stop playing,” said Harry. “Well, here goes …”

He put Hagrid’s flute to his lips and blew. It wasn’t really a tune, but from the first note the beast’s eyes began to droop. Harry hardly drew breath. Slowly, the dog’s growls ceased — it tottered on its paws and fell to its knees, then it slumped to the ground, fast asleep.

“Keep playing,” Ron warned Harry as they slipped out of the cloak and crept toward the trapdoor. They could feel the dog’s hot, smelly breath as they approached the giant heads.

“I think we’ll be able to pull the door open,” said Ron, peering over the dog’s back. “Want to go first, Hermione?”

“No, I don’t!”

“All right.” Ron gritted his teeth and stepped carefully over the dog’s legs. He bent and pulled the ring of the trapdoor, which swung up and open.

“What can you see?” Hermione said anxiously.

“Nothing — just black — there’s no way of climbing down, we’ll just have to drop.”

Harry, who was still playing the flute, waved at Ron to get his attention and pointed at himself.

“You want to go first? Are you sure?” said Ron. “I don’t know how deep this thing goes. Give the flute to Hermione so she can keep him asleep.”

Harry handed the flute over. In the few seconds’ silence, the dog growled and twitched, but the moment Hermione began to play, it fell back into its deep sleep.

Harry climbed over it and looked down through the trapdoor. There was no sign of the bottom.

He lowered himself through the hole until he was hanging on by his fingertips. Then he looked up at Ron and said, “If anything happens to me, don’t follow. Go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, right?”

“Right,” said Ron.

“See you in a minute, I hope. …”

And Harry let go. Cold, damp air rushed past him as he fell down, down, down and —FLUMP. With a funny, muffled sort of thump he landed on something soft. He sat up and felt around, his eyes not used to the gloom. It felt as though he was sitting on some sort of plant.

"It's okay!" he called up to the light the size of a postage stamp, which was the open trapdoor, "it's a soft landing, you can jump!"

Ron followed right away. He landed, sprawled next to Harry.

"What's this stuff?" were his first words.

"Dunno, some sort of plant thing. I suppose it's here to break the fall. Come on, Hermione!"

The distant music stopped. There was a loud bark from the dog, but Hermione had already jumped. She landed on Harry's other side.

"We must be miles under the school," she said.

"Lucky this plant thing's here, really," said Ron.

"Lucky!" shrieked Hermione. "Look at you both!"

She leapt up and struggled toward a damp wall. She had to struggle because the moment she had landed, the plant had started to twist snakelike tendrils around her ankles. As for Harry and Ron, their legs had already been bound tightly in long creepers without their noticing.

Hermione had managed to free herself before the plant got a firm grip on her. Now she watched in horror as the two boys fought to pull the plant off them, but the more they strained against it, the tighter and faster the plant wound around them.

"Stop moving!" Hermione ordered them. "I know what this is — it's Devil's Snare!"

"Oh, I'm so glad we know what it's called, that's a great help," snarled Ron, leaning back, trying to stop the plant from curling around his neck.

"Shut up, I'm trying to remember how to kill it!" said Her-mione.

“Well, hurry up, I can’t breathe!” Harry gasped, wrestling with it as it curled around his chest.

“Devil’s Snare, Devil’s Snare … what did Professor Sprout say? — it likes the dark and the damp —”

“So light a fire!” Harry choked.

“Yes — of course — but there’s no wood!” Hermione cried, wringing her hands.

“HAVE YOU GONE MAD?” Ron bellowed. “ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?”

“Oh, right!” said Hermione, and she whipped out her wand, waved it, muttered something, and sent a jet of the same bluebell flames she had used on Snape at the plant. In a matter of seconds, the two boys felt it loosening its grip as it cringed away from the light and warmth. Wriggling and flailing, it unraveled itself from their bodies, and they were able to pull free.

“Lucky you pay attention in Herbology, Hermione,” said Harry as he joined her by the wall, wiping sweat off his face.

“Yeah,” said Ron, “and lucky Harry doesn’t lose his head in a cri-sis — ‘there’s no wood,’ honestly.”

“This way,” said Harry, pointing down a stone passageway, which was the only way forward.

All they could hear apart from their footsteps was the gentle drip of water trickling down the walls. The passageway sloped down-ward, and Harry was reminded of Gringotts. With an unpleasant jolt of the heart, he remembered the dragons said to be guarding vaults in the wizards’ bank. If they met a dragon, a fully-grown dragon — Norbert had been bad enough …“Can you hear something?” Ron whispered.

Harry listened. A soft rustling and clinking seemed to be com-ing from up ahead.

“Do you think it’s a ghost?”

“I don’t know … sounds like wings to me.”

“There’s light ahead — I can see something moving.”

They reached the end of the passageway and saw before them a brilliantly lit chamber, its ceiling arching high above them. It was full of small, jewel-bright birds, fluttering and tumbling all around the room. On the opposite side of the chamber was a heavy wooden door.

“Do you think they’ll attack us if we cross the room?” said Ron.

“Probably,” said Harry. “They don’t look very vicious, but I sup-pose if they all swooped down at once … well, there’s no other choice … I’ll run.”

He took a deep breath, covered his face with his arms, and sprinted across the room. He expected to feel sharp beaks and claws tearing at him any second, but nothing happened. He reached the door untouched. He pulled the handle, but it was locked.

The other two followed him. They tugged and heaved at the door, but it wouldn’t budge, not even when Hermione tried her Alohomora Charm.

“Now what?” said Ron.

“These birds … they can’t be here just for decoration,” said Hermione.

They watched the birds soaring overhead, glittering — glitter-ing?

“They’re not birds!” Harry said suddenly. “They’re keys! Winged keys — look carefully. So that must mean …” he looked around the

chamber while the other two squinted up at the flock of keys. "… yes — look! Broomsticks! We've got to catch the key to the door!"

"But there are hundreds of them!"

Ron examined the lock on the door.

"We're looking for a big, old-fashioned one — probably silver, like the handle."

They each seized a broomstick and kicked off into the air, soar-ing into the midst of the cloud of keys. They grabbed and snatched, but the bewitched keys darted and dived so quickly it was almost impossible to catch one.

Not for nothing, though, was Harry the youngest Seeker in a century. He had a knack for spotting things other people didn't. Af-ter a minute's weaving about through the whirl of rainbow feathers, he noticed a large silver key that had a bent wing, as if it had al-ready been caught and stuffed roughly into the keyhole.

"That one!" he called to the others. "That big one — there — no, there — with bright blue wings — the feathers are all crum-pled on one side."

Ron went speeding in the direction that Harry was pointing, crashed into the ceiling, and nearly fell off his broom.

"We've got to close in on it!" Harry called, not taking his eyes off the key with the damaged wing. "Ron, you come at it from above — Hermione, stay below and stop it from going down — and I'll try and catch it. Right, NOW!"

Ron dived, Hermione rocketed upward, the key dodged them both, and Harry streaked after it; it sped toward the wall, Harry leaned forward and with a nasty, crunching noise, pinned it against the stone

with one hand. Ron and Hermione's cheers echoed around the high chamber.

They landed quickly, and Harry ran to the door, the key strug-gling in his hand. He rammed it into the lock and turned — it worked. The moment the lock had clicked open, the key took flight again, looking very battered now that it had been caught twice.

"Ready?" Harry asked the other two, his hand on the door han-dle. They nodded. He pulled the door open.

The next chamber was so dark they couldn't see anything at all. But as they stepped into it, light suddenly flooded the room to re-veal an astonishing sight.

They were standing on the edge of a huge chessboard, behind the black chessmen, which were all taller than they were and carved from what looked like black stone. Facing them, way across the chamber, were the white pieces. Harry, Ron and Hermione shiv-ered slightly — the towering white chessmen had no faces.

"Now what do we do?" Harry whispered.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" said Ron. "We've got to play our way across the room."

Behind the white pieces they could see another door.

"How?" said Hermione nervously.

"I think," said Ron, "we're going to have to be chessmen."

He walked up to a black knight and put his hand out to touch the knights horse. At once, the stone sprang to life. The horse pawed the ground and the knight turned his helmeted head to look down at Ron.

"Do we — er — have to join you to get across?"

The black knight nodded. Ron turned to the other two.

“This needs thinking about. …” he said. “I suppose we’ve got to take the place of three of the black pieces. …”

Harry and Hermione stayed quiet, watching Ron think. Finally he said, “Now, don’t be offended or anything, but neither of you are that good at chess —”

“We’re not offended,” said Harry quickly. “Just tell us what to do.”

“Well, Harry, you take the place of that bishop, and Hermione, you go there instead of that castle.”

“What about you?”

“I’m going to be a knight,” said Ron.

The chessmen seemed to have been listening, because at these words a knight, a bishop, and a castle turned their backs on the white pieces and walked off the board, leaving three empty squares that Harry, Ron, and Hermione took.

“White always plays first in chess,” said Ron, peering across the board. “Yes … look …”

A white pawn had moved forward two squares.

Ron started to direct the black pieces. They moved silently wherever he sent them. Harry’s knees were trembling. What if they lost?

“Harry — move diagonally four squares to the right.”

Their first real shock came when their other knight was taken. The white queen smashed him to the floor and dragged him off the board, where he lay quite still, facedown.

“Had to let that happen,” said Ron, looking shaken. “Leaves you free to take that bishop, Hermione, go on.”

Every time one of their men was lost, the white pieces showed no mercy. Soon there was a huddle of limp black players slumped along the wall. Twice, Ron only just noticed in time that Harry and Hermione were in danger. He himself darted around the board, taking almost as many white pieces as they had lost black ones.

“We’re nearly there,” he muttered suddenly. “Let me think — let me think …”

The white queen turned her blank face toward him.

“Yes …” said Ron softly, “it’s the only way … I’ve got to be taken.”

“NO!” Harry and Hermione shouted.

“That’s chess!” snapped Ron. “You’ve got to make some sacri-fices! I make my move and she’ll take me — that leaves you free to checkmate the king, Harry!”

“But —”

“Do you want to stop Snape or not?”

“Ron —”

“Look, if you don’t hurry up, he’ll already have the Stone!”

There was no alternative.

“Ready?” Ron called, his face pale but determined. “Here I go — now, don’t hang around once you’ve won.”

He stepped forward, and the white queen pounced. She struck Ron hard across the head with her stone arm, and he crashed to the floor

— Hermione screamed but stayed on her square — the white queen dragged Ron to one side. He looked as if he'd been knocked out.

Shaking, Harry moved three spaces to the left.

The white king took off his crown and threw it at Harry's feet. They had won. The chessmen parted and bowed, leaving the door ahead clear. With one last desperate look back at Ron, Harry and Hermione charged through the door and up the next passageway.

"What if he's — ?"

"He'll be all right," said Harry, trying to convince himself. "What do you reckon's next?"

"We've had Sprout's, that was the Devil's Snare; Flitwick must've put charms on the keys; McGonagall transfigured the chessmen to make them alive; that leaves Quirrell's spell, and Snape's …"

They had reached another door.

"All right?" Harry whispered.

"Go on."

Harry pushed it open.

A disgusting smell filled their nostrils, making both of them pull their robes up over their noses. Eyes watering, they saw, flat on the floor in front of them, a troll even larger than the one they had tackled, out cold with a bloody lump on its head.

"I'm glad we didn't have to fight that one," Harry whispered as they stepped carefully over one of its massive legs. "Come on, I can't breathe."

He pulled open the next door, both of them hardly daring to look at what came next — but there was nothing very frightening in here, just

a table with seven differently shaped bottles standing on it in a line.

“Snape’s,” said Harry. “What do we have to do?”

They stepped over the threshold, and immediately a fire sprang up behind them in the doorway. It wasn’t ordinary fire either; it was purple. At the same instant, black flames shot up in the doorway leading onward. They were trapped.

“Look!” Hermione seized a roll of paper lying next to the bottles. Harry looked over her shoulder to read it:Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,One among us seven will let you move ahead,Another will transport the drinker back instead,Two among our number hold only nettle wine,Three of us are killers, waiting hidden in line.

Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:First, however slyly the poison tries to hideYou will always find some on nettle wine’s left side;Second, different are those who stand at either end,But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;Fourth, the second left and the second on the rightAre twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.

Hermione let out a great sigh and Harry, amazed, saw that she was smiling, the very last thing he felt like doing.

“Brilliant,” said Hermione. “This isn’t magic — it’s logic — a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven’t got an ounce of logic, they’d be stuck in here forever.”

“But so will we, won’t we?”

“Of course not,” said Hermione. “Everything we need is here on this paper. Seven bottles: three are poison; two are wine; one will get us

safely through the black fire, and one will get us back through the purple."

"But how do we know which to drink?"

"Give me a minute."

Hermione read the paper several times. Then she walked up and down the line of bottles, muttering to herself and pointing at them. At last, she clapped her hands.

"Got it," she said. "The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire — toward the Stone."

Harry looked at the tiny bottle.

"There's only enough there for one of us," he said. "That's hardly one swallow."

They looked at each other.

"Which one will get you back through the purple flames?"

Hermione pointed at a rounded bottle at the right end of the line.

"You drink that," said Harry. "No, listen, get back and get Ron. Grab brooms from the flying-key room, they'll get you out of the trapdoor and past Fluffy — go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, we need him. I might be able to hold Snape off for a while, but I'm no match for him, really."

"But Harry — what if You-Know-Who's with him?"

"Well — I was lucky once, wasn't I?" said Harry, pointing at his scar. "I might get lucky again."

Hermione's lip trembled, and she suddenly dashed at Harry and threw her arms around him.

"Hermione!"

"Harry — you're a great wizard, you know."

"I'm not as good as you," said Harry, very embarrassed, as she let go of him.

"Me!" said Hermione. "Books! And cleverness! There are more important things — friendship and bravery and — oh Harry — be careful!"

"You drink first," said Harry. "You are sure which is which, aren't you?"

"Positive," said Hermione. She took a long drink from the round bottle at the end, and shuddered.

"It's not poison?" said Harry anxiously.

"No — but it's like ice."

"Quick, go, before it wears off."

"Good luck — take care —"

"GO!"

Hermione turned and walked straight through the purple fire.

Harry took a deep breath and picked up the smallest bottle. He turned to face the black flames.

"Here I come," he said, and he drained the little bottle in one gulp.

It was indeed as though ice was flooding his body. He put the bottle down and walked forward; he braced himself, saw the black flames licking his body, but couldn't feel them — for a moment he could see nothing but dark fire — then he was on the other side, in the last chamber.

There was already someone there — but it wasn't Snape. It wasn't even Voldemort.

Chapter 17 The Man With Two Faces

It was Quirrell.

“You!” gasped Harry.

Quirrell smiled. His face wasn’t twitching at all.

“Me,” he said calmly. “I wondered whether I’d be meeting you here, Potter.”

“But I thought — Snape —”

“Severus?” Quirrell laughed, and it wasn’t his usual quivering treble, either, but cold and sharp. “Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn’t he? So useful to have him swooping around like an over-grown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?”

Harry couldn’t take it in. This couldn’t be true, it couldn’t.

“But Snape tried to kill me!”

“No, no, no. I tried to kill you. Your friend Miss Granger acci-dentally knocked me over as she rushed to set fire to Snape at that Quidditch match. She broke my eye contact with you. Another few seconds and I’d have got you off that broom. I’d have managed it before then if Snape hadn’t been muttering a countercurse, try-ing to save you.”

“Snape was trying to save me?”

“Of course,” said Quirrell coolly. “Why do you think he wanted to referee your next match? He was trying to make sure I didn’t do it again. Funny, really … he needn’t have bothered. I couldn’t do anything with Dumbledore watching. All the other teachers thought Snape was trying to stop Gryffindor from winning, he did make

himself unpopular … and what a waste of time, when after all that, I'm going to kill you tonight."

Quirrell snapped his fingers. Ropes sprang out of thin air and wrapped themselves tightly around Harry.

"You're too nosy to live, Potter. Scurrying around the school on Halloween like that, for all I knew you'd seen me coming to look at what was guarding the Stone."

"You let the troll in?"

"Certainly. I have a special gift with trolls — you must have seen what I did to the one in the chamber back there? Unfortunately, while everyone else was running around looking for it, Snape, who already suspected me, went straight to the third floor to head me off — and not only did my troll fail to beat you to death, that three-headed dog didn't even manage to bite Snape's leg off properly.

"Now, wait quietly, Potter. I need to examine this interesting mirror."

It was only then that Harry realized what was standing behind Quirrell. It was the Mirror of Erised.

"This mirror is the key to finding the Stone," Quirrell mur-mured, tapping his way around the frame. "Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this … but he's in London … I'll be far away by the time he gets back. …"

All Harry could think of doing was to keep Quirrell talking and stop him from concentrating on the mirror.

"I saw you and Snape in the forest —" he blurted out.

"Yes," said Quirrell idly, walking around the mirror to look at the back. "He was on to me by that time, trying to find out how far I'd got. He

suspected me all along. Tried to frighten me — as though he could, when I had Lord Voldemort on my side. …”

Quirrell came back out from behind the mirror and stared hun-grily into it.

“I see the Stone … I’m presenting it to my master … but where is it?”

Harry struggled against the ropes binding him, but they didn’t give. He had to keep Quirrell from giving his whole attention to the mirror.

“But Snape always seemed to hate me so much.”

“Oh, he does,” said Quirrell casually, “heavens, yes. He was at Hogwarts with your father, didn’t you know? They loathed each other. But he never wanted you dead.”

“But I heard you a few days ago, sobbing — I thought Snape was threatening you.

For the first time, a spasm of fear flitted across Quirrell’s face.

“Sometimes,” he said, “I find it hard to follow my master’s in-structions — he is a great wizard and I am weak —”

“You mean he was there in the classroom with you?” Harry gasped.

“He is with me wherever I go,” said Quirrell quietly. “I met him when I traveled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it. … Since then, I have served him faithfully, although I have let him down many times. He has had to be very hard on me.” Quirrell shivered sud-denly. “He does not forgive mistakes easily. When I failed to steal the Stone from Gringotts, he was most displeased. He pun-ished me … decided he would have to keep a closer watch on me. …”

Quirrell's voice trailed away. Harry was remembering his trip to Diagon Alley — how could he have been so stupid? He'd seen Quirrell there that very day, shaken hands with him in the Leaky Cauldron.

Quirrell cursed under his breath.

"I don't understand … is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?"

Harry's mind was racing.

What I want more than anything else in the world at the moment, he thought, is to find the Stone before Quirrell does. So if I look in the mirror, I should see myself finding it — which means I'll see where it's hidden! But how can I look without Quirrell realizing what I'm up to?

He tried to edge to the left, to get in front of the glass without Quirrell noticing, but the ropes around his ankles were too tight: he tripped and fell over. Quirrell ignored him. He was still talking to himself.

"What does this mirror do? How does it work? Help me, Master!"

And to Harry's horror, a voice answered, and the voice seemed to come from Quirrell himself.

"Use the boy … Use the boy …"

Quirrell rounded on Harry.

"Yes — Potter — come here."

He clapped his hands once, and the ropes binding Harry fell off. Harry got slowly to his feet.

"Come here," Quirrell repeated. "Look in the mirror and tell me what you see."

Harry walked toward him.

I must lie, he thought desperately. I must look and lie about what I see, that's all.

Quirrell moved close behind him. Harry breathed in the funny smell that seemed to come from Quirrell's turban. He closed his eyes, stepped in front of the mirror, and opened them again.

He saw his reflection, pale and scared-looking at first. But a mo-ment later, the reflection smiled at him. It put its hand into its pocket and pulled out a blood-red stone. It winked and put the Stone back in its pocket — and as it did so, Harry felt something heavy drop into his real pocket. Somehow — incredibly — he'd gotten the Stone.

"Well?" said Quirrell impatiently. "What do you see?"

Harry screwed up his courage.

"I see myself shaking hands with Dumbledore," he invented. "I — I've won the House Cup for Gryffindor."

Quirrell cursed again.

"Get out of the way," he said. As Harry moved aside, he felt the Sorcerer's Stone against his leg. Dare he make a break for it?

But he hadn't walked five paces before a high voice spoke, though Quirrell wasn't moving his lips.

"He lies … He lies …"

"Potter, come back here!" Quirrell shouted. "Tell me the truth! What did you just see?"

The high voice spoke again.

"Let me speak to him … face-to-face. …"

“Master, you are not strong enough!”

“I have strength enough … for this. …”

Harry felt as if Devil’s Snare was rooting him to the spot. He couldn’t move a muscle. Petrified, he watched as Quirrell reached up and began to unwrap his turban. What was going on? The tur-ban fell away. Quirrell’s head looked strangely small without it. Then he turned slowly on the spot.

Harry would have screamed, but he couldn’t make a sound. Where there should have been a back to Quirrell’s head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake.

“Harry Potter …” it whispered.

Harry tried to take a step backward but his legs wouldn’t move.

“See what I have become?” the face said. “Mere shadow and va-por … I have form only when I can share another’s body … but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds. … Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks … you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the for-est … and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own. … Now … why don’t you give me that Stone in your pocket?”

So he knew. The feeling suddenly surged back into Harry’s legs. He stumbled backward.

“Don’t be a fool,” snarled the face. “Better save your own life and join me … or you’ll meet the same end as your parents. … They died begging me for mercy. …”

“LIAR!” Harry shouted suddenly.

Quirrell was walking backward at him, so that Voldemort could still see him. The evil face was now smiling.

“How touching …” it hissed. “I always value bravery. … Yes, boy, your parents were brave. … I killed your father first, and he put up a courageous fight … but your mother needn’t have died … she was trying to protect you. … Now give me the Stone, unless you want her to have died in vain.”

“NEVER!”

Harry sprang toward the flame door, but Voldemort screamed “SEIZE HIM!” and the next second, Harry felt Quirrell’s hand close on his wrist. At once, a needle-sharp pain seared across Harry’s scar; his head felt as though it was about to split in two; he yelled, struggling with all his might, and to his surprise, Quirrell let go of him. The pain in his head lessened — he looked around wildly to see where Quirrell had gone, and saw him hunched in pain, looking at his fingers — they were blistering before his eyes.

“Seize him! SEIZE HIM!” shrieked Voldemort again, and Quir-rell lunged, knocking Harry clean off his feet, landing on top of him, both hands around Harry’s neck — Harry’s scar was almost blinding him with pain, yet he could see Quirrell howling in agony.

“Master, I cannot hold him — my hands — my hands!”

And Quirrell, though pinning Harry to the ground with his knees, let go of his neck and stared, bewildered, at his own palms — Harry could see they looked burned, raw, red, and shiny.

“Then kill him, fool, and be done!” screeched Voldemort.

Quirrell raised his hand to perform a deadly curse, but Harry, by instinct, reached up and grabbed Quirrell’s face —“AAAARGH!”

Quirrell rolled off him, his face blistering, too, and then Harry knew: Quirrell couldn't touch his bare skin, not without suffering terrible pain — his only chance was to keep hold of Quirrell, keep him in enough pain to stop him from doing a curse.

Harry jumped to his feet, caught Quirrell by the arm, and hung on as tight as he could. Quirrell screamed and tried to throw Harry off — the pain in Harry's head was building — he couldn't see — he could only hear Quirrell's terrible shrieks and Voldemort's yells of, "KILL HIM! KILL HIM!" and other voices, maybe in Harry's own head, crying, "Harry! Harry!"

He felt Quirrell's arm wrenched from his grasp, knew all was lost, and fell into blackness, down … down … down …Something gold was glinting just above him. The Snitch! He tried to catch it, but his arms were too heavy.

He blinked. It wasn't the Snitch at all. It was a pair of glasses. How strange.

He blinked again. The smiling face of Albus Dumbledore swam into view above him.

"Good afternoon, Harry," said Dumbledore.

Harry stared at him. Then he remembered: "Sir! The Stone! It was Quirrell! He's got the Stone! Sir, quick —"

"Calm yourself, dear boy, you are a little behind the times," said Dumbledore. "Quirrell does not have the Stone."

"Then who does? Sir, I —"

"Harry, please relax, or Madam Pomfrey will have me thrown out."

Harry swallowed and looked around him. He realized he must be in the hospital wing. He was lying in a bed with white linen sheets, and

next to him was a table piled high with what looked like half the candy shop.

“Tokens from your friends and admirers,” said Dumbledore, beaming. “What happened down in the dungeons between you and Professor Quirrell is a complete secret, so, naturally, the whole school knows. I believe your friends Misters Fred and George Weasley were responsible for trying to send you a toilet seat. No doubt they thought it would amuse you. Madam Pomfrey, how-ever, felt it might not be very hygienic, and confiscated it.”

“How long have I been in here?”

“Three days. Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Granger will be most relieved you have come round, they have been extremely worried.”

“But sir, the Stone —”

“I see you are not to be distracted. Very well, the Stone. Profes-sor Quirrell did not manage to take it from you. I arrived in time to prevent that, although you were doing very well on your own, I must say.”

“You got there? You got Hermione’s owl?”

“We must have crossed in midair. No sooner had I reached Lon-don than it became clear to me that the place I should be was the one I had just left. I arrived just in time to pull Quirrell off you —”

“It was you.”

“I feared I might be too late.”

“You nearly were, I couldn’t have kept him off the Stone much longer —”

“Not the Stone, boy, you — the effort involved nearly killed you. For one terrible moment there, I was afraid it had. As for the Stone, it has

been destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” said Harry blankly. “But your friend — Nicolas Flamel —”

“Oh, you know about Nicolas?” said Dumbledore, sounding quite delighted. “You did do the thing properly, didn’t you? Well, Nicolas and I have had a little chat, and agreed it’s all for the best.”

“But that means he and his wife will die, won’t they?”

“They have enough Elixir stored to set their affairs in order and then, yes, they will die.”

Dumbledore smiled at the look of amazement on Harry’s face.

“To one as young as you, I’m sure it seems incredible, but to Nicolas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. You know, the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all — the trou-ble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them.”

Harry lay there, lost for words. Dumbledore hummed a little and smiled at the ceiling.

“Sir?” said Harry. “I’ve been thinking … Sir — even if the Stone’s gone, Vol-, I mean, You-Know-Who —”

“Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.”

“Yes, sir. Well, Voldemort’s going to try other ways of coming back, isn’t he? I mean, he hasn’t gone, has he?”

“No, Harry, he has not. He is still out there somewhere, perhaps looking for another body to share … not being truly alive, he can-not be killed. He left Quirrell to die; he shows just as little mercy to his followers as his enemies. Nevertheless, Harry, while you may only have delayed his return to power, it will merely take someone else who is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle next time — and if he is delayed again, and again, why, he may never re-turn to power.”

Harry nodded, but stopped quickly, because it made his head hurt. Then he said, “Sir, there are some other things I’d like to know, if you can tell me … things I want to know the truth about. …”

“The truth.” Dumbledore sighed. “It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution. How-ever, I shall answer your questions unless I have a very good rea-son not to, in which case I beg you’ll forgive me. I shall not, of course, lie.”

“Well … Voldemort said that he only killed my mother because she tried to stop him from killing me. But why would he want to kill me in the first place?”

Dumbledore sighed very deeply this time.

“Alas, the first thing you ask me, I cannot tell you. Not today. Not now. You will know, one day … put it from your mind for now, Harry. When you are older … I know you hate to hear this … when you are ready, you will know.”

And Harry knew it would be no good to argue.

“But why couldn’t Quirrell touch me?”

“Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn’t realize that love as power-ful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign … to have been loved so deeply, even though the per-son who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin.

Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this rea-son. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good."

Dumbledore now became very interested in a bird out on the windowsill, which gave Harry time to dry his eyes on the sheet. When he had found his voice again, Harry said, "And the Invisi-bility Cloak — do you know who sent it to me?"

"Ah — your father happened to leave it in my possession, and I thought you might like it." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Useful things … your father used it mainly for sneaking off to the kitchens to steal food when he was here."

"And there's something else …"

"Fire away."

"Quirrell said Snape —"

"Professor Snape, Harry."

"Yes, him — Quirrell said he hates me because he hated my fa-ther. Is that true?"

"Well, they did rather detest each other. Not unlike yourself and Mr. Malfoy. And then, your father did something Snape could never forgive."

"What?"

"He saved his life."

"What?"

"Yes …" said Dumbledore dreamily. "Funny, the way people's minds work, isn't it? Professor Snape couldn't bear being in your fa-ther's debt. … I do believe he worked so hard to protect you this year

because he felt that would make him and your father even. Then he could go back to hating your father's memory in peace. …"

Harry tried to understand this but it made his head pound, so he stopped.

"And sir, there's one more thing …"

"Just the one?"

"How did I get the Stone out of the mirror?"

"Ah, now, I'm glad you asked me that. It was one of my more brilliant ideas, and between you and me, that's saying something. You see, only one who wanted to find the Stone — find it, but not use it — would be able to get it, otherwise they'd just see them-selves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life. My brain surprises even me sometimes. … Now, enough questions. I suggest you make a start on these sweets. Ah! Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans! I was unfortunate enough in my youth to come across a vomit-flavored one, and since then I'm afraid I've rather lost my liking for them — but I think I'll be safe with a nice toffee, don't you?"

He smiled and popped the golden-brown bean into his mouth. Then he choked and said, "Alas! Ear wax!"

Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, was a nice woman, but very strict.

"Just five minutes," Harry pleaded.

"Absolutely not."

"You let Professor Dumbledore in. …"

"Well, of course, that was the headmaster, quite different. You need rest."

“I am resting, look, lying down and everything. Oh, go on, Madam Pomfrey …”

“Oh, very well,” she said. “But five minutes only.”

And she let Ron and Hermione in.

“Harry!”

Hermione looked ready to fling her arms around him again, but Harry was glad she held herself in as his head was still very sore.

“Oh, Harry, we were sure you were going to — Dumbledore was so worried —”

“The whole school’s talking about it,” said Ron. “What really happened?”

It was one of those rare occasions when the true story is even more strange and exciting than the wild rumors. Harry told them everything: Quirrell; the mirror; the Stone; and Voldemort. Ron and Hermione were a very good audience; they gasped in all the right places, and when Harry told them what was under Quirrell’s turban, Hermione screamed out loud.

“So the Stone’s gone?” said Ron finally. “Flamel’s just going to die?”

“That’s what I said, but Dumbledore thinks that — what was it? — ‘to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great ad-venture.’ ”

“I always said he was off his rocker,” said Ron, looking quite impressed at how crazy his hero was.

“So what happened to you two?” said Harry.

“Well, I got back all right,” said Hermione. “I brought Ron round — that took a while — and we were dashing up to the owlery to contact Dumbledore when we met him in the entrance hall — he already

knew — he just said, ‘Harry’s gone after him, hasn’t he?’ and hurtled off to the third floor.”

“D’you think he meant you to do it?” said Ron. “Sending you your fathers cloak and everything?”

“Well,” Hermione exploded, “if he did — I mean to say — that’s terrible — you could have been killed.”

“No, it isn’t,” said Harry thoughtfully. “He’s a funny man, Dum-bledore. I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance. I think he knows more or less everything that goes on here, you know. I reckon he had a pretty good idea we were going to try, and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help. I don’t think it was an accident he let me find out how the mirror worked. It’s al-most like he thought I had the right to face Voldemort if I could. …”

“Yeah, Dumbledore’s off his rocker, all right,” said Ron proudly. “Listen, you’ve got to be up for the end-of-year feast tomorrow. The points are all in and Slytherin won, of course — you missed the last Quidditch match, we were steamrollered by Ravenclaw without you — but the food’ll be good.”

At that moment, Madam Pomfrey bustled over.

“You’ve had nearly fifteen minutes, now OUT,” she said firmly.

* * *

After a good night’s sleep, Harry felt nearly back to normal.

“I want to go to the feast,” he told Madam Pomfrey as she straightened his many candy boxes. “I can, can’t I?”

“Professor Dumbledore says you are to be allowed to go,” she said sniffily, as though in her opinion Professor Dumbledore didn’t realize how risky feasts could be. “And you have another visitor.”

“Oh, good,” said Harry. “Who is it?”

Hagrid sidled through the door as he spoke. As usual when he was indoors, Hagrid looked too big to be allowed. He sat down next to Harry, took one look at him, and burst into tears.

“It’s — all — my — ruddy — fault!” he sobbed, his face in his hands. “I told the evil git how ter get past Fluffy! I told him! It was the only thing he didn’t know, an’ I told him! Yeh could’ve died! All fer a dragon egg! I’ll never drink again! I should be chucked out an’ made ter live as a Muggle!”

“Hagrid!” said Harry, shocked to see Hagrid shaking with grief and remorse, great tears leaking down into his beard. “Hagrid, he’d have found out somehow, this is Voldemort we’re talking about, he’d have found out even if you hadn’t told him.”

“Yeh could’ve died!” sobbed Hagrid. “An’ don’ say the name!”

“VOLDEMORT!” Harry bellowed, and Hagrid was so shocked, he stopped crying. “I’ve met him and I’m calling him by his name. Please cheer up, Hagrid, we saved the Stone, it’s gone, he can’t use it. Have a Chocolate Frog, I’ve got loads. …”

Hagrid wiped his nose on the back of his hand and said, “That reminds me. I’ve got yeh a present.”

“It’s not a stoat sandwich, is it?” said Harry anxiously, and at last Hagrid gave a weak chuckle.

“Nah. Dumbledore gave me the day off yesterday ter fix it. ’Course, he shoulda sacked me instead — anyway, got yeh this …”

It seemed to be a handsome, leather-covered book. Harry opened it curiously. It was full of wizard photographs. Smiling and waving at him from every page were his mother and father.

“Sent owls off ter all yer parents’ old school friends, askin’ fer photos … knew yeh didn’ have any … d’yeh like it?”

Harry couldn’t speak, but Hagrid understood.

Harry made his way down to the end-of-year feast alone that night. He had been held up by Madam Pomfrey’s fussing about, insisting on giving him one last checkup, so the Great Hall was already full. It was decked out in the Slytherin colors of green and silver to cel-ebrate Slytherin’s winning the House Cup for the seventh year in a row. A huge banner showing the Slytherin serpent covered the wall behind the High Table.

When Harry walked in there was a sudden hush, and then everybody started talking loudly at once. He slipped into a seat be-tween Ron and Hermione at the Gryffindor table and tried to ig-nore the fact that people were standing up to look at him.

Fortunately, Dumbledore arrived moments later. The babble died away.

“Another year gone!” Dumbledore said cheerfully. “And I must trouble you with an old man’s wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are all a little fuller than they were … you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts. …“Now, as I understand it, the House Cup here needs awarding, and the points stand thus: In fourth place, Gryffindor, with three hundred and twelve points; in third, Hufflepuff, with three hun-dred and fifty-two; Ravenclaw has four hundred and twenty-six and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy-two.”

A storm of cheering and stamping broke out from the Slytherin table. Harry could see Draco Malfoy banging his goblet on the table. It was a sickening sight.

“Yes, yes, well done, Slytherin,” said Dumbledore. “However, re-cent events must be taken into account.”

The room went very still. The Slytherins’ smiles faded a little.

“Ahem,” said Dumbledore. “I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes …“First — to Mr. Ronald Weasley …”

Ron went purple in the face; he looked like a radish with a bad sunburn.

“… for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor House fifty points.”

Gryffindor cheers nearly raised the bewitched ceiling; the stars overhead seemed to quiver. Percy could be heard telling the other prefects, “My brother, you know! My youngest brother! Got past McGonagall’s giant chess set!”

At last there was silence again.

“Second — to Miss Hermione Granger … for the use of cool logic in the face of fire, I award Gryffindor House fifty points.”

Hermione buried her face in her arms; Harry strongly suspected she had burst into tears. Gryffindors up and down the table were beside themselves — they were a hundred points up.

“Third — to Mr. Harry Potter …” said Dumbledore. The room went deadly quiet. “… for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor House sixty points.”

The din was deafening. Those who could add up while yelling themselves hoarse knew that Gryffindor now had four hundred and seventy-two points — exactly the same as Slytherin. They had tied for the House Cup — if only Dumbledore had given Harry just one more point.

Dumbledore raised his hand. The room gradually fell silent.

“There are all kinds of courage,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom.”

Someone standing outside the Great Hall might well have thought some sort of explosion had taken place, so loud was the noise that erupted from the Gryffindor table. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood up to yell and cheer as Neville, white with shock, disappeared under a pile of people hugging him. He had never won so much as a point for Gryffindor before. Harry, still cheering, nudged Ron in the ribs and pointed at Malfoy, who couldn’t have looked more stunned and horrified if he’d just had the Body-Bind Curse put on him.

“Which means,” Dumbledore called over the storm of applause, for even Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were celebrating the downfall of Slytherin, “we need a little change of decoration.”

He clapped his hands. In an instant, the green hangings became scarlet and the silver became gold; the huge Slytherin serpent vanished and a towering Gryffindor lion took its place. Snape was shaking Professor McGonagall’s hand, with a horrible, forced smile. He caught Harry’s eye and Harry knew at once that Snape’s feelings toward him hadn’t changed one jot. This didn’t worry Harry. It seemed as though life would be back to normal next year, or as normal as it ever was at Hogwarts.

It was the best evening of Harry’s life, better than winning at Quidditch, or Christmas, or knocking out mountain trolls … he would never, ever forget tonight.

Harry had almost forgotten that the exam results were still to come, but come they did. To their great surprise, both he and Ron passed with good marks; Hermione, of course, had the best grades of the first years. Even Neville scraped through, his good Herbol-ogy mark

making up for his abysmal Potions one. They had hoped that Goyle, who was almost as stupid as he was mean, might be thrown out, but he had passed, too. It was a shame, but as Ron said, you couldn't have everything in life.

And suddenly, their wardrobes were empty, their trunks were packed, Neville's toad was found lurking in a corner of the toilets; notes were handed out to all students, warning them not to use magic over the holidays ("I always hope they'll forget to give us these," said Fred Weasley sadly); Hagrid was there to take them down to the fleet of boats that sailed across the lake; they were boarding the Hogwarts Express; talking and laughing as the coun-tryside became greener and tidier; eating Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans as they sped past Muggle towns; pulling off their wizard robes and putting on jackets and coats; pulling into platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross station.

It took quite a while for them all to get off the platform. A wiz-ened old guard was up by the ticket barrier, letting them go through the gate in twos and threes so they didn't attract atten-tion by all bursting out of a solid wall at once and alarming the Muggles.

"You must come and stay this summer," said Ron, "both of you — I'll send you an owl."

"Thanks," said Harry, "I'll need something to look forward to."

People jostled them as they moved forward toward the gateway back to the Muggle world. Some of them called:"Bye, Harry!"

"See you, Potter!"

"Still famous," said Ron, grinning at him.

"Not where I'm going, I promise you," said Harry.

He, Ron, and Hermione passed through the gateway together.

"There he is, Mom, there he is, look!"

It was Ginny Weasley, Ron's younger sister, but she wasn't point-ing at Ron.

"Harry Potter!" she squealed. "Look, Mom! I can see —"

"Be quiet, Ginny, and it's rude to point."

Mrs. Weasley smiled down at them.

"Busy year?" she said.

"Very," said Harry. "Thanks for the fudge and the sweater, Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, it was nothing, dear."

"Ready, are you?"

It was Uncle Vernon, still purple-faced, still mustached, still looking furious at the nerve of Harry, carrying an owl in a cage in a station full of ordinary people. Behind him stood Aunt Petunia and Dudley, looking terrified at the very sight of Harry.

"You must be Harry's family!" said Mrs. Weasley.

"In a manner of speaking," said Uncle Vernon. "Hurry up, boy, we haven't got all day." He walked away.

Harry hung back for a last word with Ron and Hermione.

"See you over the summer, then."

"Hope you have — er — a good holiday," said Hermione, look-ing uncertainly after Uncle Vernon, shocked that anyone could be so unpleasant.

“Oh, I will,” said Harry, and they were surprised at the grin that was spreading over his face. “They don’t know we’re not allowed to use magic at home. I’m going to have a lot of fun with Dudley this summer. …”

Harry Potter and The Chamber Of Secrets

Chapter 1 The Worst Birthday

Chapter 2 Dobby’s Warning

Chapter 3 The Burrow

Chapter 4 At Flourish and Blotts

Chapter 5 The Whomping Willow

Chapter 6 Gilderoy Lockhart

Chapter 7 Mudbloods and Murmurs

Chapter 8 The Deathday Party

Chapter 9 The Writing on the Wall

Chapter 10 The Rogue Bludger

Chapter 11 The Dueling Club

Chapter 12 The Polyjuice Potion

Chapter 13 The Very Secret Diary

Chapter 14 Cornelius Fudge

Chapter 15 Aragog

Chapter 16 The Chamber of Secrets

Chapter 17 The Heir of Slytherin

Chapter 18 Dobby's Reward

Return to the Main Contents

Chapter 1 The Worst Birthday

Not for the first time, an argument had broken out over breakfast at number four, Privet Drive. Mr. Vernon Durs-ley had been woken in the early hours of the morning by a loud, hooting noise from his nephew Harry's room.

"Third time this week!" he roared across the table. "If you can't control that owl, it'll have to go!"

Harry tried, yet again, to explain.

"She's bored," he said. "She's used to flying around outside. If I could just let her out at night —"

"Do I look stupid?" snarled Uncle Vernon, a bit of fried egg dan-gling from his bushy mustache. "I know what'll happen if that owl's let out."

He exchanged dark looks with his wife, Petunia.

Harry tried to argue back but his words were drowned by a long, loud belch from the Dursleys' son, Dudley.

"I want more bacon."

"There's more in the frying pan, sweetums," said Aunt Petunia, turning misty eyes on her massive son. "We must build you up while we've got the chance. … I don't like the sound of that school food. …"

"Nonsense, Petunia, I never went hungry when I was at Smelt-ings," said Uncle Vernon heartily. "Dudley gets enough, don't you, son?"

Dudley, who was so large his bottom drooped over either side of the kitchen chair, grinned and turned to Harry.

"Pass the frying pan."

“You’ve forgotten the magic word,” said Harry irritably.

The effect of this simple sentence on the rest of the family was incredible: Dudley gasped and fell off his chair with a crash that shook the whole kitchen; Mrs. Dursley gave a small scream and clapped her hands to her mouth; Mr. Dursley jumped to his feet, veins throbbing in his temples.

“I meant ‘please’!” said Harry quickly. “I didn’t mean —”

“WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU,” thundered his uncle, spraying spit over the table, “ABOUT SAYING THE ‘M’ WORD IN OUR HOUSE?”

“But I —”

“HOW DARE YOU THREATEN DUDLEY!” roared Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his fist.

“I just —”

“I WARNED YOU! I WILL NOT TOLERATE MENTION OF YOUR ABNORMALITY UNDER THIS ROOF!”

Harry stared from his purple-faced uncle to his pale aunt, who was trying to heave Dudley to his feet.

“All right,” said Harry, “all right …”

Uncle Vernon sat back down, breathing like a winded rhinoceros and watching Harry closely out of the corners of his small, sharp eyes.

Ever since Harry had come home for the summer holidays, Un-cle Vernon had been treating him like a bomb that might go off at any moment, because Harry Potter wasn’t a normal boy. As a mat-ter of fact, he was as not normal as it is possible to be.

Harry Potter was a wizard — a wizard fresh from his first year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And if the Dursleys

were unhappy to have him back for the holidays, it was nothing to how Harry felt.

He missed Hogwarts so much it was like having a constant stomachache. He missed the castle, with its secret passageways and ghosts, his classes (though perhaps not Snape, the Potions master), the mail arriving by owl, eating banquets in the Great Hall, sleep-ing in his four-poster bed in the tower dormitory, visiting the gamekeeper, Hagrid, in his cabin next to the Forbidden Forest in the grounds, and, especially, Quidditch, the most popular sport in the wizarding world (six tall goal posts, four flying balls, and four-teen players on broomsticks).

All Harry's spellbooks, his wand, robes, cauldron, and top-of-the-line Nimbus Two Thousand broomstick had been locked in a cupboard under the stairs by Uncle Vernon the instant Harry had come home. What did the Dursleys care if Harry lost his place on the House Quidditch team because he hadn't practiced all sum-mer? What was it to the Dursleys if Harry went back to school without any of his homework done? The Dursleys were what wiz-ards called Muggles (not a drop of magical blood in their veins), and as far as they were concerned, having a wizard in the family was a matter of deepest shame. Uncle Vernon had even padlocked Harry's owl, Hedwig, inside her cage, to stop her from carrying messages to anyone in the wizarding world.

Harry looked nothing like the rest of the family. Uncle Vernon was large and neckless, with an enormous black mustache; Aunt Petunia was horse-faced and bony; Dudley was blond, pink, and porky. Harry, on the other hand, was small and skinny, with bril-liant green eyes and jet-black hair that was always untidy. He wore round glasses, and on his forehead was a thin, lightning-shaped scar.

It was this scar that made Harry so particularly unusual, even for a wizard. This scar was the only hint of Harry's very mysterious past, of

the reason he had been left on the Dursleys' doorstep eleven years before.

At the age of one year old, Harry had somehow survived a curse from the greatest Dark sorcerer of all time, Lord Voldemort, whose name most witches and wizards still feared to speak. Harry's par-ents had died in Voldemort's attack, but Harry had escaped with his lightning scar, and somehow — nobody understood why — Voldemort's powers had been destroyed the instant he had failed to kill Harry.

So Harry had been brought up by his dead mother's sister and her husband. He had spent ten years with the Dursleys, never un-derstanding why he kept making odd things happen without meaning to, believing the Dursleys' story that he had got his scar in the car crash that had killed his parents.

And then, exactly a year ago, Hogwarts had written to Harry, and the whole story had come out. Harry had taken up his place at wizard school, where he and his scar were famous … but now the school year was over, and he was back with the Dursleys for the summer, back to being treated like a dog that had rolled in some-thing smelly.

The Dursleys hadn't even remembered that today happened to be Harry's twelfth birthday. Of course, his hopes hadn't been high; they'd never given him a real present, let alone a cake — but to ig-nore it completely …At that moment, Uncle Vernon cleared his throat importantly and said, "Now, as we all know, today is a very important day."

Harry looked up, hardly daring to believe it.

"This could well be the day I make the biggest deal of my ca-reer," said Uncle Vernon.

Harry went back to his toast. Of course, he thought bitterly, Un-cle Vernon was talking about the stupid dinner party. He'd been talk-ing of nothing else for two weeks. Some rich builder and his wife were

coming to dinner and Uncle Vernon was hoping to get a huge order from him (Uncle Vernon's company made drills).

"I think we should run through the schedule one more time," said Uncle Vernon. "We should all be in position at eight o'clock. Petunia, you will be — ?"

"In the lounge," said Aunt Petunia promptly, "waiting to wel-come them graciously to our home."

"Good, good. And Dudley?"

"I'll be waiting to open the door." Dudley put on a foul, sim-pering smile. "May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

"They'll love him!" cried Aunt Petunia rapturously.

"Excellent, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon. Then he rounded on Harry. "And you?"

"I'll be in my bedroom, making no noise and pretending I'm not there," said Harry tonelessly.

"Exactly," said Uncle Vernon nastily. "I will lead them into the lounge, introduce you, Petunia, and pour them drinks. At eight-fifteen —"

"I'll announce dinner," said Aunt Petunia.

"And, Dudley, you'll say —"

"May I take you through to the dining room, Mrs. Mason?" said Dudley, offering his fat arm to an invisible woman.

"My perfect little gentleman!" sniffed Aunt Petunia.

"And you?" said Uncle Vernon viciously to Harry.

“I’ll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I’m not there,” said Harry dully.

“Precisely. Now, we should aim to get in a few good compli-ments at dinner. Petunia, any ideas?”

“Vernon tells me you’re a wonderful golfer, Mr. Mason. … Do tell me where you bought your dress, Mrs. Mason. …”

“Perfect … Dudley?”

“How about — ‘We had to write an essay about our hero at school, Mr. Mason, and I wrote about you.’ ”

This was too much for both Aunt Petunia and Harry. Aunt Petu-nia burst into tears and hugged her son, while Harry ducked under the table so they wouldn’t see him laughing.

“And you, boy?”

Harry fought to keep his face straight as he emerged.

“I’ll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I’m not there,” he said.

“Too right, you will,” said Uncle Vernon forcefully. “The Ma-sons don’t know anything about you and it’s going to stay that way. When dinner’s over, you take Mrs. Mason back to the lounge for coffee, Petunia, and I’ll bring the subject around to drills. With any luck, I’ll have the deal signed and sealed before the news at ten. We’ll be shopping for a vacation home in Majorca this time to-morrow.”

Harry couldn’t feel too excited about this. He didn’t think the Dursleys would like him any better in Majorca than they did on Privet Drive.

“Right — I’m off into town to pick up the dinner jackets for Dudley and me. And you,” he snarled at Harry. “You stay out of your aunt’s way

while she's cleaning."

Harry left through the back door. It was a brilliant, sunny day. He crossed the lawn, slumped down on the garden bench, and sang under his breath:"Happy birthday to me … happy birthday to me …"

No cards, no presents, and he would be spending the evening pretending not to exist. He gazed miserably into the hedge. He had never felt so lonely. More than anything else at Hogwarts, more even than playing Quidditch, Harry missed his best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. They, however, didn't seem to be missing him at all. Neither of them had written to him all summer, even though Ron had said he was going to ask Harry to come and stay.

Countless times, Harry had been on the point of unlocking Hedwig's cage by magic and sending her to Ron and Hermione with a letter, but it wasn't worth the risk. Underage wizards weren't allowed to use magic outside of school. Harry hadn't told the Dursleys this; he knew it was only their terror that he might turn them all into dung beetles that stopped them from locking him in the cupboard under the stairs with his wand and broomstick. For the first couple of weeks back, Harry had enjoyed muttering non-sense words under his breath and watching Dudley tearing out of the room as fast as his fat legs would carry him. But the long silence from Ron and Hermione had made Harry feel so cut off from the magical world that even taunting Dudley had lost its appeal — and now Ron and Hermione had forgotten his birthday.

What wouldn't he give now for a message from Hogwarts? From any witch or wizard? He'd almost be glad of a sight of his arch-enemy, Draco Malfoy, just to be sure it hadn't all been a dream. …Not that his whole year at Hogwarts had been fun. At the very end of last term, Harry had come face-to-face with none other than Lord Voldemort himself. Voldemort might be a ruin of his former self, but he was still terrifying, still cunning, still determined to re-gain power. Harry had slipped through Voldemort's clutches for a second time, but it had

been a narrow escape, and even now, weeks later, Harry kept waking in the night, drenched in cold sweat, won-dering where Voldemort was now, remembering his livid face, his wide, mad eyes —Harry suddenly sat bolt upright on the garden bench. He had been staring absent-mindedly into the hedge — and the hedge was staring back. Two enormous green eyes had appeared among the leaves.

Harry jumped to his feet just as a jeering voice floated across the lawn.

“I know what day it is,” sang Dudley, waddling toward him.

The huge eyes blinked and vanished.

“What?” said Harry, not taking his eyes off the spot where they had been.

“I know what day it is,” Dudley repeated, coming right up to him.

“Well done,” said Harry. “So you’ve finally learned the days of the week.”

“Today’s your birthday,” sneered Dudley. “How come you haven’t got any cards? Haven’t you even got friends at that freak place?”

“Better not let your mum hear you talking about my school,” said Harry coolly.

Dudley hitched up his trousers, which were slipping down his fat bottom.

“Why’re you staring at the hedge?” he said suspiciously.

“I’m trying to decide what would be the best spell to set it on fire,” said Harry.

Dudley stumbled backward at once, a look of panic on his fat face.

“You c-can’t — Dad told you you’re not to do m-magic — he said he’ll chuck you out of the house — and you haven’t got any-where else to go — you haven’t got any friends to take you —”

“Jiggery pokery!” said Harry in a fierce voice. “Hocus pocus — squiggly wiggly —”

“MUUUUUUM!” howled Dudley, tripping over his feet as he dashed back toward the house. “MUUUUM! He’s doing you know what!”

Harry paid dearly for his moment of fun. As neither Dudley nor the hedge was in any way hurt, Aunt Petunia knew he hadn’t really done magic, but he still had to duck as she aimed a heavy blow at his head with the soapy frying pan. Then she gave him work to do, with the promise he wouldn’t eat again until he’d finished.

While Dudley lolled around watching and eating ice cream, Harry cleaned the windows, washed the car, mowed the lawn, trimmed the flowerbeds, pruned and watered the roses, and re-painted the garden bench. The sun blazed overhead, burning the back of his neck. Harry knew he shouldn’t have risen to Dudley’s bait, but Dudley had said the very thing Harry had been thinking himself … maybe he didn’t have any friends at Hogwarts. …Wish they could see famous Harry Potter now, he thought savagely as he spread manure on the flower beds, his back aching, sweat run-ning down his face.

It was half past seven in the evening when at last, exhausted, he heard Aunt Petunia calling him.

“Get in here! And walk on the newspaper!”

Harry moved gladly into the shade of the gleaming kitchen. On top of the fridge stood tonight’s pudding: a huge mound of whipped cream and sugared violets. A loin of roast pork was siz-zling in the oven.

“Eat quickly! The Masons will be here soon!” snapped Aunt Petunia, pointing to two slices of bread and a lump of cheese on the kitchen

table. She was already wearing a salmon-pink cocktail dress.

Harry washed his hands and bolted down his pitiful supper. The moment he had finished, Aunt Petunia whisked away his plate. “Upstairs! Hurry!”

As he passed the door to the living room, Harry caught a glimpse of Uncle Vernon and Dudley in bow ties and dinner jack-ets. He had only just reached the upstairs landing when the door-bell rang and Uncle Vernon’s furious face appeared at the foot of the stairs.

“Remember, boy — one sound —”

Harry crossed to his bedroom on tiptoe, slipped inside, closed the door, and turned to collapse on his bed.

The trouble was, there was already someone sitting on it.

Chapter 2 Dobby's Warning

Harry managed not to shout out, but it was a close thing. The little creature on the bed had large, bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls. Harry knew instantly that this was what had been watching him out of the garden hedge that morning.

As they stared at each other, Harry heard Dudley's voice from the hall.

"May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

The creature slipped off the bed and bowed so low that the end of its long, thin nose touched the carpet. Harry noticed that it was wearing what looked like an old pillowcase, with rips for arm- and leg-holes.

"Er — hello," said Harry nervously.

"Harry Potter!" said the creature in a high-pitched voice Harry was sure would carry down the stairs. "So long has Dobby wanted to meet you, sir … Such an honor it is. …"

"Th-thank you," said Harry, edging along the wall and sinking into his desk chair, next to Hedwig, who was asleep in her large cage. He wanted to ask, "What are you?" but thought it would sound too rude, so instead he said, "Who are you?"

"Dobby, sir. Just Dobby. Dobby the house-elf," said the crea-ture.

"Oh — really?" said Harry. "Er — I don't want to be rude or anything, but — this isn't a great time for me to have a house-elf in my bedroom."

Aunt Petunia's high, false laugh sounded from the living room. The elf hung his head.

“Not that I’m not pleased to meet you,” said Harry quickly, “but, er, is there any particular reason you’re here?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” said Dobby earnestly. “Dobby has come to tell you, sir … it is difficult, sir … Dobby wonders where to be-gin. …”

“Sit down,” said Harry politely, pointing at the bed.

To his horror, the elf burst into tears — very noisy tears.

“S-sit down!” he wailed. “Never … never ever …”

Harry thought he heard the voices downstairs falter.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, “I didn’t mean to offend you or any-thing —”

“Offend Dobby!” choked the elf. “Dobby has never been asked to sit down by a wizard — like an equal —”

Harry, trying to say “Shh!” and look comforting at the same time, ushered Dobby back onto the bed where he sat hiccoughing, looking like a large and very ugly doll. At last he managed to con-trol himself, and sat with his great eyes fixed on Harry in an ex-pression of watery adoration.

“You can’t have met many decent wizards,” said Harry, trying to cheer him up.

Dobby shook his head. Then, without warning, he leapt up and started banging his head furiously on the window, shouting, “Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!”

“Don’t — what are you doing?” Harry hissed, springing up and pulling Dobby back onto the bed — Hedwig had woken up with a particularly loud screech and was beating her wings wildly against the bars of her cage.

“Dobby had to punish himself, sir,” said the elf, who had gone slightly cross-eyed. “Dobby almost spoke ill of his family, sir. …”

“Your family?”

“The wizard family Dobby serves, sir. … Dobby is a house-elf — bound to serve one house and one family forever. …”

“Do they know you’re here?” asked Harry curiously.

Dobby shuddered.

“Oh, no, sir, no … Dobby will have to punish himself most grievously for coming to see you, sir. Dobby will have to shut his ears in the oven door for this. If they ever knew, sir —”

“But won’t they notice if you shut your ears in the oven door?”

“Dobby doubts it, sir. Dobby is always having to punish himself for something, sir. They lets Dobby get on with it, sir. Sometimes they reminds me to do extra punishments. …”

“But why don’t you leave? Escape?”

“A house-elf must be set free, sir. And the family will never set Dobby free … Dobby will serve the family until he dies, sir. …”

Harry stared.

“And I thought I had it bad staying here for another four weeks,” he said. “This makes the Dursleys sound almost human. Can’t any-one help you? Can’t I?”

Almost at once, Harry wished he hadn’t spoken. Dobby dis-solved again into wails of gratitude.

“Please,” Harry whispered frantically, “please be quiet. If the Dursleys hear anything, if they know you’re here —”

“Harry Potter asks if he can help Dobby … Dobby has heard of your greatness, sir, but of your goodness, Dobby never knew. …”

Harry, who was feeling distinctly hot in the face, said, “What-ever you’ve heard about my greatness is a load of rubbish. I’m not even top of my year at Hogwarts; that’s Hermione, she —”

But he stopped quickly, because thinking about Hermione was painful.

“Harry Potter is humble and modest,” said Dobby reverently, his orb-like eyes aglow. “Harry Potter speaks not of his triumph over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named —”

“Voldemort?” said Harry.

Dobby clapped his hands over his bat ears and moaned, “Ah, speak not the name, sir! Speak not the name!”

“Sorry,” said Harry quickly. “I know lots of people don’t like it. My friend Ron —”

He stopped again. Thinking about Ron was painful, too.

Dobby leaned toward Harry, his eyes wide as headlights.

“Dobby heard tell,” he said hoarsely, “that Harry Potter met the Dark Lord for a second time, just weeks ago … that Harry Potter escaped yet again.”

Harry nodded and Dobby’s eyes suddenly shone with tears.

“Ah, sir,” he gasped, dabbing his face with a corner of the grubby pillowcase he was wearing. “Harry Potter is valiant and bold! He has braved so many dangers already! But Dobby has come to pro-tect Harry Potter, to warn him, even if he does have to shut his ears in the oven door later. … Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts.”

There was a silence broken only by the chink of knives and forks from downstairs and the distant rumble of Uncle Vernon's voice.

"W-what?" Harry stammered. "But I've got to go back — term starts on September first. It's all that's keeping me going. You don't know what it's like here. I don't belong here. I belong in your world — at Hogwarts."

"No, no, no," squeaked Dobby, shaking his head so hard his ears flapped. "Harry Potter must stay where he is safe. He is too great, too good, to lose. If Harry Potter goes back to Hogwarts, he will be in mortal danger."

"Why?" said Harry in surprise.

"There is a plot, Harry Potter. A plot to make most terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year," whispered Dobby, suddenly trembling all over. "Dobby has known it for months, sir. Harry Potter must not put himself in peril. He is too important, sir!"

"What terrible things?" said Harry at once. "Who's plotting them?"

Dobby made a funny choking noise and then banged his head frantically against the wall.

"All right!" cried Harry, grabbing the elf's arm to stop him. "You can't tell me. I understand. But why are you warning me?" A sud-den, unpleasant thought struck him. "Hang on — this hasn't got anything to do with Vol — sorry — with You-Know-Who, has it? You could just shake or nod," he added hastily as Dobby's head tilted worryingly close to the wall again.

Slowly, Dobby shook his head.

"Not — not He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, sir —"

But Dobby's eyes were wide and he seemed to be trying to give Harry a hint. Harry, however, was completely lost.

"He hasn't got a brother, has he?"

Dobby shook his head, his eyes wider than ever.

"Well then, I can't think who else would have a chance of mak-ing horrible things happen at Hogwarts," said Harry. "I mean, there's Dumbledore, for one thing — you know who Dumbledore is, don't you?"

Dobby bowed his head.

"Albus Dumbledore is the greatest headmaster Hogwarts has ever had. Dobby knows it, sir. Dobby has heard Dumbledore's powers rival those of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the height of his strength. But, sir" — Dobby's voice dropped to an urgent whisper — "there are powers Dumbledore doesn't … powers no decent wizard …"

And before Harry could stop him, Dobby bounded off the bed, seized Harry's desk lamp, and started beating himself around the head with earsplitting yelps.

A sudden silence fell downstairs. Two seconds later Harry, heart thudding madly, heard Uncle Vernon coming into the hall, calling, "Dudley must have left his television on again, the little tyke!"

"Quick! In the closet!" hissed Harry, stuffing Dobby in, shutting the door, and flinging himself onto the bed just as the door handle turned.

"What — the — devil — are — you — doing?" said Uncle Ver-non through gritted teeth, his face horribly close to Harry's. "You've just ruined the punch line of my Japanese golfer joke. … One more sound and you'll wish you'd never been born, boy!"

He stomped flat-footed from the room.

Shaking, Harry let Dobby out of the closet.

"See what it's like here?" he said. "See why I've got to go back to Hogwarts? It's the only place I've got — well, I think I've got friends."

"Friends who don't even write to Harry Potter?" said Dobby slyly.

"I expect they've just been — wait a minute," said Harry, frown-ing. "How do you know my friends haven't been writing to me?"

Dobby shuffled his feet.

"Harry Potter mustn't be angry with Dobby. Dobby did it for the best —"

"Have you been stopping my letters?"

"Dobby has them here, sir," said the elf. Stepping nimbly out of Harry's reach, he pulled a thick wad of envelopes from the inside of the pillowcase he was wearing. Harry could make out Hermione's neat writing, Ron's untidy scrawl, and even a scribble that looked as though it was from the Hogwarts gamekeeper, Hagrid.

Dobby blinked anxiously up at Harry.

"Harry Potter mustn't be angry. … Dobby hoped … if Harry Potter thought his friends had forgotten him … Harry Potter might not want to go back to school, sir. …"

Harry wasn't listening. He made a grab for the letters, but Dobby jumped out of reach.

"Harry Potter will have them, sir, if he gives Dobby his word that he will not return to Hogwarts. Ah, sir, this is a danger you must not face! Say you won't go back, sir!"

"No," said Harry angrily. "Give me my friends' letters!"

“Then Harry Potter leaves Dobby no choice,” said the elf sadly.

Before Harry could move, Dobby had darted to the bedroom door, pulled it open, and sprinted down the stairs.

Mouth dry, stomach lurching, Harry sprang after him, trying not to make a sound. He jumped the last six steps, landing catlike on the hall carpet, looking around for Dobby. From the dining room he heard Uncle Vernon saying, “… tell Petunia that very funny story about those American plumbers, Mr. Mason. She’s been dying to hear …”

Harry ran up the hall into the kitchen and felt his stomach dis-appear.

Aunt Petunia’s masterpiece of a pudding, the mountain of cream and sugared violets, was floating up near the ceiling. On top of a cupboard in the corner crouched Dobby.

“No,” croaked Harry.“Please … they’ll kill me. …”

“Harry Potter must say he’s not going back to school —”

“Dobby … please …”

“Say it, sir —”

“I can’t —”

Dobby gave him a tragic look.

“Then Dobby must do it, sir, for Harry Potter’s own good.”

The pudding fell to the floor with a heart-stopping crash. Cream splattered the windows and walls as the dish shattered. With a crack like a whip, Dobby vanished.

There were screams from the dining room and Uncle Vernon burst into the kitchen to find Harry, rigid with shock, covered from head to foot in Aunt Petunia’s pudding.

At first, it looked as though Uncle Vernon would manage to gloss the whole thing over. ("Just our nephew — very disturbed — meeting strangers upsets him, so we kept him upstairs. …") He shooed the shocked Masons back into the dining room, promised Harry he would flay him to within an inch of his life when the Ma-sons had left, and handed him a mop. Aunt Petunia dug some ice cream out of the freezer and Harry, still shaking, started scrubbing the kitchen clean.

Uncle Vernon might still have been able to make his deal — if it hadn't been for the owl.

Aunt Petunia was just passing around a box of after-dinner mints when a huge barn owl swooped through the dining room window, dropped a letter on Mrs. Mason's head, and swooped out again. Mrs. Mason screamed like a banshee and ran from the house shouting about lunatics. Mr. Mason stayed just long enough to tell the Dursleys that his wife was mortally afraid of birds of all shapes and sizes, and to ask whether this was their idea of a joke.

Harry stood in the kitchen, clutching the mop for support, as Uncle Vernon advanced on him, a demonic glint in his tiny eyes.

"Read it!" he hissed evilly, brandishing the letter the owl had delivered. "Go on — read it!"

Harry took it. It did not contain birthday greetings.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that a Hover Charm was used at your place of residence this evening at twelve min-utes past nine.

As you know, underage wizards are not permitted to per-form spells outside school, and further spellwork on your part may lead to expulsion from said school (Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, Para-graph C).

We would also ask you to remember that any magical activity that risks notice by members of the non-magical community (Muggles) is a serious offense under section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy.

Enjoy your holidays!

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

IMPROPER USE OF MAGIC OFFICE

Ministry of Magic

Harry looked up from the letter and gulped.

"You didn't tell us you weren't allowed to use magic outside school," said Uncle Vernon, a mad gleam dancing in his eyes. "For-got to mention it. … Slipped your mind, I daresay. …"

He was bearing down on Harry like a great bulldog, all his teeth bared. "Well, I've got news for you, boy. … I'm locking you up. … You're never going back to that school … never … and if you try and magic yourself out — they'll expel you!"

And laughing like a maniac, he dragged Harry back upstairs.

Uncle Vernon was as bad as his word. The following morning, he paid a man to fit bars on Harry's window. He himself fitted a cat-flap in the bedroom door, so that small amounts of food could be pushed inside three times a day. They let Harry out to use the bathroom morning and evening. Otherwise, he was locked in his room around the clock.

Three days later, the Dursleys were showing no sign of relenting, and Harry couldn't see any way out of his situation. He lay on his bed

watching the sun sinking behind the bars on the window and wondered miserably what was going to happen to him.

What was the good of magicking himself out of his room if Hogwarts would expel him for doing it? Yet life at Privet Drive had reached an all-time low. Now that the Dursleys knew they weren't going to wake up as fruit bats, he had lost his only weapon. Dobby might have saved Harry from horrible happenings at Hogwarts, but the way things were going, he'd probably starve to death any-way.

The cat-flap rattled and Aunt Petunia's hand appeared, pushing a bowl of canned soup into the room. Harry, whose insides were aching with hunger, jumped off his bed and seized it. The soup was stone-cold, but he drank half of it in one gulp. Then he crossed the room to Hedwig's cage and tipped the soggy vegetables at the bot-tom of the bowl into her empty food tray. She ruffled her feathers and gave him a look of deep disgust.

"It's no good turning your beak up at it — that's all we've got," said Harry grimly.

He put the empty bowl back on the floor next to the cat-flap and lay back down on the bed, somehow even hungrier than he had been before the soup.

Supposing he was still alive in another four weeks, what would happen if he didn't turn up at Hogwarts? Would someone be sent to see why he hadn't come back? Would they be able to make the Dursleys let him go?

The room was growing dark. Exhausted, stomach rumbling, mind spinning over the same unanswerable questions, Harry fell into an uneasy sleep.

He dreamed that he was on show in a zoo, with a card reading UNDERAGE WIZARD attached to his cage. People goggled through the bars at him as he lay, starving and weak, on a bed of straw. He

saw Dobby's face in the crowd and shouted out, asking for help, but Dobby called, "Harry Potter is safe there, sir!" and vanished. Then the Dursleys appeared and Dudley rattled the bars of the cage, laughing at him.

"Stop it," Harry muttered as the rattling pounded in his sore head. "Leave me alone … cut it out … I'm trying to sleep. …"

He opened his eyes. Moonlight was shining through the bars on the window. And someone was goggling through the bars at him: a freckle-faced, red-haired, long-nosed someone.

Ron Weasley was outside Harry's window.

Chapter 3 The Burrow

“Ron!” breathed Harry, creeping to the window and pushing it up so they could talk through the bars. “Ron, how did you — What the — ?”

Harry’s mouth fell open as the full impact of what he was see-ing hit him. Ron was leaning out of the back window of an old turquoise car, which was parked in midair. Grinning at Harry from the front seats were Fred and George, Ron’s elder twin brothers.

“All right, Harry?” asked George.

“What’s been going on?” said Ron. “Why haven’t you been an-swering my letters? I’ve asked you to stay about twelve times, and then Dad came home and said you’d got an official warning for us-ing magic in front of Muggles —”

“It wasn’t me — and how did he know?”

“He works for the Ministry,” said Ron. “You know we’re not sup-posed to do spells outside school —”

“You should talk,” said Harry, staring at the floating car.

“Oh, this doesn’t count,” said Ron. “We’re only borrowing this. It’s Dad’s, we didn’t enchant it. But doing magic in front of those Muggles you live with —”

“I told you, I didn’t — but it’ll take too long to explain now — look, can you tell them at Hogwarts that the Dursleys have locked me up and won’t let me come back, and obviously I can’t magic myself out, because the Ministry’ll think that’s the second spell I’ve done in three days, so —”

“Stop gibbering,” said Ron. “We’ve come to take you home with us.”

"But you can't magic me out either —"

"We don't need to," said Ron, jerking his head toward the front seat and grinning. "You forget who I've got with me."

"Tie that around the bars," said Fred, throwing the end of a rope to Harry.

"If the Dursleys wake up, I'm dead," said Harry as he tied the rope tightly around a bar and Fred revved up the car.

"Don't worry," said Fred, "and stand back."

Harry moved back into the shadows next to Hedwig, who seemed to have realized how important this was and kept still and silent. The car revved louder and louder and suddenly, with a crunching noise, the bars were pulled clean out of the window as Fred drove straight up in the air. Harry ran back to the window to see the bars dangling a few feet above the ground. Panting, Ron hoisted them up into the car. Harry listened anxiously, but there was no sound from the Dursleys' bedroom.

When the bars were safely in the back seat with Ron, Fred re-versed as close as possible to Harry's window.

"Get in," Ron said.

"But all my Hogwarts stuff — my wand — my broomstick —"

"Where is it?"

"Locked in the cupboard under the stairs, and I can't get out of this room —"

"No problem," said George from the front passenger seat. "Out of the way, Harry."

Fred and George climbed catlike through the window into Harry's room. You had to hand it to them, thought Harry, as George took an ordinary hairpin from his pocket and started to pick the lock.

"A lot of wizards think it's a waste of time, knowing this sort of Muggle trick," said Fred, "but we feel they're skills worth learning, even if they are a bit slow."

There was a small click and the door swung open.

"So — we'll get your trunk — you grab anything you need from your room and hand it out to Ron," whispered George.

"Watch out for the bottom stair — it creaks," Harry whispered back as the twins disappeared onto the dark landing.

Harry dashed around his room, collecting his things and passing them out of the window to Ron. Then he went to help Fred and George heave his trunk up the stairs. Harry heard Uncle Vernon cough.

At last, panting, they reached the landing, then carried the trunk through Harry's room to the open window. Fred climbed back into the car to pull with Ron, and Harry and George pushed from the bedroom side. Inch by inch, the trunk slid through the window.

Uncle Vernon coughed again.

"A bit more," panted Fred, who was pulling from inside the car. "One good push —"

Harry and George threw their shoulders against the trunk and it slid out of the window into the back seat of the car.

"Okay, let's go," George whispered.

But as Harry climbed onto the windowsill there came a sudden loud screech from behind him, followed immediately by the thun-der of Uncle Vernon's voice.

"THAT RUDDY OWL!"

"I've forgotten Hedwig!"

Harry tore back across the room as the landing light clicked on — he snatched up Hedwig's cage, dashed to the window, and passed it out to Ron. He was scrambling back onto the chest of drawers when Uncle Vernon hammered on the unlocked door — and it crashed open.

For a split second, Uncle Vernon stood framed in the doorway; then he let out a bellow like an angry bull and dived at Harry, grabbing him by the ankle.

Ron, Fred, and George seized Harry's arms and pulled as hard as they could.

"Petunia!" roared Uncle Vernon. "He's getting away! HE'S GETTING AWAY!"

But the Weasleys gave a gigantic tug and Harry's leg slid out of Uncle Vernon's grasp — Harry was in the car — he'd slammed the door shut —"Put your foot down, Fred!" yelled Ron, and the car shot suddenly toward the moon.

Harry couldn't believe it — he was free. He rolled down the window, the night air whipping his hair, and looked back at the shrinking rooftops of Privet Drive. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petu-nia, and Dudley were all hanging, dumbstruck, out of Harry's window.

"See you next summer!" Harry yelled.

The Weasleys roared with laughter and Harry settled back in his seat, grinning from ear to ear.

“Let Hedwig out,” he told Ron. “She can fly behind us. She hasn’t had a chance to stretch her wings for ages.”

George handed the hairpin to Ron and, a moment later, Hedwig soared joyfully out of the window to glide alongside them like a ghost.

“So — what’s the story, Harry?” said Ron impatiently. “What’s been happening?”

Harry told them all about Dobby, the warning he’d given Harry and the fiasco of the violet pudding. There was a long, shocked si-lence when he had finished.

“Very fishy,” said Fred finally.

“Definitely dodgy,” agreed George. “So he wouldn’t even tell you who’s supposed to be plotting all this stuff?”

“I don’t think he could,” said Harry. “I told you, every time he got close to letting something slip, he started banging his head against the wall.”

He saw Fred and George look at each other.

“What, you think he was lying to me?” said Harry.

“Well,” said Fred, “put it this way — house-elves have got pow-erful magic of their own, but they can’t usually use it without their master’s permission. I reckon old Dobby was sent to stop you coming back to Hogwarts. Someone’s idea of a joke. Can you think of anyone at school with a grudge against you?”

“Yes,” said Harry and Ron together, instantly.

“Draco Malfoy,” Harry explained. “He hates me.”

“Draco Malfoy?” said George, turning around. “Not Lucius Malfoy’s son?”

“Must be, it’s not a very common name, is it?” said Harry. “Why?”

“I’ve heard Dad talking about him,” said George. “He was a big supporter of You-Know-Who.”

“And when You-Know-Who disappeared,” said Fred, craning around to look at Harry, “Lucius Malfoy came back saying he’d never meant any of it. Load of dung — Dad reckons he was right in You-Know-Who’s inner circle.”

Harry had heard these rumors about Malfoy’s family before, and they didn’t surprise him at all. Malfoy made Dudley Dursley look like a kind, thoughtful, and sensitive boy.

“I don’t know whether the Malfoys own a house-elf. …” said Harry.

“Well, whoever owns him will be an old wizarding family, and they’ll be rich,” said Fred.

“Yeah, Mum’s always wishing we had a house-elf to do the iron-ing,” said George. “But all we’ve got is a lousy old ghoul in the at-tic and gnomes all over the garden. House-elves come with big old manors and castles and places like that; you wouldn’t catch one in our house. …”

Harry was silent. Judging by the fact that Draco Malfoy usually had the best of everything, his family was rolling in wizard gold; he could just see Malfoy strutting around a large manor house. Send-ing the family servant to stop Harry from going back to Hogwarts also sounded exactly like the sort of thing Malfoy would do. Had Harry been stupid to take Dobby seriously?

“I’m glad we came to get you, anyway,” said Ron. “I was getting really worried when you didn’t answer any of my letters. I thought it was

Errol's fault at first —"

"Who's Errol?"

"Our owl. He's ancient. It wouldn't be the first time he'd col-lapsed on a delivery. So then I tried to borrow Hermes —"

"Who?"

"The owl Mum and Dad bought Percy when he was made pre-fect," said Fred from the front.

"But Percy wouldn't lend him to me," said Ron. "Said he needed him."

"Percy's been acting very oddly this summer," said George, frowning. "And he has been sending a lot of letters and spending a load of time shut up in his room. … I mean, there's only so many times you can polish a prefect badge. … You're driving too far west, Fred," he added, pointing at a compass on the dashboard. Fred twiddled the steering wheel.

"So, does your dad know you've got the car?" said Harry, guess-ing the answer.

"Er, no," said Ron, "he had to work tonight. Hopefully we'll be able to get it back in the garage without Mum noticing we flew it."

"What does your dad do at the Ministry of Magic, anyway?"

"He works in the most boring department," said Ron. "The Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office."

"The what?"

"It's all to do with bewitching things that are Muggle-made, you know, in case they end up back in a Muggle shop or house. Like, last year, some old witch died and her tea set was sold to an an-tiques shop. This Muggle woman bought it, took it home, and tried to serve her

friends tea in it. It was a nightmare — Dad was working overtime for weeks."

"What happened?"

"The teapot went berserk and squirted boiling tea all over the place and one man ended up in the hospital with the sugar tongs clamped to his nose. Dad was going frantic — it's only him and an old warlock called Perkins in the office — and they had to do Memory Charms and all sorts of stuff to cover it up —"

"But your dad — this car —"

Fred laughed. "Yeah, Dad's crazy about everything to do with Muggles; our shed's full of Muggle stuff. He takes it apart, puts spells on it, and puts it back together again. If he raided our house he'd have to put himself under arrest. It drives Mum mad."

"That's the main road," said George, peering down through the windshield. "We'll be there in ten minutes. … Just as well, it's get-ting light. …"

A faint pinkish glow was visible along the horizon to the east.

Fred brought the car lower, and Harry saw a dark patchwork of fields and clumps of trees.

"We're a little way outside the village," said George. "Ottery St. Catchpole."

Lower and lower went the flying car. The edge of a brilliant red sun was now gleaming through the trees.

"Touchdown!" said Fred as, with a slight bump, they hit the ground. They had landed next to a tumbledown garage in a small yard, and Harry looked out for the first time at Ron's house.

It looked as though it had once been a large stone pigpen, but extra rooms had been added here and there until it was several sto-ries high and so crooked it looked as though it were held up by magic (which, Harry reminded himself, it probably was). Four or five chimneys were perched on top of the red roof. A lopsided sign stuck in the ground near the entrance read, THE BURROW. Around the front door lay a jumble of rubber boots and a very rusty caul-dron. Several fat brown chickens were pecking their way around the yard.

"It's not much," said Ron.

"It's wonderful," said Harry happily, thinking of Privet Drive.

They got out of the car.

"Now, we'll go upstairs really quietly," said Fred, "and wait for Mum to call us for breakfast. Then, Ron, you come bounding downstairs going, 'Mum, look who turned up in the night!' and she'll be all pleased to see Harry and no one need ever know we flew the car."

"Right," said Ron. "Come on, Harry, I sleep at the — at the top —"

Ron had gone a nasty greenish color, his eyes fixed on the house. The other three wheeled around.

Mrs. Weasley was marching across the yard, scattering chickens, and for a short, plump, kind-faced woman, it was remarkable how much she looked like a saber-toothed tiger.

"Ah," said Fred.

"Oh, dear," said George.

Mrs. Weasley came to a halt in front of them, her hands on her hips, staring from one guilty face to the next. She was wearing a flowered apron with a wand sticking out of the pocket.

“So,” she said.

“ ’Morning, Mum,” said George, in what he clearly thought was a jaunty, winning voice.

“Have you any idea how worried I’ve been?” said Mrs. Weasley in a deadly whisper.

“Sorry, Mum, but see, we had to —”

All three of Mrs. Weasley’s sons were taller than she was, but they cowered as her rage broke over them.

“Beds empty! No note! Car gone — could have crashed — out of my mind with worry — did you care? — never, as long as I’ve lived — you wait until your father gets home, we never had trouble like this from Bill or Charlie or Percy —”

“Perfect Percy,” muttered Fred.

“YOU COULD DO WITH TAKING A LEAF OUT OF PERCY’S BOOK!” yelled Mrs. Weasley, prodding a finger in Fred’s chest. “You could have died, you could have been seen, you could have lost your father his job —”

It seemed to go on for hours. Mrs. Weasley had shouted herself hoarse before she turned on Harry, who backed away.

“I’m very pleased to see you, Harry, dear,” she said. “Come in and have some breakfast.”

She turned and walked back into the house and Harry, after a nervous glance at Ron, who nodded encouragingly, followed her.

The kitchen was small and rather cramped. There was a scrubbed wooden table and chairs in the middle, and Harry sat down on the

edge of his seat, looking around. He had never been in a wizard house before.

The clock on the wall opposite him had only one hand and no numbers at all. Written around the edge were things like Time to make tea, Time to feed the chickens, and You're late. Books were stacked three deep on the mantelpiece, books with titles like Charm Your Own Cheese, Enchantment in Baking, and One Minute Feasts — It's Magic! And unless Harry's ears were deceiving him, the old radio next to the sink had just announced that coming up was "Witching Hour, with the popular singing sorceress, Celestina Warbeck."

Mrs. Weasley was clattering around, cooking breakfast a little haphazardly, throwing dirty looks at her sons as she threw sausages into the frying pan. Every now and then she muttered things like "don't know what you were thinking of," and "never would have believed it."

"I don't blame you, dear," she assured Harry, tipping eight or nine sausages onto his plate. "Arthur and I have been worried about you, too. Just last night we were saying we'd come and get you our-selves if you hadn't written back to Ron by Friday. But really" (she was now adding three fried eggs to his plate), "flying an illegal car halfway across the country — anyone could have seen you —"

She flicked her wand casually at the dishes in the sink, which be-gan to clean themselves, clinking gently in the background.

"It was cloudy, Mum!" said Fred.

"You keep your mouth closed while you're eating!" Mrs. Weasley snapped.

"They were starving him, Mum!" said George.

“And you!” said Mrs. Weasley, but it was with a slightly softened expression that she started cutting Harry bread and buttering it for him.

At that moment there was a diversion in the form of a small, red-headed figure in a long nightdress, who appeared in the kitchen, gave a small squeal, and ran out again.

“Ginny,” said Ron in an undertone to Harry. “My sister. She’s been talking about you all summer.”

“Yeah, she’ll be wanting your autograph, Harry,” Fred said with a grin, but he caught his mother’s eye and bent his face over his plate without another word. Nothing more was said until all four plates were clean, which took a surprisingly short time.

“Blimey, I’m tired,” yawned Fred, setting down his knife and fork at last. “I think I’ll go to bed and —”

“You will not,” snapped Mrs. Weasley. “It’s your own fault you’ve been up all night. You’re going to de-gnome the garden for me; they’re getting completely out of hand again —”

“Oh, Mum —”

“And you two,” she said, glaring at Ron and Fred. “You can go up to bed, dear,” she added to Harry. “You didn’t ask them to fly that wretched car —”

But Harry, who felt wide awake, said quickly, “I’ll help Ron. I’ve never seen a de-gnoming —”

“That’s very sweet of you, dear, but it’s dull work,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Now, let’s see what Lockhart’s got to say on the subject —”

And she pulled a heavy book from the stack on the mantelpiece. George groaned.

“Mum, we know how to de-gnome a garden —”

Harry looked at the cover of Mrs. Weasley’s book. Written across it in fancy gold letters were the words Gilderoy Lockhart’s Guide to Household Pests. There was a big photograph on the front of a very good-looking wizard with wavy blond hair and bright blue eyes. As always in the wizarding world, the photograph was moving; the wizard, who Harry supposed was Gilderoy Lockhart, kept winking cheekily up at them all. Mrs. Weasley beamed down at him.

“Oh, he is marvelous,” she said. “He knows his household pests, all right, it’s a wonderful book. …”

“Mum fancies him,” said Fred, in a very audible whisper.

“Don’t be so ridiculous, Fred,” said Mrs. Weasley, her cheeks rather pink. “All right, if you think you know better than Lockhart, you can go and get on with it, and woe betide you if there’s a sin-gle gnome in that garden when I come out to inspect it.”

Yawning and grumbling, the Weasleys slouched outside with Harry behind them. The garden was large, and in Harry’s eyes, ex-actly what a garden should be. The Dursleys wouldn’t have liked it — there were plenty of weeds, and the grass needed cutting — but there were gnarled trees all around the walls, plants Harry had never seen spilling from every flower bed, and a big green pond full of frogs.

“Muggles have garden gnomes, too, you know,” Harry told Ron as they crossed the lawn.

“Yeah, I’ve seen those things they think are gnomes,” said Ron, bent double with his head in a peony bush, “like fat little Santa Clauses with fishing rods. …”

There was a violent scuffling noise, the peony bush shuddered, and Ron straightened up. “This is a gnome,” he said grimly.

“Gerroff me! Gerroff me!” squealed the gnome.

It was certainly nothing like Santa Claus. It was small and leath-ery looking, with a large, knobby, bald head exactly like a potato. Ron held it at arm’s length as it kicked out at him with its horny lit-tle feet; he grasped it around the ankles and turned it upside down.

“This is what you have to do,” he said. He raised the gnome above his head (“Gerroff me!”) and started to swing it in great cir-cles like a lasso. Seeing the shocked look on Harry’s face, Ron added, “It doesn’t hurt them — you’ve just got to make them really dizzy so they can’t find their way back to the gnomeholes.”

He let go of the gnome’s ankles: It flew twenty feet into the air and landed with a thud in the field over the hedge.

“Pitiful,” said Fred. “I bet I can get mine beyond that stump.”

Harry learned quickly not to feel too sorry for the gnomes. He decided just to drop the first one he caught over the hedge, but the gnome, sensing weakness, sank its razor-sharp teeth into Harry’s finger and he had a hard job shaking it off — until —“Wow, Harry — that must’ve been fifty feet. …”

The air was soon thick with flying gnomes.

“See, they’re not too bright,” said George, seizing five or six gnomes at once. “The moment they know the de-gnoming’s going on they storm up to have a look. You’d think they’d have learned by now just to stay put.”

Soon, the crowd of gnomes in the field started walking away in a straggling line, their little shoulders hunched.

“They’ll be back,” said Ron as they watched the gnomes disap-pear into the hedge on the other side of the field. “They love it here. … Dad’s too soft with them; he thinks they’re funny. …”

Just then, the front door slammed.

“He’s back!” said George. “Dad’s home!”

They hurried through the garden and back into the house.

Mr. Weasley was slumped in a kitchen chair with his glasses off and his eyes closed. He was a thin man, going bald, but the little hair he had was as red as any of his children’s. He was wearing long green robes, which were dusty and travel-worn.

“What a night,” he mumbled, groping for the teapot as they all sat down around him. “Nine raids. Nine! And old Mundungus Fletcher tried to put a hex on me when I had my back turned. …”

Mr. Weasley took a long gulp of tea and sighed.

“Find anything, Dad?” said Fred eagerly.

“All I got were a few shrinking door keys and a biting kettle,” yawned Mr. Weasley. “There was some pretty nasty stuff that wasn’t my department, though. Mortlake was taken away for ques-tioning about some extremely odd ferrets, but that’s the Commit-tee on Experimental Charms, thank goodness. …”

“Why would anyone bother making door keys shrink?” said George.

“Just Muggle-baiting,” sighed Mr. Weasley. “Sell them a key that keeps shrinking to nothing so they can never find it when they need it. … Of course, it’s very hard to convict anyone because no Muggle would admit their key keeps shrinking — they’ll insist they just keep losing it. Bless them, they’ll go to any lengths to ig-nore magic, even if it’s staring them in the face. … But the things our lot have taken to enchanting, you wouldn’t believe —”

“LIKE CARS, FOR INSTANCE?”

Mrs. Weasley had appeared, holding a long poker like a sword. Mr. Weasley's eyes jerked open. He stared guiltily at his wife.

"C-cars, Molly, dear?"

"Yes, Arthur, cars," said Mrs. Weasley, her eyes flashing. "Imag-ine a wizard buying a rusty old car and telling his wife all he wanted to do with it was take it apart to see how it worked, while really he was enchanting it to make it fly."

Mr. Weasley blinked.

"Well, dear, I think you'll find that he would be quite within the law to do that, even if — er — he maybe would have done better to, um, tell his wife the truth. … There's a loophole in the law, you'll find. … As long as he wasn't intending to fly the car, the fact that the car could fly wouldn't —"

"Arthur Weasley, you made sure there was a loophole when you wrote that law!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "Just so you could carry on tinkering with all that Muggle rubbish in your shed! And for your information, Harry arrived this morning in the car you weren't in-tending to fly!"

"Harry?" said Mr. Weasley blankly. "Harry who?"

He looked around, saw Harry, and jumped.

"Good lord, is it Harry Potter? Very pleased to meet you, Ron's told us so much about —"

"Your sons flew that car to Harry's house and back last night!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "What have you got to say about that, eh?"

"Did you really?" said Mr. Weasley eagerly. "Did it go all right? I — I mean," he faltered as sparks flew from Mrs. Weasley's eyes, "that — that was very wrong, boys — very wrong indeed. …"

“Let’s leave them to it,” Ron muttered to Harry as Mrs. Weasley swelled like a bullfrog. “Come on, I’ll show you my bedroom.”

They slipped out of the kitchen and down a narrow passageway to an uneven staircase, which wound its way, zigzagging up through the house. On the third landing, a door stood ajar. Harry just caught sight of a pair of bright brown eyes staring at him be-fore it closed with a snap.

“Ginny,” said Ron. “You don’t know how weird it is for her to be this shy. She never shuts up normally —”

They climbed two more flights until they reached a door with peeling paint and a small plaque on it, saying RONALD’S ROOM.

Harry stepped in, his head almost touching the sloping ceiling, and blinked. It was like walking into a furnace: Nearly everything in Ron’s room seemed to be a violent shade of orange: the bed-spread, the walls, even the ceiling. Then Harry realized that Ron had covered nearly every inch of the shabby wallpaper with posters of the same seven witches and wizards, all wearing bright orange robes, carrying broomsticks, and waving energetically.

“Your Quidditch team?” said Harry.

“The Chudley Cannons,” said Ron, pointing at the orange bed-spread, which was emblazoned with two giant black C’s and a speeding cannonball. “Ninth in the league.”

Ron’s school spellbooks were stacked untidily in a corner, next to a pile of comics that all seemed to feature The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle. Ron’s magic wand was lying on top of a fish tank full of frog spawn on the windowsill, next to his fat gray rat, Scabbers, who was snoozing in a patch of sun.

Harry stepped over a pack of Self-Shuffling playing cards on the floor and looked out of the tiny window. In the field far below he could see

a gang of gnomes sneaking one by one back through the Weasleys' hedge. Then he turned to look at Ron, who was watch-ing him almost nervously, as though waiting for his opinion.

"It's a bit small," said Ron quickly. "Not like that room you had with the Muggles. And I'm right underneath the ghoul in the attic; he's always banging on the pipes and groaning. …"

But Harry, grinning widely, said, "This is the best house I've ever been in."

Ron's ears went pink.

Chapter 4 At Flourish and Blotts

Life at the Burrow was as different as possible from life on Privet Drive. The Dursleys liked everything neat and ordered; the Weasleys' house burst with the strange and unexpected. Harry got a shock the first time he looked in the mirror over the kitchen man-telpiece and it shouted, "Tuck your shirt in, scruffy!" The ghoul in the attic howled and dropped pipes whenever he felt things were getting too quiet, and small explosions from Fred and George's bedroom were considered perfectly normal. What Harry found most unusual about life at Ron's, however, wasn't the talking mir-ror or the clanking ghoul: It was the fact that everybody there seemed to like him.

Mrs. Weasley fussed over the state of his socks and tried to force him to eat fourth helpings at every meal. Mr. Weasley liked Harry to sit next to him at the dinner table so that he could bombard him with questions about life with Muggles, asking him to explain how things like plugs and the postal service worked.

"Fascinating!" he would say as Harry talked him through using a telephone. "Ingenious, really, how many ways Muggles have found of getting along without magic."

Harry heard from Hogwarts one sunny morning about a week after he had arrived at the Burrow. He and Ron went down to breakfast to find Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ginny already sitting at the kitchen table. The moment she saw Harry, Ginny acciden-tally knocked her porridge bowl to the floor with a loud clatter. Ginny seemed very prone to knocking things over whenever Harry entered a room. She dived under the table to retrieve the bowl and emerged with her face glowing like the setting sun. Pretending he hadn't noticed this, Harry sat down and took the toast Mrs. Weasley offered him.

"Letters from school," said Mr. Weasley, passing Harry and Ron identical envelopes of yellowish parchment, addressed in green ink.

“Dumbledore already knows you’re here, Harry — doesn’t miss a trick, that man. You two’ve got them, too,” he added, as Fred and George ambled in, still in their pajamas.

For a few minutes there was silence as they all read their letters. Harry’s told him to catch the Hogwarts Express as usual from King’s Cross station on September first. There was also a list of the new books he’d need for the coming year.

SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS WILL REQUIRE:The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2by Miranda Goshawk

Break with a Banshee by Gilderoy LockhartGadding with Ghouls by Gilderoy LockhartHolidays with Hags by Gilderoy LockhartTravels with Trolls by Gilderoy LockhartVoyages with Vampires by Gilderoy LockhartWanderings with Werewolves by Gilderoy LockhartYear with the Yeti by Gilderoy LockhartFred, who had finished his own list, peered over at Harry’s.

“You’ve been told to get all Lockhart’s books, too!” he said. “The new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher must be a fan — bet it’s a witch.”

At this point, Fred caught his mother’s eye and quickly busied himself with the marmalade.

“That lot won’t come cheap,” said George, with a quick look at his parents. “Lockhart’s books are really expensive. …”

“Well, we’ll manage,” said Mrs. Weasley, but she looked wor-ried. “I expect we’ll be able to pick up a lot of Ginny’s things secondhand.”

“Oh, are you starting at Hogwarts this year?” Harry asked Ginny.

She nodded, blushing to the roots of her flaming hair, and put her elbow in the butter dish. Fortunately no one saw this except Harry, because just then Ron’s elder brother Percy walked in. He was

already dressed, his Hogwarts prefect badge pinned to his sweater vest.

“Morning, all,” said Percy briskly. “Lovely day.”

He sat down in the only remaining chair but leapt up again al-most immediately, pulling from underneath him a molting, gray feather duster — at least, that was what Harry thought it was, un-til he saw that it was breathing.

“Errol!” said Ron, taking the limp owl from Percy and extracting a letter from under its wing. “Finally — he’s got Hermione’s an-swer. I wrote to her saying we were going to try and rescue you from the Dursleys.”

He carried Errol to a perch just inside the back door and tried to stand him on it, but Errol flopped straight off again so Ron laid him on the draining board instead, muttering, “Pathetic.” Then he ripped open Hermione’s letter and read it out loud:“ ‘Dear Ron, and Harry if you’re there,“ ‘I hope everything went all right and that Harry is okay and that you didn’t do anything illegal to get him out, Ron, because that would get Harry into trouble, too. I’ve been really worried and if Harry is all right, will you please let me know at once, but perhaps it would be bet-ter if you used a different owl, because I think another delivery might finish your one off.

“ ‘I’m very busy with schoolwork, of course’ — How can she be?” said Ron in horror. “We’re on vacation! — ‘and we’re going to Lon-don next Wednesday to buy my new books. Why don’t we meet in Diagon Alley?

“ ‘Let me know what’s happening as soon as you can. Love from Hermione.’ ”

“Well, that fits in nicely, we can go and get all your things then, too,” said Mrs. Weasley, starting to clear the table. “What’re you all up to today?”

Harry, Ron, Fred, and George were planning to go up the hill to a small paddock the Weasleys owned. It was surrounded by trees that blocked it from view of the village below, meaning that they could practice Quidditch there, as long as they didn't fly too high. They couldn't use real Quidditch balls, which would have been hard to explain if they had escaped and flown away over the village; instead they threw apples for one another to catch. They took turns riding Harry's Nimbus Two Thousand, which was easily the best broom; Ron's old Shooting Star was often outstripped by passing butterflies.

Five minutes later they were marching up the hill, broomsticks over their shoulders. They had asked Percy if he wanted to join them, but he had said he was busy. Harry had only seen Percy at mealtimes so far; he stayed shut in his room the rest of the time.

"Wish I knew what he was up to," said Fred, frowning. "He's not himself. His exam results came the day before you did; twelve O.W.L.s and he hardly gloated at all."

"Ordinary Wizarding Levels," George explained, seeing Harry's puzzled look. "Bill got twelve, too. If we're not careful, we'll have another Head Boy in the family. I don't think I could stand the shame."

Bill was the oldest Weasley brother. He and the next brother, Charlie, had already left Hogwarts. Harry had never met either of them, but knew that Charlie was in Romania studying dragons and Bill in Egypt working for the wizard's bank, Gringotts.

"Dunno how Mum and Dad are going to afford all our school stuff this year," said George after a while. "Five sets of Lockhart books! And Ginny needs robes and a wand and everything. …"

Harry said nothing. He felt a bit awkward. Stored in an under-ground vault at Gringotts in London was a small fortune that his parents had left him. Of course, it was only in the wizarding world that he had money; you couldn't use Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts in Muggle shops. He had never mentioned his Gringotts bank ac-count to the

Dursleys; he didn't think their horror of anything con-nected with magic would stretch to a large pile of gold.

Mrs. Weasley woke them all early the following Wednesday. After a quick half a dozen bacon sandwiches each, they pulled on their coats and Mrs. Weasley took a flowerpot off the kitchen mantel-piece and peered inside.

"We're running low, Arthur," she sighed. "We'll have to buy some more today. … Ah well, guests first! After you, Harry dear!"

And she offered him the flowerpot.

Harry stared at them all watching him.

"W-what am I supposed to do?" he stammered.

"He's never traveled by Floo powder," said Ron suddenly. "Sorry, Harry, I forgot."

"Never?" said Mr. Weasley. "But how did you get to Diagon Al-ley to buy your school things last year?"

"I went on the Underground —"

"Really?" said Mr. Weasley eagerly. "Were there escapators? How exactly —"

"Not now, Arthur," said Mrs. Weasley. "Floo powder's a lot quicker, dear, but goodness me, if you've never used it before —"

"He'll be all right, Mum," said Fred. "Harry, watch us first."

He took a pinch of glittering powder out of the flowerpot, stepped up to the fire, and threw the powder into the flames.

With a roar, the fire turned emerald green and rose higher than Fred, who stepped right into it, shouted, "Diagon Alley!" and van-ished.

“You must speak clearly, dear,” Mrs. Weasley told Harry as George dipped his hand into the flowerpot. “And be sure to get out at the right grate. …”

“The right what?” said Harry nervously as the fire roared and whipped George out of sight, too.

“Well, there are an awful lot of wizard fires to choose from, you know, but as long as you’ve spoken clearly —”

“He’ll be fine, Molly, don’t fuss,” said Mr. Weasley, helping him-self to Floo powder, too.

“But, dear, if he got lost, how would we ever explain to his aunt and uncle?”

“They wouldn’t mind,” Harry reassured her. “Dudley would think it was a brilliant joke if I got lost up a chimney, don’t worry about that —”

“Well … all right … you go after Arthur,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Now, when you get into the fire, say where you’re going —”

“And keep your elbows tucked in,” Ron advised.

“And your eyes shut,” said Mrs. Weasley. “The soot —”

“Don’t fidget,” said Ron. “Or you might well fall out of the wrong fireplace —”

“But don’t panic and get out too early; wait until you see Fred and George.”

Trying hard to bear all this in mind, Harry took a pinch of Floo powder and walked to the edge of the fire. He took a deep breath, scattered the powder into the flames, and stepped forward; the fire felt like a warm breeze; he opened his mouth and immediately swallowed a lot of hot ash.

“D-Dia-gon Alley,” he coughed.

It felt as though he were being sucked down a giant drain. He seemed to be spinning very fast — the roaring in his ears was deafening — he tried to keep his eyes open but the whirl of green flames made him feel sick — something hard knocked his elbow and he tucked it in tightly, still spinning and spinning — now it felt as though cold hands were slapping his face — squinting through his glasses he saw a blurred stream of fireplaces and snatched glimpses of the rooms beyond — his bacon sandwiches were churning inside him — he closed his eyes again wishing it would stop, and then —He fell, face forward, onto cold stone and felt the bridge of his glasses snap.

Dizzy and bruised, covered in soot, he got gingerly to his feet, holding his broken glasses up to his eyes. He was quite alone, but where he was, he had no idea. All he could tell was that he was standing in the stone fireplace of what looked like a large, dimly lit wizard’s shop — but nothing in here was ever likely to be on a Hogwarts school list.

A glass case nearby held a withered hand on a cushion, a bloodstained pack of cards, and a staring glass eye. Evil-looking masks stared down from the walls, an assortment of human bones lay upon the counter, and rusty, spiked instruments hung from the ceiling. Even worse, the dark, narrow street Harry could see through the dusty shop window was definitely not Diagon Alley.

The sooner he got out of here, the better. Nose still stinging where it had hit the hearth, Harry made his way swiftly and silently toward the door, but before he’d got halfway toward it, two people appeared on the other side of the glass — and one of them was the very last person Harry wanted to meet when he was lost, covered in soot, and wearing broken glasses: Draco Malfoy.

Harry looked quickly around and spotted a large black cabinet to his left; he shot inside it and pulled the doors closed, leaving a small

crack to peer through. Seconds later, a bell clanged, and Mal-foy stepped into the shop.

The man who followed could only be Draco's father. He had the same pale, pointed face and identical cold, gray eyes. Mr. Malfoy crossed the shop, looking lazily at the items on display, and rang a bell on the counter before turning to his son and saying, "Touch nothing, Draco."

Malfoy, who had reached for the glass eye, said, "I thought you were going to buy me a present."

"I said I would buy you a racing broom," said his father, drum-ming his fingers on the counter.

"What's the good of that if I'm not on the House team?" said Malfoy, looking sulky and bad-tempered. "Harry Potter got a Nimbus Two Thousand last year. Special permission from Dum-bledore so he could play for Gryffindor. He's not even that good, it's just because he's famous … famous for having a stupid scar on his forehead. …"

Malfoy bent down to examine a shelf full of skulls.

"… everyone thinks he's so smart, wonderful Potter with his scar and his broomstick —"

"You have told me this at least a dozen times already," said Mr. Malfoy, with a quelling look at his son. "And I would remind you that it is not — prudent — to appear less than fond of Harry Pot-ter, not when most of our kind regard him as the hero who made the Dark Lord disappear — ah, Mr. Borgin."

A stooping man had appeared behind the counter, smoothing his greasy hair back from his face.

"Mr. Malfoy, what a pleasure to see you again," said Mr. Borgin in a voice as oily as his hair. "Delighted — and young Master Mal-foy, too

— charmed. How may I be of assistance? I must show you, just in today, and very reasonably priced —"

"I'm not buying today, Mr. Borgin, but selling," said Mr. Mal-foy.

"Selling?" The smile faded slightly from Mr. Borgin's face.

"You have heard, of course, that the Ministry is conducting more raids," said Mr. Malfoy, taking a roll of parchment from his inside pocket and unraveling it for Mr. Borgin to read. "I have a few — ah — items at home that might embarrass me, if the Min-istry were to call. …"

Mr. Borgin fixed a pair of pince-nez to his nose and looked down the list.

"The Ministry wouldn't presume to trouble you, sir, surely?"

Mr. Malfoy's lip curled.

"I have not been visited yet. The name Malfoy still commands a certain respect, yet the Ministry grows ever more meddlesome. There are rumors about a new Muggle Protection Act — no doubt that flea-bitten, Muggle-loving fool Arthur Weasley is behind it —"

Harry felt a hot surge of anger.

"— and as you see, certain of these poisons might make it ap-pear —"

"I understand, sir, of course," said Mr. Borgin. "Let me see …"

"Can I have that?" interrupted Draco, pointing at the withered hand on its cushion.

"Ah, the Hand of Glory!" said Mr. Borgin, abandoning Mr. Malfoy's list and scurrying over to Draco. "Insert a candle and it gives light only to

the holder! Best friend of thieves and plunderers! Your son has fine taste, sir."

"I hope my son will amount to more than a thief or a plunderer, Borgin," said Mr. Malfoy coldly, and Mr. Borgin said quickly, "No offense, sir, no offense meant —"

"Though if his grades don't pick up," said Mr. Malfoy, more coldly still, "that may indeed be all he is fit for —"

"It's not my fault," retorted Draco. "The teachers all have fa-vorites, that Hermione Granger —"

"I would have thought you'd be ashamed that a girl of no wizard family beat you in every exam," snapped Mr. Malfoy.

"Ha!" said Harry under his breath, pleased to see Draco looking both abashed and angry.

"It's the same all over," said Mr. Borgin, in his oily voice. "Wiz-ard blood is counting for less everywhere —"

"Not with me," said Mr. Malfoy, his long nostrils flaring.

"No, sir, nor with me, sir," said Mr. Borgin, with a deep bow.

"In that case, perhaps we can return to my list," said Mr. Malfoy shortly. "I am in something of a hurry, Borgin, I have important business elsewhere today —"

They started to haggle. Harry watched nervously as Draco drew nearer and nearer to his hiding place, examining the objects for sale. Draco paused to examine a long coil of hangman's rope and to read, smirking, the card propped on a magnificent necklace of opals, Caution: Do Not Touch. Cursed — Has Claimed the Lives of Nineteen Muggle Owners to Date.

Draco turned away and saw the cabinet right in front of him. He walked forward — he stretched out his hand for the handle —“Done,” said Mr. Malfoy at the counter. “Come, Draco —”

Harry wiped his forehead on his sleeve as Draco turned away.

“Good day to you, Mr. Borgin. I’ll expect you at the manor to-morrow to pick up the goods.”

The moment the door had closed, Mr. Borgin dropped his oily manner.

“Good day yourself, Mister Malfoy, and if the stories are true, you haven’t sold me half of what’s hidden in your manor. …”

Muttering darkly, Mr. Borgin disappeared into a back room. Harry waited for a minute in case he came back, then, quietly as he could, slipped out of the cabinet, past the glass cases, and out of the shop door.

Clutching his broken glasses to his face, Harry stared around. He had emerged into a dingy alleyway that seemed to be made up entirely of shops devoted to the Dark Arts. The one he’d just left, Borgin and Burkes, looked like the largest, but opposite was a nasty window display of shrunken heads and, two doors down, a large cage was alive with gigantic black spiders. Two shabby-looking wiz-ards were watching him from the shadow of a doorway, muttering to each other. Feeling jumpy, Harry set off, trying to hold his glasses on straight and hoping against hope he’d be able to find a way out of here.

An old wooden street sign hanging over a shop selling poiso-nous candles told him he was in Knockturn Alley. This didn’t help, as Harry had never heard of such a place. He supposed he hadn’t spoken clearly enough through his mouthful of ashes back in the Weasleys’ fire. Trying to stay calm, he wondered what to do.

“Not lost are you, my dear?” said a voice in his ear, making him jump.

An aged witch stood in front of him, holding a tray of what looked horribly like whole human fingernails. She leered at him, showing mossy teeth. Harry backed away.

“I’m fine, thanks,” he said. “I’m just —”

“HARRY! What d’yeh think yer doin’ down there?”

Harry’s heart leapt. So did the witch; a load of fingernails cas-caded down over her feet and she cursed as the massive form of Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, came striding toward them, beetle-black eyes flashing over his great bristling beard.

“Hagrid!” Harry croaked in relief. “I was lost — Floo pow-der —”

Hagrid seized Harry by the scruff of the neck and pulled him away from the witch, knocking the tray right out of her hands. Her shrieks followed them all the way along the twisting alleyway out into bright sunlight. Harry saw a familiar, snow-white marble building in the distance — Gringotts Bank. Hagrid had steered him right into Diagon Alley.

“Yer a mess!” said Hagrid gruffly, brushing soot off Harry so forcefully he nearly knocked him into a barrel of dragon dung out-side an apothecary. “Skulkin’ around Knockturn Alley, I dunno — dodgy place, Harry — don’ want no one ter see yeh down there —”

“I realized that,” said Harry, ducking as Hagrid made to brush him off again. “I told you, I was lost — what were you doing down there, anyway?”

“I was lookin’ fer a Flesh-Eatin’ Slug Repellent,” growled Ha-grid. “They’re ruinin’ the school cabbages. Yer not on yer own?”

“I’m staying with the Weasleys but we got separated,” Harry ex-plained. “I’ve got to go and find them. …”

They set off together down the street.

“How come yeh never wrote back ter me?” said Hagrid as Harry jogged alongside him (he had to take three steps to every stride of Hagrid’s enormous boots). Harry explained all about Dobby and the Dursleys.

“Lousy Muggles,” growled Hagrid. “If I’d’ve known —”

“Harry! Harry! Over here!”

Harry looked up and saw Hermione Granger standing at the top of the white flight of steps to Gringotts. She ran down to meet them, her bushy brown hair flying behind her.

“What happened to your glasses? Hello, Hagrid — Oh, it’s wonderful to see you two again — Are you coming into Gringotts, Harry?”

“As soon as I’ve found the Weasleys,” said Harry.

“Yeh won’t have long ter wait,” Hagrid said with a grin.

Harry and Hermione looked around: Sprinting up the crowded street were Ron, Fred, George, Percy, and Mr. Weasley.

“Harry,” Mr. Weasley panted. “We hoped you’d only gone one grate too far. …” He mopped his glistening bald patch. “Molly’s frantic — she’s coming now —”

“Where did you come out?” Ron asked.

“Knockturn Alley,” said Hagrid grimly.

“Excellent!” said Fred and George together.

“We’ve never been allowed in,” said Ron enviously.

“I should ruddy well think not,” growled Hagrid.

Mrs. Weasley now came galloping into view, her handbag swing-ing wildly in one hand, Ginny just clinging onto the other.

“Oh, Harry — oh, my dear — you could have been any-where —”

Gasping for breath she pulled a large clothes brush out of her bag and began sweeping off the soot Hagrid hadn’t managed to beat away. Mr. Weasley took Harry’s glasses, gave them a tap of his wand, and returned them, good as new.

“Well, gotta be off,” said Hagrid, who was having his hand wrung by Mrs. Weasley (“Knockturn Alley! If you hadn’t found him, Hagrid!”). “See yer at Hogwarts!” And he strode away, head and shoulders taller than anyone else in the packed street.

“Guess who I saw in Borgin and Burkes?” Harry asked Ron and Hermione as they climbed the Gringotts steps. “Malfoy and his fa-ther.”

“Did Lucius Malfoy buy anything?” said Mr. Weasley sharply behind them.

“No, he was selling —”

“So he’s worried,” said Mr. Weasley with grim satisfaction. “Oh, I’d love to get Lucius Malfoy for something. …”

“You be careful, Arthur,” said Mrs. Weasley sharply as they were bowed into the bank by a goblin at the door. “That family’s trou-ble. Don’t go biting off more than you can chew —”

“So you don’t think I’m a match for Lucius Malfoy?” said Mr. Weasley indignantly, but he was distracted almost at once by the sight of Hermione’s parents, who were standing nervously at the counter that ran all along the great marble hall, waiting for Hermione to introduce them.

“But you’re Muggles!” said Mr. Weasley delightedly. “We must have a drink! What’s that you’ve got there? Oh, you’re changing Muggle money. Molly, look!” He pointed excitedly at the ten-pound notes in Mr. Granger’s hand.

“Meet you back here,” Ron said to Hermione as the Weasleys and Harry were led off to their underground vaults by another Gringotts goblin.

The vaults were reached by means of small, goblin-driven carts that sped along minature train tracks through the bank’s under-ground tunnels. Harry enjoyed the breakneck journey down to the Weasleys’ vault, but felt dreadful, far worse than he had in Knock-turn Alley, when it was opened. There was a very small pile of sil-ver Sickles inside, and just one gold Galleon. Mrs. Weasley felt right into the corners before sweeping the whole lot into her bag. Harry felt even worse when they reached his vault. He tried to block the contents from view as he hastily shoved handfuls of coins into a leather bag.

Back outside on the marble steps, they all separated. Percy mut-tered vaguely about needing a new quill. Fred and George had spotted their friend from Hogwarts, Lee Jordan. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were going to a secondhand robe shop. Mr. Weasley was in-sisting on taking the Grangers off to the Leaky Cauldron for a drink.

“We’ll all meet at Flourish and Blotts in an hour to buy your schoolbooks,” said Mrs. Weasley, setting off with Ginny. “And not one step down Knockturn Alley!” she shouted at the twins’ retreat-ing backs.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione strolled off along the winding, cob-bled street. The bag of gold, silver, and bronze jangling cheerfully in Harry’s pocket was clamoring to be spent, so he bought three large strawberry-and-peanut-butter ice creams, which they slurped happily as they wandered up the alley, examining the fascinating shop windows. Ron gazed longingly at a full set of Chudley Can-non robes

in the windows of Quality Quidditch Supplies until Hermione dragged them off to buy ink and parchment next door. In Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop, they met Fred, George, and Lee Jordan, who were stocking up on Dr. Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks, and in a tiny junk shop full of bro-ken wands, lopsided brass scales, and old cloaks covered in potion stains they found Percy, deeply immersed in a small and deeply boring book called Prefects Who Gained Power.

"A study of Hogwarts prefects and their later careers," Ron read aloud off the back cover. "That sounds fascinating. …"

"Go away," Percy snapped.

" 'Course, he's very ambitious, Percy, he's got it all planned out. … He wants to be Minister of Magic …" Ron told Harry and Hermione in an undertone as they left Percy to it.

An hour later, they headed for Flourish and Blotts. They were by no means the only ones making their way to the bookshop. As they approached it, they saw to their surprise a large crowd jostling outside the doors, trying to get in. The reason for this was proclaimed by a large banner stretched across the upper windows:GILDEROY LOCKHART

will be signing copies of his autobiographyMAGICAL ME

today 12:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

"We can actually meet him!" Hermione squealed. "I mean, he's written almost the whole booklist!"

The crowd seemed to be made up mostly of witches around Mrs. Weasley's age. A harassed-looking wizard stood at the door, saying, "Calmly, please, ladies. … Don't push, there … mind the books, now. …"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione squeezed inside. A long line wound right to the back of the shop, where Gilderoy Lockhart was signing his books. They each grabbed a copy of The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2 and sneaked up the line to where the rest of the Weasleys were standing with Mr. and Mrs. Granger.

"Oh, there you are, good," said Mrs. Weasley. She sounded breathless and kept patting her hair. "We'll be able to see him in a minute. …"

Gilderoy Lockhart came slowly into view, seated at a table surrounded by large pictures of his own face, all winking and flashing dazzlingly white teeth at the crowd. The real Lockhart was wearing robes of forget-me-not blue that exactly matched his eyes; his pointed wizard's hat was set at a jaunty angle on his wavy hair.

A short, irritable-looking man was dancing around taking photographs with a large black camera that emitted puffs of purple smoke with every blinding flash.

"Out of the way, there," he snarled at Ron, moving back to get a better shot. "This is for the Daily Prophet —"

"Big deal," said Ron, rubbing his foot where the photographer had stepped on it.

Gilderoy Lockhart heard him. He looked up. He saw Ron — and then he saw Harry. He stared. Then he leapt to his feet and positively shouted, "It can't be Harry Potter?"

The crowd parted, whispering excitedly; Lockhart dived for-ward, seized Harry's arm, and pulled him to the front. The crowd burst into applause. Harry's face burned as Lockhart shook his hand for the photographer, who was clicking away madly, wafting thick smoke over the Weasleys.

“Nice big smile, Harry,” said Lockhart, through his own gleam-ing teeth. “Together, you and I are worth the front page.”

When he finally let go of Harry’s hand, Harry could hardly feel his fingers. He tried to sidle back over to the Weasleys, but Lock-hart threw an arm around his shoulders and clamped him tightly to his side.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said loudly, waving for quiet. “What an extraordinary moment this is! The perfect moment for me to make a little announcement I’ve been sitting on for some time!

“When young Harry here stepped into Flourish and Blotts to-day, he only wanted to buy my autobiography — which I shall be happy to present him now, free of charge —” The crowd applauded again. “He had no idea,” Lockhart continued, giving Harry a little shake that made his glasses slip to the end of his nose, “that he would shortly be getting much, much more than my book, Magical Me. He and his schoolmates will, in fact, be getting the real magical me. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure and pride in announcing that this September, I will be taking up the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!”

The crowd cheered and clapped and Harry found himself being presented with the entire works of Gilderoy Lockhart. Staggering slightly under their weight, he managed to make his way out of the limelight to the edge of the room, where Ginny was standing next to her new cauldron.

“You have these,” Harry mumbled to her, tipping the books into the cauldron. “I’ll buy my own —”

“Bet you loved that, didn’t you, Potter?” said a voice Harry had no trouble recognizing. He straightened up and found himself face-to-face with Draco Malfoy, who was wearing his usual sneer.

“Famous Harry Potter,” said Malfoy. “Can’t even go into a book-shop without making the front page.”

“Leave him alone, he didn’t want all that!” said Ginny. It was the first time she had spoken in front of Harry. She was glaring at Mal-foy.

“Potter, you’ve got yourself a girlfriend!” drawled Malfoy. Ginny went scarlet as Ron and Hermione fought their way over, both clutching stacks of Lockhart’s books.

“Oh, it’s you,” said Ron, looking at Malfoy as if he were some-thing unpleasant on the sole of his shoe. “Bet you’re surprised to see Harry here, eh?”

“Not as surprised as I am to see you in a shop, Weasley,” retorted Malfoy. “I suppose your parents will go hungry for a month to pay for all those.”

Ron went as red as Ginny. He dropped his books into the caul-dron, too, and started toward Malfoy, but Harry and Hermione grabbed the back of his jacket.

“Ron!” said Mr. Weasley, struggling over with Fred and George. “What are you doing? It’s too crowded in here, let’s go outside.”

“Well, well, well — Arthur Weasley.”

It was Mr. Malfoy. He stood with his hand on Draco’s shoulder, sneering in just the same way.

“Lucius,” said Mr. Weasley, nodding coldly.

“Busy time at the Ministry, I hear,” said Mr. Malfoy. “All those raids … I hope they’re paying you overtime?”

He reached into Ginny’s cauldron and extracted, from amid the glossy Lockhart books, a very old, very battered copy of A Begin-

ner's Guide to Transfiguration.

"Obviously not," Mr. Malfoy said. "Dear me, what's the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well for it?"

Mr. Weasley flushed darker than either Ron or Ginny.

"We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wiz-ard, Malfoy," he said.

"Clearly," said Mr. Malfoy, his pale eyes straying to Mr. and Mrs. Granger, who were watching apprehensively. "The company you keep, Weasley … and I thought your family could sink no lower —"

There was a thud of metal as Ginny's cauldron went flying; Mr. Weasley had thrown himself at Mr. Malfoy, knocking him back-ward into a bookshelf. Dozens of heavy spellbooks came thunder-ing down on all their heads; there was a yell of, "Get him, Dad!" from Fred or George; Mrs. Weasley was shrieking, "No, Arthur, no!"; the crowd stampeded backward, knocking more shelves over; "Gentlemen, please — please!" cried the assistant, and then, louder than all —"Break it up, there, gents, break it up —"

Hagrid was wading toward them through the sea of books. In an instant he had pulled Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy apart. Mr. Weasley had a cut lip and Mr. Malfoy had been hit in the eye by an Encyclopedia of Toadstools. He was still holding Ginny's old Transfiguration book. He thrust it at her, his eyes glittering with malice.

"Here, girl — take your book — it's the best your father can give you —" Pulling himself out of Hagrid's grip he beckoned to Draco and swept from the shop.

"Yeh should've ignored him, Arthur," said Hagrid, almost lifting Mr. Weasley off his feet as he straightened his robes. "Rotten ter the core, the whole family, everyone knows that — no Malfoy's worth

listenin' ter — bad blood, that's what it is — come on now — let's get outta here."

The assistant looked as though he wanted to stop them from leaving, but he barely came up to Hagrid's waist and seemed to think better of it. They hurried up the street, the Grangers shaking with fright and Mrs. Weasley beside herself with fury.

"A fine example to set for your children … brawling in pub-lic … what Gilderoy Lockhart must've thought —"

"He was pleased," said Fred. "Didn't you hear him as we were leaving? He was asking that bloke from the Daily Prophet if he'd be able to work the fight into his report — said it was all publicity —"

But it was a subdued group that headed back to the fireside in the Leaky Cauldron, where Harry, the Weasleys, and all their shop-ping would be traveling back to the Burrow using Floo powder. They said good-bye to the Grangers, who were leaving the pub for the Muggle street on the other side; Mr. Weasley started to ask them how bus stops worked, but stopped quickly at the look on Mrs. Weasley's face.

Harry took off his glasses and put them safely in his pocket be-fore helping himself to Floo powder. It definitely wasn't his favorite way to travel.

Chapter 5 The Whomping Willow

The end of the summer vacation came too quickly for Harry's liking. He was looking forward to getting back to Hogwarts, but his month at the Burrow had been the happiest of his life. It was difficult not to feel jealous of Ron when he thought of the Dursleys and the sort of welcome he could expect next time he turned up on Privet Drive.

On their last evening, Mrs. Weasley conjured up a sumptuous dinner that included all of Harry's favorite things, ending with a mouthwatering treacle pudding. Fred and George rounded off the evening with a display of Filibuster fireworks; they filled the kitchen with red and blue stars that bounced from ceiling to wall for at least half an hour. Then it was time for a last mug of hot chocolate and bed.

It took a long while to get started next morning. They were up at dawn, but somehow they still seemed to have a great deal to do. Mrs. Weasley dashed about in a bad mood looking for spare socks and quills; people kept colliding on the stairs, half-dressed with bits of toast in their hands; and Mr. Weasley nearly broke his neck, trip-ping over a stray chicken as he crossed the yard carrying Ginny's trunk to the car.

Harry couldn't see how eight people, six large trunks, two owls, and a rat were going to fit into one small Ford Anglia. He had reck-oned, of course, without the special features that Mr. Weasley had added.

"Not a word to Molly," he whispered to Harry as he opened the trunk and showed him how it had been magically expanded so that the luggage fitted easily.

When at last they were all in the car, Mrs. Weasley glanced into the back seat, where Harry, Ron, Fred, George, and Percy were all sitting comfortably side by side, and said, "Muggles do know more than we give them credit for, don't they?" She and Ginny got into the front

seat, which had been stretched so that it resembled a park bench. "I mean, you'd never know it was this roomy from the out-side, would you?"

Mr. Weasley started up the engine and they trundled out of the yard, Harry turning back for a last look at the house. He barely had time to wonder when he'd see it again when they were back — George had forgotten his box of Filibuster fireworks. Five minutes after that, they skidded to a halt in the yard so that Fred could run in for his broomstick. They had almost reached the highway when Ginny shrieked that she'd left her diary. By the time she had clam-bered back into the car, they were running very late, and tempers were running high.

Mr. Weasley glanced at his watch and then at his wife.

"Molly, dear —"

"No, Arthur —"

"No one would see — this little button here is an Invisibility Booster I installed — that'd get us up in the air — then we fly above the clouds. We'd be there in ten minutes and no one would be any the wiser —"

"I said no, Arthur, not in broad daylight —"

They reached King's Cross at a quarter to eleven. Mr. Weasley dashed across the road to get trolleys for their trunks and they all hurried into the station.

Harry had caught the Hogwarts Express the previous year. The tricky part was getting onto platform nine and three-quarters, which wasn't visible to the Muggle eye. What you had to do was walk through the solid barrier dividing platforms nine and ten. It didn't hurt, but it had to be done carefully so that none of the Muggles noticed you vanishing.

"Percy first," said Mrs. Weasley, looking nervously at the clock overhead, which showed they had only five minutes to disappear casually through the barrier.

Percy strode briskly forward and vanished. Mr. Weasley went next; Fred and George followed.

"I'll take Ginny and you two come right after us," Mrs. Weasley told Harry and Ron, grabbing Ginny's hand and setting off. In the blink of an eye they were gone.

"Let's go together, we've only got a minute," Ron said to Harry.

Harry made sure that Hedwig's cage was safely wedged on top of his trunk and wheeled his trolley around to face the barrier. He felt perfectly confident; this wasn't nearly as uncomfortable as using Floo powder. Both of them bent low over the handles of their trol-leys and walked purposefully toward the barrier, gathering speed. A few feet away from it, they broke into a run and —CRASH.

Both trolleys hit the barrier and bounced backward; Ron's trunk fell off with a loud thump, Harry was knocked off his feet, and Hedwig's cage bounced onto the shiny floor, and she rolled away, shrieking indignantly; people all around them stared and a guard nearby yelled, "What in blazes d'you think you're doing?"

"Lost control of the trolley," Harry gasped, clutching his ribs as he got up. Ron ran to pick up Hedwig, who was causing such a scene that there was a lot of muttering about cruelty to animals from the surrounding crowd.

"Why can't we get through?" Harry hissed to Ron.

"I dunno —"

Ron looked wildly around. A dozen curious people were still watching them.

“We’re going to miss the train,” Ron whispered. “I don’t under-stand why the gateway’s sealed itself —”

Harry looked up at the giant clock with a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. Ten seconds … nine seconds …He wheeled his trolley forward cautiously until it was right against the barrier and pushed with all his might. The metal re-mained solid.

Three seconds … two seconds … one second …“It’s gone,” said Ron, sounding stunned. “The train’s left. What if Mum and Dad can’t get back through to us? Have you got any Muggle money?”

Harry gave a hollow laugh. “The Dursleys haven’t given me pocket money for about six years.”

Ron pressed his ear to the cold barrier.

“Can’t hear a thing,” he said tensely. “What’re we going to do? I don’t know how long it’ll take Mum and Dad to get back to us.”

They looked around. People were still watching them, mainly because of Hedwig’s continuing screeches.

“I think we’d better go and wait by the car,” said Harry. “We’re attracting too much atten —”

“Harry!” said Ron, his eyes gleaming. “The car!”

“What about it?”

“We can fly the car to Hogwarts!”

“But I thought —”

“We’re stuck, right? And we’ve got to get to school, haven’t we? And even underage wizards are allowed to use magic if it’s a real emergency, section nineteen or something of the Restriction of Thingy —”

“But your mum and dad …” said Harry, pushing against the barrier again in the vain hope that it would give way. “How will they get home?”

“They don’t need the car!” said Ron impatiently. “They know how to Apparate! You know, just vanish and reappear at home! They only bother with Floo powder and the car because we’re all underage and we’re not allowed to Apparate yet. …”

Harry’s feeling of panic turned suddenly to excitement.

“Can you fly it?”

“No problem,” said Ron, wheeling his trolley around to face the exit. “C’mon, let’s go. If we hurry we’ll be able to follow the Hog-warts Express —”

And they marched off through the crowd of curious Muggles, out of the station and back onto the side road where the old Ford Anglia was parked.

Ron unlocked the cavernous trunk with a series of taps from his wand. They heaved their luggage back in, put Hedwig on the back seat, and got into the front.

“Check that no one’s watching,” said Ron, starting the ignition with another tap of his wand. Harry stuck his head out of the win-dow: Traffic was rumbling along the main road ahead, but their street was empty.

“Okay,” he said.

Ron pressed a tiny silver button on the dashboard. The car around them vanished — and so did they. Harry could feel the seat vibrating beneath him, hear the engine, feel his hands on his knees and his glasses on his nose, but for all he could see, he had become a pair of

eyeballs, floating a few feet above the ground in a dingy street full of parked cars.

“Let’s go,” said Ron’s voice from his right.

And the ground and the dirty buildings on either side fell away, dropping out of sight as the car rose; in seconds, the whole of London lay, smoky and glittering, below them.

Then there was a popping noise and the car, Harry, and Ron reappeared.

“Uh-oh,” said Ron, jabbing at the Invisibility Booster. “It’s faulty —”

Both of them pummeled it. The car vanished. Then it flickered back again.

“Hold on!” Ron yelled, and he slammed his foot on the accelerator; they shot straight into the low, woolly clouds and everything turned dull and foggy.

“Now what?” said Harry, blinking at the solid mass of cloud pressing in on them from all sides.

“We need to see the train to know what direction to go in,” said Ron.

“Dip back down again — quickly —”

They dropped back beneath the clouds and twisted around in their seats, squinting at the ground.

“I can see it!” Harry yelled. “Right ahead — there!”

The Hogwarts Express was streaking along below them like a scarlet snake.

“Due north,” said Ron, checking the compass on the dashboard. “Okay, we’ll just have to check on it every half hour or so — hold on

—”

And they shot up through the clouds. A minute later, they burst out into a blaze of sunlight.

It was a different world. The wheels of the car skimmed the sea of fluffy cloud, the sky a bright, endless blue under the blinding white sun.

“All we’ve got to worry about now are airplanes,” said Ron.

They looked at each other and started to laugh; for a long time, they couldn’t stop.

It was as though they had been plunged into a fabulous dream. This, thought Harry, was surely the only way to travel — past swirls and turrets of snowy cloud, in a car full of hot, bright sun-light, with a fat pack of toffees in the glove compartment, and the prospect of seeing Fred’s and George’s jealous faces when they landed smoothly and spectacularly on the sweeping lawn in front of Hogwarts castle.

They made regular checks on the train as they flew farther and farther north, each dip beneath the clouds showing them a dif-ferent view. London was soon far behind them, replaced by neat green fields that gave way in turn to wide, purplish moors, a great city alive with cars like multicolored ants, villages with tiny toy churches.

Several uneventful hours later, however, Harry had to admit that some of the fun was wearing off. The toffees had made them ex-tremely thirsty and they had nothing to drink. He and Ron had pulled off their sweaters, but Harry’s T-shirt was sticking to the back of his seat and his glasses kept sliding down to the end of his sweaty nose. He had stopped noticing the fantastic cloud shapes now and was thinking longingly of the train miles below, where you could buy ice-cold pumpkin juice from a trolley pushed by a plump witch. Why hadn’t they been able to get onto platform nine and three-quarters?

“Can’t be much further, can it?” croaked Ron, hours later still, as the sun started to sink into their floor of cloud, staining it a deep pink. “Ready for another check on the train?”

It was still right below them, winding its way past a snowcapped mountain. It was much darker beneath the canopy of clouds.

Ron put his foot on the accelerator and drove them upward again, but as he did so, the engine began to whine.

Harry and Ron exchanged nervous glances.

“It’s probably just tired,” said Ron. “It’s never been this far be-fore. …”

And they both pretended not to notice the whining growing louder and louder as the sky became steadily darker. Stars were blossoming in the blackness. Harry pulled his sweater back on, try-ing to ignore the way the windshield wipers were now waving fee-bly, as though in protest.

“Not far,” said Ron, more to the car than to Harry, “not far now,” and he patted the dashboard nervously.

When they flew back beneath the clouds a little while later, they had to squint through the darkness for a landmark they knew.

“There!” Harry shouted, making Ron and Hedwig jump. “Straight ahead!”

Silhouetted on the dark horizon, high on the cliff over the lake, stood the many turrets and towers of Hogwarts castle.

But the car had begun to shudder and was losing speed.

“Come on,” Ron said cajolingly, giving the steering wheel a lit-tle shake, “nearly there, come on —”

The engine groaned. Narrow jets of steam were issuing from un-der the hood. Harry found himself gripping the edges of his seat very hard as they flew toward the lake.

The car gave a nasty wobble. Glancing out of his window, Harry saw the smooth, black, glassy surface of the water, a mile below. Ron's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. The car wobbled again.

“Come on,” Ron muttered.

They were over the lake — the castle was right ahead — Ron put his foot down.

There was a loud clunk, a splutter, and the engine died com-pletely.

“Uh-oh,” said Ron, into the silence.

The nose of the car dropped. They were falling, gathering speed, heading straight for the solid castle wall.

“Noooooo!” Ron yelled, swinging the steering wheel around; they missed the dark stone wall by inches as the car turned in a great arc, soaring over the dark greenhouses, then the vegetable patch, and then out over the black lawns, losing altitude all the time.

Ron let go of the steering wheel completely and pulled his wand out of his back pocket —“STOP! STOP!” he yelled, whacking the dashboard and the windshield, but they were still plummeting, the ground flying up toward them —“WATCH OUT FOR THAT TREE!” Harry bellowed, lunging for the steering wheel, but too late — CRUNCH.

With an earsplitting bang of metal on wood, they hit the thick tree trunk and dropped to the ground with a heavy jolt. Steam was billowing from under the crumpled hood; Hedwig was shrieking in terror; a golf-ball-sized lump was throbbing on Harry's head where he

had hit the windshield; and to his right, Ron let out a low, de-spairing groan.

“Are you okay?” Harry said urgently.

“My wand,” said Ron, in a shaky voice. “Look at my wand —”

It had snapped, almost in two; the tip was dangling limply, held on by a few splinters.

Harry opened his mouth to say he was sure they’d be able to mend it up at the school, but he never even got started. At that very moment, something hit his side of the car with the force of a charging bull, sending him lurching sideways into Ron, just as an equally heavy blow hit the roof.

“What’s happen — ?”

Ron gasped, staring through the windshield, and Harry looked around just in time to see a branch as thick as a python smash into it. The tree they had hit was attacking them. Its trunk was bent al-most double, and its gnarled boughs were pummeling every inch of the car it could reach.

“Aaargh!” said Ron as another twisted limb punched a large dent into his door; the windshield was now trembling under a hail of blows from knuckle-like twigs and a branch as thick as a battering ram was pounding furiously on the roof, which seemed to be cav-ing —“Run for it!” Ron shouted, throwing his full weight against his door, but next second he had been knocked backward into Harry’s lap by a vicious uppercut from another branch.

“We’re done for!” he moaned as the ceiling sagged, but suddenly the floor of the car was vibrating — the engine had restarted.

“Reverse!” Harry yelled, and the car shot backward; the tree was still trying to hit them; they could hear its roots creaking as it al-most

ripped itself up, lashing out at them as they sped out of reach.

“That,” panted Ron, “was close. Well done, car —”

The car, however, had reached the end of its tether. With two sharp clunks, the doors flew open and Harry felt his seat tip side-ways: Next thing he knew he was sprawled on the damp ground. Loud thuds told him that the car was ejecting their luggage from the trunk; Hedwig’s cage flew through the air and burst open; she rose out of it with an angry screech and sped off toward the castle without a backward look. Then, dented, scratched, and steaming, the car rumbled off into the darkness, its rear lights blazing angrily.

“Come back!” Ron yelled after it, brandishing his broken wand. “Dad’ll kill me!”

But the car disappeared from view with one last snort from its exhaust.

“Can you believe our luck?” said Ron miserably, bending down to pick up Scabbers. “Of all the trees we could’ve hit, we had to get one that hits back.”

He glanced over his shoulder at the ancient tree, which was still flailing its branches threateningly.

“Come on,” said Harry wearily, “we’d better get up to the school. …”

It wasn’t at all the triumphant arrival they had pictured. Stiff, cold, and bruised, they seized the ends of their trunks and began dragging them up the grassy slope, toward the great oak front doors.

“I think the feast’s already started,” said Ron, dropping his trunk at the foot of the front steps and crossing quietly to look through a brightly lit window. “Hey — Harry — come and look — it’s the Sorting!”

Harry hurried over and, together, he and Ron peered in at the Great Hall.

Innumerable candles were hovering in midair over four long, crowded tables, making the golden plates and goblets sparkle. Overhead, the bewitched ceiling, which always mirrored the sky outside, sparkled with stars.

Through the forest of pointed black Hogwarts hats, Harry saw a long line of scared-looking first years filing into the Hall. Ginny was among them, easily visible because of her vivid Weasley hair. Meanwhile, Professor McGonagall, a bespectacled witch with her hair in a tight bun, was placing the famous Hogwarts Sorting Hat on a stool before the newcomers.

Every year, this aged old hat, patched, frayed, and dirty, sorted new students into the four Hogwarts houses (Gryffindor, Huf-flepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin). Harry well remembered putting it on, exactly one year ago, and waiting, petrified, for its decision as it muttered aloud in his ear. For a few horrible seconds he had feared that the hat was going to put him in Slytherin, the House that had turned out more Dark witches and wizards than any other — but he had ended up in Gryffindor, along with Ron, Hermione, and the rest of the Weasleys. Last term, Harry and Ron had helped Gryffindor win the House Championship, beating Slytherin for the first time in seven years.

A very small, mousy-haired boy had been called forward to place the hat on his head. Harry's eyes wandered past him to where Pro-fessor Dumbledore, the headmaster, sat watching the Sorting from the staff table, his long silver beard and half-moon glasses shining brightly in the candlelight. Several seats along, Harry saw Gilderoy Lockhart, dressed in robes of aquamarine. And there at the end was Hagrid, huge and hairy, drinking deeply from his goblet.

“Hang on …” Harry muttered to Ron. “There’s an empty chair at the staff table. … Where’s Snape?”

Professor Severus Snape was Harry’s least favorite teacher. Harry also happened to be Snape’s least favorite student. Cruel, sarcastic, and disliked by everybody except the students from his own House (Slytherin), Snape taught Potions.

“Maybe he’s ill!” said Ron hopefully.

“Maybe he’s left,” said Harry, “because he missed out on the Defense Against the Dark Arts job again!”

“Or he might have been sacked!” said Ron enthusiastically. “I mean, everyone hates him —”

“Or maybe,” said a very cold voice right behind them, “he’s waiting to hear why you two didn’t arrive on the school train.”

Harry spun around. There, his black robes rippling in a cold breeze, stood Severus Snape. He was a thin man with sallow skin, a hooked nose, and greasy, shoulder-length black hair, and at this moment, he was smiling in a way that told Harry he and Ron were in very deep trouble.

“Follow me,” said Snape.

Not daring even to look at each other, Harry and Ron followed Snape up the steps into the vast, echoing entrance hall, which was lit with flaming torches. A delicious smell of food was wafting from the Great Hall, but Snape led them away from the warmth and light, down a narrow stone staircase that led into the dungeons.

“In!” he said, opening a door halfway down the cold passageway and pointing.

They entered Snape's office, shivering. The shadowy walls were lined with shelves of large glass jars, in which floated all manner of revolting things Harry didn't really want to know the name of at the moment. The fireplace was dark and empty. Snape closed the door and turned to look at them.

"So," he said softly, "the train isn't good enough for the famous Harry Potter and his faithful sidekick, Weasley. Wanted to arrive with a bang, did we, boys?"

"No, sir, it was the barrier at King's Cross, it —"

"Silence!" said Snape coldly. "What have you done with the car?"

Ron gulped. This wasn't the first time Snape had given Harry the impression of being able to read minds. But a moment later, he understood, as Snape unrolled today's issue of the Evening Prophet.

"You were seen," he hissed, showing them the headline: FLY-ING FORD ANGLIA MYSTIFIES MUGGLES. He began to read aloud: "Two Muggles in London, convinced they saw an old car flying over the Post Office tower … at noon in Norfolk, Mrs. Hetty Bayliss, while hanging out her washing … Mr. Angus Fleet, of Peebles, reported to police … Six or seven Muggles in all. I be-lieve your father works in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office?" he said, looking up at Ron and smiling still more nastily. "Dear, dear … his own son …"

Harry felt as though he'd just been walloped in the stomach by one of the mad tree's larger branches. If anyone found out Mr. Weasley had bewitched the car … he hadn't thought of that. …"I noticed, in my search of the park, that considerable damage seems to have been done to a very valuable Whomping Willow," Snape went on.

"That tree did more damage to us than we —" Ron blurted out.

"Silence!" snapped Snape again. "Most unfortunately, you are not in my House and the decision to expel you does not rest with me. I shall

go and fetch the people who do have that happy power. You will wait here."

Harry and Ron stared at each other, white-faced. Harry didn't feel hungry anymore. He now felt extremely sick. He tried not to look at a large, slimy something suspended in green liquid on a shelf behind Snape's desk. If Snape had gone to fetch Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor House, they were hardly any bet-ter off. She might be fairer than Snape, but she was still extremely strict.

Ten minutes later, Snape returned, and sure enough it was Pro-fessor McGonagall who accompanied him. Harry had seen Profes-sor McGonagall angry on several occasions, but either he had forgotten just how thin her mouth could go, or he had never seen her this angry before. She raised her wand the moment she entered; Harry and Ron both flinched, but she merely pointed it at the empty fireplace, where flames suddenly erupted.

"Sit," she said, and they both backed into chairs by the fire.

"Explain," she said, her glasses glinting ominously.

Ron launched into the story, starting with the barrier at the sta-tion refusing to let them through.

"— so we had no choice, Professor, we couldn't get on the train."

"Why didn't you send us a letter by owl? I believe you have an owl?" Professor McGonagall said coldly to Harry.

Harry gaped at her. Now she'd said it, that seemed the obvious thing to have done.

"I — I didn't think —"

"That," said Professor McGonagall, "is obvious."

There was a knock on the office door and Snape, now looking happier than ever, opened it. There stood the headmaster, Professor Dumbledore.

Harry's whole body went numb. Dumbledore was looking un-usually grave. He stared down his very crooked nose at them, and Harry suddenly found himself wishing he and Ron were still being beaten up by the Whomping Willow.

There was a long silence. Then Dumbledore said, "Please ex-plain why you did this."

It would have been better if he had shouted. Harry hated the dis-appointment in his voice. For some reason, he was unable to look Dumbledore in the eyes, and spoke instead to his knees. He told Dumbledore everything except that Mr. Weasley owned the be-witched car, making it sound as though he and Ron had happened to find a flying car parked outside the station. He knew Dumble-dore would see through this at once, but Dumbledore asked no questions about the car. When Harry had finished, he merely con-tinued to peer at them through his spectacles.

"We'll go and get our stuff," said Ron in a hopeless sort of voice.

"What are you talking about, Weasley?" barked Professor Mc-Gonagall.

"Well, you're expelling us, aren't you?" said Ron.

Harry looked quickly at Dumbledore.

"Not today, Mr. Weasley," said Dumbledore. "But I must im-press upon both of you the seriousness of what you have done. I will be writing to both your families tonight. I must also warn you that if you do anything like this again, I will have no choice but to expel you."

Snape looked as though Christmas had been canceled. He cleared his throat and said, "Professor Dumbledore, these boys have flouted the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry, caused serious damage to an old and valuable tree — surely acts of this nature —"

"It will be for Professor McGonagall to decide on these boys' punishments, Severus," said Dumbledore calmly. "They are in her House and are therefore her responsibility." He turned to Professor McGonagall. "I must go back to the feast, Minerva, I've got to give out a few notices. Come, Severus, there's a delicious-looking cus-tard tart I want to sample —"

Snape shot a look of pure venom at Harry and Ron as he allowed himself to be swept out of his office, leaving them alone with Professor McGonagall, who was still eyeing them like a wrathful eagle.

"You'd better get along to the hospital wing, Weasley, you're bleeding."

"Not much," said Ron, hastily wiping the cut over his eye with his sleeve. "Professor, I wanted to watch my sister being Sorted —"

"The Sorting Ceremony is over," said Professor McGonagall. "Your sister is also in Gryffindor."

"Oh, good," said Ron.

"And speaking of Gryffindor —" Professor McGonagall said sharply, but Harry cut in: "Professor, when we took the car, term hadn't started, so — so Gryffindor shouldn't really have points taken from it — should it?" he finished, watching her anxiously.

Professor McGonagall gave him a piercing look, but he was sure she had almost smiled. Her mouth looked less thin, anyway.

"I will not take any points from Gryffindor," she said, and Harry's heart lightened considerably. "But you will both get a de-tention."

It was better than Harry had expected. As for Dumbledore's writing to the Dursleys, that was nothing. Harry knew perfectly well they'd just be disappointed that the Whomping Willow hadn't squashed him flat.

Professor McGonagall raised her wand again and pointed it at Snape's desk. A large plate of sandwiches, two silver goblets, and a jug of iced pumpkin juice appeared with a pop.

"You will eat in here and then go straight up to your dormitory," she said. "I must also return to the feast."

When the door had closed behind her, Ron let out a long, low whistle.

"I thought we'd had it," he said, grabbing a sandwich.

"So did I," said Harry, taking one, too.

"Can you believe our luck, though?" said Ron thickly through a mouthful of chicken and ham. "Fred and George must've flown that car five or six times and no Muggle ever saw them." He swal-lowed and took another huge bite. "Why couldn't we get through the barrier?"

Harry shrugged. "We'll have to watch our step from now on, though," he said, taking a grateful swig of pumpkin juice. "Wish we could've gone up to the feast. …"

"She didn't want us showing off," said Ron sagely. "Doesn't want people to think it's clever, arriving by flying car."

When they had eaten as many sandwiches as they could (the plate kept refilling itself), they rose and left the office, treading the familiar path to Gryffindor Tower. The castle was quiet; it seemed that the feast was over. They walked past muttering portraits and creaking suits of armor, and climbed narrow flights of stone stairs, until at last they reached the passage where the secret entrance to Gryffindor

Tower was hidden, behind an oil painting of a very fat woman in a pink silk dress.

“Password?” she said as they approached.

“Er —” said Harry.

They didn’t know the new year’s password, not having met a Gryffindor prefect yet, but help came almost immediately; they heard hurrying feet behind them and turned to see Hermione dashing toward them.

“There you are! Where have you been? The most ridiculous ru-mors — someone said you’d been expelled for crashing a flying car —”

“Well, we haven’t been expelled,” Harry assured her.

“You’re not telling me you did fly here?” said Hermione, sound-ing almost as severe as Professor McGonagall.

“Skip the lecture,” said Ron impatiently, “and tell us the new password.”

“It’s ‘wattlebird,’ ” said Hermione impatiently, “but that’s not the point —”

Her words were cut short, however, as the portrait of the fat lady swung open and there was a sudden storm of clapping. It looked as though the whole of Gryffindor House was still awake, packed into the circular common room, standing on the lopsided tables and squashy armchairs, waiting for them to arrive. Arms reached through the portrait hole to pull Harry and Ron inside, leaving Hermione to scramble in after them.

“Brilliant!” yelled Lee Jordan. “Inspired! What an entrance! Fly-ing a car right into the Whomping Willow, people’ll be talking about that one for years —”

“Good for you,” said a fifth year Harry had never spoken to; someone was patting him on the back as though he’d just won a marathon; Fred and George pushed their way to the front of the crowd and said together, “Why couldn’t we’ve come in the car, eh?” Ron was scarlet in the face, grinning embarrassedly, but Harry could see one person who didn’t look happy at all. Percy was visible over the heads of some excited first years, and he seemed to be try-ing to get near enough to start telling them off. Harry nudged Ron in the ribs and nodded in Percy’s direction. Ron got the point at once.

“Got to get upstairs — bit tired,” he said, and the two of them started pushing their way toward the door on the other side of the room, which led to a spiral staircase and the dormitories.

“ ’Night,” Harry called back to Hermione, who was wearing a scowl just like Percy’s.

They managed to get to the other side of the common room, still having their backs slapped, and gained the peace of the stair-case. They hurried up it, right to the top, and at last reached the door of their old dormitory, which now had a sign on it saying SECOND YEARS. They entered the familiar, circular room, with its five four-posters hung with red velvet and its high, narrow win-dows. Their trunks had been brought up for them and stood at the ends of their beds.

Ron grinned guiltily at Harry.

“I know I shouldn’t’ve enjoyed that or anything, but —”

The dormitory door flew open and in came the other second year Gryffindor boys, Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom.

“Unbelievable!” beamed Seamus.

“Cool,” said Dean.

“Amazing,” said Neville, awestruck.

Harry couldn’t help it. He grinned, too.

Chapter 6 Gilderoy Lockhart

The next day, however, Harry barely grinned once. Things started to go downhill from breakfast in the Great Hall. The four long House tables were laden with tureens of porridge, plates of kippers, mountains of toast, and dishes of eggs and bacon, be-neath the enchanted ceiling (today, a dull, cloudy gray). Harry and Ron sat down at the Gryffindor table next to Hermione, who had her copy of Voyages with Vampires propped open against a milk jug. There was a slight stiffness in the way she said " 'Morning," which told Harry that she was still disapproving of the way they had ar-rived. Neville Longbottom, on the other hand, greeted them cheer-fully. Neville was a round-faced and accident-prone boy with the worst memory of anyone Harry had ever met.

"Mail's due any minute — I think Gran's sending a few things I forgot."

Harry had only just started his porridge when, sure enough, there was a rushing sound overhead and a hundred or so owls streamed in, circling the hall and dropping letters and packages into the chattering crowd. A big, lumpy package bounced off Neville's head and, a second later, something large and gray fell into Hermione's jug, spraying them all with milk and feathers.

"Errol!" said Ron, pulling the bedraggled owl out by the feet. Er-rol slumped, unconscious, onto the table, his legs in the air and a damp red envelope in his beak.

"Oh, no —" Ron gasped.

"It's all right, he's still alive," said Hermione, prodding Errol gently with the tip of her finger.

"It's not that — it's that."

Ron was pointing at the red envelope. It looked quite ordinary to Harry, but Ron and Neville were both looking at it as though they expected it to explode.

“What’s the matter?” said Harry.

“She’s — she’s sent me a Howler,” said Ron faintly.

“You’d better open it, Ron,” said Neville in a timid whisper. “It’ll be worse if you don’t. My gran sent me one once, and I ignored it and” — he gulped — “it was horrible.”

Harry looked from their petrified faces to the red envelope.

“What’s a Howler?” he said.

But Ron’s whole attention was fixed on the letter, which had be-gun to smoke at the corners.

“Open it,” Neville urged. “It’ll all be over in a few minutes —”

Ron stretched out a shaking hand, eased the envelope from Er-rol’s beak, and slit it open. Neville stuffed his fingers in his ears. A split second later, Harry knew why. He thought for a moment it had exploded; a roar of sound filled the huge hall, shaking dust from the ceiling.

“— STEALING THE CAR, I WOULDN’T HAVE BEEN SUR-PRISED IF THEY’D EXPELLED YOU, YOU WAIT TILL I GET HOLD OF YOU, I DON’T SUPPOSE YOU STOPPED TO THINK WHAT YOUR FATHER AND I WENT THROUGH WHEN WE SAW IT WAS GONE —”

Mrs. Weasley’s yells, a hundred times louder than usual, made the plates and spoons rattle on the table, and echoed deafeningly off the stone walls. People throughout the hall were swiveling around to see

who had received the Howler, and Ron sank so low in his chair that only his crimson forehead could be seen.

"— LETTER FROM DUMBLEDORE LAST NIGHT, I THOUGHT YOUR FATHER WOULD DIE OF SHAME, WE DIDN'T BRING YOU UP TO BEHAVE LIKE THIS, YOU AND HARRY COULD BOTH HAVE DIED —"

Harry had been wondering when his name was going to crop up. He tried very hard to look as though he couldn't hear the voice that was making his eardrums throb.

"— ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTED — YOUR FATHER'S FAC-ING AN INQUIRY AT WORK, IT'S ENTIRELY YOUR FAULT AND IF YOU PUT ANOTHER TOE OUT OF LINE WE'LL BRING YOU STRAIGHT BACK HOME."

A ringing silence fell. The red envelope, which had dropped from Ron's hand, burst into flames and curled into ashes. Harry and Ron sat stunned, as though a tidal wave had just passed over them. A few people laughed and, gradually, a babble of talk broke out again.

Hermione closed Voyages with Vampires and looked down at the top of Ron's head.

"Well, I don't know what you expected, Ron, but you —"

"Don't tell me I deserved it," snapped Ron.

Harry pushed his porridge away. His insides were burning with guilt. Mr. Weasley was facing an inquiry at work. After all Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had done for him over the summer …But he had no time to dwell on this; Professor McGonagall was moving along the Gryffindor table, handing out course schedules. Harry took his and saw that they had double Herbology with the Hufflepuffs first.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the castle together, crossed the vegetable patch, and made for the greenhouses, where the magical plants were kept. At least the Howler had done one good thing: Hermione seemed to think they had now been punished enough and was being perfectly friendly again.

As they neared the greenhouses they saw the rest of the class standing outside, waiting for Professor Sprout. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had only just joined them when she came striding into view across the lawn, accompanied by Gilderoy Lockhart. Profes-sor Sprout's arms were full of bandages, and with another twinge of guilt, Harry spotted the Whomping Willow in the distance, several of its branches now in slings.

Professor Sprout was a squat little witch who wore a patched hat over her flyaway hair; there was usually a large amount of earth on her clothes and her fingernails would have made Aunt Petunia faint. Gilderoy Lockhart, however, was immaculate in sweeping robes of turquoise, his golden hair shining under a perfectly posi-tioned turquoise hat with gold trimming.

"Oh, hello there!" he called, beaming around at the assembled students. "Just been showing Professor Sprout the right way to doc-tor a Whomping Willow! But I don't want you running away with the idea that I'm better at Herbology than she is! I just happen to have met several of these exotic plants on my travels …"

"Greenhouse three today, chaps!" said Professor Sprout, who was looking distinctly disgruntled, not at all her usual cheerful self.

There was a murmur of interest. They had only ever worked in greenhouse one before — greenhouse three housed far more in-teresting and dangerous plants. Professor Sprout took a large key from her belt and unlocked the door. Harry caught a whiff of damp earth and fertilizer mingling with the heavy perfume of some giant,

umbrella-sized flowers dangling from the ceiling. He was about to follow Ron and Hermione inside when Lockhart's hand shot out.

"Harry! I've been wanting a word — you don't mind if he's a couple of minutes late, do you, Professor Sprout?"

Judging by Professor Sprout's scowl, she did mind, but Lockhart said, "That's the ticket," and closed the greenhouse door in her face.

"Harry," said Lockhart, his large white teeth gleaming in the sunlight as he shook his head. "Harry, Harry, Harry."

Completely nonplussed, Harry said nothing.

"When I heard — well, of course, it was all my fault. Could have kicked myself."

Harry had no idea what he was talking about. He was about to say so when Lockhart went on, "Don't know when I've been more shocked. Flying a car to Hogwarts! Well, of course, I knew at once why you'd done it. Stood out a mile. Harry, Harry, Harry."

It was remarkable how he could show every one of those brilliant teeth even when he wasn't talking.

"Gave you a taste for publicity, didn't I?" said Lockhart. "Gave you the bug. You got onto the front page of the paper with me and you couldn't wait to do it again."

"Oh, no, Professor, see —"

"Harry, Harry, Harry," said Lockhart, reaching out and grasping his shoulder. "I understand. Natural to want a bit more once you've had that first taste — and I blame myself for giving you that, be-cause it was bound to go to your head — but see here, young man, you can't start flying cars to try and get yourself noticed. Just calm down, all right? Plenty of time for all that when you're older. Yes, yes, I know

what you're thinking! 'It's all right for him, he's an in-ternationally famous wizard already!' But when I was twelve, I was just as much of a nobody as you are now. In fact, I'd say I was even more of a nobody! I mean, a few people have heard of you, haven't they? All that business with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" He glanced at the lightning scar on Harry's forehead. "I know, I know — it's not quite as good as winning Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award five times in a row, as I have — but it's a start, Harry, it's a start."

He gave Harry a hearty wink and strode off. Harry stood stunned for a few seconds, then, remembering he was supposed to be in the greenhouse, he opened the door and slid inside.

Professor Sprout was standing behind a trestle bench in the cen-ter of the greenhouse. About twenty pairs of different-colored ear-muffs were lying on the bench. When Harry had taken his place between Ron and Hermione, she said, "We'll be repotting Man-drakes today. Now, who can tell me the properties of the Man-drake?"

To nobody's surprise, Hermione's hand was first into the air.

"Mandrake, or Mandragora, is a powerful restorative," said Her-mione, sounding as usual as though she had swallowed the text-book. "It is used to return people who have been transfigured or cursed to their original state."

"Excellent. Ten points to Gryffindor," said Professor Sprout. "The Mandrake forms an essential part of most antidotes. It is also, however, dangerous. Who can tell me why?"

Hermione's hand narrowly missed Harry's glasses as it shot up again.

"The cry of the Mandrake is fatal to anyone who hears it," she said promptly.

"Precisely. Take another ten points," said Professor Sprout. "Now, the Mandrakes we have here are still very young."

She pointed to a row of deep trays as she spoke, and everyone shuffled forward for a better look. A hundred or so tufty little plants, purplish green in color, were growing there in rows. They looked quite unremarkable to Harry, who didn't have the slightest idea what Hermione meant by the "cry" of the Mandrake.

"Everyone take a pair of earmuffs," said Professor Sprout.

There was a scramble as everyone tried to seize a pair that wasn't pink and fluffy.

"When I tell you to put them on, make sure your ears are com-pletely covered," said Professor Sprout. "When it is safe to remove them, I will give you the thumbs-up. Right — earmuffs on."

Harry snapped the earmuffs over his ears. They shut out sound completely. Professor Sprout put the pink, fluffy pair over her own ears, rolled up the sleeves of her robes, grasped one of the tufty plants firmly, and pulled hard.

Harry let out a gasp of surprise that no one could hear.

Instead of roots, a small, muddy, and extremely ugly baby popped out of the earth. The leaves were growing right out of his head. He had pale green, mottled skin, and was clearly bawling at the top of his lungs.

Professor Sprout took a large plant pot from under the table and plunged the Mandrake into it, burying him in dark, damp com-post until only the tufted leaves were visible. Professor Sprout dusted off her hands, gave them all the thumbs-up, and removed her own earmuffs.

"As our Mandrakes are only seedlings, their cries won't kill yet," she said calmly as though she'd just done nothing more exciting than water a begonia. "However, they will knock you out for sev-eral hours, and as I'm sure none of you want to miss your first day back, make

sure your earmuffs are securely in place while you work. I will attract your attention when it is time to pack up.

"Four to a tray — there is a large supply of pots here — com-post in the sacks over there — and be careful of the Venomous Tentacula, it's teething."

She gave a sharp slap to a spiky, dark red plant as she spoke, making it draw in the long feelers that had been inching sneakily over her shoulder.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were joined at their tray by a curly-haired Hufflepuff boy Harry knew by sight but had never spoken to.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley," he said brightly, shaking Harry by the hand. "Know who you are, of course, the famous Harry Potter. … And you're Hermione Granger — always top in everything" (Hermione beamed as she had her hand shaken too) "— and Ron Weasley. Wasn't that your flying car?"

Ron didn't smile. The Howler was obviously still on his mind.

"That Lockhart's something, isn't he?" said Justin happily as they began filling their plant pots with dragon dung compost. "Awfully brave chap. Have you read his books? I'd have died of fear if I'd been cornered in a telephone booth by a werewolf, but he stayed cool and — zap — just fantastic.

"My name was down for Eton, you know. I can't tell you how glad I am I came here instead. Of course, Mother was slightly dis-appointed, but since I made her read Lockhart's books I think she's begun to see how useful it'll be to have a fully trained wizard in the family. …"

After that they didn't have much chance to talk. Their earmuffs were back on and they needed to concentrate on the Mandrakes. Professor Sprout had made it look extremely easy, but it wasn't. The Mandrakes didn't like coming out of the earth, but didn't seem to want

to go back into it either. They squirmed, kicked, flailed their sharp little fists, and gnashed their teeth; Harry spent ten whole minutes trying to squash a particularly fat one into a pot.

By the end of the class, Harry, like everyone else, was sweaty, aching, and covered in earth. Everyone traipsed back to the castle for a quick wash and then the Gryffindors hurried off to Transfig-uration.

Professor McGonagall's classes were always hard work, but today was especially difficult. Everything Harry had learned last year seemed to have leaked out of his head during the summer. He was supposed to be turning a beetle into a button, but all he managed to do was give his beetle a lot of exercise as it scuttled over the desk-top avoiding his wand.

Ron was having far worse problems. He had patched up his wand with some borrowed Spellotape, but it seemed to be damaged beyond repair. It kept crackling and sparking at odd moments, and every time Ron tried to transfigure his beetle it engulfed him in thick gray smoke that smelled of rotten eggs. Unable to see what he was doing, Ron accidentally squashed his beetle with his el-bow and had to ask for a new one. Professor McGonagall wasn't pleased.

Harry was relieved to hear the lunch bell. His brain felt like a wrung sponge. Everyone filed out of the classroom except him and Ron, who was whacking his wand furiously on the desk.

"Stupid — useless — thing —"

"Write home for another one," Harry suggested as the wand let off a volley of bangs like a firecracker.

"Oh, yeah, and get another Howler back," said Ron, stuffing the now hissing wand into his bag. " 'It's your own fault your wand got snapped —' "

They went down to lunch, where Ron's mood was not improved by Hermione's showing them the handful of perfect coat buttons she had produced in Transfiguration.

"What've we got this afternoon?" said Harry, hastily changing the subject.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts," said Hermione at once.

"Why," demanded Ron, seizing her schedule, "have you outlined all Lockhart's lessons in little hearts?"

Hermione snatched the schedule back, blushing furiously.

They finished lunch and went outside into the overcast court-yard. Hermione sat down on a stone step and buried her nose in Voyages with Vampires again. Harry and Ron stood talking about Quidditch for several minutes before Harry became aware that he was being closely watched. Looking up, he saw the very small, mousy-haired boy he'd seen trying on the Sorting Hat last night staring at Harry as though transfixed. He was clutching what looked like an ordinary Muggle camera, and the moment Harry looked at him, he went bright red.

"All right, Harry? I'm — I'm Colin Creevey," he said breath-lessly, taking a tentative step forward. "I'm in Gryffindor, too. D'you think — would it be all right if — can I have a picture?" he said, raising the camera hopefully.

"A picture?" Harry repeated blankly.

"So I can prove I've met you," said Colin Creevey eagerly, edg-ing further forward. "I know all about you. Everyone's told me. About how you survived when You-Know-Who tried to kill you and how he disappeared and everything and how you've still got a lightning scar on your forehead" (his eyes raked Harry's hairline) "and a boy in my dormitory said if I develop the film in the right potion, the pictures'll

move.” Colin drew a great shuddering breath of excitement and said, “It’s amazing here, isn’t it? I never knew all the odd stuff I could do was magic till I got the letter from Hog-warts. My dad’s a milkman, he couldn’t believe it either. So I’m tak-ing loads of pictures to send home to him. And it’d be really good if I had one of you” — he looked imploringly at Harry — “maybe your friend could take it and I could stand next to you? And then, could you sign it?”

“Signed photos? You’re giving out signed photos, Potter?”

Loud and scathing, Draco Malfoy’s voice echoed around the courtyard. He had stopped right behind Colin, flanked, as he al-ways was at Hogwarts, by his large and thuggish cronies, Crabbe and Goyle.

“Everyone line up!” Malfoy roared to the crowd. “Harry Potter’s giving out signed photos!”

“No, I’m not,” said Harry angrily, his fists clenching. “Shut up, Malfoy.”

“You’re just jealous,” piped up Colin, whose entire body was about as thick as Crabbe’s neck.

“Jealous?” said Malfoy, who didn’t need to shout anymore: Half the courtyard was listening in. “Of what? I don’t want a foul scar right across my head, thanks. I don’t think getting your head cut open makes you that special, myself.”

Crabbe and Goyle were sniggering stupidly.

“Eat slugs, Malfoy,” said Ron angrily. Crabbe stopped laughing and started rubbing his knuckles in a menacing way.

“Be careful, Weasley,” sneered Malfoy. “You don’t want to start any trouble or your mommy’ll have to come and take you away from school.” He put on a shrill, piercing voice. “If you put another toe out of line —”

A knot of Slytherin fifth years nearby laughed loudly at this.

“Weasley would like a signed photo, Potter,” smirked Malfoy. “It’d be worth more than his family’s whole house —”

Ron whipped out his Spellotaped wand, but Hermione shut Voyages with Vampires with a snap and whispered, “Look out!”

“What’s all this, what’s all this?” Gilderoy Lockhart was striding toward them, his turquoise robes swirling behind him. “Who’s giv-ing out signed photos?”

Harry started to speak but he was cut short as Lockhart flung an arm around his shoulders and thundered jovially, “Shouldn’t have asked! We meet again, Harry!”

Pinned to Lockhart’s side and burning with humiliation, Harry saw Malfoy slide smirking back into the crowd.

“Come on then, Mr. Creevey,” said Lockhart, beaming at Colin. “A double portrait, can’t do better than that, and we’ll both sign it for you.”

Colin fumbled for his camera and took the picture as the bell rang behind them, signaling the start of afternoon classes.

“Off you go, move along there,” Lockhart called to the crowd, and he set off back to the castle with Harry, who was wishing he knew a good Vanishing Spell, still clasped to his side.

“A word to the wise, Harry,” said Lockhart paternally as they entered the building through a side door. “I covered up for you back there with young Creevey — if he was photographing me, too, your schoolmates won’t think you’re setting yourself up so much. …”

Deaf to Harry’s stammers, Lockhart swept him down a corridor lined with staring students and up a staircase.

“Let me just say that handing out signed pictures at this stage of your career isn’t sensible — looks a tad bigheaded, Harry, to be frank. There may well come a time when, like me, you’ll need to keep a stack handy wherever you go, but” — he gave a little chor-tle — “I don’t think you’re quite there yet.”

They had reached Lockhart’s classroom and he let Harry go at last. Harry yanked his robes straight and headed for a seat at the very back of the class, where he busied himself with piling all seven of Lockhart’s books in front of him, so that he could avoid looking at the real thing.

The rest of the class came clattering in, and Ron and Hermione sat down on either side of Harry.

“You could’ve fried an egg on your face,” said Ron. “You’d better hope Creevey doesn’t meet Ginny, or they’ll be starting a Harry Potter fan club.”

“Shut up,” snapped Harry. The last thing he needed was for Lockhart to hear the phrase “Harry Potter fan club.”

When the whole class was seated, Lockhart cleared his throat loudly and silence fell. He reached forward, picked up Neville Longbottom’s copy of Travels with Trolls, and held it up to show his own, winking portrait on the front.

“Me,” he said, pointing at it and winking as well. “Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly’s Most-Charming-Smile Award — but I don’t talk about that. I didn’t get rid of the Bandon Banshee by smiling at her!”

He waited for them to laugh; a few people smiled weakly.

“I see you’ve all bought a complete set of my books — well done. I thought we’d start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about —

just to check how well you've read them, how much you've taken in —"

When he had handed out the test papers he returned to the front of the class and said, "You have thirty minutes — start — now!"

Harry looked down at his paper and read:1. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color?

2. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition?

3. What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart'sgreatest achievement to date?

On and on it went, over three sides of paper, right down to:54. When is Gilderoy Lockhart's birthday, and whatwould his ideal gift be?

Half an hour later, Lockhart collected the papers and rifled through them in front of the class.

"Tut, tut — hardly any of you remembered that my favorite color is lilac. I say so in Year with the Yeti. And a few of you need to read Wanderings with Werewolves more carefully — I clearly state in chapter twelve that my ideal birthday gift would be harmony be-tween all magic and non-magic peoples — though I wouldn't say no to a large bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky!"

He gave them another roguish wink. Ron was now staring at Lockhart with an expression of disbelief on his face; Seamus Finni-gan and Dean Thomas, who were sitting in front, were shaking with silent laughter. Hermione, on the other hand, was listening to Lockhart with rapt attention and gave a start when he mentioned her name.

"… but Miss Hermione Granger knew my secret ambition is to rid the world of evil and market my own range of hair-care po-tions — good girl! In fact" — he flipped her paper over — "full marks! Where is Miss Hermione Granger?"

Hermione raised a trembling hand.

"Excellent!" beamed Lockhart. "Quite excellent! Take ten points for Gryffindor! And so — to business —"

He bent down behind his desk and lifted a large, covered cage onto it.

"Now — be warned! It is my job to arm you against the foulest creatures known to wizardkind! You may find yourselves facing your worst fears in this room. Know only that no harm can befall you whilst I am here. All I ask is that you remain calm."

In spite of himself, Harry leaned around his pile of books for a better look at the cage. Lockhart placed a hand on the cover. Dean and Seamus had stopped laughing now. Neville was cowering in his front row seat.

"I must ask you not to scream," said Lockhart in a low voice. "It might provoke them."

As the whole class held its breath, Lockhart whipped off the cover.

"Yes," he said dramatically. "Freshly caught Cornish pixies."

Seamus Finnigan couldn't control himself. He let out a snort of laughter that even Lockhart couldn't mistake for a scream of terror.

"Yes?" He smiled at Seamus.

"Well, they're not — they're not very — dangerous, are they?" Seamus choked.

"Don't be so sure!" said Lockhart, waggling a finger annoyingly at Seamus. "Devilish tricky little blighters they can be!"

The pixies were electric blue and about eight inches high, with pointed faces and voices so shrill it was like listening to a lot of budgies arguing. The moment the cover had been removed, they had

started jabbering and rocketing around, rattling the bars and making bizarre faces at the people nearest them.

“Right, then,” Lockhart said loudly. “Let’s see what you make of them!” And he opened the cage.

It was pandemonium. The pixies shot in every direction like rockets. Two of them seized Neville by the ears and lifted him into the air. Several shot straight through the window, showering the back row with broken glass. The rest proceeded to wreck the class-room more effectively than a rampaging rhino. They grabbed ink bottles and sprayed the class with them, shredded books and pa-pers, tore pictures from the walls, up-ended the waste basket, grabbed bags and books and threw them out of the smashed win-dow; within minutes, half the class was sheltering under desks and Neville was swinging from the iron chandelier in the ceiling.

“Come on now — round them up, round them up, they’re only pixies,” Lockhart shouted.

He rolled up his sleeves, brandished his wand, and bellowed, “Peskipiksi Pesternomi!”

It had absolutely no effect; one of the pixies seized his wand and threw it out of the window, too. Lockhart gulped and dived under his own desk, narrowly avoiding being squashed by Neville, who fell a second later as the chandelier gave way.

The bell rang and there was a mad rush toward the exit. In the relative calm that followed, Lockhart straightened up, caught sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who were almost at the door, and said, “Well, I’ll ask you three to just nip the rest of them back into their cage.” He swept past them and shut the door quickly behind him.

“Can you believe him?” roared Ron as one of the remaining pix-ies bit him painfully on the ear.

“He just wants to give us some hands-on experience,” said Hermione, immobilizing two pixies at once with a clever Freezing Charm and stuffing them back into their cage.

“Hands on?” said Harry, who was trying to grab a pixie dancing out of reach with its tongue out. “Hermione, he didn’t have a clue what he was doing —”

“Rubbish,” said Hermione. “You’ve read his books — look at all those amazing things he’s done —”

“He says he’s done,” Ron muttered.

Chapter 7 Mudbloods and Murmurs

Harry spent a lot of time over the next few days dodging out of sight whenever he saw Gilderoy Lockhart coming down a corridor. Harder to avoid was Colin Creevey, who seemed to have memorized Harry's schedule. Nothing seemed to give Colin a bigger thrill than to say, "All right, Harry?" six or seven times a day and hear, "Hello, Colin," back, however exasperated Harry sounded when he said it.

Hedwig was still angry with Harry about the disasterous car journey and Ron's wand was still malfunctioning, surpassing itself on Friday morning by shooting out of Ron's hand in Charms and hitting tiny old Professor Flitwick squarely between the eyes, creat-ing a large, throbbing green boil where it had struck. So with one thing and another, Harry was quite glad to reach the weekend. He, Ron, and Hermione were planning to visit Hagrid on Saturday morning. Harry, however, was shaken awake several hours earlier than he would have liked by Oliver Wood, Captain of the Gryf-findor Quidditch team.

"Whassamatter?" said Harry groggily.

"Quidditch practice!" said Wood. "Come on!"

Harry squinted at the window. There was a thin mist hanging across the pink-and-gold sky. Now that he was awake, he couldn't understand how he could have slept through the racket the birds were making.

"Oliver," Harry croaked. "It's the crack of dawn."

"Exactly," said Wood. He was a tall and burly sixth year and, at the moment, his eyes were gleaming with a crazed enthusiasm. "It's part of our new training program. Come on, grab your broom, and let's go," said Wood heartily. "None of the other teams have started training yet; we're going to be first off the mark this year —"

Yawning and shivering slightly, Harry climbed out of bed and tried to find his Quidditch robes.

“Good man,” said Wood. “Meet you on the field in fifteen min-utes.”

When he’d found his scarlet team robes and pulled on his cloak for warmth, Harry scribbled a note to Ron explaining where he’d gone and went down the spiral staircase to the common room, his Nimbus Two Thousand on his shoulder. He had just reached the portrait hole when there was a clatter behind him and Colin Creevey came dashing down the spiral staircase, his camera swinging madly around his neck and something clutched in his hand.

“I heard someone saying your name on the stairs, Harry! Look what I’ve got here! I’ve had it developed, I wanted to show you —”

Harry looked bemusedly at the photograph Colin was brandish-ing under his nose.

A moving, black-and-white Lockhart was tugging hard on an arm Harry recognized as his own. He was pleased to see that his photographic self was putting up a good fight and refusing to be dragged into view. As Harry watched, Lockhart gave up and slumped, panting, against the white edge of the picture.

“Will you sign it?” said Colin eagerly.

“No,” said Harry flatly, glancing around to check that the room was really deserted. “Sorry, Colin, I’m in a hurry — Quidditch practice —”

He climbed through the portrait hole.

“Oh, wow! Wait for me! I’ve never watched a Quidditch game before!”

Colin scrambled through the hole after him.

“It’ll be really boring,” Harry said quickly, but Colin ignored him, his face shining with excitement.

“You were the youngest House player in a hundred years, weren’t you, Harry? Weren’t you?” said Colin, trotting alongside him. “You must be brilliant. I’ve never flown. Is it easy? Is that your own broom? Is that the best one there is?”

Harry didn’t know how to get rid of him. It was like having an extremely talkative shadow.

“I don’t really understand Quidditch,” said Colin breathlessly. “Is it true there are four balls? And two of them fly around trying to knock people off their brooms?”

“Yes,” said Harry heavily, resigned to explaining the complicated rules of Quidditch. “They’re called Bludgers. There are two Beaters on each team who carry clubs to beat the Bludgers away from their side. Fred and George Weasley are the Gryffindor Beaters.”

“And what are the other balls for?” Colin asked, tripping down a couple of steps because he was gazing open-mouthed at Harry.

“Well, the Quaffle — that’s the biggish red one — is the one that scores goals. Three Chasers on each team throw the Quaffle to each other and try and get it through the goal posts at the end of the pitch — they’re three long poles with hoops on the end.”

“And the fourth ball —”

“— is the Golden Snitch,” said Harry, “and it’s very small, very fast, and difficult to catch. But that’s what the Seeker’s got to do, because a game of Quidditch doesn’t end until the Snitch has been caught. And whichever team’s Seeker gets the Snitch earns his team an extra hundred and fifty points.”

“And you’re the Gryffindor Seeker, aren’t you?” said Colin in awe.

“Yes,” said Harry as they left the castle and started across the dew-drenched grass. “And there’s the Keeper, too. He guards the goal posts. That’s it, really.”

But Colin didn’t stop questioning Harry all the way down the sloping lawns to the Quidditch field, and Harry only shook him off when he reached the changing rooms; Colin called after him in a piping voice, “I’ll go and get a good seat, Harry!” and hurried off to the stands.

The rest of the Gryffindor team were already in the chang-ing room. Wood was the only person who looked truly awake. Fred and George Weasley were sitting, puffy-eyed and tousle-haired, next to fourth year Alicia Spinnet, who seemed to be nod-ding off against the wall behind her. Her fellow Chasers, Katie Bell and Angelina Johnson, were yawning side by side opposite them.

“There you are, Harry, what kept you?” said Wood briskly. “Now, I wanted a quick talk with you all before we actually get onto the field, because I spent the summer devising a whole new training program, which I really think will make all the differ-ence. …”

Wood was holding up a large diagram of a Quidditch field, on which were drawn many lines, arrows, and crosses in different-colored inks. He took out his wand, tapped the board, and the arrows began to wiggle over the diagram like caterpillars. As Wood launched into a speech about his new tactics, Fred Weasley’s head drooped right onto Alicia Spinnet’s shoulder and he began to snore.

The first board took nearly twenty minutes to explain, but there was another board under that, and a third under that one. Harry sank into a stupor as Wood droned on and on.

“So,” said Wood, at long last, jerking Harry from a wistful fan-tasy about what he could be eating for breakfast at this very mo-ment up at the castle. “Is that clear? Any questions?”

“I’ve got a question, Oliver,” said George, who had woken with a start. “Why couldn’t you have told us all this yesterday when we were awake?”

Wood wasn’t pleased.

“Now, listen here, you lot,” he said, glowering at them all. “We should have won the Quidditch Cup last year. We’re easily the best team. But unfortunately — owing to circumstances beyond our control —”

Harry shifted guiltily in his seat. He had been unconscious in the hospital wing for the final match of the previous year, meaning that Gryffindor had been a player short and had suffered their worst defeat in three hundred years.

Wood took a moment to regain control of himself. Their last de-feat was clearly still torturing him.

“So this year, we train harder than ever before. … Okay, let’s go and put our new theories into practice!” Wood shouted, seizing his broomstick and leading the way out of the locker rooms. Stiff-legged and still yawning, his team followed.

They had been in the locker room so long that the sun was up completely now, although remnants of mist hung over the grass in the stadium. As Harry walked onto the field, he saw Ron and Her-mione sitting in the stands.

“Aren’t you finished yet?” called Ron incredulously.

“Haven’t even started,” said Harry, looking jealously at the toast and marmalade Ron and Hermione had brought out of the Great Hall. “Wood’s been teaching us new moves.”

He mounted his broomstick and kicked at the ground, soaring up into the air. The cool morning air whipped his face, waking him far more effectively than Wood’s long talk. It felt wonderful to be back on the

Quidditch field. He soared right around the stadium at full speed, racing Fred and George.

“What’s that funny clicking noise?” called Fred as they hurtled around the corner.

Harry looked into the stands. Colin was sitting in one of the highest seats, his camera raised, taking picture after picture, the sound strangely magnified in the deserted stadium.

“Look this way, Harry! This way!” he cried shrilly.

“Who’s that?” said Fred.

“No idea,” Harry lied, putting on a spurt of speed that took him as far away as possible from Colin.

“What’s going on?” said Wood, frowning, as he skimmed through the air toward them. “Why’s that first year taking pictures? I don’t like it. He could be a Slytherin spy, trying to find out about our new training program.”

“He’s in Gryffindor,” said Harry quickly.

“And the Slytherins don’t need a spy, Oliver,” said George.

“What makes you say that?” said Wood testily.

“Because they’re here in person,” said George, pointing.

Several people in green robes were walking onto the field, broomsticks in their hands.

“I don’t believe it!” Wood hissed in outrage. “I booked the field for today! We’ll see about this!”

Wood shot toward the ground, landing rather harder than he meant to in his anger, staggering slightly as he dismounted. Harry, Fred, and

George followed.

“Flint!” Wood bellowed at the Slytherin Captain. “This is our practice time! We got up specially! You can clear off now!”

Marcus Flint was even larger than Wood. He had a look of troll-ish cunning on his face as he replied, “Plenty of room for all of us, Wood.”

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie had come over, too. There were no girls on the Slytherin team, who stood shoulder to shoulder, facing the Gryffindors, leering to a man.

“But I booked the field!” said Wood, positively spitting with rage. “I booked it!”

“Ah,” said Flint. “But I’ve got a specially signed note here from Professor Snape. ‘I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team per-mission to practice today on the Quidditch field owing to the need to train their new Seeker.’ ”

“You’ve got a new Seeker?” said Wood, distracted. “Where?”

And from behind the six large figures before them came a sev-enth, smaller boy, smirking all over his pale, pointed face. It was Draco Malfoy.

“Aren’t you Lucius Malfoy’s son?” said Fred, looking at Malfoy with dislike.

“Funny you should mention Draco’s father,” said Flint as the whole Slytherin team smiled still more broadly. “Let me show you the generous gift he’s made to the Slytherin team.”

All seven of them held out their broomsticks. Seven highly pol-ished, brand-new handles and seven sets of fine gold lettering spelling the words Nimbus Two Thousand and One gleamed under the Gryffindors’ noses in the early morning sun.

“Very latest model.Only came out last month,” said Flint carelessly, flicking a speck of dust from the end of his own. “I be-lieve it outstrips the old Two Thousand series by a considerable amount. As for the old Cleansweeps” — he smiled nastily at Fred and George, who were both clutching Cleansweep Fives — “sweeps the board with them.”

None of the Gryffindor team could think of anything to say for a moment. Malfoy was smirking so broadly his cold eyes were re-duced to slits.

“Oh, look,” said Flint. “A field invasion.”

Ron and Hermione were crossing the grass to see what was go-ing on.

“What’s happening?” Ron asked Harry. “Why aren’t you play-ing? And what’s he doing here?”

He was looking at Malfoy, taking in his Slytherin Quidditch robes.

“I’m the new Slytherin Seeker, Weasley,” said Malfoy, smugly. “Everyone’s just been admiring the brooms my father’s bought our team.”

Ron gaped, openmouthed, at the seven superb broomsticks in front of him.

“Good, aren’t they?” said Malfoy smoothly. “But perhaps the Gryffindor team will be able to raise some gold and get new brooms, too. You could raffle off those Cleansweep Fives; I expect a museum would bid for them.”

The Slytherin team howled with laughter.

“At least no one on the Gryffindor team had to buy their way in,” said Hermione sharply. “They got in on pure talent.”

The smug look on Malfoy's face flickered.

"No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood," he spat.

Harry knew at once that Malfoy had said something really bad because there was an instant uproar at his words. Flint had to dive in front of Malfoy to stop Fred and George jumping on him, Ali-cia shrieked, "How dare you!", and Ron plunged his hand into his robes, pulled out his wand, yelling, "You'll pay for that one, Mal-foy!" and pointed it furiously under Flint's arm at Malfoy's face.

A loud bang echoed around the stadium and a jet of green light shot out of the wrong end of Ron's wand, hitting him in the stom-ach and sending him reeling backward onto the grass.

"Ron! Ron! Are you all right?" squealed Hermione.

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Instead he gave an almighty belch and several slugs dribbled out of his mouth onto his lap.

The Slytherin team were paralyzed with laughter. Flint was dou-bled up, hanging onto his new broomstick for support. Malfoy was on all fours, banging the ground with his fist. The Gryffindors were gathered around Ron, who kept belching large, glistening slugs. Nobody seemed to want to touch him.

"We'd better get him to Hagrid's, it's nearest," said Harry to Hermione, who nodded bravely, and the pair of them pulled Ron up by the arms.

"What happened, Harry? What happened? Is he ill? But you can cure him, can't you?" Colin had run down from his seat and was now dancing alongside them as they left the field. Ron gave a huge heave and more slugs dribbled down his front.

"Oooh," said Colin, fascinated and raising his camera. "Can you hold him still, Harry?"

“Get out of the way, Colin!” said Harry angrily. He and Her-mione supported Ron out of the stadium and across the grounds toward the edge of the forest.

“Nearly there, Ron,” said Hermione as the gamekeeper’s cabin came into view. “You’ll be all right in a minute — almost there —”

They were within twenty feet of Hagrid’s house when the front door opened, but it wasn’t Hagrid who emerged. Gilderoy Lock-hart, wearing robes of palest mauve today, came striding out.

“Quick, behind here,” Harry hissed, dragging Ron behind a nearby bush. Hermione followed, somewhat reluctantly.

“It’s a simple matter if you know what you’re doing!” Lockhart was saying loudly to Hagrid. “If you need help, you know where I am! I’ll let you have a copy of my book. I’m surprised you haven’t already got one — I’ll sign one tonight and send it over. Well, good-bye!” And he strode away toward the castle.

Harry waited until Lockhart was out of sight, then pulled Ron out of the bush and up to Hagrid’s front door. They knocked ur-gently.

Hagrid appeared at once, looking very grumpy, but his expres-sion brightened when he saw who it was.

“Bin wonderin’ when you’d come ter see me — come in, come in — thought you mighta bin Professor Lockhart back again —”

Harry and Hermione supported Ron over the threshold into the one-roomed cabin, which had an enormous bed in one corner, a fire crackling merrily in the other. Hagrid didn’t seem perturbed by Ron’s slug problem, which Harry hastily explained as he lowered Ron into a chair.

“Better out than in,” he said cheerfully, plunking a large copper basin in front of him. “Get ’em all up, Ron.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to do except wait for it to stop,” said Hermione anxiously, watching Ron bend over the basin. “That’s a difficult curse to work at the best of times, but with a bro-ken wand —”

Hagrid was bustling around making them tea. His boarhound, Fang, was slobbering over Harry.

“What did Lockhart want with you, Hagrid?” Harry asked, scratching Fang’s ears.

“Givin’ me advice on gettin’ kelpies out of a well,” growled Hagrid, moving a half-plucked rooster off his scrubbed table and setting down the teapot. “Like I don’ know. An’ bangin’ on about some banshee he banished. If one word of it was true, I’ll eat my kettle.”

It was most unlike Hagrid to criticize a Hogwarts teacher, and Harry looked at him in surprise. Hermione, however, said in a voice somewhat higher than usual, “I think you’re being a bit un-fair. Professor Dumbledore obviously thought he was the best man for the job —”

“He was the on’y man for the job,” said Hagrid, offering them a plate of treacle toffee, while Ron coughed squelchily into his basin. “An’ I mean the on’y one. Gettin’ very difficult ter find anyone fer the Dark Arts job. People aren’t too keen ter take it on, see. They’re startin’ ter think it’s jinxed. No one’s lasted long fer a while now. So tell me,” said Hagrid, jerking his head at Ron. “Who was he tryin’ ter curse?”

“Malfoy called Hermione something — it must’ve been really bad, because everyone went wild.”

“It was bad,” said Ron hoarsely, emerging over the tabletop look-ing pale and sweaty. “Malfoy called her ‘Mudblood,’ Hagrid —”

Ron dived out of sight again as a fresh wave of slugs made their appearance. Hagrid looked outraged.

“He didn’!” he growled at Hermione.

“He did,” she said. “But I don’t know what it means. I could tell it was really rude, of course —”

“It’s about the most insulting thing he could think of,” gasped Ron, coming back up. “Mudblood’s a really foul name for someone who is Muggle-born — you know, non-magic parents. There are some wizards — like Malfoy’s family — who think they’re better than everyone else because they’re what people call pure-blood.” He gave a small burp, and a single slug fell into his outstretched hand. He threw it into the basin and continued, “I mean, the rest of us know it doesn’t make any difference at all. Look at Neville Longbottom — he’s pure-blood and he can hardly stand a caul-dron the right way up.”

“An’ they haven’t invented a spell our Hermione can’ do,” said Hagrid proudly, making Hermione go a brilliant shade of magenta.

“It’s a disgusting thing to call someone,” said Ron, wiping his sweaty brow with a shaking hand. “Dirty blood, see. Common blood. It’s ridiculous. Most wizards these days are half-blood any-way. If we hadn’t married Muggles we’d’ve died out.”

He retched and ducked out of sight again.

“Well, I don’ blame yeh fer tryin’ ter curse him, Ron,” said Ha-grid loudly over the thuds of more slugs hitting the basin. “Bu’ maybe it was a good thing yer wand backfired. ’Spect Lucius Mal-foy would’ve come marchin’ up ter school if yeh’d cursed his son. Least yer not in trouble.”

Harry would have pointed out that trouble didn’t come much worse than having slugs pouring out of your mouth, but he couldn’t; Hagrid’s treacle toffee had cemented his jaws together.

“Harry,” said Hagrid abruptly as though struck by a sudden thought. “Gotta bone ter pick with yeh. I’ve heard you’ve bin givin’ out signed photos. How come I haven’t got one?”

Furious, Harry wrenched his teeth apart.

“I have not been giving out signed photos,” he said hotly. “If Lockhart’s still spreading that around —”

But then he saw that Hagrid was laughing.

“I’m on’y jokin’,” he said, patting Harry genially on the back and sending him face first into the table. “I knew yeh hadn’t really. I told Lockhart yeh didn’ need teh. Yer more famous than him with-out tryin’.”

“Bet he didn’t like that,” said Harry, sitting up and rubbing his chin.

“Don’ think he did,” said Hagrid, his eyes twinkling. “An’ then I told him I’d never read one o’ his books an’ he decided ter go. Treacle toffee, Ron?” he added as Ron reappeared.

“No thanks,” said Ron weakly. “Better not risk it.”

“Come an’ see what I’ve bin growin’,” said Hagrid as Harry and Hermione finished the last of their tea.

In the small vegetable patch behind Hagrid’s house were a dozen of the largest pumpkins Harry had ever seen. Each was the size of a large boulder.

“Gettin’ on well, aren’t they?” said Hagrid happily. “Fer the Hal-loween feast … should be big enough by then.”

“What’ve you been feeding them?” said Harry.

Hagrid looked over his shoulder to check that they were alone.

“Well, I’ve bin givin’ them — you know — a bit o’ help —”

Harry noticed Hagrid’s flowery pink umbrella leaning against the back wall of the cabin. Harry had had reason to believe before now that this umbrella was not all it looked; in fact, he had the strong impression that Hagrid’s old school wand was concealed in-side it. Hagrid wasn’t supposed to use magic. He had been expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, but Harry had never found out why — any mention of the matter and Hagrid would clear his throat loudly and become mysteriously deaf until the subject was changed.

“An Engorgement Charm, I suppose?” said Hermione, halfway between disapproval and amusement. “Well, you’ve done a good job on them.”

“That’s what yer little sister said,” said Hagrid, nodding at Ron. “Met her jus’ yesterday.” Hagrid looked sideways at Harry, his beard twitching. “Said she was jus’ lookin’ round the grounds, but I reckon she was hopin’ she might run inter someone else at my house.” He winked at Harry. “If yeh ask me, she wouldn’ say no ter a signed —”

“Oh, shut up,” said Harry. Ron snorted with laughter and the ground was sprayed with slugs.

“Watch it!” Hagrid roared, pulling Ron away from his precious pumpkins.

It was nearly lunchtime and as Harry had only had one bit of treacle toffee since dawn, he was keen to go back to school to eat. They said good-bye to Hagrid and walked back up to the castle, Ron hiccoughing occasionally, but only bringing up two very small slugs.

They had barely set foot in the cool entrance hall when a voice rang out, “There you are, Potter — Weasley.” Professor McGona-gall was walking toward them, looking stern. “You will both do your detentions this evening.”

“What’re we doing, Professor?” said Ron, nervously suppressing a burp.

“You will be polishing the silver in the trophy room with Mr. Filch,” said Professor McGonagall. “And no magic, Weasley — el-bow grease.”

Ron gulped. Argus Filch, the caretaker, was loathed by every student in the school.

“And you, Potter, will be helping Professor Lockhart answer his fan mail,” said Professor McGonagall.

“Oh n — Professor, can’t I go and do the trophy room, too?” said Harry desperately.

“Certainly not,” said Professor McGonagall, raising her eyebrows. “Professor Lockhart requested you particularly. Eight o’clock sharp, both of you.”

Harry and Ron slouched into the Great Hall in states of deepest gloom, Hermione behind them, wearing a well-you-did-break-school-rules sort of expression. Harry didn’t enjoy his shepherd’s pie as much as he’d thought. Both he and Ron felt they’d got the worse deal.

“Filch’ll have me there all night,” said Ron heavily. “No magic! There must be about a hundred cups in that room. I’m no good at Muggle cleaning.”

“I’d swap anytime,” said Harry hollowly. “I’ve had loads of prac-tice with the Dursleys. Answering Lockhart’s fan mail … he’ll be a nightmare. …”

Saturday afternoon seemed to melt away, and in what seemed like no time, it was five minutes to eight, and Harry was dragging his feet along the second-floor corridor to Lockhart’s office. He gritted his teeth and knocked.

The door flew open at once. Lockhart beamed down at him.

“Ah, here’s the scalawag!” he said. “Come in, Harry, come in —”

Shining brightly on the walls by the light of many candles were countless framed photographs of Lockhart. He had even signed a few of them. Another large pile lay on his desk.

“You can address the envelopes!” Lockhart told Harry, as though this was a huge treat. “This first one’s to Gladys Gudgeon, bless her — huge fan of mine —”

The minutes snailed by. Harry let Lockhart’s voice wash over him, occasionally saying, “Mmm” and “Right” and “Yeah.” Now and then he caught a phrase like, “Fame’s a fickle friend, Harry,” or “Celebrity is as celebrity does, remember that.”

The candles burned lower and lower, making the light dance over the many moving faces of Lockhart watching him. Harry moved his aching hand over what felt like the thousandth enve-lope, writing out Veronica Smethley’s address. It must be nearly time to leave, Harry thought miserably, please let it be nearly time. …And then he heard something — something quite apart from the spitting of the dying candles and Lockhart’s prattle about his fans.

It was a voice, a voice to chill the bone marrow, a voice of breath-taking, ice-cold venom.

“Come … come to me. … Let me rip you. … Let me tear you. … Let me kill you. …”

Harry gave a huge jump and a large lilac blot appeared on Veronica Smethley’s street.

“What?” he said loudly.

“I know!” said Lockhart. “Six solid months at the top of the best-seller list! Broke all records!”

“No,” said Harry frantically. “That voice!”

“Sorry?” said Lockhart, looking puzzled. “What voice?”

“That — that voice that said — didn’t you hear it?”

Lockhart was looking at Harry in high astonishment.

“What are you talking about, Harry? Perhaps you’re getting a lit-tle drowsy? Great Scott — look at the time! “We’ve been here nearly four hours! I’d never have believed it — the time’s flown, hasn’t it?”

Harry didn’t answer. He was straining his ears to hear the voice again, but there was no sound now except for Lockhart telling him he mustn’t expect a treat like this every time he got detention. Feel-ing dazed, Harry left.

It was so late that the Gryffindor common room was almost empty. Harry went straight up to the dormitory. Ron wasn’t back yet. Harry pulled on his pajamas, got into bed, and waited. Half an hour later, Ron arrived, nursing his right arm and bringing a strong smell of polish into the darkened room.

“My muscles have all seized up,” he groaned, sinking on his bed. “Fourteen times he made me buff up that Quidditch Cup before he was satisfied. And then I had another slug attack all over a Special Award for Services to the School. Took ages to get the slime off. … How was it with Lockhart?”

Keeping his voice low so as not to wake Neville, Dean, and Sea-mus, Harry told Ron exactly what he had heard.

“And Lockhart said he couldn’t hear it?” said Ron. Harry could see him frowning in the moonlight. “D’you think he was lying? But I don’t

get it — even someone invisible would've had to open the door."

"I know," said Harry, lying back in his four-poster and staring at the canopy above him. "I don't get it either."

Chapter 8 The Deathday Party

October arrived, spreading a damp chill over the grounds and into the castle. Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, was kept busy by a sudden spate of colds among the staff and students. Her Pepperup Potion worked instantly, though it left the drinker smok-ing at the ears for several hours afterward. Ginny Weasley, who had been looking pale, was bullied into taking some by Percy. The steam pouring from under her vivid hair gave the impression that her whole head was on fire.

Raindrops the size of bullets thundered on the castle windows for days on end; the lake rose, the flower beds turned into muddy streams, and Hagrid's pumpkins swelled to the size of garden sheds. Oliver Wood's enthusiasm for regular training sessions, however, was not dampened, which was why Harry was to be found, late one stormy Saturday afternoon a few days before Halloween, returning to Gryffindor Tower, drenched to the skin and splattered with mud. Even aside from the rain and wind it hadn't been a happy prac-tice session. Fred and George, who had been spying on the Slyth-erin team, had seen for themselves the speed of those new Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones. They reported that the Slytherin team was no more than seven greenish blurs, shooting through the air like missiles.

As Harry squelched along the deserted corridor he came across somebody who looked just as preoccupied as he was. Nearly Head-less Nick, the ghost of Gryffindor Tower, was staring morosely out of a window, muttering under his breath, "… don't fulfill their re-quirements … half an inch, if that …"

"Hello, Nick," said Harry.

"Hello, hello," said Nearly Headless Nick, starting and looking round. He wore a dashing, plumed hat on his long curly hair, and a tunic with a ruff, which concealed the fact that his neck was al-most completely

severed. He was pale as smoke, and Harry could see right through him to the dark sky and torrential rain outside.

“You look troubled, young Potter,” said Nick, folding a trans-parent letter as he spoke and tucking it inside his doublet.

“So do you,” said Harry.

“Ah,” Nearly Headless Nick waved an elegant hand, “a matter of no importance. … It’s not as though I really wanted to join. … Thought I’d apply, but apparently I ‘don’t fulfill requirements’ —”

In spite of his airy tone, there was a look of great bitterness on his face.

“But you would think, wouldn’t you,” he erupted suddenly, pulling the letter back out of his pocket, “that getting hit forty-five times in the neck with a blunt axe would qualify you to join the Headless Hunt?”

“Oh — yes,” said Harry, who was obviously supposed to agree.

“I mean, nobody wishes more than I do that it had all been quick and clean, and my head had come off properly, I mean, it would have saved me a great deal of pain and ridicule. However —” Nearly Headless Nick shook his letter open and read furiously:“ ‘We can only accept huntsmen whose heads have parted company with their bodies. You will appreciate that it would be impossible otherwise for members to participate in hunt activities such as Horseback Head-Juggling and Head Polo. It is with the greatest regret, therefore, that I must inform you that you do not ful-fill our requirements. With very best wishes, Sir Patrick Delaney-Podmore.’ ”

Fuming, Nearly Headless Nick stuffed the letter away.

“Half an inch of skin and sinew holding my neck on, Harry! Most people would think that’s good and beheaded, but oh, no, it’s not enough for Sir Properly Decapitated-Podmore.”

Nearly Headless Nick took several deep breaths and then said, in a far calmer tone, “So — what’s bothering you? Anything I can do?”

“No,” said Harry. “Not unless you know where we can get seven free Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones for our match against Sly —”

The rest of Harry’s sentence was drowned out by a high-pitched mewling from somewhere near his ankles. He looked down and found himself gazing into a pair of lamp-like yellow eyes. It was Mrs. Norris, the skeletal gray cat who was used by the caretaker, Ar-gus Filch, as a sort of deputy in his endless battle against students.

“You’d better get out of here, Harry,” said Nick quickly. “Filch isn’t in a good mood — he’s got the flu and some third years acci-dentally plastered frog brains all over the ceiling in dungeon five. He’s been cleaning all morning, and if he sees you dripping mud all over the place —”

“Right,” said Harry, backing away from the accusing stare of Mrs. Norris, but not quickly enough. Drawn to the spot by the mysteri-ous power that seemed to connect him with his foul cat, Argus Filch burst suddenly through a tapestry to Harry’s right, wheezing and looking wildly about for the rule-breaker. There was a thick tartan scarf bound around his head, and his nose was unusually purple.

“Filth!” he shouted, his jowls aquiver, his eyes popping alarm-ingly as he pointed at the muddy puddle that had dripped from Harry’s Quidditch robes. “Mess and muck everywhere! I’ve had enough of it, I tell you! Follow me, Potter!”

So Harry waved a gloomy good-bye to Nearly Headless Nick and followed Filch back downstairs, doubling the number of muddy footprints on the floor.

Harry had never been inside Filch’s office before; it was a place most students avoided. The room was dingy and windowless, lit by a single oil lamp dangling from the low ceiling. A faint smell of fried fish

lingered about the place. Wooden filing cabinets stood around the walls; from their labels, Harry could see that they contained de-tails of every pupil Filch had ever punished. Fred and George Weasley had an entire drawer to themselves. A highly polished col-lection of chains and manacles hung on the wall behind Filch's desk. It was common knowledge that he was always begging Dumbledore to let him suspend students by their ankles from the ceiling.

Filch grabbed a quill from a pot on his desk and began shuffling around looking for parchment.

"Dung," he muttered furiously, "great sizzling dragon bogies … frog brains … rat intestines … I've had enough of it … make an example … where's the form … yes …"

He retrieved a large roll of parchment from his desk drawer and stretched it out in front of him, dipping his long black quill into the ink pot.

"Name … Harry Potter. Crime …"

"It was only a bit of mud!" said Harry.

"It's only a bit of mud to you, boy, but to me it's an extra hour scrubbing!" shouted Filch, a drip shivering unpleasantly at the end of his bulbous nose. "Crime … befouling the castle … suggested sentence …"

Dabbing at his streaming nose, Filch squinted unpleasantly at Harry, who waited with bated breath for his sentence to fall.

But as Filch lowered his quill, there was a great BANG! on the ceiling of the office, which made the oil lamp rattle.

"PEEVES!" Filch roared, flinging down his quill in a transport of rage. "I'll have you this time, I'll have you!"

And without a backward glance at Harry, Filch ran flat-footed from the office, Mrs. Norris streaking alongside him.

Peeves was the school poltergeist, a grinning, airborne menace who lived to cause havoc and distress. Harry didn't much like Peeves, but couldn't help feeling grateful for his timing. Hope-fully, whatever Peeves had done (and it sounded as though he'd wrecked something very big this time) would distract Filch from Harry.

Thinking that he should probably wait for Filch to come back, Harry sank into a moth-eaten chair next to the desk. There was only one thing on it apart from his half-completed form: a large, glossy, purple envelope with silver lettering on the front. With a quick glance at the door to check that Filch wasn't on his way back, Harry picked up the envelope and read:KWIKSPELL

A Correspondence Course in Beginners' MagicIntrigued, Harry flicked the envelope open and pulled out the sheaf of parchment inside. More curly silver writing on the front page said:Feel out of step in the world of modern magic? Find yourself making excuses not to perform simple spells? Ever been taunted for your woe-ful wandwork?

There is an answer!

Kwikspell is an all-new, fail-safe, quick-result, easy-learn course. Hundreds of witches and wizards have benefited from the Kwikspell method!

Madam Z. Nettles of Topsham writes:"I had no memory for incantations and my potions were a family joke! Now, after a Kwikspell course, I am the center of attention at parties and friends beg for the recipe of my Scintillation Solution!"

Warlock D. J. Prod of Didsbury says:"My wife used to sneer at my feeble charms, but one month into your fabulous Kwikspell course and I succeeded in turning her into a yak!

Thank you, Kwikspell!”

Fascinated, Harry thumbed through the rest of the envelope’s contents. Why on earth did Filch want a Kwikspell course? Did this mean he wasn’t a proper wizard? Harry was just reading “Les-son One: Holding Your Wand (Some Useful Tips)” when shuffling footsteps outside told him Filch was coming back. Stuffing the parchment back into the envelope, Harry threw it back onto the desk just as the door opened.

Filch was looking triumphant.

“That vanishing cabinet was extremely valuable!” he was saying gleefully to Mrs. Norris. “We’ll have Peeves out this time, my sweet —”

His eyes fell on Harry and then darted to the Kwikspell enve-lope, which, Harry realized too late, was lying two feet away from where it had started.

Filch’s pasty face went brick red. Harry braced himself for a tidal wave of fury. Filch hobbled across to his desk, snatched up the en-velope, and threw it into a drawer.

“Have you — did you read — ?” he sputtered.

“No,” Harry lied quickly.

Filch’s knobbly hands were twisting together.

“If I thought you’d read my private — not that it’s mine — for a friend — be that as it may — however —”

Harry was staring at him, alarmed; Filch had never looked mad-der. His eyes were popping, a tic was going in one of his pouchy cheeks, and the tartan scarf didn’t help.

"Very well — go — and don't breathe a word — not that — however, if you didn't read — go now, I have to write up Peeves' re-port — go —"

Amazed at his luck, Harry sped out of the office, up the corridor, and back upstairs. To escape from Filch's office without punish-ment was probably some kind of school record.

"Harry! Harry! Did it work?"

Nearly Headless Nick came gliding out of a classroom. Behind him, Harry could see the wreckage of a large black-and-gold cabi-net that appeared to have been dropped from a great height.

"I persuaded Peeves to crash it right over Filch's office," said Nick eagerly. "Thought it might distract him —"

"Was that you?" said Harry gratefully. "Yeah, it worked, I didn't even get detention. Thanks, Nick!"

They set off up the corridor together. Nearly Headless Nick, Harry noticed, was still holding Sir Patrick's rejection letter.

"I wish there was something I could do for you about the Head-less Hunt," Harry said.

Nearly Headless Nick stopped in his tracks and Harry walked right through him. He wished he hadn't; it was like stepping through an icy shower.

"But there is something you could do for me," said Nick ex-citedly. "Harry — would I be asking too much — but no, you wouldn't want —"

"What is it?" said Harry.

"Well, this Halloween will be my five hundredth deathday," said Nearly Headless Nick, drawing himself up and looking dignified.

“Oh,” said Harry, not sure whether he should look sorry or happy about this. “Right.”

“I’m holding a party down in one of the roomier dungeons. Friends will be coming from all over the country. It would be such an honor if you would attend. Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger would be most welcome, too, of course — but I daresay you’d rather go to the school feast?” He watched Harry on tenterhooks.

“No,” said Harry quickly, “I’ll come —”

“My dear boy! Harry Potter, at my deathday party! And” — he hesitated, looking excited — “do you think you could possibly mention to Sir Patrick how very frightening and impressive you find me?”

“Of — of course,” said Harry.

Nearly Headless Nick beamed at him.

“A deathday party?” said Hermione keenly when Harry had changed at last and joined her and Ron in the common room. “I bet there aren’t many living people who can say they’ve been to one of those — it’ll be fascinating!”

“Why would anyone want to celebrate the day they died?” said Ron, who was halfway through his Potions homework and grumpy. “Sounds dead depressing to me. …”

Rain was still lashing the windows, which were now inky black, but inside all looked bright and cheerful. The firelight glowed over the countless squashy armchairs where people sat reading, talking, doing homework or, in the case of Fred and George Weasley, trying to find out what would happen if you fed a Filibuster firework to a salamander. Fred had “rescued” the brilliant orange, fire-dwelling lizard from a Care of Magical Creatures class and it was now smoldering gently on a table surrounded by a knot of curious people.

Harry was at the point of telling Ron and Hermione about Filch and the Kwikspell course when the salamander suddenly whizzed into the air, emitting loud sparks and bangs as it whirled wildly round the room. The sight of Percy bellowing himself hoarse at Fred and George, the spectacular display of tangerine stars shower-ing from the salamander's mouth, and its escape into the fire, with accompanying explosions, drove both Filch and the Kwikspell en-velope from Harry's mind.

By the time Halloween arrived, Harry was regretting his rash promise to go to the deathday party. The rest of the school was happily anticipating their Halloween feast; the Great Hall had been decorated with the usual live bats, Hagrid's vast pumpkins had been carved into lanterns large enough for three men to sit in, and there were rumors that Dumbledore had booked a troupe of danc-ing skeletons for the entertainment.

"A promise is a promise," Hermione reminded Harry bossily. "You said you'd go to the deathday party."

So at seven o'clock, Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked straight past the doorway to the packed Great Hall, which was glittering invitingly with gold plates and candles, and directed their steps in-stead toward the dungeons.

The passageway leading to Nearly Headless Nick's party had been lined with candles, too, though the effect was far from cheer-ful: These were long, thin, jet-black tapers, all burning bright blue, casting a dim, ghostly light even over their own living faces. The temperature dropped with every step they took. As Harry shivered and drew his robes tightly around him, he heard what sounded like a thousand fingernails scraping an enormous blackboard.

"Is that supposed to be music?" Ron whispered. They turned a corner and saw Nearly Headless Nick standing at a doorway hung with black velvet drapes.

“My dear friends,” he said mournfully. “Welcome, welcome … so pleased you could come. …”

He swept off his plumed hat and bowed them inside.

It was an incredible sight. The dungeon was full of hundreds of pearly-white, translucent people, mostly drifting around a crowded dance floor, waltzing to the dreadful, quavering sound of thirty musical saws, played by an orchestra on a raised, black-draped plat-form. A chandelier overhead blazed midnight-blue with a thou-sand more black candles. Their breath rose in a mist before them; it was like stepping into a freezer.

“Shall we have a look around?” Harry suggested, wanting to warm up his feet.

“Careful not to walk through anyone,” said Ron nervously, and they set off around the edge of the dance floor. They passed a group of gloomy nuns, a ragged man wearing chains, and the Fat Friar, a cheerful Hufflepuff ghost, who was talking to a knight with an arrow sticking out of his forehead. Harry wasn’t surprised to see that the Bloody Baron, a gaunt, staring Slytherin ghost covered in silver bloodstains, was being given a wide berth by the other ghosts.

“Oh, no,” said Hermione, stopping abruptly. “Turn back, turn back, I don’t want to talk to Moaning Myrtle —”

“Who?” said Harry as they backtracked quickly.

“She haunts one of the toilets in the girls’ bathroom on the first floor,” said Hermione.

“She haunts a toilet?”

“Yes. It’s been out-of-order all year because she keeps having tantrums and flooding the place. I never went in there anyway if I

could avoid it; it's awful trying to have a pee with her wailing at you —"

"Look, food!" said Ron.

On the other side of the dungeon was a long table, also covered in black velvet. They approached it eagerly but next moment had stopped in their tracks, horrified. The smell was quite disgusting. Large, rotten fish were laid on handsome silver platters; cakes, burned charcoal-black, were heaped on salvers; there was a great maggoty haggis, a slab of cheese covered in furry green mold and, in pride of place, an enormous gray cake in the shape of a tomb-stone, with tar-like icing forming the words,SIR NICHOLAS DE MIMSY-PORPINGTONDIED 31ST OCTOBER, 1492

Harry watched, amazed, as a portly ghost approached the table, crouched low, and walked through it, his mouth held wide so that it passed through one of the stinking salmon.

"Can you taste it if you walk through it?" Harry asked him.

"Almost," said the ghost sadly, and he drifted away.

"I expect they've let it rot to give it a stronger flavor," said Her-mione knowledgeably, pinching her nose and leaning closer to look at the putrid haggis.

"Can we move? I feel sick," said Ron.

They had barely turned around, however, when a little man swooped suddenly from under the table and came to a halt in midair before them.

"Hello, Peeves," said Harry cautiously.

Unlike the ghosts around them, Peeves the Poltergeist was the very reverse of pale and transparent. He was wearing a bright or-ange

party hat, a revolving bow tie, and a broad grin on his wide, wicked face.

“Nibbles?” he said sweetly, offering them a bowl of peanuts cov-ered in fungus.

“No thanks,” said Hermione.

“Heard you talking about poor Myrtle,” said Peeves, his eyes dancing. “Rude you was about poor Myrtle.” He took a deep breath and bellowed, “OY! MYRTLE!”

“Oh, no, Peeves, don’t tell her what I said, she’ll be really upset,” Hermione whispered frantically. “I didn’t mean it, I don’t mind her — er, hello, Myrtle.”

The squat ghost of a girl had glided over. She had the glummest face Harry had ever seen, half-hidden behind lank hair and thick, pearly spectacles.

“What?” she said sulkily.

“How are you, Myrtle?” said Hermione in a falsely bright voice. “It’s nice to see you out of the toilet.”

Myrtle sniffed.

“Miss Granger was just talking about you —” said Peeves slyly in Myrtle’s ear.

“Just saying — saying — how nice you look tonight,” said Her-mione, glaring at Peeves.

Myrtle eyed Hermione suspiciously.

“You’re making fun of me,” she said, silver tears welling rapidly in her small, see-through eyes.

“No — honestly — didn’t I just say how nice Myrtle’s looking?” said Hermione, nudging Harry and Ron painfully in the ribs.

“Oh, yeah —”

“She did —”

“Don’t lie to me,” Myrtle gasped, tears now flooding down her face, while Peeves chuckled happily over her shoulder. “D’you think I don’t know what people call me behind my back? Fat Myr-tle! Ugly Myrtle! Miserable, moaning, moping Myrtle!”

“You’ve forgotten pimply,” Peeves hissed in her ear.

Moaning Myrtle burst into anguished sobs and fled from the dungeon. Peeves shot after her, pelting her with moldy peanuts, yelling, “Pimply! Pimply!”

“Oh, dear,” said Hermione sadly.

Nearly Headless Nick now drifted toward them through the crowd.

“Enjoying yourselves?”

“Oh, yes,” they lied.

“Not a bad turnout,” said Nearly Headless Nick proudly. “The Wailing Widow came all the way up from Kent. … It’s nearly time for my speech, I’d better go and warn the orchestra. …”

The orchestra, however, stopped playing at that very moment. They, and everyone else in the dungeon, fell silent, looking around in excitement, as a hunting horn sounded.

“Oh, here we go,” said Nearly Headless Nick bitterly.

Through the dungeon wall burst a dozen ghost horses, each ridden by a headless horseman. The assembly clapped wildly; Harry started

to clap, too, but stopped quickly at the sight of Nick's face.

The horses galloped into the middle of the dance floor and halted, rearing and plunging. At the front of the pack was a large ghost who held his bearded head under his arm, from which posi-tion he was blowing the horn. The ghost leapt down, lifted his head high in the air so he could see over the crowd (everyone laughed), and strode over to Nearly Headless Nick, squashing his head back onto his neck.

"Nick!" he roared. "How are you? Head still hanging in there?"

He gave a hearty guffaw and clapped Nearly Headless Nick on the shoulder.

"Welcome, Patrick," said Nick stiffly.

"Live 'uns!" said Sir Patrick, spotting Harry, Ron, and Hermione and giving a huge, fake jump of astonishment, so that his head fell off again (the crowd howled with laughter).

"Very amusing," said Nearly Headless Nick darkly.

"Don't mind Nick!" shouted Sir Patrick's head from the floor. "Still upset we won't let him join the Hunt! But I mean to say — look at the fellow —"

"I think," said Harry hurriedly, at a meaningful look from Nick, "Nick's very — frightening and — er —"

"Ha!" yelled Sir Patrick's head. "Bet he asked you to say that!"

"If I could have everyone's attention, it's time for my speech!" said Nearly Headless Nick loudly, striding toward the podium and climbing into an icy blue spotlight.

"My late lamented lords, ladies, and gentlemen, it is my great sorrow …"

But nobody heard much more. Sir Patrick and the rest of the Headless Hunt had just started a game of Head Hockey and the crowd were turning to watch. Nearly Headless Nick tried vainly to recapture his audience, but gave up as Sir Patrick's head went sailing past him to loud cheers.

Harry was very cold by now, not to mention hungry.

"I can't stand much more of this," Ron muttered, his teeth chat-tering, as the orchestra ground back into action and the ghosts swept back onto the dance floor.

"Let's go," Harry agreed.

They backed toward the door, nodding and beaming at anyone who looked at them, and a minute later were hurrying back up the passageway full of black candles.

"Pudding might not be finished yet," said Ron hopefully, lead-ing the way toward the steps to the entrance hall.

And then Harry heard it.

"… rip … tear … kill …"

It was the same voice, the same cold, murderous voice he had heard in Lockhart's office.

He stumbled to a halt, clutching at the stone wall, listening with all his might, looking around, squinting up and down the dimly lit passageway.

"Harry, what're you — ?"

"It's that voice again — shut up a minute —"

"… soohungry … for so long …"

“Listen!” said Harry urgently, and Ron and Hermione froze, watching him.

“… kill … time to kill …”

The voice was growing fainter. Harry was sure it was moving away — moving upward. A mixture of fear and excitement gripped him as he stared at the dark ceiling; how could it be moving up-ward? Was it a phantom, to whom stone ceilings didn’t matter?

“This way,” he shouted, and he began to run, up the stairs, into the entrance hall. It was no good hoping to hear anything here, the babble of talk from the Halloween feast was echoing out of the Great Hall. Harry sprinted up the marble staircase to the first floor, Ron and Hermione clattering behind him.

“Harry, what’re we —”

“SHH!”

Harry strained his ears. Distantly, from the floor above, and growing fainter still, he heard the voice: “… I smell blood. … I SMELL BLOOD!”

His stomach lurched —

“It’s going to kill someone!” he shouted, and ignoring Ron’s and Hermione’s bewildered faces, he ran up the next flight of steps three at a time, trying to listen over his own pounding footsteps —Harry hurtled around the whole of the second floor, Ron and Hermione panting behind him, not stopping until they turned a corner into the last, deserted passage.

“Harry, what was that all about?” said Ron, wiping sweat off his face. “I couldn’t hear anything. …”

But Hermione gave a sudden gasp, pointing down the corridor.

“Look!”

Something was shining on the wall ahead. They approached slowly, squinting through the darkness. Foot-high words had been daubed on the wall between two windows, shimmering in the light cast by the flaming torches.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEENOPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

“What’s that thing — hanging underneath?” said Ron, a slight quiver in his voice.

As they edged nearer, Harry almost slipped — there was a large puddle of water on the floor; Ron and Hermione grabbed him, and they inched toward the message, eyes fixed on a dark shadow beneath it. All three of them realized what it was at once, and leapt backward with a splash.

Mrs. Norris, the caretaker’s cat, was hanging by her tail from the torch bracket. She was stiff as a board, her eyes wide and staring.

For a few seconds, they didn’t move. Then Ron said, “Let’s get out of here.”

“Shouldn’t we try and help —” Harry began awkwardly.

“Trust me,” said Ron. “We don’t want to be found here.”

But it was too late. A rumble, as though of distant thunder, told them that the feast had just ended. From either end of the corridor where they stood came the sound of hundreds of feet climbing the stairs, and the loud, happy talk of well-fed people; next moment, students were crashing into the passage from both ends.

The chatter, the bustle, the noise died suddenly as the people in front spotted the hanging cat. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood alone, in

the middle of the corridor, as silence fell among the mass of students pressing forward to see the grisly sight.

Then someone shouted through the quiet.

“Enemies of the Heir, beware! You’ll be next, Mudbloods!”

It was Draco Malfoy. He had pushed to the front of the crowd, his cold eyes alive, his usually bloodless face flushed, as he grinned at the sight of the hanging, immobile cat.

Chapter 9 The Writing on the Wall

“What’s going on here? What’s going on?”

Attracted no doubt by Malfoy’s shout, Argus Filch came shouldering his way through the crowd. Then he saw Mrs. Norris and fell back, clutching his face in horror.

“My cat! My cat! What’s happened to Mrs. Norris?” he shrieked.

And his popping eyes fell on Harry.

“You!” he screeched. “You! You’ve murdered my cat! You’ve killed her! I’ll kill you! I’ll —”

“Argus!”

Dumbledore had arrived on the scene, followed by a number of other teachers. In seconds, he had swept past Harry, Ron, and Hermione and detached Mrs. Norris from the torch bracket.

“Come with me, Argus,” he said to Filch. “You, too, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger.”

Lockhart stepped forward eagerly.

“My office is nearest, Headmaster — just upstairs — please feel free —”

“Thank you, Gilderoy,” said Dumbledore.

The silent crowd parted to let them pass. Lockhart, looking ex-cited and important, hurried after Dumbledore; so did Professors McGonagall and Snape.

As they entered Lockhart’s darkened office there was a flurry of movement across the walls; Harry saw several of the Lockharts in the

pictures dodging out of sight, their hair in rollers. The real Lockhart lit the candles on his desk and stood back. Dumbledore laid Mrs. Norris on the polished surface and began to examine her. Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged tense looks and sank into chairs outside the pool of candlelight, watching.

The tip of Dumbledore's long, crooked nose was barely an inch from Mrs. Norris's fur. He was looking at her closely through his half-moon spectacles, his long fingers gently prodding and poking. Professor McGonagall was bent almost as close, her eyes narrowed. Snape loomed behind them, half in shadow, wearing a most pecu-liar expression: It was as though he was trying hard not to smile. And Lockhart was hovering around all of them, making sugges-tions.

"It was definitely a curse that killed her — probably the Trans-mogrifian Torture — I've seen it used many times, so unlucky I wasn't there, I know the very countercurse that would have saved her. …"

Lockhart's comments were punctuated by Filch's dry, racking sobs. He was slumped in a chair by the desk, unable to look at Mrs. Norris, his face in his hands. Much as he detested Filch, Harry couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for him, though not nearly as sorry as he felt for himself. If Dumbledore believed Filch, he would be expelled for sure.

Dumbledore was now muttering strange words under his breath and tapping Mrs. Norris with his wand but nothing happened: She continued to look as though she had been recently stuffed.

"… I remember something very similar happening in Oua-gadogou," said Lockhart, "a series of attacks, the full story's in my autobiography, I was able to provide the townsfolk with various amulets, which cleared the matter up at once. …"

The photographs of Lockhart on the walls were all nodding in agreement as he talked. One of them had forgotten to remove his hair net.

At last Dumbledore straightened up.

“She’s not dead, Argus,” he said softly.

Lockhart stopped abruptly in the middle of counting the num-ber of murders he had prevented.

“Not dead?” choked Filch, looking through his fingers at Mrs. Norris. “But why’s she all — all stiff and frozen?”

“She has been Petrified,” said Dumbledore (“Ah! I thought so!” said Lockhart). “But how, I cannot say. …”

“Ask him!” shrieked Filch, turning his blotched and tearstained face to Harry.

“No second year could have done this,” said Dumbledore firmly. “It would take Dark Magic of the most advanced —”

“He did it, he did it!” Filch spat, his pouchy face purpling. “You saw what he wrote on the wall! He found — in my office — he knows I’m a — I’m a —” Filch’s face worked horribly. “He knows I’m a Squib!” he finished.

“I never touched Mrs. Norris!” Harry said loudly, uncomfortably aware of everyone looking at him, including all the Lockharts on the walls. “And I don’t even know what a Squib is.”

“Rubbish!” snarled Filch. “He saw my Kwikspell letter!”

“If I might speak, Headmaster,” said Snape from the shadows, and Harry’s sense of foreboding increased; he was sure nothing Snape had to say was going to do him any good.

“Potter and his friends may have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time,” he said, a slight sneer curling his mouth as though he doubted it. “But we do have a set of suspicious circum-stances

here. Why was he in the upstairs corridor at all? Why wasn't he at the Halloween feast?"

Harry, Ron and Hermione all launched into an explanation about the deathday party. "… there were hundreds of ghosts, they'll tell you we were there —"

"But why not join the feast afterward?" said Snape, his black eyes glittering in the candlelight. "Why go up to that corridor?"

Ron and Hermione looked at Harry.

"Because — because —" Harry said, his heart thumping very fast; something told him it would sound very far-fetched if he told them he had been led there by a bodiless voice no one but he could hear, "because we were tired and wanted to go to bed," he said.

"Without any supper?" said Snape, a triumphant smile flicker-ing across his gaunt face. "I didn't think ghosts provided food fit for living people at their parties."

"We weren't hungry," said Ron loudly as his stomach gave a huge rumble.

Snape's nasty smile widened.

"I suggest, Headmaster, that Potter is not being entirely truth-ful," he said. "It might be a good idea if he were deprived of certain privileges until he is ready to tell us the whole story. I personally feel he should be taken off the Gryffindor Quidditch team until he is ready to be honest."

"Really, Severus," said Professor McGonagall sharply, "I see no reason to stop the boy playing Quidditch. This cat wasn't hit over the head with a broomstick. There is no evidence at all that Potter has done anything wrong."

Dumbledore was giving Harry a searching look. His twinkling light-blue gaze made Harry feel as though he were being X-rayed.

“Innocent until proven guilty, Severus,” he said firmly.

Snape looked furious. So did Filch.

“My cat has been Petrified!” he shrieked, his eyes popping. “I want to see some punishment!”

“We will be able to cure her, Argus,” said Dumbledore patiently. “Professer Sprout recently managed to procure some Mandrakes. As soon as they have reached their full size, I will have a potion made that will revive Mrs. Norris.”

“I’ll make it,” Lockhart butted in. “I must have done it a hun-dred times. I could whip up a Mandrake Restorative Draught in my sleep —”

“Excuse me,” said Snape icily. “But I believe I am the Potions master at this school.”

There was a very awkward pause.

“You may go,” Dumbledore said to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

They went, as quickly as they could without actually running. When they were a floor up from Lockhart’s office, they turned into an empty classroom and closed the door quietly behind them. Harry squinted at his friends’ darkened faces.

“D’you think I should have told them about that voice I heard?”

“No,” said Ron, without hesitation. “Hearing voices no one else can hear isn’t a good sign, even in the wizarding world.”

Something in Ron’s voice made Harry ask, “You do believe me, don’t you?”

“ ’Course I do,” said Ron quickly. “But — you must admit it’s weird. …”

“I know it’s weird,” said Harry. “The whole thing’s weird. What was that writing on the wall about? ‘The Chamber Has Been Opened’. … What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know, it rings a sort of bell,” said Ron slowly. “I think someone told me a story about a secret chamber at Hogwarts once … might’ve been Bill. …”

“And what on earth’s a Squib?” said Harry.

To his surprise, Ron stifled a snigger.

“Well — it’s not funny really — but as it’s Filch,” he said. “A Squib is someone who was born into a wizarding family but hasn’t got any magic powers. Kind of the opposite of Muggle-born wiz-ards, but Squibs are quite unusual. If Filch’s trying to learn magic from a Kwikspell course, I reckon he must be a Squib. It would ex-plain a lot. Like why he hates students so much.” Ron gave a satis-fied smile. “He’s bitter.”

A clock chimed somewhere.

“Midnight,” said Harry. “We’d better get to bed before Snape comes along and tries to frame us for something else.”

* * *

For a few days, the school could talk of little else but the attack on Mrs. Norris. Filch kept it fresh in everyone’s minds by pacing the spot where she had been attacked, as though he thought the at-tacker might come back. Harry had seen him scrubbing the mes-sage on the wall with Mrs. Skower’s All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover, but to no effect; the words still gleamed as brightly as ever on the stone. When Filch wasn’t guarding the scene of the crime, he was skulking red-eyed through the corridors, lunging out at unsuspecting students

and trying to put them in detention for things like “breathing loudly” and “looking happy.”

Ginny Weasley seemed very disturbed by Mrs. Norris’s fate. According to Ron, she was a great cat lover.

“But you haven’t really got to know Mrs. Norris,” Ron told her bracingly. “Honestly, we’re much better off without her.” Ginny’s lip trembled. “Stuff like this doesn’t often happen at Hogwarts,” Ron assured her. “They’ll catch the maniac who did it and have him out of here in no time. I just hope he’s got time to Petrify Filch before he’s expelled. I’m only joking —” Ron added hastily as Ginny blanched.

The attack had also had an effect on Hermione. It was quite usual for Hermione to spend a lot of time reading, but she was now doing almost nothing else. Nor could Harry and Ron get much re-sponse from her when they asked what she was up to, and not un-til the following Wednesday did they find out.

Harry had been held back in Potions, where Snape had made him stay behind to scrape tubeworms off the desks. After a hurried lunch, he went upstairs to meet Ron in the library, and saw Jus-tin Finch-Fletchley, the Hufflepuff boy from Herbology, coming toward him. Harry had just opened his mouth to say hello when Justin caught sight of him, turned abruptly, and sped off in the op-posite direction.

Harry found Ron at the back of the library, measuring his His-tory of Magic homework. Professor Binns had asked for a three-foot-long composition on “The Medieval Assembly of European Wizards.”

“I don’t believe it, I’m still eight inches short. …” said Ron fu-riously, letting go of his parchment, which sprang back into a roll. “And Hermione’s done four feet seven inches and her writing’s tiny.”

“Where is she?” asked Harry, grabbing the tape measure and unrolling his own homework.

“Somewhere over there,” said Ron, pointing along the shelves. “Looking for another book. I think she’s trying to read the whole library before Christmas.”

Harry told Ron about Justin Finch-Fletchley running away from him.

“Dunno why you care. I thought he was a bit of an idiot,” said Ron, scribbling away, making his writing as large as possible. “All that junk about Lockhart being so great —”

Hermione emerged from between the bookshelves. She looked irritable and at last seemed ready to talk to them.

“All the copies of Hogwarts, A History have been taken out,” she said, sitting down next to Harry and Ron. “And there’s a two-week waiting list. I wish I hadn’t left my copy at home, but I couldn’t fit it in my trunk with all the Lockhart books.”

“Why do you want it?” said Harry.

“The same reason everyone else wants it,” said Hermione, “to read up on the legend of the Chamber of Secrets.”

“What’s that?” said Harry quickly.

“That’s just it. I can’t remember,” said Hermione, biting her lip. “And I can’t find the story anywhere else —”

“Hermione, let me read your composition,” said Ron desper-ately, checking his watch.

“No, I won’t,” said Hermione, suddenly severe. “You’ve had ten days to finish it —”

“I only need another two inches, come on —”

The bell rang. Ron and Hermione led the way to History of Magic, bickering.

History of Magic was the dullest subject on their schedule. Pro-fessor Binns, who taught it, was their only ghost teacher, and the most exciting thing that ever happened in his classes was his enter-ing the room through the blackboard. Ancient and shriveled, many people said he hadn't noticed he was dead. He had simply got up to teach one day and left his body behind him in an armchair in front of the staffroom fire; his routine had not varied in the slightest since.

Today was as boring as ever. Professor Binns opened his notes and began to read in a flat drone like an old vacuum cleaner until nearly everyone in the class was in a deep stupor, occasionally com-ing to long enough to copy down a name or date, then falling asleep again. He had been speaking for half an hour when some-thing happened that had never happened before. Hermione put up her hand.

Professor Binns, glancing up in the middle of a deadly dull lecture on the International Warlock Convention of 1289, looked amazed.

"Miss — er — ?"

"Granger, Professor. I was wondering if you could tell us any-thing about the Chamber of Secrets," said Hermione in a clear voice.

Dean Thomas, who had been sitting with his mouth hanging open, gazing out of the window, jerked out of his trance; Lavender Brown's head came up off her arms and Neville Longbottom's el-bow slipped off his desk.

Professor Binns blinked.

"My subject is History of Magic," he said in his dry, wheezy voice. "I deal with, facts, Miss Granger, not myths and legends." He cleared his throat with a small noise like chalk snapping and con-tinued, "In September of that year, a subcommittee of Sardinian sorcerers —"

He stuttered to a halt. Hermione's hand was waving in the air again.

“Miss Grant?”

“Please, sir, don’t legends always have a basis in fact?”

Professor Binns was looking at her in such amazement, Harry was sure no student had ever interrupted him before, alive or dead.

“Well,” said Professor Binns slowly, “yes, one could argue that, I suppose.” He peered at Hermione as though he had never seen a student properly before. “However, the legend of which you speak is such a very sensational, even ludicrous tale —”

But the whole class was now hanging on Professor Binns’s every word. He looked dimly at them all, every face turned to his. Harry could tell he was completely thrown by such an unusual show of interest.

“Oh, very well,” he said slowly. “Let me see … the Chamber of Secrets …“You all know, of course, that Hogwarts was founded over a thousand years ago — the precise date is uncertain — by the four greatest witches and wizards of the age. The four school Houses are named after them: Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin. They built this castle together, far from prying Muggle eyes, for it was an age when magic was feared by common people, and witches and wizards suffered much persecution.”

He paused, gazed blearily around the room, and continued.

“For a few years, the founders worked in harmony together, seeking out youngsters who showed signs of magic and bringing them to the castle to be educated. But then disagreements sprang up between them. A rift began to grow between Slytherin and the others. Slytherin wished to be more selective about the students ad-mitted to Hogwarts. He believed that magical learning should be kept within all-magic families. He disliked taking students of Mug-gle parentage, believing them to be untrustworthy. After a while, there was a serious

argument on the subject between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Slytherin left the school."

Professor Binns paused again, pursing his lips, looking like a wrinkled old tortoise.

"Reliable historical sources tell us this much," he said. "But these honest facts have been obscured by the fanciful legend of the Chamber of Secrets. The story goes that Slytherin had built a hidden chamber in the castle, of which the other founders knew nothing.

"Slytherin, according to the legend, sealed the Chamber of Se-crets so that none would be able to open it until his own true heir arrived at the school. The heir alone would be able to unseal the Chamber of Secrets, unleash the horror within, and use it to purge the school of all who were unworthy to study magic."

There was silence as he finished telling the story, but it wasn't the usual, sleepy silence that filled Professor Binns's classes. There was unease in the air as everyone continued to watch him, hoping for more. Professor Binns looked faintly annoyed.

"The whole thing is arrant nonsense, of course," he said. "Natu-rally, the school has been searched for evidence of such a chamber, many times, by the most learned witches and wizards. It does not exist. A tale told to frighten the gullible."

Hermione's hand was back in the air.

"Sir — what exactly do you mean by the 'horror within' the Chamber?"

"That is believed to be some sort of monster, which the Heir of Slytherin alone can control," said Professor Binns in his dry, reedy voice.

The class exchanged nervous looks.

“I tell you, the thing does not exist,” said Professor Binns, shuf-fling his notes. “There is no Chamber and no monster.”

“But, sir,” said Seamus Finnigan, “if the Chamber can only be opened by Slytherin’s true heir, no one else would be able to find it, would they?”

“Nonsense, O’Flaherty,” said Professor Binns in an aggravated tone. “If a long succession of Hogwarts headmasters and head-mistresses haven’t found the thing —”

“But, Professor,” piped up Parvati Patil, “you’d probably have to use Dark Magic to open it —”

“Just because a wizard doesn’t use Dark Magic doesn’t mean he can’t, Miss Pennyfeather,” snapped Professor Binns. “I repeat, if the likes of Dumbledore —”

“But maybe you’ve got to be related to Slytherin, so Dumble-dore couldn’t —” began Dean Thomas, but Professor Binns had had enough.

“That will do,” he said sharply. “It is a myth! It does not exist! There is not a shred of evidence that Slytherin ever built so much as a secret broom cupboard! I regret telling you such a foolish story! We will return, if you please, to history, to solid, believable, verifi-able fact!”

And within five minutes, the class had sunk back into its usual torpor.

“I always knew Salazar Slytherin was a twisted old loony,” Ron told Harry and Hermione as they fought their way through the teeming corridors at the end of the lesson to drop off their bags before dinner. “But I never knew he started all this pure-blood stuff. I wouldn’t be in his House if you paid me. Honestly, if the Sorting Hat had tried to put me in Slytherin, I’d’ve got the train straight back home. …”

Hermione nodded fervently, but Harry didn't say anything. His stomach had just dropped unpleasantly.

Harry had never told Ron and Hermione that the Sorting Hat had seriously considered putting him in Slytherin. He could re-member, as though it were yesterday, the small voice that had spo-ken in his ear when he'd placed the hat on his head a year before: You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin would help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that. …But Harry, who had already heard of Slytherin House's reputa-tion for turning out Dark wizards, had thought desperately, Not Slytherin! and the hat had said, Oh, well, if you're sure … better be Gryffindor. …As they were shunted along in the throng, Colin Creevey went past.

"Hiya, Harry!"

"Hullo, Colin," said Harry automatically.

"Harry — Harry — a boy in my class has been saying you're —"

But Colin was so small he couldn't fight against the tide of people bearing him toward the Great Hall; they heard him squeak, "See you, Harry!" and he was gone.

"What's a boy in his class saying about you?" Hermione won-dered.

"That I'm Slytherin's heir, I expect," said Harry, his stomach dropping another inch or so as he suddenly remembered the way Justin Finch-Fletchley had run away from him at lunchtime.

"People here'll believe anything," said Ron in disgust.

The crowd thinned and they were able to climb the next stair-case without difficulty.

"D'you really think there's a Chamber of Secrets?" Ron asked Hermione.

“I don’t know,” she said, frowning. “Dumbledore couldn’t cure Mrs. Norris, and that makes me think that whatever attacked her might not be — well — human.”

As she spoke, they turned a corner and found themselves at the end of the very corridor where the attack had happened. They stopped and looked. The scene was just as it had been that night, except that there was no stiff cat hanging from the torch bracket, and an empty chair stood against the wall bearing the message “The Chamber of Secrets Has Been Opened.”

“That’s where Filch has been keeping guard,” Ron muttered.

They looked at each other. The corridor was deserted.

“Can’t hurt to have a poke around,” said Harry, dropping his bag and getting to his hands and knees so that he could crawl along, searching for clues.

“Scorch marks!” he said. “Here — and here —”

“Come and look at this!” said Hermione. “This is funny. …”

Harry got up and crossed to the window next to the message on the wall. Hermione was pointing at the topmost pane, where around twenty spiders were scuttling, apparently fighting to get through a small crack. A long, silvery thread was dangling like a rope, as though they had all climbed it in their hurry to get outside.

“Have you ever seen spiders act like that?” said Hermione wonderingly.

“No,” said Harry, “have you, Ron? Ron?”

He looked over his shoulder. Ron was standing well back and seemed to be fighting the impulse to run.

“What’s up?” said Harry.

“I — don’t — like — spiders,” said Ron tensely.

“I never knew that,” said Hermione, looking at Ron in surprise. “You’ve used spiders in Potions loads of times. …”

“I don’t mind them dead,” said Ron, who was carefully look-ing anywhere but at the window. “I just don’t like the way they move. …”

Hermione giggled.

“It’s not funny,” said Ron, fiercely. “If you must know, when I was three, Fred turned my — my teddy bear into a great big filthy spider because I broke his toy broomstick. … You wouldn’t like them either if you’d been holding your bear and suddenly it had too many legs and …”

He broke off, shuddering. Hermione was obviously still trying not to laugh. Feeling they had better get off the subject, Harry said, “Remember all that water on the floor? Where did that come from? Someone’s mopped it up.”

“It was about here,” said Ron, recovering himself to walk a few paces past Filch’s chair and pointing. “Level with this door.”

He reached for the brass doorknob but suddenly withdrew his hand as though he’d been burned.

“What’s the matter?” said Harry.

“Can’t go in there,” said Ron gruffly. “That’s a girls’ toilet.”

“Oh, Ron, there won’t be anyone in there,” said Hermione, standing up and coming over. “That’s Moaning Myrtle’s place. Come on, let’s have a look.”

And ignoring the large OUT OF ORDER sign, she opened the door.

It was the gloomiest, most depressing bathroom Harry had ever set foot in. Under a large, cracked, and spotted mirror were a row of chipped sinks. The floor was damp and reflected the dull light given off by the stubs of a few candles, burning low in their hold-ers; the wooden doors to the stalls were flaking and scratched and one of them was dangling off its hinges.

Hermione put her fingers to her lips and set off toward the end stall. When she reached it she said, “Hello, Myrtle, how are you?”

Harry and Ron went to look. Moaning Myrtle was floating above the tank of the toilet, picking a spot on her chin.

“This is a girls’ bathroom,” she said, eyeing Ron and Harry suspiciously. “They’re not girls.”

“No,” Hermione agreed. “I just wanted to show them how — er — nice it is in here.”

She waved vaguely at the dirty old mirror and the damp floor.

“Ask her if she saw anything,” Harry mouthed at Hermione.

“What are you whispering?” said Myrtle, staring at him.

“Nothing,” said Harry quickly. “We wanted to ask —”

“I wish people would stop talking behind my back!” said Myrtle, in a voice choked with tears. “I do have feelings, you know, even if I am dead —”

“Myrtle, no one wants to upset you,” said Hermione. “Harry only —”

“No one wants to upset me! That’s a good one!” howled Myrtle. “My life was nothing but misery at this place and now people come along ruining my death!”

“We wanted to ask you if you’ve seen anything funny lately,” said Hermione quickly. “Because a cat was attacked right outside your front door on Halloween.”

“Did you see anyone near here that night?” said Harry.

“I wasn’t paying attention,” said Myrtle dramatically. “Peeves upset me so much I came in here and tried to kill myself. Then, of course, I remembered that I’m — that I’m —”

“Already dead,” said Ron helpfully.

Myrtle gave a tragic sob, rose up in the air, turned over, and dived headfirst into the toilet, splashing water all over them and vanishing from sight, although from the direction of her muffled sobs, she had come to rest somewhere in the U-bend.

Harry and Ron stood with their mouths open, but Hermione shrugged wearily and said, “Honestly, that was almost cheerful for Myrtle. … Come on, let’s go.”

Harry had barely closed the door on Myrtle’s gurgling sobs when a loud voice made all three of them jump.

“RON!”

Percy Weasley had stopped dead at the head of the stairs, prefect badge agleam, an expression of complete shock on his face.

“That’s a girls’ bathroom!” he gasped. “What were you — ?”

“Just having a look around,” Ron shrugged. “Clues, you know —”

Percy swelled in a manner that reminded Harry forcefully of Mrs. Weasley.

“Get — away — from — there —” Percy said, striding toward them and starting to bustle them along, flapping his arms. “Don’t you care

what this looks like? Coming back here while everyone's at dinner —"

"Why shouldn't we be here?" said Ron hotly, stopping short and glaring at Percy. "Listen, we never laid a finger on that cat!"

"That's what I told Ginny," said Percy fiercely, "but she still seems to think you're going to be expelled, I've never seen her so upset, crying her eyes out, you might think of her, all the first years are thoroughly overexcited by this business —"

"You don't care about Ginny," said Ron, whose ears were now reddening. "You're just worried I'm going to mess up your chances of being Head Boy —"

"Five points from Gryffindor!" Percy said tersely, fingering his prefect badge. "And I hope it teaches you a lesson! No more detec-tive work, or I'll write to Mum!"

And he strode off, the back of his neck as red as Ron's ears.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione chose seats as far as possible from Percy in the common room that night. Ron was still in a very bad tem-per and kept blotting his Charms homework. When he reached absently for his wand to remove the smudges, it ignited the parch-ment. Fuming almost as much as his homework, Ron slammed The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2 shut. To Harry's surprise, Hermione followed suit.

"Who can it be, though?" she said in a quiet voice, as though continuing a conversation they had just been having. "Who'd want to frighten all the Squibs and Muggle-borns out of Hogwarts?"

"Let's think," said Ron in mock puzzlement. "Who do we know who thinks Muggle-borns are scum?"

He looked at Hermione. Hermione looked back, unconvinced.

"If you're talking about Malfoy —"

"Of course I am!" said Ron. "You heard him — 'You'll be next, Mudbloods!' — come on, you've only got to look at his foul rat face to know it's him —"

"Malfoy, the Heir of Slytherin?" said Hermione skeptically.

"Look at his family," said Harry, closing his books, too. "The whole lot of them have been in Slytherin; he's always boasting about it. They could easily be Slytherin's descendants. His father's definitely evil enough."

"They could've had the key to the Chamber of Secrets for cen-turies!" said Ron. "Handing it down, father to son. …"

"Well," said Hermione cautiously, "I suppose it's possible. …"

"But how do we prove it?" said Harry darkly.

"There might be a way," said Hermione slowly, dropping her voice still further with a quick glance across the room at Percy. "Of course, it would be difficult. And dangerous, very dangerous. We'd be breaking about fifty school rules, I expect —"

"If, in a month or so, you feel like explaining, you will let us know, won't you?" said Ron irritably.

"All right," said Hermione coldly. "What we'd need to do is to get inside the Slytherin common room and ask Malfoy a few ques-tions without him realizing it's us."

"But that's impossible," Harry said as Ron laughed.

"No, it's not," said Hermione. "All we'd need would be some Polyjuice Potion."

"What's that?" said Ron and Harry together.

"Snape mentioned it in class a few weeks ago —"

"D'you think we've got nothing better to do in Potions than lis-ten to Snape?" muttered Ron.

"It transforms you into somebody else. Think about it! We could change into three of the Slytherins. No one would know it was us. Malfoy would probably tell us anything. He's probably boasting about it in the Slytherin common room right now, if only we could hear him."

"This Polyjuice stuff sounds a bit dodgy to me," said Ron, frowning. "What if we were stuck looking like three of the Slytherins forever?"

"It wears off after a while," said Hermione, waving her hand impatiently. "But getting hold of the recipe will be very difficult. Snape said it was in a book called Moste Potente Potions and it's bound to be in the Restricted Section of the library."

There was only one way to get out a book from the Restricted Section: You needed a signed note of permission from a teacher.

"Hard to see why we'd want the book, really," said Ron, "if we weren't going to try and make one of the potions."

"I think," said Hermione, "that if we made it sound as though we were just interested in the theory, we might stand a chance. …"

"Oh, come on, no teacher's going to fall for that," said Ron. "They'd have to be really thick. …"

Chapter 10 The Rogue Bludger

Since the disastrous episode of the pixies, Professor Lockhart had not brought live creatures to class. Instead, he read passages from his books to them, and sometimes reenacted some of the more dramatic bits. He usually picked Harry to help him with these reconstructions; so far, Harry had been forced to play a sim-ple Transylvanian villager whom Lockhart had cured of a Babbling Curse, a yeti with a head cold, and a vampire who had been unable to eat anything except lettuce since Lockhart had dealt with him.

Harry was hauled to the front of the class during their very next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson, this time acting a werewolf. If he hadn't had a very good reason for keeping Lockhart in a good mood, he would have refused to do it.

"Nice loud howl, Harry — exactly — and then, if you'll believe it, I pounced — like this — slammed him to the floor — thus — with one hand, I managed to hold him down — with my other, I put my wand to his throat — I then screwed up my remain-ing strength and performed the immensely complex Homorphus Charm — he let out a piteous moan — go on, Harry — higher than that — good — the fur vanished — the fangs shrank — and he turned back into a man. Simple, yet effective — and another village will remember me forever as the hero who delivered them from the monthly terror of werewolf attacks."

The bell rang and Lockhart got to his feet.

"Homework — compose a poem about my defeat of the Wagga Wagga Werewolf! Signed copies of Magical Me to the author of the best one!"

The class began to leave. Harry returned to the back of the room, where Ron and Hermione were waiting.

“Ready?” Harry muttered.

“Wait till everyone’s gone,” said Hermione nervously. “All right …”

She approached Lockhart’s desk, a piece of paper clutched tightly in her hand, Harry and Ron right behind her.

“Er — Professor Lockhart?” Hermione stammered. “I wanted to — to get this book out of the library. Just for background read-ing.” She held out the piece of paper, her hand shaking slightly. “But the thing is, it’s in the Restricted Section of the library, so I need a teacher to sign for it — I’m sure it would help me under-stand what you say in Gadding with Ghouls about slow-acting ven-oms —”

“Ah, Gadding with Ghouls!” said Lockhart, taking the note from Hermione and smiling widely at her. “Possibly my very favorite book. You enjoyed it?”

“Oh, yes,” said Hermione eagerly. “So clever, the way you trapped that last one with the tea-strainer —”

“Well, I’m sure no one will mind me giving the best student of the year a little extra help,” said Lockhart warmly, and he pulled out an enormous peacock quill. “Yes, nice, isn’t it?” he said, misreading the revolted look on Ron’s face. “I usually save it for book signings.”

He scrawled an enormous loopy signature on the note and handed it back to Hermione.

“So, Harry,” said Lockhart, while Hermione folded the note with fumbling fingers and slipped it into her bag. “Tomorrow’s the first Quidditch match of the season, I believe? Gryffindor against Slytherin, is it not? I hear you’re a useful player. I was a Seeker, too. I was asked to try for the National Squad, but preferred to dedicate my life to the eradication of the Dark Forces. Still, if ever you feel the need for a little private training, don’t hesitate to ask. Always happy to pass on my expertise to less able players. …”

Harry made an indistinct noise in his throat and then hurried off after Ron and Hermione.

“I don’t believe it,” he said as the three of them examined the signature on the note. “He didn’t even look at the book we wanted.”

“That’s because he’s a brainless git,” said Ron. “But who cares, we’ve got what we needed —”

“He is not a brainless git,” said Hermione shrilly as they half ran toward the library.

“Just because he said you were the best student of the year —”

They dropped their voices as they entered the muffled stillness of the library. Madam Pince, the librarian, was a thin, irritable woman who looked like an underfed vulture.

“Moste Potente Potions?” she repeated suspiciously, trying to take the note from Hermione; but Hermione wouldn’t let go.

“I was wondering if I could keep it,” she said breathlessly.

“Oh, come on,” said Ron, wrenching it from her grasp and thrusting it at Madam Pince. “We’ll get you another autograph. Lockhart’ll sign anything if it stands still long enough.”

Madam Pince held the note up to the light, as though deter-mined to detect a forgery, but it passed the test. She stalked away between the lofty shelves and returned several minutes later carry-ing a large and moldy-looking book. Hermione put it carefully into her bag and they left, trying not to walk too quickly or look too guilty.

Five minutes later, they were barricaded in Moaning Myrtle’s out-of-order bathroom once again. Hermione had overridden Ron’s objections by pointing out that it was the last place anyone in their right minds would go, so they were guaranteed some privacy.

Moaning Myrtle was crying noisily in her stall, but they were ig-noring her, and she them.

Hermione opened Moste Potente Potions carefully, and the three of them bent over the damp-spotted pages. It was clear from a glance why it belonged in the Restricted Section. Some of the po-tions had effects almost too gruesome to think about, and there were some very unpleasant illustrations, which included a man who seemed to have been turned inside out and a witch sprouting several extra pairs of arms out of her head.

“Here it is,” said Hermione excitedly as she found the page headed The Polyjuice Potion. It was decorated with drawings of people halfway through transforming into other people. Harry sincerely hoped the artist had imagined the looks of intense pain on their faces.

“This is the most complicated potion I’ve ever seen,” said Hermione as they scanned the recipe. “Lacewing flies, leeches, fluxweed, and knotgrass,” she murmured, running her finger down the list of ingredients. “Well, they’re easy enough, they’re in the student store-cupboard, we can help ourselves. … Oooh, look, powdered horn of a bicorn — don’t know where we’re going to get that — shredded skin of a boomslang — that’ll be tricky, too — and of course a bit of whoever we want to change into.”

“Excuse me?” said Ron sharply. “What d’you mean, a bit of whoever we’re changing into? I’m drinking nothing with Crabbe’s toenails in it —”

Hermione continued as though she hadn’t heard him.

“We don’t have to worry about that yet, though, because we add those bits last. …”

Ron turned, speechless, to Harry, who had another worry.

"D'you realize how much we're going to have to steal, Her-mione? Shredded skin of a boomslang, that's definitely not in the students' cupboard. What're we going to do, break into Snape's pri-vate stores? I don't know if this is a good idea. …"

Hermione shut the book with a snap.

"Well, if you two are going to chicken out, fine," she said. There were bright pink patches on her cheeks and her eyes were brighter than usual. "I don't want to break rules, you know. I think threat-ening Muggle-borns is far worse than brewing up a difficult po-tion. But if you don't want to find out if it's Malfoy, I'll go straight to Madam Pince now and hand the book back in —"

"I never thought I'd see the day when you'd be persuading us to break rules," said Ron. "All right, we'll do it. But not toenails, okay?"

"How long will it take to make, anyway?" said Harry as Her-mione, looking happier, opened the book again.

"Well, since the fluxweed has got to be picked at the full moon and the lacewings have got to be stewed for twenty-one days … I'd say it'd be ready in about a month, if we can get all the ingredients."

"A month?" said Ron. "Malfoy could have attacked half the Muggle-borns in the school by then!" But Hermione's eyes nar-rowed dangerously again, and he added swiftly, "But it's the best plan we've got, so full steam ahead, I say."

However, while Hermione was checking that the coast was clear for them to leave the bathroom, Ron muttered to Harry, "It'll be a lot less hassle if you can just knock Malfoy off his broom tomor-row."

Harry woke early on Saturday morning and lay for a while think-ing about the coming Quidditch match. He was nervous, mainly at the thought of what Wood would say if Gryffindor lost, but also at the idea of facing a team mounted on the fastest racing brooms gold could

buy. He had never wanted to beat Slytherin so badly. After half an hour of lying there with his insides churning, he got up, dressed, and went down to breakfast early, where he found the rest of the Gryffindor team huddled at the long, empty table, all looking uptight and not speaking much.

As eleven o'clock approached, the whole school started to make its way down to the Quidditch stadium. It was a muggy sort of day with a hint of thunder in the air. Ron and Hermione came hurry-ing over to wish Harry good luck as he entered the locker rooms. The team pulled on their scarlet Gryffindor robes, then sat down to listen to Wood's usual pre-match pep talk.

"Slytherin has better brooms than us," he began. "No point de-nying it. But we've got better people on our brooms. We've trained harder than they have, we've been flying in all weathers —" ("Too true," muttered George Weasley. "I haven't been properly dry since August") "— and we're going to make them rue the day they let that little bit of slime, Malfoy, buy his way onto their team."

Chest heaving with emotion, Wood turned to Harry.

"It'll be down to you, Harry, to show them that a Seeker has to have something more than a rich father. Get to that Snitch before Malfoy or die trying, Harry, because we've got to win today, we've got to."

"So no pressure, Harry," said Fred, winking at him.

As they walked out onto the field, a roar of noise greeted them; mainly cheers, because Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were anxious to see Slytherin beaten, but the Slytherins in the crowd made their boos and hisses heard, too. Madam Hooch, the Quidditch teacher, asked Flint and Wood to shake hands, which they did, giving each other threatening stares and gripping rather harder than was neces-sary.

"On my whistle," said Madam Hooch. "Three … two … one …"

With a roar from the crowd to speed them upward, the fourteen players rose toward the leaden sky. Harry flew higher than any of them, squinting around for the Snitch.

“All right there, Scarhead?” yelled Malfoy, shooting underneath him as though to show off the speed of his broom.

Harry had no time to reply. At that very moment, a heavy black Bludger came pelting toward him; he avoided it so narrowly that he felt it ruffle his hair as it passed.

“Close one, Harry!” said George, streaking past him with his club in his hand, ready to knock the Bludger back toward a Slyth-erin. Harry saw George give the Bludger a powerful whack in the direction of Adrian Pucey, but the Bludger changed direction in midair and shot straight for Harry again.

Harry dropped quickly to avoid it, and George managed to hit it hard toward Malfoy. Once again, the Bludger swerved like a boomerang and shot at Harry’s head.

Harry put on a burst of speed and zoomed toward the other end of the field. He could hear the Bludger whistling along behind him. What was going on? Bludgers never concentrated on one player like this; it was their job to try and unseat as many people as possible. …Fred Weasley was waiting for the Bludger at the other end. Harry ducked as Fred swung at the Bludger with all his might; the Bludger was knocked off course.

“Gotcha!” Fred yelled happily, but he was wrong; as though it was magnetically attracted to Harry, the Bludger pelted after him once more and Harry was forced to fly off at full speed.

It had started to rain; Harry felt heavy drops fall onto his face, splattering onto his glasses. He didn’t have a clue what was going on in the rest of the game until he heard Lee Jordan, who was com-mentating, say, “Slytherin lead, sixty points to zero —”

The Slytherins' superior brooms were clearly doing their jobs, and meanwhile the mad Bludger was doing all it could to knock Harry out of the air. Fred and George were now flying so close to him on either side that Harry could see nothing at all except their flailing arms and had no chance to look for the Snitch, let alone catch it.

"Someone's — tampered — with — this — Bludger —" Fred grunted, swinging his bat with all his might at it as it launched a new attack on Harry.

"We need time out," said George, trying to signal to Wood and stop the Bludger breaking Harry's nose at the same time.

Wood had obviously got the message. Madam Hooch's whistle rang out and Harry, Fred, and George dived for the ground, still trying to avoid the mad Bludger.

"What's going on?" said Wood as the Gryffindor team huddled together, while Slytherins in the crowd jeered. "We're being flat-tened. Fred, George, where were you when that Bludger stopped Angelina scoring?"

"We were twenty feet above her, stopping the other Bludger from murdering Harry, Oliver," said George angrily. "Someone's fixed it — it won't leave Harry alone. It hasn't gone for anyone else all game. The Slytherins must have done something to it."

"But the Bludgers have been locked in Madam Hooch's office since our last practice, and there was nothing wrong with them then. …" said Wood, anxiously.

Madam Hooch was walking toward them. Over her shoulder, Harry could see the Slytherin team jeering and pointing in his di-rection.

"Listen," said Harry as she came nearer and nearer, "with you two flying around me all the time the only way I'm going to catch the

Snitch is if it flies up my sleeve. Go back to the rest of the team and let me deal with the rogue one."

"Don't be thick," said Fred. "It'll take your head off."

Wood was looking from Harry to the Weasleys.

"Oliver, this is insane," said Alicia Spinnet angrily. "You can't let Harry deal with that thing on his own. Let's ask for an inquiry —"

"If we stop now, we'll have to forfeit the match!" said Harry. "And we're not losing to Slytherin just because of a crazy Bludger! Come on, Oliver, tell them to leave me alone!"

"This is all your fault," George said angrily to Wood. " 'Get the Snitch or die trying,' what a stupid thing to tell him —"

Madam Hooch had joined them.

"Ready to resume play?" she asked Wood.

Wood looked at the determined look on Harry's face.

"All right," he said. "Fred, George, you heard Harry — leave him alone and let him deal with the Bludger on his own."

The rain was falling more heavily now. On Madam Hooch's whistle, Harry kicked hard into the air and heard the telltale whoosh of the Bludger behind him. Higher and higher Harry climbed; he looped and swooped, spiraled, zigzagged, and rolled. Slightly dizzy, he nevertheless kept his eyes wide open, rain was speckling his glasses and ran up his nostrils as he hung upside down, avoiding another fierce dive from the Bludger. He could hear laughter from the crowd; he knew he must look very stupid, but the rogue Bludger was heavy and couldn't change direction as quickly as Harry could; he began a kind of roller-coaster ride around the edges of the stadium, squinting through the silver sheets of rain to the Gryffindor goal posts, where

Adrian Pucey was trying to get past Wood —A whistling in Harry's ear told him the Bludger had just missed him again; he turned right over and sped in the opposite direction.

"Training for the ballet, Potter?" yelled Malfoy as Harry was forced to do a stupid kind of twirl in midair to dodge the Bludger, and he fled, the Bludger trailing a few feet behind him; and then, glaring back at Malfoy in hatred, he saw it — the Golden Snitch. It was hovering inches above Malfoy's left ear — and Malfoy, busy laughing at Harry, hadn't seen it.

For an agonizing moment, Harry hung in midair, not daring to speed toward Malfoy in case he looked up and saw the Snitch.

WHAM.

He had stayed still a second too long. The Bludger had hit him at last, smashed into his elbow, and Harry felt his arm break. Dimly, dazed by the searing pain in his arm, he slid sideways on his rain-drenched broom, one knee still crooked over it, his right arm dangling useless at his side — the Bludger came pelting back for a second attack, this time aiming at his face — Harry swerved out of the way, one idea firmly lodged in his numb brain: get to Malfoy.

Through a haze of rain and pain he dived for the shimmering, sneering face below him and saw its eyes widen with fear: Malfoy thought Harry was attacking him.

"What the —" he gasped, careening out of Harry's way.

Harry took his remaining hand off his broom and made a wild snatch; he felt his fingers close on the cold Snitch but was now only gripping the broom with his legs, and there was a yell from the crowd below as he headed straight for the ground, trying hard not to pass out.

With a splattering thud he hit the mud and rolled off his broom. His arm was hanging at a very strange angle; riddled with pain, he heard,

as though from a distance, a good deal of whistling and shouting. He focused on the Snitch clutched in his good hand.

“Aha,” he said vaguely. “We’ve won.”

And he fainted.

He came around, rain falling on his face, still lying on the field, with someone leaning over him. He saw a glitter of teeth.

“Oh, no, not you,” he moaned.

“Doesn’t know what he’s saying,” said Lockhart loudly to the anxious crowd of Gryffindors pressing around them. “Not to worry, Harry. I’m about to fix your arm.”

“No!” said Harry. “I’ll keep it like this, thanks. …”

He tried to sit up, but the pain was terrible. He heard a familiar clicking noise nearby.

“I don’t want a photo of this, Colin,” he said loudly.

“Lie back, Harry,” said Lockhart soothingly. “It’s a simple charm I’ve used countless times —”

“Why can’t I just go to the hospital wing?” said Harry through clenched teeth.

“He should really, Professor,” said a muddy Wood, who couldn’t help grinning even though his Seeker was injured. “Great capture, Harry, really spectacular, your best yet, I’d say —”

Through the thicket of legs around him, Harry spotted Fred and George Weasley, wrestling the rogue Bludger into a box. It was still putting up a terrific fight.

“Stand back,” said Lockhart, who was rolling up his jade-green sleeves.

“No — don’t —” said Harry weakly, but Lockhart was twirling his wand and a second later had directed it straight at Harry’s arm.

A strange and unpleasant sensation started at Harry’s shoulder and spread all the way down to his fingertips. It felt as though his arm was being deflated. He didn’t dare look at what was happen-ing. He had shut his eyes, his face turned away from his arm, but his worst fears were realized as the people above him gasped and Colin Creevey began clicking away madly. His arm didn’t hurt any-more — nor did it feel remotely like an arm.

“Ah,” said Lockhart. “Yes. Well, that can sometimes happen. But the point is, the bones are no longer broken. That’s the thing to bear in mind. So, Harry, just toddle up to the hospital wing — ah, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, would you escort him? — and Madam Pomfrey will be able to — er — tidy you up a bit.”

As Harry got to his feet, he felt strangely lopsided. Taking a deep breath he looked down at his right side. What he saw nearly made him pass out again.

Poking out of the end of his robes was what looked like a thick, flesh-colored rubber glove. He tried to move his fingers. Nothing happened.

Lockhart hadn’t mended Harry’s bones. He had removed them.

Madam Pomfrey wasn’t at all pleased.

“You should have come straight to me!” she raged, holding up the sad, limp remainder of what, half an hour before, had been a working arm. “I can mend bones in a second — but growing them back —”

“You will be able to, won’t you?” said Harry desperately.

“I’ll be able to, certainly, but it will be painful,” said Madam Pomfrey grimly, throwing Harry a pair of pajamas. “You’ll have to stay the night. …”

Hermione waited outside the curtain drawn around Harry’s bed while Ron helped him into his pajamas. It took a while to stuff the rubbery, boneless arm into a sleeve.

“How can you stick up for Lockhart now, Hermione, eh?” Ron called through the curtain as he pulled Harry’s limp fingers through the cuff. “If Harry had wanted deboning he would have asked.”

“Anyone can make a mistake,” said Hermione. “And it doesn’t hurt anymore, does it, Harry?”

“No,” said Harry, getting into bed. “But it doesn’t do anything else either.”

As he swung himself onto the bed, his arm flapped pointlessly.

Hermione and Madam Pomfrey came around the curtain. Madam Pomfrey was holding a large bottle of something labeled Skele-Gro.

“You’re in for a rough night,” she said, pouring out a steaming beakerful and handing it to him. “Regrowing bones is a nasty business.”

So was taking the Skele-Gro. It burned Harry’s mouth and throat as it went down, making him cough and splutter. Still tut-tutting about dangerous sports and inept teachers, Madam Pomfrey retreated, leaving Ron and Hermione to help Harry gulp down some water.

“We won, though,” said Ron, a grin breaking across his face. “That was some catch you made. Malfoy’s face … he looked ready to kill. …”

“I want to know how he fixed that Bludger,” said Hermione darkly.

“We can add that to the list of questions we’ll ask him when we’ve taken the Polyjuice Potion,” said Harry, sinking back onto his pillows. “I hope it tastes better than this stuff. …”

“If it’s got bits of Slytherins in it? You’ve got to be joking,” said Ron.

The door of the hospital wing burst open at that moment. Filthy and soaking wet, the rest of the Gryffindor team had arrived to see Harry.

“Unbelievable flying, Harry,” said George. “I’ve just seen Mar-cus Flint yelling at Malfoy. Something about having the Snitch on top of his head and not noticing. Malfoy didn’t seem too happy.”

They had brought cakes, sweets, and bottles of pumpkin juice; they gathered around Harry’s bed and were just getting started on what promised to be a good party when Madam Pomfrey came storming over, shouting, “This boy needs rest, he’s got thirty-three bones to regrow! Out! OUT!”

And Harry was left alone, with nothing to distract him from the stabbing pains in his limp arm.

Hours and hours later, Harry woke quite suddenly in the pitch blackness and gave a small yelp of pain: His arm now felt full of large splinters. For a second, he thought that was what had woken him. Then, with a thrill of horror, he realized that someone was sponging his forehead in the dark.

“Get off!” he said loudly, and then, “Dobby!”

The house-elf’s goggling tennis ball eyes were peering at Harry through the darkness. A single tear was running down his long, pointed nose.

“Harry Potter came back to school,” he whispered miserably. “Dobby warned and warned Harry Potter. Ah sir, why didn’t you heed Dobby? Why didn’t Harry Potter go back home when he missed the train?”

Harry heaved himself up on his pillows and pushed Dobby's sponge away.

"What're you doing here?" he said. "And how did you know I missed the train?"

Dobby's lip trembled and Harry was seized by a sudden suspi-cion.

"It was you!" he said slowly. "You stopped the barrier from letting us through!"

"Indeed yes, sir," said Dobby, nodding his head vigorously, ears flapping. "Dobby hid and watched for Harry Potter and sealed the gateway and Dobby had to iron his hands afterward" — he showed Harry ten long, bandaged fingers — "but Dobby didn't care, sir, for he thought Harry Potter was safe, and never did Dobby dream that Harry Potter would get to school another way!"

He was rocking backward and forward, shaking his ugly head.

"Dobby was so shocked when he heard Harry Potter was back at Hogwarts, he let his master's dinner burn! Such a flogging Dobby never had, sir. …"

Harry slumped back onto his pillows.

"You nearly got Ron and me expelled," he said fiercely. "You'd better get lost before my bones come back, Dobby, or I might strangle you."

Dobby smiled weakly.

"Dobby is used to death threats, sir. Dobby gets them five times a day at home."

He blew his nose on a corner of the filthy pillowcase he wore, looking so pathetic that Harry felt his anger ebb away in spite of himself.

"Why d'you wear that thing, Dobby?" he asked curiously.

“This, sir?” said Dobby, plucking at the pillowcase. “ ’Tis a mark of the house-elf’s enslavement, sir. Dobby can only be freed if his masters present him with clothes, sir. The family is careful not to pass Dobby even a sock, sir, for then he would be free to leave their house forever.”

Dobby mopped his bulging eyes and said suddenly, “Harry Pot-ter must go home! Dobby thought his Bludger would be enough to make —”

“Your Bludger?” said Harry, anger rising once more. “What d’you mean, your Bludger? You made that Bludger try and kill me?”

“Not kill you, sir, never kill you!” said Dobby, shocked. “Dobby wants to save Harry Potter’s life! Better sent home, grievously in-jured, than remain here, sir! Dobby only wanted Harry Potter hurt enough to be sent home!”

“Oh, is that all?” said Harry angrily. “I don’t suppose you’re go-ing to tell me why you wanted me sent home in pieces?”

“Ah, if Harry Potter only knew!” Dobby groaned, more tears dripping onto his ragged pillowcase. “If he knew what he means to us, to the lowly, the enslaved, we dregs of the magical world! Dobby remembers how it was when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was at the height of his powers, sir! We house-elves were treated like vermin, sir! Of course, Dobby is still treated like that, sir,” he admitted, drying his face on the pillowcase. “But mostly, sir, life has improved for my kind since you triumphed over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry Potter survived, and the Dark Lord’s power was broken, and it was a new dawn, sir, and Harry Potter shone like a beacon of hope for those of us who thought the Dark days would never end, sir. … And now, at Hogwarts, terrible things are to happen, are perhaps happening already, and Dobby cannot let Harry Potter stay here now that history is to repeat itself, now that the Chamber of Secrets is open once more —”

Dobby froze, horrorstruck, then grabbed Harry's water jug from his bedside table and cracked it over his own head, toppling out of sight. A second later, he crawled back onto the bed, cross-eyed, muttering, "Bad Dobby, very bad Dobby …"

"So there is a Chamber of Secrets?" Harry whispered. "And — did you say it's been opened before? Tell me, Dobby!"

He seized the elf's bony wrist as Dobby's hand inched toward the water jug. "But I'm not Muggle-born — how can I be in dan-ger from the Chamber?"

"Ah, sir, ask no more, ask no more of poor Dobby," stammered the elf, his eyes huge in the dark. "Dark deeds are planned in this place, but Harry Potter must not be here when they happen — go home, Harry Potter, go home. Harry Potter must not meddle in this, sir, 'tis too dangerous —"

"Who is it, Dobby?" Harry said, keeping a firm hold on Dobby's wrist to stop him from hitting himself with the water jug again. "Who's opened it? Who opened it last time?"

"Dobby can't, sir, Dobby can't, Dobby mustn't tell!" squealed the elf. "Go home, Harry Potter, go home!"

"I'm not going anywhere!" said Harry fiercely. "One of my best friends is Muggle-born; she'll be first in line if the Chamber really has been opened —"

"Harry Potter risks his own life for his friends!" moaned Dobby in a kind of miserable ecstasy. "So noble! So valiant! But he must save himself, he must, Harry Potter must not —"

Dobby suddenly froze, his bat ears quivering. Harry heard it, too. There were footsteps coming down the passageway outside.

“Dobby must go!” breathed the elf, terrified. There was a loud crack, and Harry’s fist was suddenly clenched on thin air. He slumped back into bed, his eyes on the dark doorway to the hospi-tal wing as the footsteps drew nearer.

Next moment, Dumbledore was backing into the dormitory, wearing a long woolly dressing gown and a nightcap. He was carry-ing one end of what looked like a statue. Professor McGonagall appeared a second later, carrying its feet. Together, they heaved it onto a bed.

“Get Madam Pomfrey,” whispered Dumbledore, and Professor McGonagall hurried past the end of Harry’s bed out of sight. Harry lay quite still, pretending to be asleep. He heard urgent voices, and then Professor McGonagall swept back into view, closely followed by Madam Pomfrey, who was pulling a cardigan on over her night-dress. He heard a sharp intake of breath.

“What happened?” Madam Pomfrey whispered to Dumbledore, bending over the statue on the bed.

“Another attack,” said Dumbledore. “Minerva found him on the stairs.”

“There was a bunch of grapes next to him,” said Professor Mc-Gonagall. “We think he was trying to sneak up here to visit Potter.”

Harry’s stomach gave a horrible lurch. Slowly and carefully, he raised himself a few inches so he could look at the statue on the bed. A ray of moonlight lay across its staring face.

It was Colin Creevey. His eyes were wide and his hands were stuck up in front of him, holding his camera.

“Petrified?” whispered Madam Pomfrey.

“Yes,” said Professor McGonagall. “But I shudder to think … If Albus hadn’t been on the way downstairs for hot chocolate — who knows what might have —”

The three of them stared down at Colin. Then Dumbledore leaned forward and wrenched the camera out of Colin's rigid grip.

"You don't think he managed to get a picture of his attacker?" said Professor McGonagall eagerly.

Dumbledore didn't answer. He opened the back of the camera.

"Good gracious!" said Madam Pomfrey.

A jet of steam had hissed out of the camera. Harry, three beds away, caught the acrid smell of burnt plastic.

"Melted," said Madam Pomfrey wonderingly. "All melted …"

"What does this mean, Albus?" Professor McGonagall asked urgently.

"It means," said Dumbledore, "that the Chamber of Secrets is indeed open again."

Madam Pomfrey clapped a hand to her mouth. Professor McGonagall stared at Dumbledore.

"But, Albus … surely … who?"

"The question is not who," said Dumbledore, his eyes on Colin. "The question is, how. …"

And from what Harry could see of Professor McGonagall's shad-owy face, she didn't understand this any better than he did.

Chapter 11 The Dueling Club

Harry woke up on Sunday morning to find the dormitory blazing with winter sunlight and his arm reboned but very stiff. He sat up quickly and looked over at Colin's bed, but it had been blocked from view by the high curtains Harry had changed behind yesterday. Seeing that he was awake, Madam Pom-frey came bustling over with a breakfast tray and then began bend-ing and stretching his arm and fingers.

"All in order," she said as he clumsily fed himself porridge left-handed. "When you've finished eating, you may leave."

Harry dressed as quickly as he could and hurried off to Gryf-findor Tower, desperate to tell Ron and Hermione about Colin and Dobby, but they weren't there. Harry left to look for them, wondering where they could have got to and feeling slightly hurt that they weren't interested in whether he had his bones back or not.

As Harry passed the library, Percy Weasley strolled out of it, looking in far better spirits than last time they'd met.

"Oh, hello, Harry," he said. "Excellent flying yesterday, really ex-cellent. Gryffindor has just taken the lead for the House Cup — you earned fifty points!"

"You haven't seen Ron or Hermione, have you?" said Harry.

"No, I haven't," said Percy, his smile fading. "I hope Ron's not in another girls' toilet. …"

Harry forced a laugh, watched Percy walk out of sight, and then headed straight for Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. He couldn't see why Ron and Hermione would be in there again, but after making sure that neither Filch nor any prefects were around, he opened the door and heard their voices coming from a locked stall.

“It’s me,” he said, closing the door behind him. There was a clunk, a splash, and a gasp from within the stall and he saw Hermione’s eye peering through the keyhole.

“Harry!” she said. “You gave us such a fright — come in — how’s your arm?”

“Fine,” said Harry, squeezing into the stall. An old cauldron was perched on the toilet, and a crackling from under the rim told Harry they had lit a fire beneath it. Conjuring up portable, water-proof fires was a speciality of Hermione’s.

“We’d’ve come to meet you, but we decided to get started on the Polyjuice Potion,” Ron explained as Harry, with difficulty, locked the stall again. “We’ve decided this is the safest place to hide it.”

Harry started to tell them about Colin, but Hermione inter-rupted.

“We already know — we heard Professor McGonagall telling Professor Flitwick this morning. That’s why we decided we’d better get going —”

“The sooner we get a confession out of Malfoy, the better,” snarled Ron. “D’you know what I think? He was in such a foul temper after the Quidditch match, he took it out on Colin.”

“There’s something else,” said Harry, watching Hermione tear-ing bundles of knotgrass and throwing them into the potion. “Dobby came to visit me in the middle of the night.”

Ron and Hermione looked up, amazed. Harry told them every-thing Dobby had told him — or hadn’t told him. Hermione and Ron listened with their mouths open.

“The Chamber of Secrets has been opened before?” Hermione said.

“This settles it,” said Ron in a triumphant voice. “Lucius Malfoy must’ve opened the Chamber when he was at school here and now he’s told dear old Draco how to do it. It’s obvious. Wish Dobby’d told you what kind of monster’s in there, though. I want to know how come nobody’s noticed it sneaking around the school.”

“Maybe it can make itself invisible,” said Hermione, prodding leeches to the bottom of the cauldron. “Or maybe it can disguise itself — pretend to be a suit of armor or something — I’ve read about Chameleon Ghouls —”

“You read too much, Hermione,” said Ron, pouring dead lacewings on top of the leeches. He crumpled up the empty lacewing bag and looked at Harry.

“So Dobby stopped us from getting on the train and broke your arm. …” He shook his head. “You know what, Harry? If he doesn’t stop trying to save your life he’s going to kill you.”

* * *

The news that Colin Creevey had been attacked and was now lying as though dead in the hospital wing had spread through the entire school by Monday morning. The air was suddenly thick with ru-mor and suspicion. The first years were now moving around the castle in tight-knit groups, as though scared they would be attacked if they ventured forth alone.

Ginny Weasley, who sat next to Colin Creevey in Charms, was distraught, but Harry felt that Fred and George were going the wrong way about cheering her up. They were taking turns covering themselves with fur or boils and jumping out at her from behind statues. They only stopped when Percy, apoplectic with rage, told them he was going to write to Mrs. Weasley and tell her Ginny was having nightmares.

Meanwhile, hidden from the teachers, a roaring trade in talis-mans, amulets, and other protective devices was sweeping the school. Neville Longbottom bought a large, evil-smelling green onion, a pointed purple crystal, and a rotting newt tail before the other Gryffindor boys pointed out that he was in no danger; he was a pureblood, and therefore unlikely to be attacked.

“They went for Filch first,” Neville said, his round face fearful. “And everyone knows I’m almost a Squib.”

In the second week of December Professor McGonagall came around as usual, collecting names of those who would be staying at school for Christmas. Harry, Ron, and Hermione signed her list; they had heard that Malfoy was staying, which struck them as very suspicious. The holidays would be the perfect time to use the Polyjuice Potion and try to worm a confession out of him.

Unfortunately, the potion was only half finished. They still needed the bicorn horn and the boomslang skin, and the only place they were going to get them was from Snape’s private stores. Harry privately felt he’d rather face Slytherin’s legendary monster than let Snape catch him robbing his office.

“What we need,” said Hermione briskly as Thursday afternoon’s double Potions lesson loomed nearer, “is a diversion. Then one of us can sneak into Snape’s office and take what we need.”

Harry and Ron looked at her nervously.

“I think I’d better do the actual stealing,” Hermione continued in a matter-of-fact tone. “You two will be expelled if you get into any more trouble, and I’ve got a clean record. So all you need to do is cause enough mayhem to keep Snape busy for five minutes or so.”

Harry smiled feebly. Deliberately causing mayhem in Snape’s Potions class was about as safe as poking a sleeping dragon in the eye.

Potions lessons took place in one of the large dungeons. Thurs-day afternoon's lesson proceeded in the usual way. Twenty caul-drons stood steaming between the wooden desks, on which stood brass scales and jars of ingredients. Snape prowled through the fumes, making waspish remarks about the Gryffindors' work while the Slytherins sniggered appreciatively. Draco Malfoy, who was Snape's favorite student, kept flicking puffer-fish eyes at Ron and Harry, who knew that if they retaliated they would get detention faster than you could say "Unfair."

Harry's Swelling Solution was far too runny, but he had his mind on more important things. He was waiting for Hermione's signal, and he hardly listened as Snape paused to sneer at his watery potion. When Snape turned and walked off to bully Neville, Hermione caught Harry's eye and nodded.

Harry ducked swiftly down behind his cauldron, pulled one of Fred's Filibuster fireworks out of his pocket, and gave it a quick prod with his wand. The firework began to fizz and sputter. Knowing he had only seconds, Harry straightened up, took aim, and lobbed it into the air; it landed right on target in Goyle's cauldron.

Goyle's potion exploded, showering the whole class. People shrieked as splashes of the Swelling Solution hit them. Malfoy got a faceful and his nose began to swell like a balloon; Goyle blun-dered around, his hands over his eyes, which had expanded to the size of a dinner plate — Snape was trying to restore calm and find out what had happened. Through the confusion, Harry saw Her-mione slip quietly into Snape's office.

"Silence! SILENCE!" Snape roared. "Anyone who has been splashed, come here for a Deflating Draught — when I find out who did this —"

Harry tried not to laugh as he watched Malfoy hurry forward, his head drooping with the weight of a nose like a small melon. As half the

class lumbered up to Snape's desk, some weighted down with arms like clubs, others unable to talk through gigantic puffed-up lips, Harry saw Hermione slide back into the dungeon, the front of her robes bulging.

When everyone had taken a swig of antidote and the various swellings had subsided, Snape swept over to Goyle's cauldron and scooped out the twisted black remains of the firework. There was a sudden hush.

"If I ever find out who threw this," Snape whispered, "I shall make sure that person is expelled."

Harry arranged his face into what he hoped was a puzzled ex-pression. Snape was looking right at him, and the bell that rang ten minutes later could not have been more welcome.

"He knew it was me," Harry told Ron and Hermione as they hurried back to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. "I could tell."

Hermione threw the new ingredients into the cauldron and be-gan to stir feverishly.

"It'll be ready in two weeks," she said happily.

"Snape can't prove it was you," said Ron reassuringly to Harry. "What can he do?"

"Knowing Snape, something foul," said Harry as the potion frothed and bubbled.

A week later, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were walking across the entrance hall when they saw a small knot of people gathered around the notice board, reading a piece of parchment that had just been pinned up. Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas beck-oned them over, looking excited.

“They’re starting a Dueling Club!” said Seamus. “First meeting tonight! I wouldn’t mind dueling lessons; they might come in handy one of these days. …”

“What, you reckon Slytherin’s monster can duel?” said Ron, but he, too, read the sign with interest.

“Could be useful,” he said to Harry and Hermione as they went into dinner. “Shall we go?”

Harry and Hermione were all for it, so at eight o’clock that evening they hurried back to the Great Hall. The long dining tables had vanished and a golden stage had appeared along one wall, lit by thousands of candles floating overhead. The ceiling was velvety black once more and most of the school seemed to be packed beneath it, all carrying their wands and looking excited.

“I wonder who’ll be teaching us?” said Hermione as they edged into the chattering crowd. “Someone told me Flitwick was a duel-ing champion when he was young — maybe it’ll be him.”

“As long as it’s not —” Harry began, but he ended on a groan: Gilderoy Lockhart was walking onto the stage, resplendent in robes of deep plum and accompanied by none other than Snape, wearing his usual black.

Lockhart waved an arm for silence and called, “Gather round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excel-lent!

“Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little dueling club, to train you all in case you ever need to de-fend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions — for full details, see my published works.

“Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape,” said Lockhart, flashing a wide smile. “He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about dueling himself and has sportingly agreed to help me with a short

demonstration before we begin. Now, I don't want any of you youngsters to worry — you'll still have your Potions master when I'm through with him, never fear!"

"Wouldn't it be good if they finished each other off?" Ron mut-tered in Harry's ear.

Snape's upper lip was curling. Harry wondered why Lockhart was still smiling; if Snape had been looking at him like that he'd have been running as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

Lockhart and Snape turned to face each other and bowed; at least, Lockhart did, with much twirling of his hands, whereas Snape jerked his head irritably. Then they raised their wands like swords in front of them.

"As you see, we are holding our wands in the accepted combat-ive position," Lockhart told the silent crowd. "On the count of three, we will cast our first spells. Neither of us will be aiming to kill, of course."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Harry murmured, watching Snape bar-ing his teeth.

"One — two — three —"

Both of them swung their wands above their heads and pointed them at their opponent; Snape cried: "Expelliarmus!" There was a dazzling flash of scarlet light and Lockhart was blasted off his feet: He flew backward off the stage, smashed into the wall, and slid down it to sprawl on the floor.

Malfoy and some of the other Slytherins cheered. Hermione was dancing on tiptoes. "Do you think he's all right?" she squealed through her fingers.

"Who cares?" said Harry and Ron together.

Lockhart was getting unsteadily to his feet. His hat had fallen off and his wavy hair was standing on end.

“Well, there you have it!” he said, tottering back onto the plat-form. “That was a Disarming Charm — as you see, I’ve lost my wand — ah, thank you, Miss Brown — yes, an excellent idea to show them that, Professor Snape, but if you don’t mind my saying so, it was very obvious what you were about to do. If I had wanted to stop you it would have been only too easy — however, I felt it would be instructive to let them see …”

Snape was looking murderous. Possibly Lockhart had noticed, because he said, “Enough demonstrating! I’m going to come amongst you now and put you all into pairs. Professor Snape, if you’d like to help me —”

They moved through the crowd, matching up partners. Lock-hart teamed Neville with Justin Finch-Fletchley, but Snape reached Harry and Ron first.

“Time to split up the dream team, I think,” he sneered. “Weasley, you can partner Finnigan. Potter —”

Harry moved automatically toward Hermione.

“I don’t think so,” said Snape, smiling coldly. “Mr. Malfoy, come over here. Let’s see what you make of the famous Potter. And you, Miss Granger — you can partner Miss Bulstrode.”

Malfoy strutted over, smirking. Behind him walked a Slytherin girl who reminded Harry of a picture he’d seen in Holidays with Hags. She was large and square and her heavy jaw jutted aggres-sively. Hermione gave her a weak smile that she did not return.

“Face your partners!” called Lockhart, back on the platform. “And bow!”

Harry and Malfoy barely inclined their heads, not taking their eyes off each other.

“Wands at the ready!” shouted Lockhart. “When I count to three, cast your charms to disarm your opponents — only to dis-arm them — we don’t want any accidents — one … two … three —”

Harry swung his wand high, but Malfoy had already started on “two”: His spell hit Harry so hard he felt as though he’d been hit over the head with a saucepan. He stumbled, but everything still seemed to be working, and wasting no more time, Harry pointed his wand straight at Malfoy and shouted, “Rictusempra!”

A jet of silver light hit Malfoy in the stomach and he doubled up, wheezing.

“I said disarm only!” Lockhart shouted in alarm over the heads of the battling crowd, as Malfoy sank to his knees; Harry had hit him with a Tickling Charm, and he could barely move for laugh-ing. Harry hung back, with a vague feeling it would be unsporting to bewitch Malfoy while he was on the floor, but this was a mis-take; gasping for breath, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry’s knees, choked, “Tarantallegra!” and the next second Harry’s legs began to jerk around out of his control in a kind of quickstep.

“Stop! Stop!” screamed Lockhart, but Snape took charge.

“Finite Incantatem!” he shouted; Harry’s feet stopped dancing, Malfoy stopped laughing, and they were able to look up.

A haze of greenish smoke was hovering over the scene. Both Neville and Justin were lying on the floor, panting; Ron was hold-ing up an ashen-faced Seamus, apologizing for whatever his broken wand had done; but Hermione and Millicent Bulstrode were still moving; Millicent had Hermione in a headlock and Hermione was whimpering in pain; both their wands lay forgotten on the floor. Harry leapt

forward and pulled Millicent off. It was difficult: She was a lot bigger than he was.

“Dear, dear,” said Lockhart, skittering through the crowd, look-ing at the aftermath of the duels. “Up you go, Macmillan. … Careful there, Miss Fawcett. … Pinch it hard, it’ll stop bleeding in a second, Boot —“I think I’d better teach you how to block unfriendly spells,” said Lockhart, standing flustered in the midst of the hall. He glanced at Snape, whose black eyes glinted, and looked quickly away. “Let’s have a volunteer pair — Longbottom and Finch-Fletchley, how about you —”

“A bad idea, Professor Lockhart,” said Snape, gliding over like a large and malevolent bat. “Longbottom causes devastation with the simplest spells. We’ll be sending what’s left of Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox.” Neville’s round, pink face went pinker. “How about Malfoy and Potter?” said Snape with a twisted smile.

“Excellent idea!” said Lockhart, gesturing Harry and Malfoy into the middle of the hall as the crowd backed away to give them room.

“Now, Harry,” said Lockhart. “When Draco points his wand at you, you do this.”

He raised his own wand, attempted a complicated sort of wig-gling action, and dropped it. Snape smirked as Lockhart quickly picked it up, saying, “Whoops — my wand is a little overex-cited —”

Snape moved closer to Malfoy, bent down, and whispered some-thing in his ear. Malfoy smirked, too. Harry looked up nervously at Lockhart and said, “Professor, could you show me that blocking thing again?”

“Scared?” muttered Malfoy, so that Lockhart couldn’t hear him.

“You wish,” said Harry out of the corner of his mouth.

Lockhart cuffed Harry merrily on the shoulder. “Just do what I did, Harry!”

“What, drop my wand?”

But Lockhart wasn’t listening.

“Three — two — one — go!” he shouted.

Malfoy raised his wand quickly and bellowed, “Serpensortia!”

The end of his wand exploded. Harry watched, aghast, as a long black snake shot out of it, fell heavily onto the floor between them, and raised itself, ready to strike. There were screams as the crowd backed swiftly away, clearing the floor.

“Don’t move, Potter,” said Snape lazily, clearly enjoying the sight of Harry standing motionless, eye to eye with the angry snake. “I’ll get rid of it. …”

“Allow me!” shouted Lockhart. He brandished his wand at the snake and there was a loud bang; the snake, instead of vanishing, flew ten feet into the air and fell back to the floor with a loud smack. Enraged, hissing furiously, it slithered straight toward Justin Finch-Fletchley and raised itself again, fangs exposed, poised to strike.

Harry wasn’t sure what made him do it. He wasn’t even aware of deciding to do it. All he knew was that his legs were carrying him forward as though he was on casters and that he had shouted stupidly at the snake, “Leave him alone!” And miraculously — inexplicably — the snake slumped to the floor, docile as a thick, black garden hose, its eyes now on Harry. Harry felt the fear drain out of him. He knew the snake wouldn’t attack anyone now, though how he knew it, he couldn’t have explained.

He looked up at Justin, grinning, expecting to see Justin looking relieved, or puzzled, or even grateful — but certainly not angry and

scared.

“What do you think you’re playing at?” he shouted, and before Harry could say anything, Justin had turned and stormed out of the hall.

Snape stepped forward, waved his wand, and the snake vanished in a small puff of black smoke. Snape, too, was looking at Harry in an unexpected way: It was a shrewd and calculating look, and Harry didn’t like it. He was also dimly aware of an ominous muttering all around the walls. Then he felt a tugging on the back of his robes.

“Come on,” said Ron’s voice in his ear. “Move — come on —”

Ron steered him out of the hall, Hermione hurrying alongside them. As they went through the doors, the people on either side drew away as though they were frightened of catching something. Harry didn’t have a clue what was going on, and neither Ron nor Hermione explained anything until they had dragged him all the way up to the empty Gryffindor common room. Then Ron pushed Harry into an armchair and said, “You’re a Parselmouth. Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I’m a what?” said Harry.

“A Parselmouth!” said Ron. “You can talk to snakes!”

“I know,” said Harry. “I mean, that’s only the second time I’ve ever done it. I accidentally set a boa constrictor on my cousin Dud-ley at the zoo once — long story — but it was telling me it had never seen Brazil and I sort of set it free without meaning to — that was before I knew I was a wizard —”

“A boa constrictor told you it had never seen Brazil?” Ron re-peated faintly.

“So?” said Harry. “I bet loads of people here can do it.”

“Oh, no they can’t,”said Ron. “It’s not a very common gift. Harry, this is bad.”

“What’s bad?” said Harry, starting to feel quite angry. “What’s wrong with everyone? Listen, if I hadn’t told that snake not to at-tack Justin —”

“Oh, that’s what you said to it?”

“What d’you mean? You were there — you heard me —”

“I heard you speaking Parseltongue,” said Ron. “Snake language. You could have been saying anything — no wonder Justin pan-icked, you sounded like you were egging the snake on or some-thing — it was creepy, you know —”

Harry gaped at him.

“I spoke a different language? But — I didn’t realize — how can I speak a language without knowing I can speak it?”

Ron shook his head. Both he and Hermione were looking as though someone had died. Harry couldn’t see what was so terrible.

“D’you want to tell me what’s wrong with stopping a massive snake biting off Justin’s head?” he said. “What does it matter how I did it as long as Justin doesn’t have to join the Headless Hunt?”

“It matters,” said Hermione, speaking at last in a hushed voice, “because being able to talk to snakes was what Salazar Slytherin was famous for. That’s why the symbol of Slytherin House is a serpent.”

Harry’s mouth fell open.

“Exactly,” said Ron. “And now the whole school’s going to think you’re his great-great-great-great-grandson or something —”

“But I’m not,” said Harry, with a panic he couldn’t quite explain.

“You’ll find that hard to prove,” said Hermione. “He lived about a thousand years ago; for all we know, you could be.”

* * *

Harry lay awake for hours that night. Through a gap in the cur-tains around his four-poster he watched snow starting to drift past the tower window and wondered …Could he be a descendant of Salazar Slytherin? He didn’t know anything about his father’s family, after all. The Dursleys had al-ways forbidden questions about his wizarding relatives.

Quietly, Harry tried to say something in Parseltongue. The words wouldn’t come. It seemed he had to be face-to-face with a snake to do it.

But I’m in Gryffindor, Harry thought. The Sorting Hat wouldn’t have put me in here if I had Slytherin blood. …Ah, said a nasty little voice in his brain, but the Sorting Hat wanted to put you in Slytherin, don’t you remember?

Harry turned over. He’d see Justin the next day in Herbology and he’d explain that he’d been calling the snake off, not egging it on, which (he thought angrily, pummeling his pillow) any fool should have realized.

By next morning, however, the snow that had begun in the night had turned into a blizzard so thick that the last Herbology lesson of the term was canceled: Professor Sprout wanted to fit socks and scarves on the Mandrakes, a tricky operation she would entrust to no one else, now that it was so important for the Mandrakes to grow quickly and revive Mrs. Norris and Colin Creevey.

Harry fretted about this next to the fire in the Gryffindor com-mon room, while Ron and Hermione used their time off to play a game of

wizard chess.

“For heaven’s sake, Harry,” said Hermione, exasperated, as one of Ron’s bishops wrestled her knight off his horse and dragged him off the board. “Go and find Justin if it’s so important to you.”

So Harry got up and left through the portrait hole, wondering where Justin might be.

The castle was darker than it usually was in daytime because of the thick, swirling gray snow at every window. Shivering, Harry walked past classrooms where lessons were taking place, catching snatches of what was happening within. Professor McGonagall was shouting at someone who, by the sound of it, had turned his friend into a badger. Resisting the urge to take a look, Harry walked on by, thinking that Justin might be using his free time to catch up on some work, and deciding to check the library first.

A group of the Hufflepuffs who should have been in Herbology were indeed sitting at the back of the library, but they didn’t seem to be working. Between the long lines of high bookshelves, Harry could see that their heads were close together and they were hav-ing what looked like an absorbing conversation. He couldn’t see whether Justin was among them. He was walking toward them when something of what they were saying met his ears, and he paused to listen, hidden in the Invisibility section.

“So anyway,” a stout boy was saying, “I told Justin to hide up in our dormitory. I mean to say, if Potter’s marked him down as his next victim, it’s best if he keeps a low profile for a while. Of course, Justin’s been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggle-born. Justin actually told him he’d been down for Eton. That’s not the kind of thing you bandy about with Slytherin’s heir on the loose, is it?”

“You definitely think it is Potter, then, Ernie?” said a girl with blonde pigtails anxiously.

“Hannah,” said the stout boy solemnly, “he’s a Parselmouth. Everyone knows that’s the mark of a Dark wizard. Have you ever heard of a decent one who could talk to snakes? They called Slytherin himself Serpent-tongue.”

There was some heavy murmuring at this, and Ernie went on, “Remember what was written on the wall? Enemies of the Heir, Beware. Potter had some sort of run-in with Filch. Next thing we know, Filch’s cat’s attacked. That first year, Creevey, was annoying Potter at the Quidditch match, taking pictures of him while he was lying in the mud. Next thing we know — Creevey’s been attacked.”

“He always seems so nice, though,” said Hannah uncertainly, “and, well, he’s the one who made You-Know-Who disappear. He can’t be all bad, can he?”

Ernie lowered his voice mysteriously, the Hufflepuffs bent closer, and Harry edged nearer so that he could catch Ernie’s words.

“No one knows how he survived that attack by You-Know-Who. I mean to say, he was only a baby when it happened. He should have been blasted into smithereens. Only a really powerful Dark wizard could have survived a curse like that.” He dropped his voice until it was barely more than a whisper, and said, “That’s probably why You-Know-Who wanted to kill him in the first place. Didn’t want another Dark Lord competing with him. I wonder what other powers Potter’s been hiding?”

Harry couldn’t take anymore. Clearing his throat loudly, he stepped out from behind the bookshelves. If he hadn’t been feeling so angry, he would have found the sight that greeted him funny: Every one of the Hufflepuffs looked as though they had been Pet-rified by the sight of him, and the color was draining out of Ernie’s face.

“Hello,” said Harry. “I’m looking for Justin Finch-Fletchley.”

The Hufflepuffs' worst fears had clearly been confirmed. They all looked fearfully at Ernie.

"What do you want with him?" said Ernie in a quavering voice.

"I wanted to tell him what really happened with that snake at the Dueling Club," said Harry.

Ernie bit his white lips and then, taking a deep breath, said, "We were all there. We saw what happened."

"Then you noticed that after I spoke to it, the snake backed off?" said Harry.

"All I saw," said Ernie stubbornly, though he was trembling as he spoke, "was you speaking Parseltongue and chasing the snake toward Justin."

"I didn't chase it at him!" Harry said, his voice shaking with anger. "It didn't even touch him!"

"It was a very near miss," said Ernie. "And in case you're getting ideas," he added hastily, "I might tell you that you can trace my family back through nine generations of witches and warlocks and my blood's as pure as anyone's, so —"

"I don't care what sort of blood you've got!" said Harry fiercely. "Why would I want to attack Muggle-borns?"

"I've heard you hate those Muggles you live with," said Ernie swiftly.

"It's not possible to live with the Dursleys and not hate them," said Harry. "I'd like to see you try it."

He turned on his heel and stormed out of the library, earning himself a reproving glare from Madam Pince, who was polishing the gilded cover of a large spellbook.

Harry blundered up the corridor, barely noticing where he was going, he was in such a fury. The result was that he walked into something very large and solid, which knocked him backward onto the floor.

"Oh, hello, Hagrid," Harry said, looking up.

Hagrid's face was entirely hidden by a woolly, snow-covered balaclava, but it couldn't possibly be anyone else, as he filled most of the corridor in his moleskin overcoat. A dead rooster was hanging from one of his massive, gloved hands.

"All righ', Harry?" he said, pulling up the balaclava so he could speak. "Why aren't yeh in class?"

"Canceled," said Harry, getting up. "What're you doing in here?"

Hagrid held up the limp rooster.

"Second one killed this term," he explained. "It's either foxes or a Blood-Suckin' Bugbear, an' I need the headmaster's permission ter put a charm around the hen coop."

He peered more closely at Harry from under his thick, snow-flecked eyebrows.

"Yeh sure yeh're all righ'? Yeh look all hot an' bothered —"

Harry couldn't bring himself to repeat what Ernie and the rest of the Hufflepuffs had been saying about him.

"It's nothing," he said. "I'd better get going, Hagrid, it's Transfiguration next and I've got to pick up my books."

He walked off, his mind still full of what Ernie had said about him.

"Justin's been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggle-born. …"

Harry stamped up the stairs and turned along another corridor, which was particularly dark; the torches had been extinguished by a strong, icy draft that was blowing through a loose windowpane. He was halfway down the passage when he tripped headlong over something lying on the floor.

He turned to squint at what he'd fallen over and felt as though his stomach had dissolved.

Justin Finch-Fletchley was lying on the floor, rigid and cold, a look of shock frozen on his face, his eyes staring blankly at the ceil-ing. And that wasn't all. Next to him was another figure, the strangest sight Harry had ever seen.

It was Nearly Headless Nick, no longer pearly-white and trans-parent, but black and smoky, floating immobile and horizontal, six inches off the floor. His head was half off and his face wore an ex-pression of shock identical to Justin's.

Harry got to his feet, his breathing fast and shallow, his heart do-ing a kind of drumroll against his ribs. He looked wildly up and down the deserted corridor and saw a line of spiders scuttling as fast as they could away from the bodies. The only sounds were the muffled voices of teachers from the classes on either side.

He could run, and no one would ever know he had been there. But he couldn't just leave them lying here. … He had to get help. … Would anyone believe he hadn't had anything to do with this?

As he stood there, panicking, a door right next to him opened with a bang. Peeves the Poltergeist came shooting out.

"Why, it's potty wee Potter!" cackled Peeves, knocking Harry's glasses askew as he bounced past him. "What's Potter up to? Why's Potter lurking —"

Peeves stopped, halfway through a midair somersault. Upside down, he spotted Justin and Nearly Headless Nick. He flipped the right way up, filled his lungs and, before Harry could stop him, screamed, “ATTACK! ATTACK! ANOTHER ATTACK! NO MORTAL OR GHOST IS SAFE! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! ATTAAAACK!”

Crash — crash — crash — door after door flew open along the corridor and people flooded out. For several long minutes, there was a scene of such confusion that Justin was in danger of being squashed and people kept standing in Nearly Headless Nick. Harry found himself pinned against the wall as the teachers shouted for quiet. Professor McGonagall came running, followed by her own class, one of whom still had black-and-white-striped hair. She used her wand to set off a loud bang, which restored silence, and ordered everyone back into their classes. No sooner had the scene cleared somewhat than Ernie the Hufflepuff arrived, panting, on the scene.

“Caught in the act!”Ernie yelled, his face stark white, pointing his finger dramatically at Harry.

“That will do, Macmillan!” said Professor McGonagall sharply.

Peeves was bobbing overhead, now grinning wickedly, surveying the scene; Peeves always loved chaos. As the teachers bent over Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, examining them, Peeves broke into song:“Oh, Potter, you rotter, oh, what have you done,You’re killing off students, you think it’s good fun —”

“That’s enough, Peeves!” barked Professor McGonagall, and Peeves zoomed away backward, with his tongue out at Harry.

Justin was carried up to the hospital wing by Professor Flitwick and Professor Sinistra of the Astronomy department, but nobody seemed to know what to do for Nearly Headless Nick. In the end, Professor McGonagall conjured a large fan out of thin air, which she gave to Ernie with instructions to waft Nearly Headless Nick up the stairs.

This Ernie did, fanning Nick along like a silent black hovercraft. This left Harry and Professor McGonagall alone to-gether.

“This way, Potter,” she said.

“Professor,” said Harry at once, “I swear I didn’t —”

“This is out of my hands, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall curtly.

They marched in silence around a corner and she stopped before a large and extremely ugly stone gargoyle.

“Lemon drop!” she said. This was evidently a password, because the gargoyle sprang suddenly to life and hopped aside as the wall behind him split in two. Even full of dread for what was coming, Harry couldn’t fail to be amazed. Behind the wall was a spiral stair-case that was moving smoothly upward, like an escalator. As he and Professor McGonagall stepped onto it, Harry heard the wall thud closed behind them. They rose upward in circles, higher and higher, until at last, slightly dizzy, Harry saw a gleaming oak door ahead, with a brass knocker in the shape of a griffin.

He knew now where he was being taken. This must be where Dumbledore lived.

Chapter 12 The Polyjuice Potion

They stepped off the stone staircase at the top, and Professor McGonagall rapped on the door. It opened silently and they entered. Professor McGonagall told Harry to wait and left him there, alone.

Harry looked around. One thing was certain: of all the teachers' offices Harry had visited so far this year, Dumbledore's was by far the most interesting. If he hadn't been scared out of his wits that he was about to be thrown out of school, he would have been very pleased to have a chance to look around it.

It was a large and beautiful circular room, full of funny little noises. A number of curious silver instruments stood on spindle-legged tables, whirring and emitting little puffs of smoke. The walls were covered with portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses, all of whom were snoozing gently in their frames. There was also an enormous, claw-footed desk, and, sitting on a shelf behind it, a shabby, tattered wizard's hat — the Sorting Hat.

Harry hesitated. He cast a wary eye around the sleeping witches and wizards on the walls. Surely it couldn't hurt if he took the hat down and tried it on again? Just to see … just to make sure it had put him in the right House —He walked quietly around the desk, lifted the hat from its shelf, and lowered it slowly onto his head. It was much too large and slipped down over his eyes, just as it had done the last time he'd put it on. Harry stared at the black inside of the hat, waiting. Then a small voice said in his ear, "Bee in your bonnet, Harry Potter?"

"Er, yes," Harry muttered. "Er — sorry to bother you — I wanted to ask —"

"You've been wondering whether I put you in the right House," said the hat smartly. "Yes … you were particularly difficult to place. But I

stand by what I said before" — Harry's heart leapt — "you would have done well in Slytherin —"

Harry's stomach plummeted. He grabbed the point of the hat and pulled it off. It hung limply in his hand, grubby and faded. Harry pushed it back onto its shelf, feeling sick.

"You're wrong," he said aloud to the still and silent hat. It didn't move. Harry backed away, watching it. Then a strange, gagging noise behind him made him wheel around.

He wasn't alone after all. Standing on a golden perch behind the door was a decrepit-looking bird that resembled a half-plucked turkey. Harry stared at it and the bird looked balefully back, mak-ing its gagging noise again. Harry thought it looked very ill. Its eyes were dull and, even as Harry watched, a couple more feathers fell out of its tail.

Harry was just thinking that all he needed was for Dumbledore's pet bird to die while he was alone in the office with it, when the bird burst into flames.

Harry yelled in shock and backed away into the desk. He looked feverishly around in case there was a glass of water somewhere but couldn't see one; the bird, meanwhile, had become a fireball; it gave one loud shriek and next second there was nothing but a smolder-ing pile of ash on the floor.

The office door opened. Dumbledore came in, looking very somber.

"Professor," Harry gasped. "Your bird — I couldn't do any-thing — he just caught fire —"

To Harry's astonishment, Dumbledore smiled.

"About time, too," he said. "He's been looking dreadful for days; I've been telling him to get a move on."

He chuckled at the stunned look on Harry's face.

"Fawkes is a phoenix, Harry. Phoenixes burst into flame when it is time for them to die and are reborn from the ashes. Watch him …"

Harry looked down in time to see a tiny, wrinkled, newborn bird poke its head out of the ashes. It was quite as ugly as the old one.

"It's a shame you had to see him on a Burning Day," said Dumbledore, seating himself behind his desk. "He's really very handsome most of the time, wonderful red and gold plumage. Fascinating creatures, phoenixes. They can carry immensely heavy loads, their tears have healing powers, and they make highly faith-ful pets."

In the shock of Fawkes catching fire, Harry had forgotten what he was there for, but it all came back to him as Dumbledore settled himself in the high chair behind the desk and fixed Harry with his penetrating, light-blue stare.

Before Dumbledore could speak another word, however, the door of the office flew open with an almighty bang and Hagrid burst in, a wild look in his eyes, his balaclava perched on top of his shaggy black head and the dead rooster still swinging from his hand.

"It wasn' Harry, Professor Dumbledore!" said Hagrid urgently. "I was talkin' ter him seconds before that kid was found, he never had time, sir —"

Dumbledore tried to say something, but Hagrid went ranting on, waving the rooster around in his agitation, sending feathers everywhere.

"— it can't've bin him, I'll swear it in front o' the Ministry o' Magic if I have to —"

"Hagrid, I —"

"— yeh've got the wrong boy, sir, I know Harry never —"

"Hagrid!" said Dumbledore loudly. "I do not think that Harry at-tacked those people."

"Oh," said Hagrid, the rooster falling limply at his side. "Right. I'll wait outside then, Headmaster."

And he stomped out looking embarrassed.

"You don't think it was me, Professor?" Harry repeated hopefully as Dumbledore brushed rooster feathers off his desk.

"No, Harry, I don't," said Dumbledore, though his face was somber again. "But I still want to talk to you."

Harry waited nervously while Dumbledore considered him, the tips of his long fingers together.

"I must ask you, Harry, whether there is anything you'd like to tell me," he said gently. "Anything at all."

Harry didn't know what to say. He thought of Malfoy shouting, "You'll be next, Mudbloods!" and of the Polyjuice Potion simmer-ing away in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Then he thought of the disembodied voice he had heard twice and remembered what Ron had said: "Hearing voices no one else can hear isn't a good sign, even in the wizarding world." He thought, too, about what everyone was saying about him, and his growing dread that he was somehow con-nected with Salazar Slytherin. …"No," said Harry. "There isn't anything, Professor. …"

The double attack on Justin and Nearly Headless Nick turned what had hitherto been nervousness into real panic. Curiously, it was Nearly Headless Nick's fate that seemed to worry people most. What could possibly do that to a ghost? people asked each other; what terrible power could harm someone who was already dead? There

was almost a stampede to book seats on the Hogwarts Ex-press so that students could go home for Christmas.

“At this rate, we’ll be the only ones left,” Ron told Harry and Hermione. “Us, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. What a jolly holiday it’s going to be.”

Crabbe and Goyle, who always did whatever Malfoy did, had signed up to stay over the holidays, too. But Harry was glad that most people were leaving. He was tired of people skirting around him in the corridors, as though he were about to sprout fangs or spit poison; tired of all the muttering, pointing, and hissing as he passed.

Fred and George, however, found all this very funny. They went out of their way to march ahead of Harry down the corridors, shouting, “Make way for the Heir of Slytherin, seriously evil wiz-ard coming through. …”

Percy was deeply disapproving of this behavior.

“It is not a laughing matter,” he said coldly.

“Oh, get out of the way, Percy,” said Fred. “Harry’s in a hurry.”

“Yeah, he’s off to the Chamber of Secrets for a cup of tea with his fanged servant,” said George, chortling.

Ginny didn’t find it amusing either.

“Oh, don’t,” she wailed every time Fred asked Harry loudly who he was planning to attack next, or when George pretended to ward Harry off with a large clove of garlic when they met.

Harry didn’t mind; it made him feel better that Fred and George, at least, thought the idea of his being Slytherin’s heir was quite ludicrous. But their antics seemed to be aggravating Draco Malfoy, who looked increasingly sour each time he saw them at it.

“It’s because he’s bursting to say it’s really him,” said Ron know-ingly. “You know how he hates anyone beating him at anything, and you’re getting all the credit for his dirty work.”

“Not for long,” said Hermione in a satisfied tone. “The Poly-juice Potion’s nearly ready. We’ll be getting the truth out of him any day now.”

At last the term ended, and a silence deep as the snow on the grounds descended on the castle. Harry found it peaceful, rather than gloomy, and enjoyed the fact that he, Hermione, and the Weasleys had the run of Gryffindor Tower, which meant they could play Exploding Snap loudly without bothering anyone, and prac-tice dueling in private. Fred, George, and Ginny had chosen to stay at school rather than visit Bill in Egypt with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Percy, who disapproved of what he termed their childish behavior, didn’t spend much time in the Gryffindor common room. He had already told them pompously that he was only staying over Christ-mas because it was his duty as a prefect to support the teachers dur-ing this troubled time.

Christmas morning dawned, cold and white. Harry and Ron, the only ones left in their dormitory, were woken very early by Hermione, who burst in, fully dressed and carrying presents for them both.

“Wake up,” she said loudly, pulling back the curtains at the win-dow.

“Hermione — you’re not supposed to be in here —” said Ron, shielding his eyes against the light.

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” said Hermione, throwing him his present. “I’ve been up for nearly an hour, adding more lace-wings to the potion. It’s ready.”

Harry sat up, suddenly wide awake.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive,” said Hermione, shirting Scabbers the rat so that she could sit down on the end of Ron’s four-poster. “If we’re going to do it, I say it should be tonight.”

At that moment, Hedwig swooped into the room, carrying a very small package in her beak.

“Hello,” said Harry happily as she landed on his bed. “Are you speaking to me again?”

She nibbled his ear in an affectionate sort of way, which was a far better present than the one that she had brought him, which turned out to be from the Dursleys. They had sent Harry a tooth-pick and a note telling him to find out whether he’d be able to stay at Hogwarts for the summer vacation, too.

The rest of Harry’s Christmas presents were far more satisfac-tory. Hagrid had sent him a large tin of treacle toffee, which Harry decided to soften by the fire before eating; Ron had given him a book called Flying with the Cannons, a book of interesting facts about his favorite Quidditch team, and Hermione had bought him a luxury eagle-feather quill. Harry opened the last present to find a new, hand-knitted sweater from Mrs. Weasley and a large plum cake. He read her card with a fresh surge of guilt, thinking about Mr. Weasley’s car (which hadn’t been seen since its crash with the Whomping Willow), and the bout of rule-breaking he and Ron were planning next.

No one, not even someone dreading taking Polyjuice Potion later, could fail to enjoy Christmas dinner at Hogwarts.

The Great Hall looked magnificent. Not only were there a dozen frost-covered Christmas trees and thick streamers of holly and mistletoe crisscrossing the ceiling, but enchanted snow was falling, warm and dry, from the ceiling. Dumbledore led them in a few of his favorite carols, Hagrid booming more and more loudly with every goblet of eggnog he consumed. Percy, who hadn’t noticed that Fred had bewitched his prefect badge so that it now read “Pin-head,” kept

asking them all what they were sniggering at. Harry didn't even care that Draco Malfoy was making loud, snide remarks about his new sweater from the Slytherin table. With a bit of luck, Malfoy would be getting his comeuppance in a few hours' time.

Harry and Ron had barely finished their third helpings of Christmas pudding when Hermione ushered them out of the hall to finalize their plans for the evening.

"We still need a bit of the people you're changing into," said Hermione matter-of-factly, as though she were sending them to the supermarket for laundry detergent. "And obviously, it'll be best if you can get something of Crabbe's and Goyle's; they're Malfoy's best friends, he'll tell them anything. And we also need to make sure the real Crabbe and Goyle can't burst in on us while we're in-terrogating him.

"I've got it all worked out," she went on smoothly, ignoring Harry's and Ron's stupefied faces. She held up two plump choco-late cakes. "I've filled these with a simple Sleeping Draught. All you have to do is make sure Crabbe and Goyle find them. You know how greedy they are, they're bound to eat them. Once they're asleep, pull out a few of their hairs and hide them in a broom closet."

Harry and Ron looked incredulously at each other.

"Hermione, I don't think —"

"That could go seriously wrong —"

But Hermione had a steely glint in her eye not unlike the one Professor McGonagall sometimes had.

"The potion will be useless without Crabbe's and Goyle's hair," she said sternly. "You do want to investigate Malfoy, don't you?"

“Oh, all right, all right,” said Harry. “But what about you? Whose hair are you ripping out?”

“I’ve already got mine!” said Hermione brightly, pulling a tiny bottle out of her pocket and showing them the single hair inside it. “Remember Millicent Bulstrode wrestling with me at the Dueling Club? She left this on my robes when she was trying to strangle me! And she’s gone home for Christmas — so I’ll just have to tell the Slytherins I’ve decided to come back.”

When Hermione had bustled off to check on the Polyjuice Po-tion again, Ron turned to Harry with a doom-laden expression.

“Have you ever heard of a plan where so many things could go wrong?”

But to Harry’s and Ron’s utter amazement, stage one of the opera-tion went just as smoothly as Hermione had said. They lurked in the deserted entrance hall after Christmas tea, waiting for Crabbe and Goyle who had remained alone at the Slytherin table, shovel-ing down fourth helpings of trifle. Harry had perched the choco-late cakes on the end of the banisters. When they spotted Crabbe and Goyle coming out of the Great Hall, Harry and Ron hid quickly behind a suit of armor next to the front door.

“How thick can you get?” Ron whispered ecstatically as Crabbe gleefully pointed out the cakes to Goyle and grabbed them. Grin-ning stupidly, they stuffed the cakes whole into their large mouths. For a moment, both of them chewed greedily, looks of triumph on their faces. Then, without the smallest change of expression, they both keeled over backward onto the floor.

By far the hardest part was hiding them in the closet across the hall. Once they were safely stowed among the buckets and mops, Harry yanked out a couple of the bristles that covered Goyle’s forehead and Ron pulled out several of Crabbe’s hairs. They also stole their shoes, because their own were far too small for Crabbe- and Goyle-size feet.

Then, still stunned at what they had just done, they sprinted up to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

They could hardly see for the thick black smoke issuing from the stall in which Hermione was stirring the cauldron. Pulling their robes up over their faces, Harry and Ron knocked softly on the door.

"Hermione?"

They heard the scrape of the lock and Hermione emerged, shiny-faced and looking anxious. Behind her they heard the gloop gloop of the bubbling, glutinous potion. Three glass tumblers stood ready on the toilet seat.

"Did you get them?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

Harry showed her Goyle's hair.

"Good. And I sneaked these spare robes out of the laundry," Hermione said, holding up a small sack. "You'll need bigger sizes once you're Crabbe and Goyle."

The three of them stared into the cauldron. Close up, the potion looked like thick, dark mud, bubbling sluggishly.

"I'm sure I've done everything right," said Hermione, nervously rereading the splotched page of Moste Potente Potions. "It looks like the book says it should … once we've drunk it, we'll have exactly an hour before we change back into ourselves."

"Now what?" Ron whispered.

"We separate it into three glasses and add the hairs."

Hermione ladled large dollops of the potion into each of the glasses. Then, her hand trembling, she shook Millicent Bulstrode's hair out of its bottle into the first glass.

The potion hissed loudly like a boiling kettle and frothed madly. A second later, it had turned a sick sort of yellow.

"Urgh — essence of Millicent Bulstrode," said Ron, eyeing it with loathing. "Bet it tastes disgusting."

"Add yours, then," said Hermione.

Harry dropped Goyle's hair into the middle glass and Ron put Crabbe's into the last one. Both glasses hissed and frothed: Goyle's turned the khaki color of a booger, Crabbe's a dark, murky brown.

"Hang on," said Harry as Ron and Hermione reached for their glasses. "We'd better not all drink them in here. … Once we turn into Crabbe and Goyle we won't fit. And Millicent Bulstrode's no pixie."

"Good thinking," said Ron, unlocking the door. "We'll take sep-arate stalls."

Careful not to spill a drop of his Polyjuice Potion, Harry slipped into the middle stall.

"Ready?" he called.

"Ready," came Ron's and Hermione's voices.

"One — two — three —"

Pinching his nose, Harry drank the potion down in two large gulps. It tasted like overcooked cabbage.

Immediately, his insides started writhing as though he'd just swallowed live snakes — doubled up, he wondered whether he was going to be sick — then a burning sensation spread rapidly from his stomach to the very ends of his fingers and toes — next, bring-ing him gasping to all fours, came a horrible melting feeling, as the skin all over his body bubbled like hot wax — and before his eyes, his

hands began to grow, the fingers thickened, the nails broadened, the knuckles were bulging like bolts — his shoulders stretched painfully and a prickling on his forehead told him that hair was creeping down toward his eyebrows — his robes ripped as his chest expanded like a barrel bursting its hoops — his feet were agony in shoes four sizes too small —As suddenly as it had started, everything stopped. Harry lay facedown on the stone-cold floor, listening to Myrtle gurgling morosely in the end toilet. With difficulty, he kicked off his shoes and stood up. So this was what it felt like, being Goyle. His large hand trembling, he pulled off his old robes, which were hanging a foot above his ankles, pulled on the spare ones, and laced up Goyle's boatlike shoes. He reached up to brush his hair out of his eyes and met only the short growth of wiry bristles, low on his forehead. Then he realized that his glasses were clouding his eyes because Goyle obviously didn't need them — he took them off and called, "Are you two okay?" Goyle's low rasp of a voice issued from his mouth.

"Yeah," came the deep grunt of Crabbe from his right.

Harry unlocked his door and stepped in front of the cracked mirror. Goyle stared back at him out of dull, deepset eyes. Harry scratched his ear. So did Goyle.

Ron's door opened. They stared at each other. Except that he looked pale and shocked, Ron was indistinguishable from Crabbe, from the pudding-bowl haircut to the long, gorilla arms.

"This is unbelievable," said Ron, approaching the mirror and prodding Crabbe's flat nose. "Unbelievable."

"We'd better get going," said Harry, loosening the watch that was cutting into Goyle's thick wrist. "We've still got to find out where the Slytherin common room is. I only hope we can find someone to follow …"

Ron, who had been gazing at Harry, said, "You don't know how bizarre it is to see Goyle thinking." He banged on Hermione's door.

“C’mon, we need to go —”

A high-pitched voice answered him.

“I — I don’t think I’m going to come after all. You go on with-out me.”

“Hermione, we know Millicent Bulstrode’s ugly, no one’s going to know it’s you —”

“No — really — I don’t think I’ll come. You two hurry up, you’re wasting time —”

Harry looked at Ron, bewildered.

“That looks more like Goyle,” said Ron. “That’s how he looks every time a teacher asks him a question.”

“Hermione, are you okay?” said Harry through the door.

“Fine — I’m fine — go on —”

Harry looked at his watch. Five of their precious sixty minutes had already passed.

“We’ll meet you back here, all right?” he said.

Harry and Ron opened the door of the bathroom carefully, checked that the coast was clear, and set off.

“Don’t swing your arms like that,” Harry muttered to Ron.

“Eh?”

“Crabbe holds them sort of stiff. …”

“How’s this?”

“Yeah, that’s better. …”

They went down the marble staircase. All they needed now was a Slytherin that they could follow to the Slytherin common room, but there was nobody around.

“Any ideas?” muttered Harry.

“The Slytherins always come up to breakfast from over there,” said Ron, nodding at the entrance to the dungeons. The words had barely left his mouth when a girl with long, curly hair emerged from the entrance.

“Excuse me,” said Ron, hurrying up to her. “We’ve forgotten the way to our common room.”

“I beg your pardon?” said the girl stiffly. “Our common room? I’m a Ravenclaw.”

She walked away, looking suspiciously back at them.

Harry and Ron hurried down the stone steps into the darkness, their footsteps echoing particularly loudly as Crabbe’s and Goyle’s huge feet hit the floor, feeling that this wasn’t going to be as easy as they had hoped.

The labyrinthine passages were deserted. They walked deeper and deeper under the school, constantly checking their watches to see how much time they had left. After a quarter of an hour, just when they were getting desperate, they heard a sudden movement ahead.

“Ha!” said Ron excitedly. “There’s one of them now!”

The figure was emerging from a side room. As they hurried nearer, however, their hearts sank. It wasn’t a Slytherin, it was Percy.

“What’re you doing down here?” said Ron in surprise.

Percy looked affronted.

"That," he said stiffly, "is none of your business. It's Crabbe, isn't it?"

"Wh — oh, yeah," said Ron.

"Well, get off to your dormitories," said Percy sternly. "It's not safe to go wandering around dark corridors these days."

"You are," Ron pointed out.

"I," said Percy, drawing himself up, "am a prefect. Nothing's about to attack me."

A voice suddenly echoed behind Harry and Ron. Draco Malfoy was strolling toward them, and for the first time in his life, Harry was pleased to see him.

"There you are," he drawled, looking at them. "Have you two been pigging out in the Great Hall all this time? I've been looking for you; I want to show you something really funny."

Malfoy glanced witheringly at Percy.

"And what're you doing down here, Weasley?" he sneered.

Percy looked outraged.

"You want to show a bit more respect to a school prefect!" he said. "I don't like your attitude!"

Malfoy sneered and motioned for Harry and Ron to follow him. Harry almost said something apologetic to Percy but caught him-self just in time. He and Ron hurried after Malfoy, who said as they turned into the next passage, "That Peter Weasley —"

"Percy," Ron corrected him automatically.

"Whatever," said Malfoy. "I've noticed him sneaking around a lot lately. And I bet I know what he's up to. He thinks he's going to catch

Slytherin’s heir single-handed.”

He gave a short, derisive laugh. Harry and Ron exchanged ex-cited looks.

Malfoy paused by a stretch of bare, damp stone wall.

“What’s the new password again?” he said to Harry.

“Er —” said Harry.

“Oh, yeah — pure-blood!” said Malfoy, not listening, and a stone door concealed in the wall slid open. Malfoy marched through it, and Harry and Ron followed him.

The Slytherin common room was a long, low underground room with rough stone walls and ceiling from which round, green-ish lamps were hanging on chains. A fire was crackling under an elaborately carved mantelpiece ahead of them, and several Slyth-erins were silhouetted around it in high-backed chairs.

“Wait here,” said Malfoy to Harry and Ron, motioning them to a pair of empty chairs set back from the fire. “I’ll go and get it — my father’s just sent it to me —”

Wondering what Malfoy was going to show them, Harry and Ron sat down, doing their best to look at home.

Malfoy came back a minute later, holding what looked like a newspaper clipping. He thrust it under Ron’s nose.

“That’ll give you a laugh,” he said.

Harry saw Ron's eyes widen in shock. He read the clipping quickly, gave a very forced laugh, and handed it to Harry.

It had been clipped out of the Daily Prophet, and it said:INQUIRY AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGICArthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of

Muggle Artifacts Office, was today fined fifty Galleons for bewitching a Muggle car.

Mr. Lucius Malfoy, a governor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where the enchanted car crashed earlier this year, called today for Mr. Weasley's resignation.

"Weasley has brought the Ministry into disrepute," Mr. Malfoy told our reporter. "He is clearly unfit to draw up our laws and his ridiculous Muggle Protection Act should be scrapped immediately."

Mr. Weasley was unavailable for comment, although his wife told reporters to clear off or she'd set the family ghoul on them.

"Well?" said Malfoy impatiently as Harry handed the clipping back to him. "Don't you think it's funny?"

"Ha, ha," said Harry bleakly.

"Arthur Weasley loves Muggles so much he should snap his wand in half and go and join them," said Malfoy scornfully. "You'd never know the Weasleys were purebloods, the way they behave."

Ron's — or rather, Crabbe's — face was contorted with fury.

"What's up with you, Crabbe?" snapped Malfoy.

"Stomachache," Ron grunted.

"Well, go up to the hospital wing and give all those Mudbloods a kick from me," said Malfoy, snickering. "You know, I'm surprised the Daily Prophet hasn't reported all these attacks yet," he went on thoughtfully. "I suppose Dumbledore's trying to hush it all up. He'll be sacked if it doesn't stop soon. Father's always said old Dumbledore's the worst thing that's ever happened to this place. He loves Muggle-borns. A decent headmaster would never've let slime like that Creevey in."

Malfoy started taking pictures with an imaginary camera and did a cruel but accurate impression of Colin: " 'Potter, can I have your picture, Potter? Can I have your autograph? Can I lick your shoes, please, Potter?' "

He dropped his hands and looked at Harry and Ron.

"What's the matter with you two?"

Far too late, Harry and Ron forced themselves to laugh, but Malfoy seemed satisfied; perhaps Crabbe and Goyle were always slow on the uptake.

"Saint Potter, the Mudbloods' friend," said Malfoy slowly. "He's another one with no proper wizard feeling, or he wouldn't go around with that jumped-up Granger Mudblood. And people think he's Slytherin's heir!"

Harry and Ron waited with bated breath: Malfoy was surely sec-onds away from telling them it was him — but then —"I wish I knew who it is," said Malfoy petulantly. "I could help them."

Ron's jaw dropped so that Crabbe looked even more clueless than usual. Fortunately, Malfoy didn't notice, and Harry, thinking fast, said, "You must have some idea who's behind it all. …"

"You know I haven't, Goyle, how many times do I have to tell you?" snapped Malfoy. "And Father won't tell me anything about the last time the Chamber was opened either. Of course, it was fifty years ago, so it was before his time, but he knows all about it, and he says that it was all kept quiet and it'll look suspicious if I know too much about it. But I know one thing — last time the Cham-ber of Secrets was opened, a Mudblood died. So I bet it's a matter of time before one of them's killed this time. … I hope it's Granger," he said with relish.

Ron was clenching Crabbe's gigantic fists. Feeling that it would be a bit of a giveaway if Ron punched Malfoy, Harry shot him a warning look and said, "D'you know if the person who opened the Chamber last time was caught?"

"Oh, yeah … whoever it was was expelled," said Malfoy. "They're probably still in Azkaban."

"Azkaban?" said Harry, puzzled.

"Azkaban — the wizard prison, Goyle," said Malfoy, looking at him in disbelief. "Honestly, if you were any slower, you'd be going backward."

He shifted restlessly in his chair and said, "Father says to keep my head down and let the Heir of Slytherin get on with it. He says the school needs ridding of all the Mudblood filth, but not to get mixed up in it. Of course, he's got a lot on his plate at the moment. You know the Ministry of Magic raided our manor last week?"

Harry tried to force Goyle's dull face into a look of concern.

"Yeah …" said Malfoy. "Luckily, they didn't find much. Father's got some very valuable Dark Arts stuff. But luckily, we've got our own secret chamber under the drawing-room floor —"

"Ho!" said Ron.

Malfoy looked at him. So did Harry. Ron blushed. Even his hair was turning red. His nose was also slowly lengthening — their hour was up, Ron was turning back into himself, and from the look of horror he was suddenly giving Harry, he must be, too.

They both jumped to their feet.

"Medicine for my stomach," Ron grunted, and without further ado they sprinted the length of the Slytherin common room, hurled themselves

at the stone wall, and dashed up the passage, hoping against hope that Malfoy hadn't noticed anything. Harry could feel his feet slipping around in Goyle's huge shoes and had to hoist up his robes as he shrank; they crashed up the steps into the dark entrance hall, which was full of a muffled pounding coming from the closet where they'd locked Crabbe and Goyle. Leaving their shoes outside the closet door, they sprinted in their socks up the marble staircase toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"Well, it wasn't a complete waste of time," Ron panted, closing the bathroom door behind them. "I know we still haven't found out who's doing the attacks, but I'm going to write to Dad tomor-row and tell him to check under the Malfoys' drawing room."

Harry checked his face in the cracked mirror. He was back to normal. He put his glasses on as Ron hammered on the door of Hermione's stall.

"Hermione, come out, we've got loads to tell you —"

"Go away!" Hermione squeaked.

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

"What's the matter?" said Ron. "You must be back to normal by now, we are —"

But Moaning Myrtle glided suddenly through the stall door. Harry had never seen her looking so happy.

"Ooooooh, wait till you see," she said. "It's awful —"

They heard the lock slide back and Hermione emerged, sob-bing, her robes pulled up over her head.

"What's up?" said Ron uncertainly. "Have you still got Milli-cent's nose or something?"

Hermione let her robes fall and Ron backed into the sink.

Her face was covered in black fur. Her eyes had turned yellow and there were long, pointed ears poking through her hair.

“It was a c-cat hair!” she howled. “M-Millicent Bulstrode m-must have a cat! And the p-potion isn’t supposed to be used for animal transformations!”

“Uh-oh,” said Ron.

“You’ll be teased something dreadful,” said Myrtle happily.

“It’s okay, Hermione,” said Harry quickly. “We’ll take you up to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey never asks too many ques-tions. …”

It took a long time to persuade Hermione to leave the bath-room. Moaning Myrtle sped them on their way with a hearty guf-faw. “Wait till everyone finds out you’ve got a tail!”

Chapter 13 The Very Secret Diary

Hermione remained in the hospital wing for several weeks. There was a flurry of rumor about her disappearance when the rest of the school arrived back from their Christmas hol-idays, because of course everyone thought that she had been at-tacked. So many students filed past the hospital wing trying to catch a glimpse of her that Madam Pomfrey took out her curtains again and placed them around Hermione's bed, to spare her the shame of being seen with a furry face.

Harry and Ron went to visit her every evening. When the new term started, they brought her each day's homework.

"If I'd sprouted whiskers, I'd take a break from work," said Ron, tipping a stack of books onto Hermione's bedside table one evening.

"Don't be silly, Ron, I've got to keep up," said Hermione briskly. Her spirits were greatly improved by the fact that all the hair had gone from her face and her eyes were turning slowly back to brown. "I don't suppose you've got any new leads?" she added in a whisper, so that Madam Pomfrey couldn't hear her.

"Nothing," said Harry gloomily.

"I was so sure it was Malfoy," said Ron, for about the hundredth time.

"What's that?" asked Harry, pointing to something gold sticking out from under Hermione's pillow.

"Just a get well card," said Hermione hastily, trying to poke it out of sight, but Ron was too quick for her. He pulled it out, flicked it open, and read aloud:"To Miss Granger, wishing you a speedy recovery, from your con-cerned teacher, Professor Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense

League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award."

Ron looked up at Hermione, disgusted.

"You sleep with this under your pillow?"

But Hermione was spared answering by Madam Pomfrey sweep-ing over with her evening dose of medicine.

"Is Lockhart the smarmiest bloke you've ever met, or what?" Ron said to Harry as they left the infirmary and started up the stairs toward Gryffindor Tower. Snape had given them so much homework, Harry thought he was likely to be in the sixth year be-fore he finished it. Ron was just saying he wished he had asked Hermione how many rat tails you were supposed to add to a Hair-Raising Potion when an angry outburst from the floor above reached their ears.

"That's Filch," Harry muttered as they hurried up the stairs and paused, out of sight, listening hard.

"You don't think someone else's been attacked?" said Ron tensely.

They stood still, their heads inclined toward Filch's voice, which sounded quite hysterical.

"— evenmore work for me! Mopping all night, like I haven't got enough to do! No, this is the final straw, I'm going to Dumbledore —"

His footsteps receded along the out-of-sight corridor and they heard a distant door slam.

They poked their heads around the corner. Filch had clearly been manning his usual lookout post: They were once again on the spot where Mrs. Norris had been attacked. They saw at a glance what Filch had been shouting about. A great flood of water stretched over half the corridor, and it looked as though it was still seeping from

under the door of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Now that Filch had stopped shouting, they could hear Myrtle's wails echoing off the bathroom walls.

"Now what's up with her?" said Ron.

"Let's go and see," said Harry, and holding their robes over their ankles they stepped through the great wash of water to the door bearing its OUT OF ORDER sign, ignored it as always, and entered.

Moaning Myrtle was crying, if possible, louder and harder than ever before. She seemed to be hiding down her usual toilet. It was dark in the bathroom because the candles had been extinguished in the great rush of water that had left both walls and floor soaking wet.

"What's up, Myrtle?" said Harry.

"Who's that?" glugged Myrtle miserably. "Come to throw some-thing else at me?"

Harry waded across to her stall and said, "Why would I throw something at you?"

"Don't ask me," Myrtle shouted, emerging with a wave of yet more water, which splashed onto the already sopping floor. "Here I am, minding my own business, and someone thinks it's funny to throw a book at me. …"

"But it can't hurt you if someone throws something at you," said Harry, reasonably. "I mean, it'd just go right through you, wouldn't it?"

He had said the wrong thing. Myrtle puffed herself up and shrieked, "Let's all throw books at Myrtle, because she can't feel it! Ten points if you can get it through her stomach! Fifty points if it goes through her head! Well, ha, ha, ha! What a lovely game, I don't think!"

"Who threw it at you, anyway?" asked Harry.

“I don’t know. … I was just sitting in the U-bend, thinking about death, and it fell right through the top of my head,” said Myrtle, glaring at them. “It’s over there, it got washed out. …”

Harry and Ron looked under the sink where Myrtle was point-ing. A small, thin book lay there. It had a shabby black cover and was as wet as everything else in the bathroom. Harry stepped for-ward to pick it up, but Ron suddenly flung out an arm to hold him back.

“What?” said Harry.

“Are you crazy?” said Ron. “It could be dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” said Harry, laughing. “Come off it, how could it be dangerous?”

“You’d be surprised,” said Ron, who was looking apprehensively at the book. “Some of the books the Ministry’s confiscated — Dad’s told me — there was one that burned your eyes out. And everyone who read Sonnets of a Sorcerer spoke in limericks for the rest of their lives. And some old witch in Bath had a book that you could never stop reading! You just had to wander around with your nose in it, trying to do everything one-handed. And —”

“All right, I’ve got the point,” said Harry.

The little book lay on the floor, nondescript and soggy.

“Well, we won’t find out unless we look at it,” he said, and he ducked around Ron and picked it up off the floor.

Harry saw at once that it was a diary, and the faded year on the cover told him it was fifty years old. He opened it eagerly. On the first page he could just make out the name “T. M. Riddle” in smudged ink.

“Hang on,” said Ron, who had approached cautiously and was looking over Harry’s shoulder. “I know that name. … T. M. Rid-dle got

an award for special services to the school fifty years ago.”

“How on earth d’you know that?” said Harry in amazement.

“Because Filch made me polish his shield about fifty times in detention,” said Ron resentfully. “That was the one I burped slugs all over. If you’d wiped slime off a name for an hour, you’d remember it, too.”

Harry peeled the wet pages apart. They were completely blank. There wasn’t the faintest trace of writing on any of them, not even Auntie Mabel’s birthday, or dentist, half-past three.

“He never wrote in it,” said Harry, disappointed.

“I wonder why someone wanted to flush it away?” said Ron cu-riously.

Harry turned to the back cover of the book and saw the printed name of a variety store on Vauxhall Road, London.

“He must’ve been Muggle-born,” said Harry thoughtfully. “To have bought a diary from Vauxhall Road. …”

“Well, it’s not much use to you,” said Ron. He dropped his voice. “Fifty points if you can get it through Myrtle’s nose.”

Harry, however, pocketed it.

Hermione left the hospital wing, de-whiskered, tail-less, and fur-free, at the beginning of February. On her first evening back in Gryffindor Tower, Harry showed her T. M. Riddle’s diary and told her the story of how they had found it.

“Oooh, it might have hidden powers,” said Hermione enthusi-astically, taking the diary and looking at it closely.

“If it has, it’s hiding them very well,” said Ron. “Maybe it’s shy. I don’t know why you don’t chuck it, Harry.”

“I wish I knew why someone did try to chuck it,” said Harry. “I wouldn’t mind knowing how Riddle got an award for special ser-vices to Hogwarts either.”

“Could’ve been anything,” said Ron. “Maybe he got thirty O.W.L.s or saved a teacher from the giant squid. Maybe he mur-dered Myrtle; that would’ve done everyone a favor. …”

But Harry could tell from the arrested look on Hermione’s face that she was thinking what he was thinking.

“What?” said Ron, looking from one to the other.

“Well, the Chamber of Secrets was opened fifty years ago, wasn’t it?” he said. “That’s what Malfoy said.”

“Yeah …” said Ron slowly.

“And this diary is fifty years old,” said Hermione, tapping it ex-citedly.

“So?”

“Oh, Ron, wake up,” snapped Hermione. “We know the person who opened the Chamber last time was expelled fifty years ago. We know T. M. Riddle got an award for special services to the school fifty years ago. Well, what if Riddle got his special award for catch-ing the Heir of Slytherin? His diary would probably tell us every-thing — where the Chamber is, and how to open it, and what sort of creature lives in it — the person who’s behind the attacks this time wouldn’t want that lying around, would they?”

“That’s a brilliant theory, Hermione,” said Ron, “with just one tiny little flaw. There’s nothing written in his diary.”

But Hermione was pulling her wand out of her bag.

“It might be invisible ink!” she whispered.

She tapped the diary three times and said, “Aparecium!”

Nothing happened. Undaunted, Hermione shoved her hand back into her bag and pulled out what appeared to be a bright red eraser.

“It’s a Revealer, I got it in Diagon Alley,” she said.

She rubbed hard on January first. Nothing happened.

“I’m telling you, there’s nothing to find in there,” said Ron. “Riddle just got a diary for Christmas and couldn’t be bothered filling it in.”

Harry couldn’t explain, even to himself, why he didn’t just throw Riddle’s diary away. The fact was that even though he knew the diary was blank, he kept absentmindedly picking it up and turn-ing the pages, as though it were a story he wanted to finish. And while Harry was sure he had never heard the name T. M. Riddle before, it still seemed to mean something to him, almost as though Riddle was a friend he’d had when he was very small, and had half-forgotten. But this was absurd. He’d never had friends before Hogwarts, Dudley had made sure of that.

Nevertheless, Harry was determined to find out more about Riddle, so next day at break, he headed for the trophy room to ex-amine Riddle’s special award, accompanied by an interested Her-mione and a thoroughly unconvinced Ron, who told them he’d seen enough of the trophy room to last him a lifetime.

Riddle’s burnished gold shield was tucked away in a corner cab-inet. It didn’t carry details of why it had been given to him (“Good thing, too, or it’d be even bigger and I’d still be polishing it,” said Ron). However, they did find Riddle’s name on an old Medal for Magical Merit, and on a list of old Head Boys.

“He sounds like Percy,” said Ron, wrinkling his nose in disgust. “Prefect, Head Boy … probably top of every class —”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” said Hermione in a slightly hurt voice.

The sun had now begun to shine weakly on Hogwarts again. Inside the castle, the mood had grown more hopeful. There had been no more attacks since those on Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, and Madam Pomfrey was pleased to report that the Mandrakes were becoming moody and secretive, meaning that they were fast leav-ing childhood.

“The moment their acne clears up, they’ll be ready for repotting again,” Harry heard her telling Filch kindly one afternoon. “And after that, it won’t be long until we’re cutting them up and stewing them. You’ll have Mrs. Norris back in no time.”

Perhaps the Heir of Slytherin had lost his or her nerve, thought Harry. It must be getting riskier and riskier to open the Chamber of Secrets, with the school so alert and suspicious. Perhaps the monster, whatever it was, was even now settling itself down to hi-bernate for another fifty years. …Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff didn’t take this cheerful view. He was still convinced that Harry was the guilty one, that he had “given himself away” at the Dueling Club. Peeves wasn’t helping matters; he kept popping up in the crowded corridors singing “Oh, Potter, you rotter …” now with a dance routine to match.

Gilderoy Lockhart seemed to think he himself had made the at-tacks stop. Harry overheard him telling Professor McGonagall so while the Gryffindors were lining up for Transfiguration.

“I don’t think there’ll be any more trouble, Minerva,” he said, tapping his nose knowingly and winking. “I think the Chamber has been locked for good this time. The culprit must have known it was only a matter of time before I caught him. Rather sensible to stop now, before I came down hard on him.

“You know, what the school needs now is a morale-booster. Wash away the memories of last term! I won’t say any more just now, but I

think I know just the thing. …”

He tapped his nose again and strode off.

Lockhart’s idea of a morale-booster became clear at breakfast time on February fourteenth. Harry hadn’t had much sleep because of a late-running Quidditch practice the night before, and he hur-ried down to the Great Hall, slightly late. He thought, for a mo-ment, that he’d walked through the wrong doors.

The walls were all covered with large, lurid pink flowers. Worse still, heart-shaped confetti was falling from the pale blue ceiling. Harry went over to the Gryffindor table, where Ron was sitting looking sickened, and Hermione seemed to have been overcome with giggles.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked them, sitting down and wiping confetti off his bacon.

Ron pointed to the teachers’ table, apparently too disgusted to speak. Lockhart, wearing lurid pink robes to match the decora-tions, was waving for silence. The teachers on either side of him were looking stony-faced. From where he sat, Harry could see a muscle going in Professor McGonagall’s cheek. Snape looked as though someone had just fed him a large beaker of Skele-Gro.

“Happy Valentine’s Day!”Lockhart shouted. “And may I thank the forty-six people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging this little surprise for you all — and it doesn’t end here!”

Lockhart clapped his hands and through the doors to the entrance hall marched a dozen surly-looking dwarfs. Not just any dwarfs, however. Lockhart had them all wearing golden wings and carrying harps.

“My friendly, card-carrying cupids!” beamed Lockhart. “They will be roving around the school today delivering your valentines! And the fun doesn’t stop here! I’m sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a Love Potion! And while you’re at it, Professor Flitwick knows more about Entrancing Enchantments than any wizard I’ve ever met, the sly old dog!”

Professor Flitwick buried his face in his hands. Snape was looking as though the first person to ask him for a Love Potion would be force-fed poison.

“Please, Hermione, tell me you weren’t one of the forty-six,” said Ron as they left the Great Hall for their first lesson. Hermione sud-denly became very interested in searching her bag for her schedule and didn’t answer.

All day long, the dwarfs kept barging into their classes to deliver valentines, to the annoyance of the teachers, and late that after-noon as the Gryffindors were walking upstairs for Charms, one of the dwarfs caught up with Harry.

“Oy, you! ’Arry Potter!” shouted a particularly grim-looking dwarf, elbowing people out of the way to get to Harry.

Hot all over at the thought of being given a valentine in front of a line of first years, which happened to include Ginny Weasley, Harry tried to escape. The dwarf, however, cut his way through the crowd by kicking people’s shins, and reached him before he’d gone two paces.

“I’ve got a musical message to deliver to ’Arry Potter in person,” he said, twanging his harp in a threatening sort of way.

“Not here,” Harry hissed, trying to escape.

“Stay still!” grunted the dwarf, grabbing hold of Harry’s bag and pulling him back.

“Let me go!” Harry snarled, tugging.

With a loud ripping noise, his bag split in two. His books, wand, parchment, and quill spilled onto the floor and his ink bottle smashed over everything.

Harry scrambled around, trying to pick it all up before the dwarf started singing, causing something of a holdup in the corridor.

“What’s going on here?” came the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy. Harry started stuffing everything feverishly into his ripped bag, desperate to get away before Malfoy could hear his musical valentine.

“What’s all this commotion?” said another familiar voice as Percy Weasley arrived.

Losing his head, Harry tried to make a run for it, but the dwarf seized him around the knees and brought him crashing to the floor.

“Right,” he said, sitting on Harry’s ankles. “Here is your singing valentine:His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,His hair is as dark as a blackboard.

I wish he was mine, he’s really divine,The hero who conquered the Dark Lord.”

Harry would have given all the gold in Gringotts to evaporate on the spot. Trying valiantly to laugh along with everyone else, he got up, his feet numb from the weight of the dwarf, as Percy Weasley did his best to disperse the crowd, some of whom were crying with mirth.

“Off you go, off you go, the bell rang five minutes ago, off to class, now,” he said, shooing some of the younger students away. “And you, Malfoy —”

Harry, glancing over, saw Malfoy stoop and snatch up some-thing. Leering, he showed it to Crabbe and Goyle, and Harry real-ized that he'd got Riddle's diary.

"Give that back," said Harry quietly.

"Wonder what Potter's written in this?" said Malfoy, who obviously hadn't noticed the year on the cover and thought he had Harry's own diary. A hush fell over the onlookers. Ginny was star-ing from the diary to Harry, looking terrified.

"Hand it over, Malfoy," said Percy sternly.

"When I've had a look," said Malfoy, waving the diary taunt-ingly at Harry.

Percy said, "As a school prefect —" but Harry had lost his tem-per. He pulled out his wand and shouted, "Expelliarmus!" and just as Snape had disarmed Lockhart, so Malfoy found the diary shoot-ing out of his hand into the air. Ron, grinning broadly, caught it.

"Harry!" said Percy loudly. "No magic in the corridors. I'll have to report this, you know!"

But Harry didn't care, he was one-up on Malfoy, and that was worth five points from Gryffindor any day. Malfoy was looking fu-rious, and as Ginny passed him to enter her classroom, he yelled spitefully after her, "I don't think Potter liked your valentine much!"

Ginny covered her face with her hands and ran into class. Snarling, Ron pulled out his wand, too, but Harry pulled him away. Ron didn't need to spend the whole of Charms belching slugs.

It wasn't until they had reached Professor Flitwick's class that Harry noticed something rather odd about Riddle's diary. All his other books were drenched in scarlet ink. The diary, however, was as clean as it had been before the ink bottle had smashed all over it. He tried to

point this out to Ron, but Ron was having trouble with his wand again; large purple bubbles were blossoming out of the end, and he wasn't much interested in anything else.

* * *

Harry went to bed before anyone else in his dormitory that night. This was partly because he didn't think he could stand Fred and George singing, "His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad" one more time, and partly because he wanted to examine Riddle's diary again, and knew that Ron thought he was wasting his time.

Harry sat on his four-poster and flicked through the blank pages, not one of which had a trace of scarlet ink on it. Then he pulled a new bottle out of his bedside cabinet, dipped his quill into it, and dropped a blot onto the first page of the diary.

The ink shone brightly on the paper for a second and then, as though it was being sucked into the page, vanished. Excited, Harry loaded up his quill a second time and wrote, "My name is Harry Potter."

The words shone momentarily on the page and they, too, sank without trace. Then, at last, something happened.

Oozing back out of the page, in his very own ink, came words Harry had never written.

"Hello, Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?"

These words, too, faded away, but not before Harry had started to scribble back.

"Someone tried to flush it down a toilet."

He waited eagerly for Riddle's reply.

“Lucky that I recorded my memories in some more lasting way than ink. But I always knew that there would be those who would not want this diary read.”

“What do you mean?” Harry scrawled, blotting the page in his excitement.

“I mean that this diary holds memories of terrible things. Things that were covered up. Things that happened at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

“That’s where I am now,” Harry wrote quickly. “I’m at Hog-warts, and horrible stuff’s been happening. Do you know anything about the Chamber of Secrets?”

His heart was hammering. Riddle’s reply came quickly, his writ-ing becoming untidier, as though he was hurrying to tell all he knew.

“Of course I know about the Chamber of Secrets. In my day, they told us it was a legend, that it did not exist. But this was a lie. In my fifth year, the Chamber was opened and the monster attacked several students, finally killing one. I caught the person who’d opened the Chamber and he was expelled. But the headmaster, Professor Dippet, ashamed that such a thing had happened at Hogwarts, forbade me to tell the truth. A story was given out that the girl had died in a freak ac-cident. They gave me a nice, shiny, engraved trophy for my trouble and warned me to keep my mouth shut. But I knew it could happen again. The monster lived on, and the one who had the power to release it was not imprisoned.”

Harry nearly upset his ink bottle in his hurry to write back.

“It’s happening again now. There have been three attacks and no one seems to know who’s behind them. Who was it last time?”

“I can show you, if you like,” came Riddle’s reply. “You don’t have to take my word for it. I can take you inside my memory of the night

when I caught him."

Harry hesitated, his quill suspended over the diary. What did Riddle mean? How could he be taken inside somebody else's mem-ory? He glanced nervously at the door to the dormitory, which was growing dark. When he looked back at the diary, he saw fresh words forming.

"Let me show you."

Harry paused for a fraction of a second and then wrote two letters.

"OK."

The pages of the diary began to blow as though caught in a high wind, stopping halfway through the month of June. Mouth hang-ing open, Harry saw that the little square for June thirteenth seemed to have turned into a minuscule television screen. His hands trembling slightly, he raised the book to press his eye against the little window, and before he knew what was happening, he was tilting forward; the window was widening, he felt his body leave his bed, and he was pitched headfirst through the opening in the page, into a whirl of color and shadow.

He felt his feet hit solid ground, and stood, shaking, as the blurred shapes around him came suddenly into focus.

He knew immediately where he was. This circular room with the sleeping portraits was Dumbledore's office — but it wasn't Dumbledore who was sitting behind the desk. A wizened, frail-looking wizard, bald except for a few wisps of white hair, was read-ing a letter by candlelight. Harry had never seen this man before.

"I'm sorry," he said shakily. "I didn't mean to butt in —"

But the wizard didn't look up. He continued to read, frowning slightly. Harry drew nearer to his desk and stammered, "Er — I'll just go, shall I?"

Still the wizard ignored him. He didn't seem even to have heard him. Thinking that the wizard might be deaf, Harry raised his voice.

"Sorry I disturbed you. I'll go now," he half-shouted.

The wizard folded up the letter with a sigh, stood up, walked past Harry without glancing at him, and went to draw the curtains at his window.

The sky outside the window was ruby-red; it seemed to be sun-set. The wizard went back to the desk, sat down, and twiddled his thumbs, watching the door.

Harry looked around the office. No Fawkes the phoenix — no whirring silver contraptions. This was Hogwarts as Riddle had known it, meaning that this unknown wizard was headmaster, not Dumbledore, and he, Harry, was little more than a phantom, com-pletely invisible to the people of fifty years ago.

There was a knock on the office door.

"Enter," said the old wizard in a feeble voice.

A boy of about sixteen entered, taking off his pointed hat. A sil-ver prefect's badge was glinting on his chest. He was much taller than Harry, but he, too, had jet-black hair.

"Ah, Riddle," said the headmaster.

"You wanted to see me, Professor Dippet?" said Riddle. He looked nervous.

"Sit down," said Dippet. "I've just been reading the letter you sent me."

"Oh," said Riddle. He sat down, gripping his hands together very tightly.

"My dear boy," said Dippet kindly, "I cannot possibly let you stay at school over the summer. Surely you want to go home for the holidays?"

"No," said Riddle at once. "I'd much rather stay at Hogwarts than go back to that — to that —"

"You live in a Muggle orphanage during the holidays, I believe?" said Dippet curiously.

"Yes, sir," said Riddle, reddening slightly.

"You are Muggle-born?"

"Half-blood, sir," said Riddle. "Muggle father, witch mother."

"And are both your parents — ?"

"My mother died just after I was born, sir. They told me at the orphanage she lived just long enough to name me — Tom after my father, Marvolo after my grandfather."

Dippet clucked his tongue sympathetically.

"The thing is, Tom," he sighed, "special arrangements might have been made for you, but in the current circumstances. …"

"You mean all these attacks, sir?" said Riddle, and Harry's heart leapt, and he moved closer, scared of missing anything.

"Precisely," said the headmaster. "My dear boy, you must see how foolish it would be of me to allow you to remain at the castle when term ends. Particularly in light of the recent tragedy … the death of that poor little girl. … You will be safer by far at your or-phanage. As a matter of fact, the Ministry of Magic is even now talking about closing the school. We are no nearer locating the — er — source of all this unpleasantness. …"

Riddle's eyes had widened.

"Sir — if the person was caught — if it all stopped —"

"What do you mean?" said Dippet with a squeak in his voice, sitting up in his chair. "Riddle, do you mean you know something about these attacks?"

"No, sir," said Riddle quickly.

But Harry was sure it was the same sort of "no" that he himself had given Dumbledore.

Dippet sank back, looking faintly disappointed.

"You may go, Tom. …"

Riddle slid off his chair and slouched out of the room. Harry fol-lowed him.

Down the moving spiral staircase they went, emerging next to the gargoyle in the darkening corridor. Riddle stopped, and so did Harry, watching him. Harry could tell that Riddle was doing some serious thinking. He was biting his lip, his forehead fur-rowed.

Then, as though he had suddenly reached a decision, he hurried off, Harry gliding noiselessly behind him. They didn't see another person until they reached the entrance hall, when a tall wizard with long, sweeping auburn hair and a beard called to Riddle from the marble staircase.

"What are you doing, wandering around this late, Tom?"

Harry gaped at the wizard. He was none other than a fifty-year-younger Dumbledore.

"I had to see the headmaster, sir," said Riddle.

“Well, hurry off to bed,” said Dumbledore, giving Riddle ex-actly the kind of penetrating stare Harry knew so well. “Best not to roam the corridors these days. Not since …”

He sighed heavily, bade Riddle good night, and strode off. Rid-dle watched him walk out of sight and then, moving quickly, headed straight down the stone steps to the dungeons, with Harry in hot pursuit.

But to Harry’s disappointment, Riddle led him not into a hid-den passageway or a secret tunnel but to the very dungeon in which Harry had Potions with Snape. The torches hadn’t been lit, and when Riddle pushed the door almost closed, Harry could only just see him, standing stock-still by the door, watching the passage out-side.

It felt to Harry that they were there for at least an hour. All he could see was the figure of Riddle at the door, staring through the crack, waiting like a statue. And just when Harry had stopped feel-ing expectant and tense and started wishing he could return to the present, he heard something move beyond the door.

Someone was creeping along the passage. He heard whoever it was pass the dungeon where he and Riddle were hidden. Riddle, quiet as a shadow, edged through the door and followed, Harry tip-toeing behind him, forgetting that he couldn’t be heard.

For perhaps five minutes they followed the footsteps, until Rid-dle stopped suddenly, his head inclined in the direction of new noises. Harry heard a door creak open, and then someone speaking in a hoarse whisper.

“C’mon … gotta get yeh outta here. … C’mon now … in the box …”

There was something familiar about that voice. …Riddle suddenly jumped around the corner. Harry stepped out behind him. He could see the dark outline of a huge boy who was crouching in front of an open door, a very large box next to it.

“ ’Evening, Rubeus,” said Riddle sharply.

The boy slammed the door shut and stood up.

“What yer doin’ down here, Tom?”

Riddle stepped closer.

“It’s all over,” he said. “I’m going to have to turn you in, Rubeus. They’re talking about closing Hogwarts if the attacks don’t stop.”

“What d’yeh —”

“I don’t think you meant to kill anyone. But monsters don’t make good pets. I suppose you just let it out for exercise and —”

“It never killed no one!” said the large boy, backing against the closed door. From behind him, Harry could hear a funny rustling and clicking.

“Come on, Rubeus,” said Riddle, moving yet closer. “The dead girl’s parents will be here tomorrow. The least Hogwarts can do is make sure that the thing that killed their daughter is slaugh-tered. …”

“It wasn’t him!” roared the boy, his voice echoing in the dark passage. “He wouldn’! He never!”

“Stand aside,” said Riddle, drawing out his wand.

His spell lit the corridor with a sudden flaming light. The door behind the large boy flew open with such force it knocked him into the wall opposite. And out of it came something that made Harry let out a long, piercing scream unheard by anyone —A vast, low-slung, hairy body and a tangle of black legs; a gleam of many eyes and a pair of razor-sharp pincers — Riddle raised his wand again, but he was too late. The thing bowled him over as it scuttled away, tearing up the corridor and out of sight. Riddle scrambled to his feet, looking after it;

he raised his wand, but the huge boy leapt on him, seized his wand, and threw him back down, yelling, "NOOOOOOO!"

The scene whirled, the darkness became complete; Harry felt himself falling and, with a crash, he landed spread-eagled on his four-poster in the Gryffindor dormitory, Riddle's diary lying open on his stomach.

Before he had had time to regain his breath, the dormitory door opened and Ron came in.

"There you are," he said.

Harry sat up. He was sweating and shaking.

"What's up?" said Ron, looking at him with concern.

"It was Hagrid, Ron. Hagrid opened the Chamber of Secrets fifty years ago."

Chapter 14 Cornelius Fudge

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had always known that Hagrid had an unfortunate liking for large and monstrous crea-tures. During their first year at Hogwarts he had tried to raise a dragon in his little wooden house, and it would be a long time before they forgot the giant, three-headed dog he'd christened "Fluffy." And if, as a boy, Hagrid had heard that a monster was hid-den somewhere in the castle, Harry was sure he'd have gone to any lengths for a glimpse of it. He'd probably thought it was a shame that the monster had been cooped up so long, and thought it de-served the chance to stretch its many legs; Harry could just imag-ine the thirteen-year-old Hagrid trying to fit a leash and collar on it. But he was equally certain that Hagrid would never have meant to kill anybody.

Harry half wished he hadn't found out how to work Riddle's di-ary. Again and again Ron and Hermione made him recount what he'd seen, until he was heartily sick of telling them and sick of the long, circular conversations that followed.

"Riddle might have got the wrong person," said Hermione. "Maybe it was some other monster that was attacking people. …"

"How many monsters d'you think this place can hold?" Ron asked dully.

"We always knew Hagrid had been expelled," said Harry miser-ably. "And the attacks must've stopped after Hagrid was kicked out. Otherwise, Riddle wouldn't have got his award."

Ron tried a different tack.

"Riddle does sound like Percy — who asked him to squeal on Hagrid, anyway?"

"But the monster had killed someone, Ron," said Hermione.

“And Riddle was going to go back to some Muggle orphanage if they closed Hogwarts,” said Harry. “I don’t blame him for wanting to stay here. …”

“You met Hagrid down Knockturn Alley, didn’t you, Harry?”

“He was buying a Flesh-Eating Slug Repellent,” said Harry quickly.

The three of them fell silent. After a long pause, Hermione voiced the knottiest question of all in a hesitant voice.

“Do you think we should go and ask Hagrid about it all?”

“That’d be a cheerful visit,” said Ron. “ ‘Hello, Hagrid. Tell us, have you been setting anything mad and hairy loose in the castle lately?’ ”

In the end, they decided that they would not say anything to Hagrid unless there was another attack, and as more and more days went by with no whisper from the disembodied voice, they became hopeful that they would never need to talk to him about why he had been expelled. It was now nearly four months since Justin and Nearly Headless Nick had been Petrified, and nearly everybody seemed to think that the attacker, whoever it was, had retired for good. Peeves had finally got bored of his “Oh, Potter, you rotter” song, Ernie Macmillan asked Harry quite politely to pass a bucket of leaping toadstools in Herbology one day, and in March several of the Mandrakes threw a loud and raucous party in greenhouse three. This made Professor Sprout very happy.

“The moment they start trying to move into each other’s pots, we’ll know they’re fully mature,” she told Harry. “Then we’ll be able to revive those poor people in the hospital wing.”

The second years were given something new to think about during their Easter holidays. The time had come to choose their subjects for the third year, a matter that Hermione, at least, took very seri-ously.

“It could affect our whole future,” she told Harry and Ron as they pored over lists of new subjects, marking them with checks.

“I just want to give up Potions,” said Harry.

“We can’t,” said Ron gloomily. “We keep all our old subjects, or I’d’ve ditched Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“But that’s very important!” said Hermione, shocked.

“Not the way Lockhart teaches it,” said Ron. “I haven’t learned anything from him except not to set pixies loose.”

Neville Longbottom had been sent letters from all the witches and wizards in his family, all giving him different advice on what to choose. Confused and worried, he sat reading the subject lists with his tongue poking out, asking people whether they thought Arith-mancy sounded more difficult than the study of Ancient Runes. Dean Thomas, who, like Harry, had grown up with Muggles, ended up closing his eyes and jabbing his wand at the list, then picking the subjects it landed on. Hermione took nobody’s advice but signed up for everything.

Harry smiled grimly to himself at the thought of what Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would say if he tried to discuss his career in wizardry with them. Not that he didn’t get any guidance: Percy Weasley was eager to share his experience.

“Depends where you want to go, Harry,” he said. “It’s never too early to think about the future, so I’d recommend Divination. Peo-ple say Muggle Studies is a soft option, but I personally think wiz-ards should have a thorough understanding of the non-magical community, particularly if they’re thinking of working in close contact with them — look at my father, he has to deal with Mug-gle business all the time. My brother Charlie was always more of an outdoor type, so he went for Care of Magical Creatures. Play to your strengths, Harry.”

But the only thing Harry felt he was really good at was Quid-ditch. In the end, he chose the same new subjects as Ron, feeling that if he was lousy at them, at least he'd have someone friendly to help him.

Gryffindor's next Quidditch match would be against Hufflepuff. Wood was insisting on team practices every night after dinner, so that Harry barely had time for anything but Quidditch and home-work. However, the training sessions were getting better, or at least drier, and the evening before Saturday's match he went up to his dormitory to drop off his broomstick feeling Gryffindor's chances for the Quidditch Cup had never been better.

But his cheerful mood didn't last long. At the top of the stairs to the dormitory, he met Neville Longbottom, who was looking frantic.

"Harry — I don't know who did it — I just found —"

Watching Harry fearfully, Neville pushed open the door.

The contents of Harry's trunk had been thrown everywhere. His cloak lay ripped on the floor. The bedclothes had been pulled off his four-poster and the drawer had been pulled out of his bedside cabinet, the contents strewn over the mattress.

Harry walked over to the bed, openmouthed, treading on a few loose pages of Travels with Trolls. As he and Neville pulled the blan-kets back onto his bed, Ron, Dean, and Seamus came in. Dean swore loudly.

"What happened, Harry?"

"No idea," said Harry. But Ron was examining Harry's robes. All the pockets were hanging out.

"Someone's been looking for something," said Ron. "Is there anything missing?"

Harry started to pick up all his things and throw them into his trunk. It was only as he threw the last of the Lockhart books back into it that he realized what wasn't there.

"Riddle's diary's gone," he said in an undertone to Ron.

"What?"

Harry jerked his head toward the dormitory door and Ron fol-lowed him out. They hurried down to the Gryffindor common room, which was half-empty, and joined Hermione, who was sit-ting alone, reading a book called Ancient Runes Made Easy.

Hermione looked aghast at the news.

"But — only a Gryffindor could have stolen — nobody else knows our password —"

"Exactly," said Harry.

They woke the next day to brilliant sunshine and a light, refreshing breeze.

"Perfect Quidditch conditions!" said Wood enthusiastically at the Gryffindor table, loading the team's plates with scrambled eggs. "Harry, buck up there, you need a decent breakfast."

Harry had been staring down the packed Gryffindor table, won-dering if the new owner of Riddle's diary was right in front of his eyes. Hermione had been urging him to report the robbery, but Harry didn't like the idea. He'd have to tell a teacher all about the diary, and how many people knew why Hagrid had been expelled fifty years ago? He didn't want to be the one who brought it all up again.

As he left the Great Hall with Ron and Hermione to go and col-lect his Quidditch things, another very serious worry was added to Harry's

growing list. He had just set foot on the marble staircase when he heard it yet again —"Kill this time … let me rip … tear …"

He shouted aloud and Ron and Hermione both jumped away from him in alarm.

"The voice!" said Harry, looking over his shoulder. "I just heard it again — didn't you?"

Ron shook his head, wide-eyed. Hermione, however, clapped a hand to her forehead.

"Harry — I think I've just understood something! I've got to go to the library!"

And she sprinted away, up the stairs.

"What does she understand?" said Harry distractedly, still look-ing around, trying to tell where the voice had come from.

"Loads more than I do," said Ron, shaking his head.

"But why's she got to go to the library?"

"Because that's what Hermione does," said Ron, shrugging. "When in doubt, go to the library."

Harry stood, irresolute, trying to catch the voice again, but people were now emerging from the Great Hall behind him, talk-ing loudly, exiting through the front doors on their way to the Quidditch pitch.

"You'd better get moving," said Ron. "It's nearly eleven — the match —"

Harry raced up to Gryffindor Tower, collected his Nimbus Two Thousand, and joined the large crowd swarming across the grounds, but his mind was still in the castle along with the bodiless voice, and

as he pulled on his scarlet robes in the locker room, his only comfort was that everyone was now outside to watch the game.

The teams walked onto the field to tumultuous applause. Oliver Wood took off for a warm-up flight around the goal posts; Madam Hooch released the balls. The Hufflepuffs, who played in canary yellow, were standing in a huddle, having a last-minute discussion of tactics.

Harry was just mounting his broom when Professor McGona-gall came half marching, half running across the pitch, carrying an enormous purple megaphone.

Harry's heart dropped like a stone.

"This match has been canceled," Professor McGonagall called through the megaphone, addressing the packed stadium. There were boos and shouts. Oliver Wood, looking devastated, landed and ran toward Professor McGonagall without getting off his broomstick.

"But, Professor!" he shouted. "We've got to play — the Cup — Gryffindor —"

Professor McGonagall ignored him and continued to shout through her megaphone:"All students are to make their way back to the House common rooms, where their Heads of Houses will give them further infor-mation. As quickly as you can, please!"

Then she lowered the megaphone and beckoned Harry over to her.

"Potter, I think you'd better come with me. …"

Wondering how she could possibly suspect him this time, Harry saw Ron detach himself from the complaining crowd; he came running up to them as they set off toward the castle. To Harry's sur-prise, Professor McGonagall didn't object.

"Yes, perhaps you'd better come, too, Weasley. …"

Some of the students swarming around them were grumbling about the match being canceled; others looked worried. Harry and Ron followed Professor McGonagall back into the school and up the marble staircase. But they weren't taken to anybody's office this time.

"This will be a bit of a shock," said Professor McGonagall in a surprisingly gentle voice as they approached the infirmary. "There has been another attack … another double attack."

Harry's insides did a horrible somersault. Professor McGonagall pushed the door open and he and Ron entered.

Madam Pomfrey was bending over a sixth-year girl with long, curly hair. Harry recognized her as the Ravenclaw they'd acciden-tally asked for directions to the Slytherin common room. And on the bed next to her was —"Hermione!" Ron groaned.

Hermione lay utterly still, her eyes open and glassy.

"They were found near the library," said Professor McGonagall. "I don't suppose either of you can explain this? It was on the floor next to them. …"

She was holding up a small, circular mirror.

Harry and Ron shook their heads, both staring at Hermione.

"I will escort you back to Gryffindor Tower," said Profes-sor McGonagall heavily. "I need to address the students in any case."

"All students will return to their House common rooms by six o'clock in the evening. No student is to leave the dormitories after that time. You will be escorted to each lesson by a teacher. No stu-dent is to use the bathroom unaccompanied by a teacher. All fur-ther Quidditch training and matches are to be postponed. There will be no more evening activities."

The Gryffindors packed inside the common room listened to Professor McGonagall in silence. She rolled up the parchment from which she had been reading and said in a somewhat choked voice, “I need hardly add that I have rarely been so distressed. It is likely that the school will be closed unless the culprit behind these attacks is caught. I would urge anyone who thinks they might know anything about them to come forward.”

She climbed somewhat awkwardly out of the portrait hole, and the Gryffindors began talking immediately.

“That’s two Gryffindors down, not counting a Gryffindor ghost, one Ravenclaw, and one Hufflepuff,” said the Weasley twins’ friend Lee Jordan, counting on his fingers. “Haven’t any of the teachers noticed that the Slytherins are all safe? Isn’t it obvious all this stuff’s coming from Slytherin? The Heir of Slytherin, the monster of Slytherin — why don’t they just chuck all the Slytherins out?” he roared, to nods and scattered applause.

Percy Weasley was sitting in a chair behind Lee, but for once he didn’t seem keen to make his views heard. He was looking pale and stunned.

“Percy’s in shock,” George told Harry quietly. “That Ravenclaw girl — Penelope Clearwater — she’s a prefect. I don’t think he thought the monster would dare attack a prefect.”

But Harry was only half-listening. He didn’t seem to be able to get rid of the picture of Hermione, lying on the hospital bed as though carved out of stone. And if the culprit wasn’t caught soon, he was looking at a lifetime back with the Dursleys. Tom Riddle had turned Hagrid in because he was faced with the prospect of a Muggle orphanage if the school closed. Harry now knew exactly how he had felt.

“What’re we going to do?” said Ron quietly in Harry’s ear. “D’you think they suspect Hagrid?”

“We’ve got to go and talk to him,” said Harry, making up his mind. “I can’t believe it’s him this time, but if he set the monster loose last time he’ll know how to get inside the Chamber of Secrets, and that’s a start.”

“But McGonagall said we’ve got to stay in our tower unless we’re in class —”

“I think,” said Harry, more quietly still, “it’s time to get my dad’s old cloak out again.”

Harry had inherited just one thing from his father: a long and sil-very Invisibility Cloak. It was their only chance of sneaking out of the school to visit Hagrid without anyone knowing about it. They went to bed at the usual time, waited until Neville, Dean, and Sea-mus had stopped discussing the Chamber of Secrets and finally fallen asleep, then got up, dressed again, and threw the cloak over themselves.

The journey through the dark and deserted castle corridors wasn’t enjoyable. Harry, who had wandered the castle at night sev-eral times before, had never seen it so crowded after sunset. Teach-ers, prefects, and ghosts were marching the corridors in pairs, staring around for any unusual activity. Their Invisibility Cloak didn’t stop them making any noise, and there was a particularly tense moment when Ron stubbed his toe only yards from the spot where Snape stood standing guard. Thankfully, Snape sneezed at almost exactly the moment Ron swore. It was with relief that they reached the oak front doors and eased them open.

It was a clear, starry night. They hurried toward the lit windows of Hagrid’s house and pulled off the cloak only when they were right outside his front door.

Seconds after they had knocked, Hagrid flung it open. They found themselves face-to-face with him aiming a crossbow at them. Fang the boarhound barked loudly behind him.

“Oh,” he said, lowering the weapon and staring at them. “What’re you two doin’ here?”

“What’s that for?” said Harry, pointing at the crossbow as they stepped inside.

“Nothin’ — nothin’ — “ Hagrid muttered. “I’ve bin expectin’ — doesn’ matter — Sit down — I’ll make tea —”

He hardly seemed to know what he was doing. He nearly extinguished the fire, spilling water from the kettle on it, and then smashed the teapot with a nervous jerk of his massive hand.

“Are you okay, Hagrid?” said Harry. “Did you hear about Hermione?”

“Oh, I heard, all righ’,” said Hagrid, a slight break in his voice.

He kept glancing nervously at the windows. He poured them both large mugs of boiling water (he had forgotten to add tea bags) and was just putting a slab of fruitcake on a plate when there was a loud knock on the door.

Hagrid dropped the fruitcake. Harry and Ron exchanged panic-stricken looks, then threw the Invisibility Cloak back over them-selves and retreated into a corner. Hagrid checked that they were hidden, seized his crossbow, and flung open his door once more.

“Good evening, Hagrid.”

It was Dumbledore. He entered, looking deadly serious, and was followed by a second, very odd-looking man.

The stranger had rumpled gray hair and an anxious expression, and was wearing a strange mixture of clothes: a pinstriped suit, a scarlet tie, a long black cloak, and pointed purple boots. Under his arm he carried a lime-green bowler.

“That’s Dad’s boss!” Ron breathed. “Cornelius Fudge, the Min-ister of Magic!”

Harry elbowed Ron hard to make him shut up.

Hagrid had gone pale and sweaty. He dropped into one of his chairs and looked from Dumbledore to Cornelius Fudge.

“Bad business, Hagrid,” said Fudge in rather clipped tones. “Very bad business. Had to come. Four attacks on Muggle-borns. Things’ve gone far enough. Ministry’s got to act.”

“I never,” said Hagrid, looking imploringly at Dumbledore. “You know I never, Professor Dumbledore, sir —”

“I want it understood, Cornelius, that Hagrid has my full confi-dence,” said Dumbledore, frowning at Fudge.

“Look, Albus,” said Fudge, uncomfortably. “Hagrid’s record’s against him. Ministry’s got to do something — the school gover-nors have been in touch —”

“Yet again, Cornelius, I tell you that taking Hagrid away will not help in the slightest,” said Dumbledore. His blue eyes were full of a fire Harry had never seen before.

“Look at it from my point of view,” said Fudge, fidgeting with his bowler. “I’m under a lot of pressure. Got to be seen to be doing some-thing. If it turns out it wasn’t Hagrid, he’ll be back and no more said. But I’ve got to take him. Got to. Wouldn’t be doing my duty —”

“Take me?” said Hagrid, who was trembling. “Take me where?”

“For a short stretch only,” said Fudge, not meeting Hagrid’s eyes. “Not a punishment, Hagrid, more a precaution. If someone else is caught, you’ll be let out with a full apology —”

“Not Azkaban?” croaked Hagrid.

Before Fudge could answer, there was another loud rap on the door.

Dumbledore answered it. It was Harry’s turn for an elbow in the ribs; he’d let out an audible gasp.

Mr. Lucius Malfoy strode into Hagrid’s hut, swathed in a long black traveling cloak, smiling a cold and satisfied smile. Fang started to growl.

“Already here, Fudge,” he said approvingly. “Good, good …”

“What’re you doin’ here?” said Hagrid furiously. “Get outta my house!”

“My dear man, please believe me, I have no pleasure at all in be-ing inside your — er — d’you call this a house?” said Lucius Mal-foy, sneering as he looked around the small cabin. “I simply called at the school and was told that the headmaster was here.”

“And what exactly did you want with me, Lucius?” said Dum-bledore. He spoke politely, but the fire was still blazing in his blue eyes.

“Dreadful thing, Dumbledore,” said Malfoy lazily, taking out a long roll of parchment, “but the governors feel it’s time for you to step aside. This is an Order of Suspension — you’ll find all twelve signatures on it. I’m afraid we feel you’re losing your touch. How many attacks have there been now? Two more this afternoon, wasn’t it? At this rate, there’ll be no Muggle-borns left at Hogwarts, and we all know what an awful loss that would be to the school.”

“Oh, now, see here, Lucius,” said Fudge, looking alarmed, “Dumbledore suspended — no, no — last thing we want just now —”

“The appointment — or suspension — of the headmaster is a matter for the governors, Fudge,” said Mr. Malfoy smoothly. “And as Dumbledore has failed to stop these attacks —”

"See here, Malfoy, if Dumbledore can't stop them," said Fudge, whose upper lip was sweating now, "I mean to say, who can?"

"That remains to be seen," said Mr. Malfoy with a nasty smile. "But as all twelve of us have voted —"

Hagrid leapt to his feet, his shaggy black head grazing the ceil-ing.

"An' how many did yeh have ter threaten an' blackmail before they agreed, Malfoy, eh?" he roared.

"Dear, dear, you know, that temper of yours will lead you into trouble one of these days, Hagrid," said Mr. Malfoy. "I would ad-vise you not to shout at the Azkaban guards like that. They won't like it at all."

"Yeh can' take Dumbledore!" yelled Hagrid, making Fang the boarhound cower and whimper in his basket. "Take him away, an' the Muggle-borns won' stand a chance! There'll be killin' next!"

"Calm yourself, Hagrid," said Dumbledore sharply. He looked at Lucius Malfoy.

"If the governors want my removal, Lucius, I shall of course step aside —"

"But —" stuttered Fudge.

"No!" growled Hagrid.

Dumbledore had not taken his bright blue eyes off Lucius Mal-foy's cold gray ones.

"However," said Dumbledore, speaking very slowly and clearly so that none of them could miss a word, "you will find that I will only truly have left this school when none here are loyal to me. You will also find that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it."

For a second, Harry was almost sure Dumbledore's eyes flickered toward the corner where he and Ron stood hidden.

"Admirable sentiments," said Malfoy, bowing. "We shall all miss your — er — highly individual way of running things, Albus, and only hope that your successor will manage to prevent any — ah — killins."

He strode to the cabin door, opened it, and bowed Dumbledore out. Fudge, fiddling with his bowler, waited for Hagrid to go ahead of him, but Hagrid stood his ground, took a deep breath, and said carefully, "If anyone wanted ter find out some stuff, all they'd have ter do would be ter follow the spiders. That'd lead 'em right! That's all I'm sayin'."

Fudge stared at him in amazement.

"All right, I'm comin'," said Hagrid, pulling on his moleskin overcoat. But as he was about to follow Fudge through the door, he stopped again and said loudly, "An' someone'll need ter feed Fang while I'm away."

The door banged shut and Ron pulled off the Invisibility Cloak.

"We're in trouble now," he said hoarsely. "No Dumbledore. They might as well close the school tonight. There'll be an attack a day with him gone."

Fang started howling, scratching at the closed door.

Chapter 15 Aragog

Summer was creeping over the grounds around the castle; sky and lake alike turned periwinkle blue and flowers large as cab-bages burst into bloom in the greenhouses. But with no Hagrid vis-ible from the castle windows, striding the grounds with Fang at his heels, the scene didn't look right to Harry; no better, in fact, than the inside of the castle, where things were so horribly wrong.

Harry and Ron had tried to visit Hermione, but visitors were now barred from the hospital wing.

"We're taking no more chances," Madam Pomfrey told them se-verely through a crack in the infirmary door. "No, I'm sorry, there's every chance the attacker might come back to finish these people off. …"

With Dumbledore gone, fear had spread as never before, so that the sun warming the castle walls outside seemed to stop at the mul-lioned windows. There was barely a face to be seen in the school that didn't look worried and tense, and any laughter that rang through the corridors sounded shrill and unnatural and was quickly stifled.

Harry constantly repeated Dumbledore's final words to himself. "I will only truly have left this school when none here are loyal to me. … Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it." But what good were these words? Who exactly were they sup-posed to ask for help, when everyone was just as confused and scared as they were?

Hagrid's hint about the spiders was far easier to understand — the trouble was, there didn't seem to be a single spider left in the castle to follow. Harry looked everywhere he went, helped (rather reluctantly) by Ron. They were hampered, of course, by the fact that they weren't allowed to wander off on their own but had to move around the castle in a pack with the other Gryffindors. Most of their fellow students

seemed glad that they were being shep-herded from class to class by teachers, but Harry found it very irk-some.

One person, however, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the atmosphere of terror and suspicion. Draco Malfoy was strutting around the school as though he had just been appointed Head Boy. Harry didn't realize what he was so pleased about until the Potions lesson about two weeks after Dumbledore and Hagrid had left, when, sitting right behind Malfoy, Harry overheard him gloating to Crabbe and Goyle.

"I always thought Father might be the one who got rid of Dumbledore," he said, not troubling to keep his voice down. "I told you he thinks Dumbledore's the worst headmaster the school's ever had. Maybe we'll get a decent headmaster now. Someone who won't want the Chamber of Secrets closed. McGonagall won't last long, she's only filling in. …"

Snape swept past Harry, making no comment about Hermione's empty seat and cauldron.

"Sir," said Malfoy loudly. "Sir, why don't you apply for the headmaster's job?"

"Now, now, Malfoy," said Snape, though he couldn't suppress a thin-lipped smile. "Professor Dumbledore has only been suspended by the governors. I daresay he'll be back with us soon enough."

"Yeah, right," said Malfoy, smirking. "I expect you'd have Fa-ther's vote, sir, if you wanted to apply for the job — I'll tell Father you're the best teacher here, sir —"

Snape smirked as he swept off around the dungeon, fortunately not spotting Seamus Finnigan, who was pretending to vomit into his cauldron.

“I’m quite surprised the Mudbloods haven’t all packed their bags by now,” Malfoy went on. “Bet you five Galleons the next one dies. Pity it wasn’t Granger —”

The bell rang at that moment, which was lucky; at Malfoy’s last words, Ron had leapt off his stool, and in the scramble to collect bags and books, his attempts to reach Malfoy went unnoticed.

“Let me at him,” Ron growled as Harry and Dean hung onto his arms. “I don’t care, I don’t need my wand, I’m going to kill him with my bare hands —”

“Hurry up, I’ve got to take you all to Herbology,” barked Snape over the class’s heads, and off they marched, with Harry, Ron, and Dean bringing up the rear, Ron still trying to get loose. It was only safe to let go of him when Snape had seen them out of the castle and they were making their way across the vegetable patch toward the greenhouses.

The Herbology class was very subdued; there were now two missing from their number, Justin and Hermione.

Professor Sprout set them all to work pruning the Abyssinian Shrivelfigs. Harry went to tip an armful of withered stalks onto the compost heap and found himself face-to-face with Ernie Macmil-lan. Ernie took a deep breath and said, very formally, “I just want to say, Harry, that I’m sorry I ever suspected you. I know you’d never attack Hermione Granger, and I apologize for all the stuff I said. We’re all in the same boat now, and, well —”

He held out a pudgy hand, and Harry shook it.

Ernie and his friend Hannah came to work at the same Shrivelfig as Harry and Ron.

“That Draco Malfoy character,” said Ernie, breaking off dead twigs, “he seems very pleased about all this, doesn’t he? D’you know, I think

he might be Slytherin's heir."

"That's clever of you," said Ron, who didn't seem to have for-given Ernie as readily as Harry.

"Do you think it's Malfoy, Harry?" Ernie asked.

"No," said Harry, so firmly that Ernie and Hannah stared.

A second later, Harry spotted something.

Several large spiders were scuttling over the ground on the other side of the glass, moving in an unnaturally straight line as though taking the shortest route to a prearranged meeting. Harry hit Ron over the hand with his pruning shears.

"Ouch! What're you —"

Harry pointed out the spiders, following their progress with his eyes screwed up against the sun.

"Oh, yeah," said Ron, trying, and failing, to look pleased. "But we can't follow them now —"

Ernie and Hannah were listening curiously.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he focused on the spiders. If they pur-sued their fixed course, there could be no doubt about where they would end up.

"Looks like they're heading for the Forbidden Forest. …"

And Ron looked even unhappier about that.

At the end of the lesson Professor Sprout escorted the class to their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. Harry and Ron lagged behind the others so they could talk out of earshot.

“We’ll have to use the Invisibility Cloak again,” Harry told Ron. “We can take Fang with us. He’s used to going into the forest with Hagrid, he might be some help.”

“Right,” said Ron, who was twirling his wand nervously in his fingers. “Er — aren’t there — aren’t there supposed to be were-wolves in the forest?” he added as they took their usual places at the back of Lockhart’s classroom.

Preferring not to answer that question, Harry said, “There are good things in there, too. The centaurs are all right, and the uni-corns …”

Ron had never been into the Forbidden Forest before. Harry had entered it only once and had hoped never to do so again.

Lockhart bounded into the room and the class stared at him. Every other teacher in the place was looking grimmer than usual, but Lockhart appeared nothing short of buoyant.

“Come now,” he cried, beaming around him. “Why all these long faces?”

People swapped exasperated looks, but nobody answered.

“Don’t you people realize,” said Lockhart, speaking slowly, as though they were all a bit dim, “the danger has passed! The culprit has been taken away —”

“Says who?” said Dean Thomas loudly.

“My dear young man, the Minister of Magic wouldn’t have taken Hagrid if he hadn’t been one hundred percent sure that he was guilty,” said Lockhart, in the tone of someone explaining that one and one made two.

“Oh, yes he would,” said Ron, even more loudly than Dean.

“I flatter myself I know a touch more about Hagrid’s arrest than you do, Mr. Weasley,” said Lockhart in a self-satisfied tone.

Ron started to say that he didn’t think so, somehow, but stopped in midsentence when Harry kicked him hard under the desk.

“We weren’t there, remember?” Harry muttered.

But Lockhart’s disgusting cheeriness, his hints that he had al-ways thought Hagrid was no good, his confidence that the whole business was now at an end, irritated Harry so much that he yearned to throw Gadding with Ghouls right in Lockhart’s stupid face. Instead he contented himself with scrawling a note to Ron: Let’s do it tonight.

Ron read the message, swallowed hard, and looked sideways at the empty seat usually filled by Hermione. The sight seemed to stiffen his resolve, and he nodded.

The Gryffindor common room was always very crowded these days, because from six o’clock onward the Gryffindors had no-where else to go. They also had plenty to talk about, with the result that the common room often didn’t empty until past midnight.

Harry went to get the Invisibility Cloak out of his trunk right af-ter dinner, and spent the evening sitting on it, waiting for the room to clear. Fred and George challenged Harry and Ron to a few games of Exploding Snap, and Ginny sat watching them, very sub-dued in Hermione’s usual chair. Harry and Ron kept losing on pur-pose, trying to finish the games quickly, but even so, it was well past midnight when Fred, George, and Ginny finally went to bed.

Harry and Ron waited for the distant sounds of two dormitory doors closing before seizing the cloak, throwing it over themselves, and climbing through the portrait hole.

It was another difficult journey through the castle, dodging all the teachers. At last they reached the entrance hall, slid back the lock on

the oak front doors, squeezed between them, trying to stop any creaking, and stepped out into the moonlit grounds.

“ ’Course,” said Ron abruptly as they strode across the black grass, “we might get to the forest and find there’s nothing to follow. Those spiders might not’ve been going there at all. I know it looked like they were moving in that sort of general direction, but …”

His voice trailed away hopefully.

They reached Hagrid’s house, sad and sorry-looking with its blank windows. When Harry pushed the door open, Fang went mad with joy at the sight of them. Worried he might wake everyone at the castle with his deep, booming barks, they hastily fed him treacle toffee from a tin on the mantelpiece, which glued his teeth together.

Harry left the Invisibility Cloak on Hagrid’s table. There would be no need for it in the pitch-dark forest.

“C’mon, Fang, we’re going for a walk,” said Harry, patting his leg, and Fang bounded happily out of the house behind them, dashed to the edge of the forest, and lifted his leg against a large sycamore tree.

Harry took out his wand, murmured, “Lumos!” and a tiny light appeared at the end of it, just enough to let them watch the path for signs of spiders.

“Good thinking,” said Ron. “I’d light mine, too, but you know — it’d probably blow up or something. …”

Harry tapped Ron on the shoulder, pointing at the grass. Two solitary spiders were hurrying away from the wandlight into the shade of the trees.

“Okay,” Ron sighed as though resigned to the worst, “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

So, with Fang scampering around them, sniffing tree roots and leaves, they entered the forest. By the glow of Harry's wand, they followed the steady trickle of spiders moving along the path. They walked behind them for about twenty minutes, not speaking, listening hard for noises other than breaking twigs and rustling leaves. Then, when the trees had become thicker than ever, so that the stars overhead were no longer visible, and Harry's wand shone alone in the sea of dark, they saw their spider guides leaving the path.

Harry paused, trying to see where the spiders were going, but everything outside his little sphere of light was pitch-black. He had never been this deep into the forest before. He could vividly remember Hagrid advising him not to leave the forest path last time he'd been in here. But Hagrid was miles away now, probably sitting in a cell in Azkaban, and he had also said to follow the spiders.

Something wet touched Harry's hand and he jumped backward, crushing Ron's foot, but it was only Fang's nose.

"What d'you reckon?" Harry said to Ron, whose eyes he could just make out, reflecting the light from his wand.

"We've come this far," said Ron.

So they followed the darting shadows of the spiders into the trees. They couldn't move very quickly now; there were tree roots and stumps in their way, barely visible in the near blackness. Harry could feel Fang's hot breath on his hand. More than once, they had to stop, so that Harry could crouch down and find the spiders in the wandlight.

They walked for what seemed like at least half an hour, their robes snagging on low-slung branches and brambles. After a while, they noticed that the ground seemed to be sloping downward, though the trees were as thick as ever.

Then Fang suddenly let loose a great, echoing bark, making both Harry and Ron jump out of their skins.

“What?” said Ron loudly, looking around into the pitch-dark, and gripping Harry’s elbow very hard.

“There’s something moving over there,” Harry breathed. “Lis-ten … sounds like something big. …”

They listened. Some distance to their right, the something big was snapping branches as it carved a path through the trees.

“Oh, no,” said Ron. “Oh, no, oh, no, oh —”

“Shut up,” said Harry frantically. “It’ll hear you.”

“Hear me?” said Ron in an unnaturally high voice. “It’s already heard Fang!”

The darkness seemed to be pressing on their eyeballs as they stood, terrified, waiting. There was a strange rumbling noise and then silence.

“What d’you think it’s doing?” said Harry.

“Probably getting ready to pounce,” said Ron.

They waited, shivering, hardly daring to move.

“D’you think it’s gone?” Harry whispered.

“Dunno —”

Then, to their right, came a sudden blaze of light, so bright in the darkness that both of them flung up their hands to shield their eyes. Fang yelped and tried to run, but got lodged in a tangle of thorns and yelped even louder.

“Harry!” Ron shouted, his voice breaking with relief. “Harry, it’s our car!”

“What?”

“Come on!”

Harry blundered after Ron toward the light, stumbling and trip-ping, and a moment later they had emerged into a clearing.

Mr. Weasley’s car was standing, empty, in the middle of a circle of thick trees under a roof of dense branches, its headlights ablaze. As Ron walked, openmouthed, toward it, it moved slowly toward him, exactly like a large, turquoise dog greeting its owner.

“It’s been here all the time!” said Ron delightedly, walking around the car. “Look at it. The forest’s turned it wild. …”

The sides of the car were scratched and smeared with mud. Apparently it had taken to trundling around the forest on its own. Fang didn’t seem at all keen on it; he kept close to Harry, who could feel him quivering. His breathing slowing down again, Harry stuffed his wand back into his robes.

“And we thought it was going to attack us!” said Ron, leaning against the car and patting it. “I wondered where it had gone!”

Harry squinted around on the floodlit ground for signs of more spiders, but they had all scuttled away from the glare of the headlights.

“We’ve lost the trail,” he said. “C’mon, let’s go and find them.”

Ron didn’t speak. He didn’t move. His eyes were fixed on a point some ten feet above the forest floor, right behind Harry. His face was livid with terror.

Harry didn’t even have time to turn around. There was a loud clicking noise and suddenly he felt something long and hairy seize him around the middle and lift him off the ground, so that he was hanging

facedown. Struggling, terrified, he heard more clicking, and saw Ron's legs leave the ground, too, heard Fang whimpering and howling — next moment, he was being swept away into the dark trees.

Head hanging, Harry saw that what had hold of him was march-ing on six immensely long, hairy legs, the front two clutching him tightly below a pair of shining black pincers. Behind him, he could hear another of the creatures, no doubt carrying Ron. They were moving into the very heart of the forest. Harry could hear Fang fighting to free himself from a third monster, whining loudly, but Harry couldn't have yelled even if he had wanted to; he seemed to have left his voice back with the car in the clearing.

He never knew how long he was in the creature's clutches; he only knew that the darkness suddenly lifted enough for him to see that the leaf-strewn ground was now swarming with spiders. Cran-ing his neck sideways, he realized that they had reached the ridge of a vast hollow, a hollow that had been cleared of trees, so that the stars shone brightly onto the worst scene he had ever laid eyes on.

Spiders. Not tiny spiders like those surging over the leaves below. Spiders the size of carthorses, eight-eyed, eight-legged, black, hairy, gigantic. The massive specimen that was carrying Harry made its way down the steep slope toward a misty, domed web in the very center of the hollow, while its fellows closed in all around it, click-ing their pincers excitedly at the sight of its load.

Harry fell to the ground on all fours as the spider released him. Ron and Fang thudded down next to him. Fang wasn't howling anymore, but cowering silently on the spot. Ron looked exactly like Harry felt. His mouth was stretched wide in a kind of silent scream and his eyes were popping.

Harry suddenly realized that the spider that had dropped him was saying something. It had been hard to tell, because he clicked his

pincers with every word he spoke.

“Aragog!” it called. “Aragog!”

And from the middle of the misty, domed web, a spider the size of a small elephant emerged, very slowly. There was gray in the black of his body and legs, and each of the eyes on his ugly, pin-cered head was milky white. He was blind.

“What is it?” he said, clicking his pincers rapidly.

“Men,” clicked the spider who had caught Harry.

“Is it Hagrid?” said Aragog, moving closer, his eight milky eyes wandering vaguely.

“Strangers,” clicked the spider who had brought Ron.

“Kill them,” clicked Aragog fretfully. “I was sleeping. …”

“We’re friends of Hagrid’s,” Harry shouted. His heart seemed to have left his chest to pound in his throat.

Click, click, click went the pincers of the spiders all around the hollow.

Aragog paused.

“Hagrid has never sent men into our hollow before,” he said slowly.

“Hagrid’s in trouble,” said Harry, breathing very fast. “That’s why we’ve come.”

“In trouble?” said the aged spider, and Harry thought he heard concern beneath the clicking pincers. “But why has he sent you?”

Harry thought of getting to his feet but decided against it; he didn’t think his legs would support him. So he spoke from the ground, as calmly as he could.

“They think, up at the school, that Hagrid’s been setting a — a — something on students. They’ve taken him to Azkaban.”

Aragog clicked his pincers furiously, and all around the hol-low the sound was echoed by the crowd of spiders; it was like applause, except applause didn’t usually make Harry feel sick with fear.

“But that was years ago,” said Aragog fretfully. “Years and years ago. I remember it well. That’s why they made him leave the school. They believed that I was the monster that dwells in what they call the Chamber of Secrets. They thought that Hagrid had opened the Chamber and set me free.”

“And you … you didn’t come from the Chamber of Secrets?” said Harry, who could feel cold sweat on his forehead.

“I!” said Aragog, clicking angrily. “I was not born in the castle. I come from a distant land. A traveler gave me to Hagrid when I was an egg. Hagrid was only a boy, but he cared for me, hidden in a cupboard in the castle, feeding me on scraps from the table. Hagrid is my good friend, and a good man. When I was discovered, and blamed for the death of a girl, he protected me. I have lived here in the forest ever since, where Hagrid still visits me. He even found me a wife, Mosag, and you see how our family has grown, all through Hagrid’s goodness. …”

Harry summoned what remained of his courage.

“So you never — never attacked anyone?”

“Never,” croaked the old spider. “It would have been my in-stinct, but out of respect for Hagrid, I never harmed a human. The body of the girl who was killed was discovered in a bathroom. I never saw any part of the castle but the cupboard in which I grew up. Our kind like the dark and the quiet. …”

“But then … Do you know what did kill that girl?” said Harry. “Because whatever it is, it’s back and attacking people again —”

His words were drowned by a loud outbreak of clicking and the rustling of many long legs shifting angrily; large black shapes shifted all around him.

“The thing that lives in the castle,” said Aragog, “is an ancient creature we spiders fear above all others. Well do I remember how I pleaded with Hagrid to let me go, when I sensed the beast mov-ing about the school.”

“What is it?” said Harry urgently.

More loud clicking, more rustling; the spiders seemed to be clos-ing in.

“We do not speak of it!” said Aragog fiercely. “We do not name it! I never even told Hagrid the name of that dread creature, though he asked me, many times.”

Harry didn’t want to press the subject, not with the spiders pressing closer on all sides. Aragog seemed to be tired of talking. He was backing slowly into his domed web, but his fellow spiders continued to inch slowly toward Harry and Ron.

“We’ll just go, then,” Harry called desperately to Aragog, hear-ing leaves rustling behind him.

“Go?” said Aragog slowly. “I think not. …”

“But — but —”

“My sons and daughters do not harm Hagrid, on my command. But I cannot deny them fresh meat, when it wanders so willingly into our midst. Good-bye, friend of Hagrid.”

Harry spun around. Feet away, towering above him, was a solid wall of spiders, clicking, their many eyes gleaming in their ugly black heads.

Even as he reached for his wand, Harry knew it was no good, there were too many of them, but as he tried to stand, ready to die fighting, a loud, long note sounded, and a blaze of light flamed through the hollow.

Mr. Weasley's car was thundering down the slope, headlights glaring, its horn screeching, knocking spiders aside; several were thrown onto their backs, their endless legs waving in the air. The car screeched to a halt in front of Harry and Ron and the doors flew open.

"Get Fang!" Harry yelled, diving into the front seat; Ron seized the boarhound around the middle and threw him, yelping, into the back of the car — the doors slammed shut — Ron didn't touch the accelerator but the car didn't need him; the engine roared and they were off, hitting more spiders. They sped up the slope, out of the hollow, and they were soon crashing through the forest, branches whipping the windows as the car wound its way cleverly through the widest gaps, following a path it obviously knew.

Harry looked sideways at Ron. His mouth was still open in the silent scream, but his eyes weren't popping anymore.

"Are you okay?"

Ron stared straight ahead, unable to speak.

They smashed their way through the undergrowth, Fang howl-ing loudly in the back seat, and Harry saw the side mirror snap off as they squeezed past a large oak. After ten noisy, rocky minutes, the trees thinned, and Harry could again see patches of sky.

The car stopped so suddenly that they were nearly thrown into the windshield. They had reached the edge of the forest. Fang flung

himself at the window in his anxiety to get out, and when Harry opened the door, he shot off through the trees to Hagrid's house, tail between his legs. Harry got out too, and after a minute or so, Ron seemed to regain the feeling in his limbs and followed, still stiff-necked and staring. Harry gave the car a grateful pat as it re-versed back into the forest and disappeared from view.

Harry went back into Hagrid's cabin to get the Invisibility Cloak. Fang was trembling under a blanket in his basket. When Harry got outside again, he found Ron being violently sick in the pumpkin patch.

"Follow the spiders," said Ron weakly, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "I'll never forgive Hagrid. We're lucky to be alive."

"I bet he thought Aragog wouldn't hurt friends of his," said Harry.

"That's exactly Hagrid's problem!" said Ron, thumping the wall of the cabin. "He always thinks monsters aren't as bad as they're made out, and look where it's got him! A cell in Azkaban!" He was shivering uncontrollably now. "What was the point of sending us in there? What have we found out, I'd like to know?"

"That Hagrid never opened the Chamber of Secrets," said Harry, throwing the cloak over Ron and prodding him in the arm to make him walk. "He was innocent."

Ron gave a loud snort. Evidently, hatching Aragog in a cupboard wasn't his idea of being innocent.

As the castle loomed nearer Harry twitched the cloak to make sure their feet were hidden, then pushed the creaking front doors ajar. They walked carefully back across the entrance hall and up the marble staircase, holding their breath as they passed corridors where watchful sentries were walking. At last they reached the safety of the Gryffindor common room, where the fire had burned itself into glowing ash. They took off the cloak and climbed the winding stair to their dormitory.

Ron fell onto his bed without bothering to get undressed. Harry, however, didn't feel very sleepy. He sat on the edge of his four-poster, thinking hard about everything Aragog had said.

The creature that was lurking somewhere in the castle, he thought, sounded like a sort of monster Voldemort — even other monsters didn't want to name it. But he and Ron were no closer to finding out what it was, or how it Petrified its victims. Even Hagrid had never known what was in the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry swung his legs up onto his bed and leaned back against his pillows, watching the moon glinting at him through the tower window.

He couldn't see what else they could do. They had hit dead ends everywhere. Riddle had caught the wrong person, the Heir of Slytherin had got off, and no one could tell whether it was the same person, or a different one, who had opened the Chamber this time. There was nobody else to ask. Harry lay down, still thinking about what Aragog had said.

He was becoming drowsy when what seemed like their very last hope occurred to him, and he suddenly sat bolt upright.

"Ron," he hissed through the dark, "Ron —"

Ron woke with a yelp like Fang's, stared wildly around, and saw Harry.

"Ron — that girl who died. Aragog said she was found in a bathroom," said Harry, ignoring Neville's snuffling snores from the corner. "What if she never left the bathroom? What if she's still there?"

Ron rubbed his eyes, frowning through the moonlight. And then he understood, too.

"You don't think — not Moaning Myrtle?"

Chapter 16 The Chamber of Secrets

All those times we were in that bathroom, and she was just three toilets away," said Ron bitterly at breakfast next day, "and we could've asked her, and now …"

It had been hard enough trying to look for spiders. Escaping their teachers long enough to sneak into a girls' bathroom, the girls' bathroom, moreover, right next to the scene of the first attack, was going to be almost impossible.

But something happened in their first lesson, Transfiguration, that drove the Chamber of Secrets out of their minds for the first time in weeks. Ten minutes into the class, Professor McGonagall told them that their exams would start on the first of June, one week from today.

"Exams?" howled Seamus Finnigan. "We're still getting exams?"

There was a loud bang behind Harry as Neville Longbottom's wand slipped, vanishing one of the legs on his desk. Professor McGonagall restored it with a wave of her own wand, and turned, frowning, to Seamus.

"The whole point of keeping the school open at this time is for you to receive your education," she said sternly. "The exams will therefore take place as usual, and I trust you are all studying hard."

Studying hard! It had never occurred to Harry that there would be exams with the castle in this state. There was a great deal of mutinous muttering around the room, which made Professor McGonagall scowl even more darkly.

"Professor Dumbledore's instructions were to keep the school running as normally as possible," she said. "And that, I need hardly point out, means finding out how much you have learned this year."

Harry looked down at the pair of white rabbits he was supposed to be turning into slippers. What had he learned so far this year? He couldn't seem to think of anything that would be useful in an exam.

Ron looked as though he'd just been told he had to go and live in the Forbidden Forest.

"Can you imagine me taking exams with this?" he asked Harry, holding up his wand, which had just started whistling loudly.

Three days before their first exam, Professor McGonagall made another announcement at breakfast.

"I have good news," she said, and the Great Hall, instead of falling silent, erupted.

"Dumbledore's coming back!" several people yelled joyfully.

"You've caught the Heir of Slytherin!" squealed a girl at the Ravenclaw table.

"Quidditch matches are back on!" roared Wood excitedly.

When the hubbub had subsided, Professor McGonagall said, "Professor Sprout has informed me that the Mandrakes are ready for cutting at last. Tonight, we will be able to revive those people who have been Petrified. I need hardly remind you all that one of them may well be able to tell us who, or what, attacked them. I am hopeful that this dreadful year will end with our catching the cul-prit."

There was an explosion of cheering. Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and wasn't at all surprised to see that Draco Malfoy hadn't joined in. Ron, however, was looking happier than he'd looked in days.

"It won't matter that we never asked Myrtle, then!" he said to Harry. "Hermione'll probably have all the answers when they wake her up!

Mind you, she'll go crazy when she finds out we've got ex-ams in three days' time. She hasn't studied. It might be kinder to leave her where she is till they're over."

Just then, Ginny Weasley came over and sat down next to Ron. She looked tense and nervous, and Harry noticed that her hands were twisting in her lap.

"What's up?" said Ron, helping himself to more porridge.

Ginny didn't say anything, but glanced up and down the Gryffindor table with a scared look on her face that reminded Harry of someone, though he couldn't think who.

"Spit it out," said Ron, watching her.

Harry suddenly realized who Ginny looked like. She was rock-ing backward and forward slightly in her chair, exactly like Dobby did when he was teetering on the edge of revealing forbidden in-formation.

"I've got to tell you something," Ginny mumbled, carefully not looking at Harry.

"What is it?" said Harry.

Ginny looked as though she couldn't find the right words.

"What?" said Ron.

Ginny opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Harry leaned forward and spoke quietly, so that only Ginny and Ron could hear him.

"Is it something about the Chamber of Secrets? Have you seen something? Someone acting oddly?"

Ginny drew a deep breath and, at that precise moment, Percy Weasley appeared, looking tired and wan.

“If you’ve finished eating, I’ll take that seat, Ginny. I’m starving, I’ve only just come off patrol duty.”

Ginny jumped up as though her chair had just been electrified, gave Percy a fleeting, frightened look, and scampered away. Percy sat down and grabbed a mug from the center of the table.

“Percy!” said Ron angrily. “She was just about to tell us some-thing important!”

Halfway through a gulp of tea, Percy choked.

“What sort of thing?” he said, coughing.

“I just asked her if she’d seen anything odd, and she started to say —”

“Oh — that — that’s nothing to do with the Chamber of Se-crets,” said Percy at once.

“How do you know?” said Ron, his eyebrows raised.

“Well, er, if you must know, Ginny, er, walked in on me the other day when I was — well, never mind — the point is, she spotted me doing something and I, um, I asked her not to mention it to anybody. I must say, I did think she’d keep her word. It’s noth-ing, really, I’d just rather —”

Harry had never seen Percy look so uncomfortable.

“What were you doing, Percy?” said Ron, grinning. “Go on, tell us, we won’t laugh.”

Percy didn’t smile back.

“Pass me those rolls, Harry, I’m starving.”

Harry knew the whole mystery might be solved tomorrow without their help, but he wasn’t about to pass up a chance to speak to Myr-tle if it turned up — and to his delight it did, midmorning, when they were being led to History of Magic by Gilderoy Lockhart.

Lockhart, who had so often assured them that all danger had passed, only to be proved wrong right away, was now wholeheart-edly convinced that it was hardly worth the trouble to see them safely down the corridors. His hair wasn’t as sleek as usual; it seemed he had been up most of the night, patrolling the fourth floor.

“Mark my words,” he said, ushering them around a corner. “The first words out of those poor Petrified people’s mouths will be ‘It was Hagrid.’ Frankly, I’m astounded Professor McGonagall thinks all these security measures are necessary.”

“I agree, sir,” said Harry, making Ron drop his books in surprise.

“Thank you, Harry,” said Lockhart graciously while they waited for a long line of Hufflepuffs to pass. “I mean, we teachers have quite enough to be getting on with, without walking students to classes and standing guard all night. …”

“That’s right,” said Ron, catching on. “Why don’t you leave us here, sir, we’ve only got one more corridor to go —”

“You know, Weasley, I think I will,” said Lockhart. “I really should go and prepare my next class —”

And he hurried off.

“Prepare his class,” Ron sneered after him. “Gone to curl his hair, more like.”

They let the rest of the Gryffindors draw ahead of them, then darted down a side passage and hurried off toward Moaning Myr-tle's bathroom. But just as they were congratulating each other on their brilliant scheme —"Potter! Weasley! What are you doing?"

It was Professor McGonagall, and her mouth was the thinnest of thin lines.

"We were — we were —" Ron stammered. "We were going to — to go and see —"

"Hermione," said Harry. Ron and Professor McGonagall both looked at him.

"We haven't seen her for ages, Professor," Harry went on hur-riedly, treading on Ron's foot, "and we thought we'd sneak into the hospital wing, you know, and tell her the Mandrakes are nearly ready and, er, not to worry —"

Professor McGonagall was still staring at him, and for a mo-ment, Harry thought she was going to explode, but when she spoke, it was in a strangely croaky voice.

"Of course," she said, and Harry, amazed, saw a tear glistening in her beady eye. "Of course, I realize this has all been hardest on the friends of those who have been … I quite understand. Yes, Potter, of course you may visit Miss Granger. I will inform Profes-sor Binns where you've gone. Tell Madam Pomfrey I have given my permission."

Harry and Ron walked away, hardly daring to believe that they'd avoided detention. As they turned the corner, they distinctly heard Professor McGonagall blow her nose.

"That," said Ron fervently, "was the best story you've ever come up with."

They had no choice now but to go to the hospital wing and tell Madam Pomfrey that they had Professor McGonagall's permission to visit Hermione.

Madam Pomfrey let them in, but reluctantly.

"There's just no point talking to a Petrified person," she said, and they had to admit she had a point when they'd taken their seats next to Hermione. It was plain that Hermione didn't have the faint-est inkling that she had visitors, and that they might just as well tell her bedside cabinet not to worry for all the good it would do.

"Wonder if she did see the attacker, though?" said Ron, looking sadly at Hermione's rigid face. "Because if he sneaked up on them all, no one'll ever know. …"

But Harry wasn't looking at Hermione's face. He was more in-terested in her right hand. It lay clenched on top of her blankets, and bending closer, he saw that a piece of paper was scrunched in-side her fist.

Making sure that Madam Pomfrey was nowhere near, he pointed this out to Ron.

"Try and get it out," Ron whispered, shifting his chair so that he blocked Harry from Madam Pomfrey's view.

It was no easy task. Hermione's hand was clamped so tightly around the paper that Harry was sure he was going to tear it. While Ron kept watch he tugged and twisted, and at last, after several tense minutes, the paper came free.

It was a page torn from a very old library book. Harry smoothed it out eagerly and Ron leaned close to read it, too.

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size and

live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and ven-omous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.

And beneath this, a single word had been written, in a hand Harry recognized as Hermione's. Pipes.

It was as though somebody had just flicked a light on in his brain.

"Ron," he breathed. "This is it. This is the answer. The monster in the Chamber's a basilisk — a giant serpent! That's why I've been hearing that voice all over the place, and nobody else has heard it. It's because I understand Parseltongue. …"

Harry looked up at the beds around him.

"The basilisk kills people by looking at them. But no one's died — because no one looked it straight in the eye. Colin saw it through his camera. The basilisk burned up all the film inside it, but Colin just got Petrified. Justin … Justin must've seen the basilisk through Nearly Headless Nick! Nick got the full blast of it, but he couldn't die again … and Hermione and that Ravenclaw prefect were found with a mirror next to them. Hermione had just realized the monster was a basilisk. I bet you anything she warned the first person she met to look around corners with a mirror first! And that girl pulled out her mirror — and —"

Ron's jaw had dropped.

"And Mrs. Norris?" he whispered eagerly.

Harry thought hard, picturing the scene on the night of Hal-loween.

“The water …” he said slowly. “The flood from Moaning Myr-tle’s bathroom. I bet you Mrs. Norris only saw the reflection. …”

He scanned the page in his hand eagerly. The more he looked at it, the more it made sense.

“… The crowing of the rooster … is fatal to it!” he read aloud. “Hagrid’s roosters were killed! The Heir of Slytherin didn’t want one anywhere near the castle once the Chamber was opened! Spi-ders flee before it! It all fits!”

“But how’s the basilisk been getting around the place?” said Ron. “A giant snake … Someone would’ve seen …”

Harry, however, pointed at the word Hermione had scribbled at the foot of the page.

“Pipes,” he said. “Pipes … Ron, it’s been using the plumbing. I’ve been hearing that voice inside the walls. …”

Ron suddenly grabbed Harry’s arm.

“The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets!” he said hoarsely. “What if it’s a bathroom? What if it’s in —”

“— Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom,” said Harry.

They sat there, excitement coursing through them, hardly able to believe it.

“This means,” said Harry, “I can’t be the only Parselmouth in the school. The Heir of Slytherin’s one, too. That’s how he’s been controlling the basilisk.”

“What’re we going to do?” said Ron, whose eyes were flashing. “Should we go straight to McGonagall?”

“Let’s go to the staffroom,” said Harry, jumping up. “She’ll be there in ten minutes. It’s nearly break.”

They ran downstairs. Not wanting to be discovered hanging around in another corridor, they went straight into the deserted staffroom. It was a large, paneled room full of dark, wooden chairs. Harry and Ron paced around it, too excited to sit down.

But the bell to signal break never came.

Instead, echoing through the corridors came Professor McGonagall’s voice, magically magnified.

“All students to return to their House dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staffroom. Immediately, please.”

Harry wheeled around to stare at Ron.

“Not another attack? Not now?”

“What’ll we do?” said Ron, aghast. “Go back to the dormitory?”

“No,” said Harry, glancing around. There was an ugly sort of wardrobe to his left, full of the teachers’ cloaks. “In here. Let’s hear what it’s all about. Then we can tell them what we’ve found out.”

They hid themselves inside it, listening to the rumbling of hun-dreds of people moving overhead, and the staffroom door banging open. From between the musty folds of the cloaks, they watched the teachers filtering into the room. Some of them were looking puz-zled, others downright scared. Then Professor McGonagall arrived.

“It has happened,” she told the silent staffroom. “A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself.”

Professor Flitwick let out a squeal. Professor Sprout clapped her hands over her mouth. Snape gripped the back of a chair very hard

and said, “How can you be sure?”

“The Heir of Slytherin,” said Professor McGonagall, who was very white, “left another message. Right underneath the first one. ‘Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.’ ”

Professor Flitwick burst into tears.

“Who is it?” said Madam Hooch, who had sunk, weak-kneed, into a chair. “Which student?”

“Ginny Weasley,” said Professor McGonagall.

Harry felt Ron slide silently down onto the wardrobe floor be-side him.

“We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow,” said Professor McGonagall. “This is the end of Hogwarts. Dumbledore always said …”

The staffroom door banged open again. For one wild moment, Harry was sure it would be Dumbledore. But it was Lockhart, and he was beaming.

“So sorry — dozed off — what have I missed?”

He didn’t seem to notice that the other teachers were looking at him with something remarkably like hatred. Snape stepped forward.

“Just the man,” he said. “The very man. A girl has been snatched by the monster, Lockhart. Taken into the Chamber of Secrets itself. Your moment has come at last.”

Lockhart blanched.

“That’s right, Gilderoy,” chipped in Professor Sprout. “Weren’t you saying just last night that you’ve known all along where the en-trance to the Chamber of Secrets is?”

"I — well, I —" sputtered Lockhart.

"Yes, didn't you tell me you were sure you knew what was inside it?" piped up Professor Flitwick.

"D-did I? I don't recall —"

"I certainly remember you saying you were sorry you hadn't had a crack at the monster before Hagrid was arrested," said Snape. "Didn't you say that the whole affair had been bungled, and that you should have been given a free rein from the first?"

Lockhart stared around at his stony-faced colleagues.

"I — I really never — you may have misunderstood —"

"We'll leave it to you, then, Gilderoy," said Professor McGona-gall. "Tonight will be an excellent time to do it. We'll make sure everyone's out of your way. You'll be able to tackle the monster all by yourself. A free rein at last."

Lockhart gazed desperately around him, but nobody came to the rescue. He didn't look remotely handsome anymore. His lip was trembling, and in the absence of his usually toothy grin, he looked weak-chinned and feeble.

"V-very well," he said. "I'll — I'll be in my office, getting — getting ready."

And he left the room.

"Right," said Professor McGonagall, whose nostrils were flared, "that's got him out from under our feet. The Heads of Houses should go and inform their students what has happened. Tell them the Hogwarts Express will take them home first thing tomorrow. Will the rest of you please make sure no students have been left outside their dormitories."

The teachers rose and left, one by one.

It was probably the worst day of Harry's entire life. He, Ron, Fred, and George sat together in a corner of the Gryffindor common room, unable to say anything to each other. Percy wasn't there. He had gone to send an owl to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, then shut him-self up in his dormitory.

No afternoon ever lasted as long as that one, nor had Gryffindor Tower ever been so crowded, yet so quiet. Near sunset, Fred and George went up to bed, unable to sit there any longer.

"She knew something, Harry," said Ron, speaking for the first time since they had entered the wardrobe in the staffroom. "That's why she was taken. It wasn't some stupid thing about Percy at all. She'd found out something about the Chamber of Secrets. That must be why she was —" Ron rubbed his eyes frantically. "I mean, she was a pureblood. There can't be any other reason."

Harry could see the sun sinking, blood-red, below the skyline. This was the worst he had ever felt. If only there was something they could do. Anything.

"Harry," said Ron. "D'you think there's any chance at all she's not — you know —"

Harry didn't know what to say. He couldn't see how Ginny could still be alive.

"D'you know what?" said Ron. "I think we should go and see Lockhart. Tell him what we know. He's going to try and get into the Chamber. We can tell him where we think it is, and tell him it's a basilisk in there."

Because Harry couldn't think of anything else to do, and because he wanted to be doing something, he agreed. The Gryffindors around them were so miserable, and felt so sorry for the Weasleys, that

nobody tried to stop them as they got up, crossed the room, and left through the portrait hole.

Darkness was falling as they walked down to Lockhart's office. There seemed to be a lot of activity going on inside it. They could hear scraping, thumps, and hurried footsteps.

Harry knocked and there was a sudden silence from inside. Then the door opened the tiniest crack and they saw one of Lock-hart's eyes peering through it.

"Oh — Mr. Potter — Mr. Weasley —" he said, opening the door a bit wider. "I'm rather busy at the moment — if you would be quick —"

"Professor, we've got some information for you," said Harry. "We think it'll help you."

"Er — well — it's not terribly —" The side of Lockhart's face that they could see looked very uncomfortable. "I mean — well — all right —"

He opened the door and they entered.

His office had been almost completely stripped. Two large trunks stood open on the floor. Robes, jade-green, lilac, midnight-blue, had been hastily folded into one of them; books were jum-bled untidily into the other. The photographs that had covered the walls were now crammed into boxes on the desk.

"Are you going somewhere?" said Harry.

"Er, well, yes," said Lockhart, ripping a life-size poster of himself from the back of the door as he spoke and starting to roll it up. "Urgent call — unavoidable — got to go —"

"What about my sister?" said Ron jerkily.

“Well, as to that — most unfortunate —” said Lockhart, avoid-ing their eyes as he wrenched open a drawer and started emptying the contents into a bag. “No one regrets more than I —”

“You’re the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher!” said Harry. “You can’t go now! Not with all the Dark stuff going on here!”

“Well — I must say — when I took the job —” Lockhart mut-tered, now piling socks on top of his robes. “nothing in the job de-scription — didn’t expect —”

“You mean you’re running away? said Harry disbelievingly. “Af-ter all that stuff you did in your books —”

“Books can be misleading,” said Lockhart delicately.

“You wrote them!” Harry shouted.

“My dear boy,” said Lockhart, straightening up and frowning at Harry. “Do use your common sense. My books wouldn’t have sold half as well if people didn’t think I’d done all those things. No one wants to read about some ugly old Armenian warlock, even if he did save a village from werewolves. He’d look dreadful on the front cover. No dress sense at all. And the witch who banished the Ban-don Banshee had a hairy chin. I mean, come on —”

“So you’ve just been taking credit for what a load of other people have done?” said Harry incredulously.

“Harry, Harry,” said Lockhart, shaking his head impatiently, “it’s not nearly as simple as that. There was work involved. I had to track these people down. Ask them exactly how they managed to do what they did. Then I had to put a Memory Charm on them so they wouldn’t remember doing it. If there’s one thing I pride myself on, it’s my Memory Charms. No, it’s been a lot of work, Harry. It’s not all book signings and publicity photos, you know. You want fame, you have to be prepared for a long hard slog.”

He banged the lids of his trunks shut and locked them.

"Let's see," he said. "I think that's everything. Yes. Only one thing left."

He pulled out his wand and turned to them.

"Awfully sorry, boys, but I'll have to put a Memory Charm on you now. Can't have you blabbing my secrets all over the place. I'd never sell another book —"

Harry reached his wand just in time. Lockhart had barely raised his, when Harry bellowed, "Expelliarmus!"

Lockhart was blasted backward, falling over his trunk; his wand flew high into the air; Ron caught it, and flung it out of the open window.

"Shouldn't have let Professor Snape teach us that one," said Harry furiously, kicking Lockhart's trunk aside. Lockhart was look-ing up at him, feeble once more. Harry was still pointing his wand at him.

"What d'you want me to do?" said Lockhart weakly. "I don't know where the Chamber of Secrets is. There's nothing I can do."

"You're in luck," said Harry, forcing Lockhart to his feet at wandpoint. "We think we know where it is. And what's inside it. Let's go."

They marched Lockhart out of his office and down the nearest stairs, along the dark corridor where the messages shone on the wall, to the door of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

They sent Lockhart in first. Harry was pleased to see that he was shaking.

Moaning Myrtle was sitting on the tank of the end toilet.

"Oh, it's you," she said when she saw Harry. "What do you want this time?"

“To ask you how you died,” said Harry.

Myrtle’s whole aspect changed at once. She looked as though she had never been asked such a flattering question.

“Ooooh, it was dreadful,” she said with relish. “It happened right in here. I died in this very stall. I remember it so well. I’d hid-den because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then —” Myrtle swelled importantly, her face shining. “I died.”

“How?” said Harry.

“No idea,” said Myrtle in hushed tones. “I just remember seeing a pair of great, big, yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away. …” She looked dreamily at Harry. “And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she’d ever laughed at my glasses.”

“Where exactly did you see the eyes?” said Harry.

“Somewhere there,” said Myrtle, pointing vaguely toward the sink in front of her toilet.

Harry and Ron hurried over to it. Lockhart was standing well back, a look of utter terror on his face.

It looked like an ordinary sink. They examined every inch of it, inside and out, including the pipes below. And then Harry saw it: Scratched on the side of one of the copper taps was a tiny snake.

“That tap’s never worked,” said Myrtle brightly as he tried to turn it.

“Harry,” said Ron. “Say something. Something in Parseltongue.”

“But —” Harry thought hard. The only times he’d ever man-aged to speak Parseltongue were when he’d been faced with a real snake. He stared hard at the tiny engraving, trying to imagine it was real.

“Open up,” he said.

He looked at Ron, who shook his head.

“English,” he said.

Harry looked back at the snake, willing himself to believe it was alive. If he moved his head, the candlelight made it look as though it were moving.

“Open up,” he said.

Except that the words weren’t what he heard; a strange hissing had escaped him, and at once the tap glowed with a brilliant white light and began to spin. Next second, the sink began to move; the sink, in fact, sank, right out of sight, leaving a large pipe exposed, a pipe wide enough for a man to slide into.

Harry heard Ron gasp and looked up again. He had made up his mind what he was going to do.

“I’m going down there,” he said.

He couldn’t not go, not now they had found the entrance to the Chamber, not if there was even the faintest, slimmest, wildest chance that Ginny might be alive.

“Me too,” said Ron.

There was a pause.

“Well, you hardly seem to need me,” said Lockhart, with a shadow of his old smile. “I’ll just —”

He put his hand on the door knob, but Ron and Harry both pointed their wands at him.

"You can go first," Ron snarled.

White-faced and wandless, Lockhart approached the opening.

"Boys," he said, his voice feeble. "Boys, what good will it do?"

Harry jabbed him in the back with his wand. Lockhart slid his legs into the pipe.

"I really don't think —" he started to say, but Ron gave him a push, and he slid out of sight. Harry followed quickly. He lowered himself slowly into the pipe, then let go.

It was like rushing down an endless, slimy, dark slide. He could see more pipes branching off in all directions, but none as large as theirs, which twisted and turned, sloping steeply downward, and he knew that he was falling deeper below the school than even the dungeons. Behind him he could hear Ron, thudding slightly at the curves.

And then, just as he had begun to worry about what would hap-pen when he hit the ground, the pipe leveled out, and he shot out of the end with a wet thud, landing on the damp floor of a dark stone tunnel large enough to stand in. Lockhart was getting to his feet a little ways away, covered in slime and white as a ghost. Harry stood aside as Ron came whizzing out of the pipe, too.

"We must be miles under the school," said Harry, his voice echo-ing in the black tunnel.

"Under the lake, probably," said Ron, squinting around at the dark, slimy walls.

All three of them turned to stare into the darkness ahead.

"Lumos!" Harry muttered to his wand and it lit again. "C'mon," he said to Ron and Lockhart, and off they went, their footsteps slapping loudly on the wet floor.

The tunnel was so dark that they could only see a little distance ahead. Their shadows on the wet walls looked monstrous in the wandlight.

"Remember," Harry said quietly as they walked cautiously for-ward, "any sign of movement, close your eyes right away. …"

But the tunnel was quiet as the grave, and the first unexpected sound they heard was a loud crunch as Ron stepped on what turned out to be a rat's skull. Harry lowered his wand to look at the floor and saw that it was littered with small animal bones. Trying very hard not to imagine what Ginny might look like if they found her, Harry led the way forward, around a dark bend in the tunnel.

"Harry — there's something up there —" said Ron hoarsely, grabbing Harry's shoulder.

They froze, watching. Harry could just see the outline of some-thing huge and curved, lying right across the tunnel. It wasn't mov-ing.

"Maybe it's asleep," he breathed, glancing back at the other two. Lockhart's hands were pressed over his eyes. Harry turned back to look at the thing, his heart beating so fast it hurt.

Very slowly, his eyes as narrow as he could make them and still see, Harry edged forward, his wand held high.

The light slid over a gigantic snake skin, of a vivid, poisonous green, lying curled and empty across the tunnel floor. The creature that had shed it must have been twenty feet long at least.

"Blimey," said Ron weakly.

There was a sudden movement behind them. Gilderoy Lock-hart's knees had given way.

"Get up," said Ron sharply, pointing his wand at Lockhart.

Lockhart got to his feet — then he dived at Ron, knocking him to the ground.

Harry jumped forward, but too late — Lockhart was straighten-ing up, panting, Ron's wand in his hand and a gleaming smile back on his face.

"The adventure ends here, boys!" he said. "I shall take a bit of this skin back up to the school, tell them I was too late to save the girl, and that you two tragically lost your minds at the sight of her mangled body — say good-bye to your memories!"

He raised Ron's Spellotaped wand high over his head and yelled, "Obliviate!"

The wand exploded with the force of a small bomb. Harry flung his arms over his head and ran, slipping over the coils of snake skin, out of the way of great chunks of tunnel ceiling that were thunder-ing to the floor. Next moment, he was standing alone, gazing at a solid wall of broken rock.

"Ron!" he shouted. "Are you okay? Ron!"

"I'm here!" came Ron's muffled voice from behind the rock-fall. "I'm okay — this git's not, though — he got blasted by the wand —"

There was a dull thud and a loud "ow!" It sounded as though Ron had just kicked Lockhart in the shins.

"What now?" Ron's voice said, sounding desperate. "We can't get through — it'll take ages. …"

Harry looked up at the tunnel ceiling. Huge cracks had ap-peared in it. He had never tried to break apart anything as large as these rocks by magic, and now didn't seem a good moment to try — what if the whole tunnel caved in?

There was another thud and another "ow!" from behind the rocks. They were wasting time. Ginny had already been in the Chamber of Secrets for hours. … Harry knew there was only one thing to do.

"Wait there," he called to Ron. "Wait with Lockhart. I'll go on. … If I'm not back in an hour …"

There was a very pregnant pause.

"I'll try and shift some of this rock," said Ron, who seemed to be trying to keep his voice steady. "So you can — can get back through. And, Harry —"

"See you in a bit," said Harry, trying to inject some confidence into his shaking voice.

And he set off alone past the giant snake skin.

Soon the distant noise of Ron straining to shift the rocks was gone. The tunnel turned and turned again. Every nerve in Harry's body was tingling unpleasantly. He wanted the tunnel to end, yet dreaded what he'd find when it did. And then, at last, as he crept around yet another bend, he saw a solid wall ahead on which two entwined serpents were carved, their eyes set with great, glinting emeralds.

Harry approached, his throat very dry. There was no need to pretend these stone snakes were real; their eyes looked strangely alive.

He could guess what he had to do. He cleared his throat, and the emerald eyes seemed to flicker.

"Open," said Harry, in a low, faint hiss.

The serpents parted as the wall cracked open, the halves slid smoothly out of sight, and Harry, shaking from head to foot, walked inside.

Chapter 17 The Heir of Slytherin

He was standing at the end of a very long, dimly lit cham-ber. Towering stone pillars entwined with more carved serpents rose to support a ceiling lost in darkness, casting long, black shadows through the odd, greenish gloom that filled the place.

His heart beating very fast, Harry stood listening to the chill si-lence. Could the basilisk be lurking in a shadowy corner, behind a pillar? And where was Ginny?

He pulled out his wand and moved forward between the ser-pentine columns. Every careful footstep echoed loudly off the shadowy walls. He kept his eyes narrowed, ready to clamp them shut at the smallest sign of movement. The hollow eye sockets of the stone snakes seemed to be following him. More than once, with a jolt of the stomach, he thought he saw one stir.

Then, as he drew level with the last pair of pillars, a statue high as the Chamber itself loomed into view, standing against the back wall.

Harry had to crane his neck to look up into the giant face above: It was ancient and monkeyish, with a long, thin beard that fell al-most to the bottom of the wizard's sweeping stone robes, where two enormous gray feet stood on the smooth Chamber floor. And between the feet, facedown, lay a small, black-robed figure with flaming-red hair.

“Ginny!” Harry muttered, sprinting to her and dropping to his knees. “Ginny — don't be dead — please don't be dead —” He flung his wand aside, grabbed Ginny's shoulders, and turned her over. Her face was white as marble, and as cold, yet her eyes were closed, so she wasn't Petrified. But then she must be —“Ginny, please wake up,” Harry muttered desperately, shaking her. Ginny's head lolled hopelessly from side to side.

“She won’t wake,” said a soft voice.

Harry jumped and spun around on his knees.

A tall, black-haired boy was leaning against the nearest pillar, watching. He was strangely blurred around the edges, as though Harry were looking at him through a misted window. But there was no mistaking him —“Tom — Tom Riddle?”

Riddle nodded, not taking his eyes off Harry’s face.

“What d’you mean, she won’t wake?” Harry said desperately. “She’s not — she’s not — ?”

“She’s still alive,” said Riddle. “But only just.”

Harry stared at him. Tom Riddle had been at Hogwarts fifty years ago, yet here he stood, a weird, misty light shining about him, not a day older than sixteen.

“Are you a ghost?” Harry said uncertainly.

“A memory,” said Riddle quietly. “Preserved in a diary for fifty years.”

He pointed toward the floor near the statue’s giant toes. Lying open there was the little black diary Harry had found in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. For a second, Harry wondered how it had got there — but there were more pressing matters to deal with.

“You’ve got to help me, Tom,” Harry said, raising Ginny’s head again. “We’ve got to get her out of here. There’s a basilisk … I don’t know where it is, but it could be along any moment. … Please, help me —”

Riddle didn’t move. Harry, sweating, managed to hoist Ginny half off the floor, and bent to pick up his wand again.

But his wand had gone.

"Did you see — ?"

He looked up. Riddle was still watching him — twirling Harry's wand between his long fingers.

"Thanks," said Harry, stretching out his hand for it.

A smile curled the corners of Riddle's mouth. He continued to stare at Harry, twirling the wand idly.

"Listen," said Harry urgently, his knees sagging with Ginny's dead weight. "We've got to go! If the basilisk comes —"

"It won't come until it is called," said Riddle calmly.

Harry lowered Ginny back onto the floor, unable to hold her up any longer.

"What d'you mean?" he said. "Look, give me my wand, I might need it —"

Riddle's smile broadened.

"You won't be needing it," he said.

Harry stared at him.

"What d'you mean, I won't be — ?"

"I've waited a long time for this, Harry Potter," said Riddle. "For the chance to see you. To speak to you."

"Look," said Harry, losing patience, "I don't think you get it. We're in the Chamber of Secrets. We can talk later —"

"We're going to talk now," said Riddle, still smiling broadly, and he pocketed Harry's wand.

Harry stared at him. There was something very funny going on here. …"How did Ginny get like this?" he asked slowly.

"Well, that's an interesting question," said Riddle pleasantly. "And quite a long story. I suppose the real reason Ginny Weasley's like this is because she opened her heart and spilled all her secrets to an invisible stranger."

"What are you talking about?" said Harry.

"The diary," said Riddle. "My diary. Little Ginny's been writing in it for months and months, telling me all her pitiful worries and woes — how her brothers tease her, how she had to come to school with secondhand robes and books, how" — Riddle's eyes glinted — "how she didn't think famous, good, great Harry Potter would ever like her. …"

All the time he spoke, Riddle's eyes never left Harry's face. There was an almost hungry look in them.

"It's very boring, having to listen to the silly little troubles of an eleven-year-old girl," he went on. "But I was patient. I wrote back. I was sympathetic, I was kind. Ginny simply loved me. No one's ever understood me like you, Tom. … I'm so glad I've got this diary to confide in. … It's like having a friend I can carry around in my pocket. …"

Riddle laughed, a high, cold laugh that didn't suit him. It made the hairs stand up on the back of Harry's neck.

"If I say it myself, Harry, I've always been able to charm the people I needed. So Ginny poured out her soul to me, and her soul happened to be exactly what I wanted. … I grew stronger and stronger on a diet of her deepest fears, her darkest secrets. I grew powerful, far more powerful than little Miss Weasley. Powerful enough to start feeding Miss Weasley a few of my secrets, to start pouring a little of my soul back into her …"

“What d’you mean?” said Harry, whose mouth had gone very dry.

“Haven’t you guessed yet, Harry Potter?” said Riddle softly. “Ginny Weasley opened the Chamber of Secrets. She strangled the school roosters and daubed threatening messages on the walls. She set the Serpent of Slytherin on four Mudbloods, and the Squib’s cat.”

“No,” Harry whispered.

“Yes,” said Riddle, calmly. “Of course, she didn’t know what she was doing at first. It was very amusing. I wish you could have seen her new diary entries … far more interesting, they became. … Dear Tom,” he recited, watching Harry’s horrified face, “I think I’m losing my memory. There are rooster feathers all over my robes and I don’t know how they got there. Dear Tom, I can’t remember what I did on the night of Halloween, but a cat was attacked and I’ve got paint all down my front. Dear Tom, Percy keeps telling me I’m pale and I’m not myself. I think he suspects me. … There was another attack today and I don’t know where I was. Tom, what am I going to do? I think I’m going mad. … I think I’m the one attacking everyone, Tom!”

Harry’s fists were clenched, the nails digging deep into his palms.

“It took a very long time for stupid little Ginny to stop trusting her diary,” said Riddle. “But she finally became suspicious and tried to dispose of it. And that’s where you came in, Harry. You found it, and I couldn’t have been more delighted. Of all the people who could have picked it up, it was you, the very person I was most anxious to meet. …”

“And why did you want to meet me?” said Harry. Anger was coursing through him, and it was an effort to keep his voice steady.

“Well, you see, Ginny told me all about you, Harry,” said Rid-dle. “Your whole fascinating history.” His eyes roved over the light-ning scar on Harry’s forehead, and their expression grew hungrier. “I knew I must find out more about you, talk to you, meet you if I could. So I

decided to show you my famous capture of that great oaf, Hagrid, to gain your trust —"

"Hagrid's my friend," said Harry, his voice now shaking. "And you framed him, didn't you? I thought you made a mistake, but —"

Riddle laughed his high laugh again.

"It was my word against Hagrid's, Harry. Well, you can imagine how it looked to old Armando Dippet. On the one hand, Tom Riddle, poor but brilliant, parentless but so brave, school prefect, model student … on the other hand, big, blundering Hagrid, in trouble every other week, trying to raise werewolf cubs under his bed, sneaking off to the Forbidden Forest to wrestle trolls … but I admit, even I was surprised how well the plan worked. I thought someone must realize that Hagrid couldn't possibly be the Heir of Slytherin. It had taken me five whole years to find out everything I could about the Chamber of Secrets and discover the secret en-trance … as though Hagrid had the brains, or the power!

"Only the Transfiguration teacher, Dumbledore, seemed to think Hagrid was innocent. He persuaded Dippet to keep Hagrid and train him as gamekeeper. Yes, I think Dumbledore might have guessed. … Dumbledore never seemed to like me as much as the other teachers did. …"

"I bet Dumbledore saw right through you," said Harry, his teeth gritted.

"Well, he certainly kept an annoyingly close watch on me after Hagrid was expelled," said Riddle carelessly. "I knew it wouldn't be safe to open the Chamber again while I was still at school. But I wasn't going to waste those long years I'd spent searching for it. I decided to leave behind a diary, preserving my sixteen-year-old self in its pages, so that one day, with luck, I would be able to lead an-other in my footsteps, and finish Salazar Slytherin's noble work."

“Well, you haven’t finished it,” said Harry triumphantly. “No one’s died this time, not even the cat. In a few hours the Mandrake Draught will be ready and everyone who was Petrified will be all right again —”

“Haven’t I already told you,” said Riddle quietly, “that killing Mudbloods doesn’t matter to me anymore? For many months now, my new target has been — you.”

Harry stared at him.

“Imagine how angry I was when the next time my diary was opened, it was Ginny who was writing to me, not you. She saw you with the diary, you see, and panicked. What if you found out how to work it, and I repeated all her secrets to you? What if, even worse, I told you who’d been strangling roosters? So the foolish lit-tle brat waited until your dormitory was deserted and stole it back. But I knew what I must do. It was clear to me that you were on the trail of Slytherin’s heir. From everything Ginny had told me about you, I knew you would go to any lengths to solve the mystery — particularly if one of your best friends was attacked. And Ginny had told me the whole school was buzzing because you could speak Parseltongue. …“So I made Ginny write her own farewell on the wall and come down here to wait. She struggled and cried and became very boring. But there isn’t much life left in her. … She put too much into the diary, into me. Enough to let me leave its pages at last. … I have been waiting for you to appear since we arrived here. I knew you’d come. I have many questions for you, Harry Potter.”

“Like what?” Harry spat, fists still clenched.

“Well,” said Riddle, smiling pleasantly, “how is it that you — a skinny boy with no extraordinary magical talent — managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time? How did you escape with nothing but a scar, while Lord Voldemort’s powers were de-stroyed?”

There was an odd red gleam in his hungry eyes now.

“Why do you care how I escaped?” said Harry slowly. “Volde-mort was after your time. …”

“Voldemort,” said Riddle softly, “is my past, present, and future, Harry Potter. …”

He pulled Harry’s wand from his pocket and began to trace it through the air, writing three shimmering words:tom marvolo riddle

Then he waved the wand once, and the letters of his name re-arranged themselves:i am lord voldemort

“You see?” he whispered. “It was a name I was already using at Hogwarts, to my most intimate friends only, of course. You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father’s name forever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother’s side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch? No, Harry — I fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!”

Harry’s brain seemed to have jammed. He stared numbly at Rid-dle, at the orphaned boy who had grown up to murder Harry’s own parents, and so many others. … At last he forced himself to speak.

“You’re not,” he said, his quiet voice full of hatred.

“Not what?” snapped Riddle.

“Not the greatest sorcerer in the world,” said Harry, breathing fast. “Sorry to disappoint you and all that, but the greatest wizard in the world is Albus Dumbledore. Everyone says so. Even when you were strong, you didn’t dare try and take over at Hogwarts. Dumbledore saw through you when you were at school and he still frightens you now, wherever you’re hiding these days —”

The smile had gone from Riddle's face, to be replaced by a very ugly look.

"Dumbledore's been driven out of this castle by the mere mem-ory of me!" he hissed.

"He's not as gone as you might think!" Harry retorted. He was speaking at random, wanting to scare Riddle, wishing rather than believing it to be true —Riddle opened his mouth, but froze.

Music was coming from somewhere. Riddle whirled around to stare down the empty Chamber. The music was growing louder. It was eerie, spine-tingling, unearthly; it lifted the hair on Harry's scalp and made his heart feel as though it was swelling to twice its normal size. Then, as the music reached such a pitch that Harry felt it vibrating inside his own ribs, flames erupted at the top of the nearest pillar.

A crimson bird the size of a swan had appeared, piping its weird music to the vaulted ceiling. It had a glittering golden tail as long as a peacock's and gleaming golden talons, which were gripping a ragged bundle.

A second later, the bird was flying straight at Harry. It dropped the ragged thing it was carrying at his feet, then landed heavily on his shoulder. As it folded its great wings, Harry looked up and saw it had a long, sharp golden beak and a beady black eye.

The bird stopped singing. It sat still and warm next to Harry's cheek, gazing steadily at Riddle.

"That's a phoenix. …" said Riddle, staring shrewdly back at it.

"Fawkes?" Harry breathed, and he felt the bird's golden claws squeeze his shoulder gently.

"And that —" said Riddle, now eyeing the ragged thing that Fawkes had dropped, "that's the old school Sorting Hat —"

So it was. Patched, frayed, and dirty, the hat lay motionless at Harry's feet.

Riddle began to laugh again. He laughed so hard that the dark Chamber rang with it, as though ten Riddles were laughing at once —"This is what Dumbledore sends his defender! A songbird and an old hat! Do you feel brave, Harry Potter? Do you feel safe now?"

Harry didn't answer. He might not see what use Fawkes or the Sorting Hat were, but he was no longer alone, and he waited for Riddle to stop laughing with his courage mounting.

"To business, Harry," said Riddle, still smiling broadly. "Twice — in your past, in my future — we have met. And twice I failed to kill you. How did you survive? Tell me everything. The longer you talk," he added softly, "the longer you stay alive."

Harry was thinking fast, weighing his chances. Riddle had the wand. He, Harry, had Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, neither of which would be much good in a duel. It looked bad, all right … but the longer Riddle stood there, the more life was dwindling out of Ginny … and in the meantime, Harry noticed suddenly, Riddle's outline was becoming clearer, more solid. … If it had to be a fight between him and Riddle, better sooner than later.

"No one knows why you lost your powers when you attacked me," said Harry abruptly. "I don't know myself. But I know why you couldn't kill me. Because my mother died to save me. My com-mon Muggle-born mother," he added, shaking with suppressed rage. "She stopped you killing me. And I've seen the real you, I saw you last year. You're a wreck. You're barely alive. That's where all your power got you. You're in hiding. You're ugly, you're foul —"

Riddle's face contorted. Then he forced it into an awful smile.

"So. Your mother died to save you. Yes, that's a powerful counter-charm. I can see now … there is nothing special about you, after all. I

wondered, you see. There are strange likenesses between us, after all. Even you must have noticed. Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself. We even look something alike … but after all, it was merely a lucky chance that saved you from me. That's all I wanted to know."

Harry stood, tense, waiting for Riddle to raise his wand. But Rid-dle's twisted smile was widening again.

"Now, Harry, I'm going to teach you a little lesson. Let's match the powers of Lord Voldemort, Heir of Salazar Slytherin, against fa-mous Harry Potter, and the best weapons Dumbledore can give him. …"

He cast an amused eye over Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, then walked away. Harry, fear spreading up his numb legs, watched Rid-dle stop between the high pillars and look up into the stone face of Slytherin, high above him in the half-darkness. Riddle opened his mouth wide and hissed — but Harry understood what he was say-ing. …"Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four."

Harry wheeled around to look up at the statue, Fawkes swaying on his shoulder.

Slytherin's gigantic stone face was moving. Horrorstruck, Harry saw his mouth opening, wider and wider, to make a huge black hole.

And something was stirring inside the statue's mouth. Something was slithering up from its depths.

Harry backed away until he hit the dark Chamber wall, and as he shut his eyes tight he felt Fawkes' wing sweep his cheek as he took flight. Harry wanted to shout, "Don't leave me!" but what chance did a phoenix have against the king of serpents?

Something huge hit the stone floor of the Chamber. Harry felt it shudder — he knew what was happening, he could sense it, could

almost see the giant serpent uncoiling itself from Slytherin's mouth. Then he heard Riddle's hissing voice:"Kill him."

The basilisk was moving toward Harry; he could hear its heavy body slithering heavily across the dusty floor. Eyes still tightly shut, Harry began to run blindly sideways, his hands outstretched, feel-ing his way — Voldemort was laughing —Harry tripped. He fell hard onto the stone and tasted blood — the serpent was barely feet from him, he could hear it coming —There was a loud, explosive spitting sound right above him, and then something heavy hit Harry so hard that he was smashed into the wall. Waiting for fangs to sink through his body he heard more mad hissing, something thrashing wildly off the pillars —He couldn't help it — he opened his eyes wide enough to squint at what was going on.

The enormous serpent, bright, poisonous green, thick as an oak trunk, had raised itself high in the air and its great blunt head was weaving drunkenly between the pillars. As Harry trembled, ready to close his eyes if it turned, he saw what had distracted the snake.

Fawkes was soaring around its head, and the basilisk was snapping furiously at him with fangs long and thin as sabers —Fawkes dived. His long golden beak sank out of sight and a sudden shower of dark blood spattered the floor. The snake's tail thrashed, narrowly missing Harry, and before Harry could shut his eyes, it turned — Harry looked straight into its face and saw that its eyes, both its great, bulbous yellow eyes, had been punctured by the phoenix; blood was streaming to the floor, and the snake was spitting in agony.

"NO!" Harry heard Riddle screaming. "LEAVE THE BIRD! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU! YOU CAN STILL SMELL HIM! KILL HIM!"

The blinded serpent swayed, confused, still deadly. Fawkes was circling its head, piping his eerie song, jabbing here and there at its scaly nose as the blood poured from its ruined eyes.

“Help me, help me,” Harry muttered wildly, “someone — any-one —”

The snake’s tail whipped across the floor again. Harry ducked. Something soft hit his face.

The basilisk had swept the Sorting Hat into Harry’s arms. Harry seized it. It was all he had left, his only chance — he rammed it onto his head and threw himself flat onto the floor as the basilisk’s tail swung over him again.

Help me — help me — Harry thought, his eyes screwed tight un-der the hat. Please help me —There was no answering voice. Instead, the hat contracted, as though an invisible hand was squeezing it very tightly.

Something very hard and heavy thudded onto the top of Harry’s head, almost knocking him out. Stars winking in front of his eyes, he grabbed the top of the hat to pull it off and felt something long and hard beneath it.

A gleaming silver sword had appeared inside the hat, its handle glittering with rubies the size of eggs.

“KILL THE BOY! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU! SNIFF — SMELL HIM!”

Harry was on his feet, ready. The basilisk’s head was falling, its body coiling around, hitting pillars as it twisted to face him. He could see the vast, bloody eye sockets, see the mouth stretching wide, wide enough to swallow him whole, lined with fangs long as his sword, thin, glittering, venomous —It lunged blindly — Harry dodged and it hit the Chamber wall. It lunged again, and its forked tongue lashed Harry’s side. He raised the sword in both his hands —The basilisk lunged again, and this time its aim was true — Harry threw his whole weight behind the sword and drove it to the hilt into the roof of the serpent’s mouth —But as warm blood drenched Harry’s arms, he felt a searing pain just above his elbow. One long, poisonous fang was sinking

deeper and deeper into his arm and it splintered as the basilisk keeled over sideways and fell, twitching, to the floor.

Harry slid down the wall. He gripped the fang that was spreading poison through his body and wrenched it out of his arm. But he knew it was too late. White-hot pain was spreading slowly and steadily from the wound. Even as he dropped the fang and watched his own blood soaking his robes, his vision went foggy. The Cham-ber was dissolving in a whirl of dull color.

A patch of scarlet swam past, and Harry heard a soft clatter of claws beside him.

“Fawkes,” said Harry thickly. “You were fantastic, Fawkes. …” He felt the bird lay its beautiful head on the spot where the serpent’s fang had pierced him.

He could hear echoing footsteps and then a dark shadow moved in front of him.

“You’re dead, Harry Potter,” said Riddle’s voice above him. “Dead. Even Dumbledore’s bird knows it. Do you see what he’s doing, Pot-ter? He’s crying.”

Harry blinked. Fawkes’s head slid in and out of focus. Thick, pearly tears were trickling down the glossy feathers.

“I’m going to sit here and watch you die, Harry Potter. Take your time. I’m in no hurry.”

Harry felt drowsy. Everything around him seemed to be spinning.

“So ends the famous Harry Potter,” said Riddle’s distant voice. “Alone in the Chamber of Secrets, forsaken by his friends, defeated at last by the Dark Lord he so unwisely challenged. You’ll be back with your dear Mudblood mother soon, Harry. … She bought you twelve years

of borrowed time … but Lord Voldemort got you in the end, as you knew he must. …"

If this is dying, thought Harry, it's not so bad.

Even the pain was leaving him. …But was this dying? Instead of going black, the Chamber seemed to be coming back into focus. Harry gave his head a little shake and there was Fawkes, still resting his head on Harry's arm. A pearly patch of tears was shining all around the wound — except that there was no wound —"Get away, bird," said Riddle's voice suddenly. "Get away from him — I said, getaway —"

Harry raised his head. Riddle was pointing Harry's wand at Fawkes; there was a bang like a gun, and Fawkes took flight again in a whirl of gold and scarlet.

"Phoenix tears …" said Riddle quietly, staring at Harry's arm. "Of course … healing powers … I forgot …"

He looked into Harry's face. "But it makes no difference. In fact, I prefer it this way. Just you and me, Harry Potter … you and me. …"

He raised the wand —

Then, in a rush of wings, Fawkes had soared back overhead and something fell into Harry's lap — the diary.

For a split second, both Harry and Riddle, wand still raised, stared at it. Then, without thinking, without considering, as though he had meant to do it all along, Harry seized the basilisk fang on the floor next to him and plunged it straight into the heart of the book.

There was a long, dreadful, piercing scream. Ink spurted out of the diary in torrents, streaming over Harry's hands, flooding the floor. Riddle was writhing and twisting, screaming and flailing and then — He had gone. Harry's wand fell to the floor with a clatter and there

was silence. Silence except for the steady drip drip of ink still oozing from the diary. The basilisk venom had burned a sizzling hole right through it.

Shaking all over, Harry pulled himself up. His head was spinning as though he'd just traveled miles by Floo powder. Slowly, he gath-ered together his wand and the Sorting Hat, and, with a huge tug, retrieved the glittering sword from the roof of the basilisk's mouth.

Then came a faint moan from the end of the Chamber. Ginny was stirring. As Harry hurried toward her, she sat up. Her bemused eyes traveled from the huge form of the dead basilisk, over Harry, in his blood-soaked robes, then to the diary in his hand. She drew a great, shuddering gasp and tears began to pour down her face.

"Harry — oh, Harry — I tried to tell you at b-breakfast, but I c-couldn't say it in front of Percy — it was me, Harry — but I — I s-swear I d-didn't mean to — R-Riddle made me, he t-took me over — and — how did you kill that — that thing? W-where's Riddle? The last thing I r-remember is him coming out of the diary —"

"It's all right," said Harry, holding up the diary, and showing Ginny the fang hole, "Riddle's finished. Look! Him and the basilisk. C'mon, Ginny, let's get out of here —"

"I'm going to be expelled!" Ginny wept as Harry helped her awk-wardly to her feet. "I've looked forward to coming to Hogwarts ever since B-Bill came and n-now I'll have to leave and — w-what'll Mum and Dad say?"

Fawkes was waiting for them, hovering in the Chamber entrance. Harry urged Ginny forward; they stepped over the motionless coils of the dead basilisk, through the echoing gloom, and back into the tunnel. Harry heard the stone doors close behind them with a soft hiss.

After a few minutes' progress up the dark tunnel, a distant sound of slowly shifting rock reached Harry's ears.

"Ron!" Harry yelled, speeding up. "Ginny's okay! I've got her!"

He heard Ron give a strangled cheer, and they turned the next bend to see his eager face staring through the sizable gap he had managed to make in the rockfall.

"Ginny!" Ron thrust an arm through the gap in the rock to pull her through first. "You're alive! I don't believe it! What happened? How — what — where did that bird come from?"

Fawkes had swooped through the gap after Ginny.

"He's Dumbledore's," said Harry, squeezing through himself.

"How come you've got a sword?" said Ron, gaping at the glitter-ing weapon in Harry's hand.

"I'll explain when we get out of here," said Harry with a sideways glance at Ginny, who was crying harder than ever.

"But —"

"Later," Harry said shortly. He didn't think it was a good idea to tell Ron yet who'd been opening the Chamber, not in front of Ginny, anyway. "Where's Lockhart?"

"Back there," said Ron, still looking puzzled but jerking his head up the tunnel toward the pipe. "He's in a bad way. Come and see."

Led by Fawkes, whose wide scarlet wings emitted a soft golden glow in the darkness, they walked all the way back to the mouth of the pipe. Gilderoy Lockhart was sitting there, humming placidly to himself.

"His memory's gone," said Ron. "The Memory Charm backfired. Hit him instead of us. Hasn't got a clue who he is, or where he is, or who we are. I told him to come and wait here. He's a danger to him-self."

Lockhart peered good-naturedly up at them all.

"Hello," he said. "Odd sort of place, this, isn't it? Do you live here?"

"No," said Ron, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

Harry bent down and looked up the long, dark pipe.

"Have you thought how we're going to get back up this?" he said to Ron.

Ron shook his head, but Fawkes the phoenix had swooped past Harry and was now fluttering in front of him, his beady eyes bright in the dark. He was waving his long golden tail feathers. Harry looked uncertainly at him.

"He looks like he wants you to grab hold …" said Ron, look-ing perplexed. "But you're much too heavy for a bird to pull up there —"

"Fawkes," said Harry, "isn't an ordinary bird." He turned quickly to the others. "We've got to hold on to each other. Ginny, grab Ron's hand. Professor Lockhart —"

"He means you," said Ron sharply to Lockhart.

"You hold Ginny's other hand —"

Harry tucked the sword and the Sorting Hat into his belt, Ron took hold of the back of Harry's robes, and Harry reached out and took hold of Fawkes's strangely hot tail feathers.

An extraordinary lightness seemed to spread through his whole body and the next second, in a rush of wings, they were flying upward through the pipe. Harry could hear Lockhart dangling below him,

saying, “Amazing! Amazing! This is just like magic!” The chill air was whipping through Harry’s hair, and before he’d stopped enjoying the ride, it was over — all four of them were hit-ting the wet floor of Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom, and as Lockhart straightened his hat, the sink that hid the pipe was sliding back into place.

Myrtle goggled at them.

“You’re alive,” she said blankly to Harry.

“There’s no need to sound so disappointed,” he said grimly, wip-ing flecks of blood and slime off his glasses.

“Oh, well … I’d just been thinking … if you had died, you’d have been welcome to share my toilet,” said Myrtle, blushing silver.

“Urgh!” said Ron as they left the bathroom for the dark, deserted corridor outside. “Harry! I think Myrtle’s grown fond of you! You’ve got competition, Ginny!”

But tears were still flooding silently down Ginny’s face.

“Where now?” said Ron, with an anxious look at Ginny. Harry pointed.

Fawkes was leading the way, glowing gold along the corridor. They strode after him, and moments later, found themselves outside Professor McGonagall’s office.

Harry knocked and pushed the door open.

Chapter 18 Dobby's Reward

For a moment there was silence as Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Lockhart stood in the doorway, covered in muck and slime and (in Harry's case) blood. Then there was a scream.

"Ginny!"

It was Mrs. Weasley, who had been sitting crying in front of the fire. She leapt to her feet, closely followed by Mr. Weasley, and both of them flung themselves on their daughter.

Harry, however, was looking past them. Professor Dumbledore was standing by the mantelpiece, beaming, next to Professor McGonagall, who was taking great, steadying gasps, clutching her chest. Fawkes went whooshing past Harry's ear and settled on Dumbledore's shoulder, just as Harry found himself and Ron being swept into Mrs. Weasley's tight embrace.

"You saved her! You saved her! How did you do it?"

"I think we'd all like to know that," said Professor McGonagall weakly.

Mrs. Weasley let go of Harry, who hesitated for a moment, then walked over to the desk and laid upon it the Sorting Hat, the ruby-encrusted sword, and what remained of Riddle's diary.

Then he started telling them everything. For nearly a quarter of an hour he spoke into the rapt silence: He told them about hearing the disembodied voice, how Hermione had finally realized that he was hearing a basilisk in the pipes; how he and Ron had followed the spiders into the forest, that Aragog had told them where the last victim of the basilisk had died; how he had guessed that Moaning Myrtle had been the victim, and that the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets might be in her bathroom. …"Very well," Professor McGonagall prompted him as he paused, "so you found out where

the entrance was — breaking a hundred school rules into pieces along the way, I might add — but how on earth did you all get out of there alive, Potter?"

So Harry, his voice now growing hoarse from all this talking, told them about Fawkes's timely arrival and about the Sorting Hat giving him the sword. But then he faltered. He had so far avoided mentioning Riddle's diary — or Ginny. She was standing with her head against Mrs. Weasley's shoulder, and tears were still coursing silently down her cheeks. What if they expelled her? Harry thought in panic. Riddle's diary didn't work anymore. … How could they prove it had been he who'd made her do it all?

Instinctively, Harry looked at Dumbledore, who smiled faintly, the firelight glancing off his half-moon spectacles.

"What interests me most," said Dumbledore gently, "is how Lord Voldemort managed to enchant Ginny, when my sources tell me he is currently in hiding in the forests of Albania."

Relief — warm, sweeping, glorious relief — swept over Harry.

"W-what's that?" said Mr. Weasley in a stunned voice. "You-Know-Who? En-enchant Ginny? But Ginny's not … Ginny hasn't been … has she?"

"It was this diary," said Harry quickly, picking it up and show-ing it to Dumbledore. "Riddle wrote it when he was sixteen. …"

Dumbledore took the diary from Harry and peered keenly down his long, crooked nose at its burnt and soggy pages.

"Brilliant," he said softly. "Of course, he was probably the most brilliant student Hogwarts has ever seen." He turned around to the Weasleys, who were looking utterly bewildered.

"Very few people know that Lord Voldemort was once called Tom Riddle. I taught him myself, fifty years ago, at Hogwarts. He disappeared after leaving the school … traveled far and wide … sank so deeply into the Dark Arts, consorted with the very worst of our kind, underwent so many dangerous, magical transformations, that when he resurfaced as Lord Voldemort, he was barely recog-nizable. Hardly anyone connected Lord Voldemort with the clever, handsome boy who was once Head Boy here."

"But, Ginny," said Mrs. Weasley. "What's our Ginny got to do with — with — him?"

"His d-diary!" Ginny sobbed. "I've b-been writing in it, and he's been w-writing back all year —"

"Ginny!" said Mr. Weasley, flabbergasted. "Haven't I taught you anything? What have I always told you? Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain. Why didn't you show the diary to me, or your mother? A suspicious object like that, it was clearly full of Dark Magic —"

"I d-didn't know," sobbed Ginny. "I found it inside one of the books Mum got me. I th-thought someone had just left it in there and forgotten about it —"

"Miss Weasley should go up to the hospital wing right away," Dumbledore interrupted in a firm voice. "This has been a terrible ordeal for her. There will be no punishment. Older and wiser wiz-ards than she have been hoodwinked by Lord Voldemort." He strode over to the door and opened it. "Bed rest and perhaps a large, steaming mug of hot chocolate. I always find that cheers me up," he added, twinkling kindly down at her. "You will find that Madam Pomfrey is still awake. She's just giving out Mandrake juice — I daresay the basilisk's victims will be waking up any moment."

"So Hermione's okay!" said Ron brightly.

“There has been no lasting harm done, Ginny,” said Dumble-dore.

Mrs. Weasley led Ginny out, and Mr. Weasley followed, still looking deeply shaken.

“You know, Minerva,” Professor Dumbledore said thoughtfully to Professor McGonagall, “I think all this merits a good feast. Might I ask you to go and alert the kitchens?”

“Right,” said Professor McGonagall crisply, also moving to the door. “I’ll leave you to deal with Potter and Weasley, shall I?”

“Certainly,” said Dumbledore.

She left, and Harry and Ron gazed uncertainly at Dumbledore. What exactly had Professor McGonagall meant, deal with them? Surely — surely — they weren’t about to be punished?

“I seem to remember telling you both that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules,” said Dumbledore.

Ron opened his mouth in horror.

“Which goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words,” Dumbledore went on, smiling. “You will both receive Spe-cial Awards for Services to the School and — let me see — yes, I think two hundred points apiece for Gryffindor.”

Ron went as brightly pink as Lockhart’s valentine flowers and closed his mouth again.

“But one of us seems to be keeping mightily quiet about his part in this dangerous adventure,” Dumbledore added. “Why so mod-est, Gilderoy?”

Harry gave a start. He had completely forgotten about Lockhart. He turned and saw that Lockhart was standing in a corner of the room,

still wearing his vague smile. When Dumbledore addressed him, Lockhart looked over his shoulder to see who he was talking to.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Ron said quickly, “there was an accident down in the Chamber of Secrets. Professor Lockhart —”

“Am I a professor?” said Lockhart in mild surprise. “Goodness. I expect I was hopeless, was I?”

“He tried to do a Memory Charm and the wand backfired,” Ron explained quietly to Dumbledore.

“Dear me,” said Dumbledore, shaking his head, his long silver mustache quivering. “Impaled upon your own sword, Gilderoy!”

“Sword?” said Lockhart dimly. “Haven’t got a sword. That boy has, though.” He pointed at Harry. “He’ll lend you one.”

“Would you mind taking Professor Lockhart up to the infir-mary, too?” Dumbledore said to Ron. “I’d like a few more words with Harry. …”

Lockhart ambled out. Ron cast a curious look back at Dumble-dore and Harry as he closed the door.

Dumbledore crossed to one of the chairs by the fire.

“Sit down, Harry,” he said, and Harry sat, feeling unaccountably nervous.

“First of all, Harry, I want to thank you,” said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling again. “You must have shown me real loyalty down in the Chamber. Nothing but that could have called Fawkes to you.”

He stroked the phoenix, which had fluttered down onto his knee. Harry grinned awkwardly as Dumbledore watched him.

“And so you met Tom Riddle,” said Dumbledore thoughtfully. “I imagine he was most interested in you. …”

Suddenly, something that was nagging at Harry came tumbling out of his mouth.

“Professor Dumbledore … Riddle said I’m like him. Strange likenesses, he said. …”

“Did he, now?” said Dumbledore, looking thoughtfully at Harry from under his thick silver eyebrows. “And what do you think, Harry?”

“I don’t think I’m like him!” said Harry, more loudly than he’d intended. “I mean, I’m — I’m in Gryffindor, I’m …”

But he fell silent, a lurking doubt resurfacing in his mind.

“Professor,” he started again after a moment. “The Sorting Hat told me I’d — I’d have done well in Slytherin. Everyone thought I was Slytherin’s heir for a while … because I can speak Parsel-tongue. …”

“You can speak Parseltongue, Harry,” said Dumbledore calmly, “because Lord Voldemort — who is the last remaining descendant of Salazar Slytherin — can speak Parseltongue. Unless I’m much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar. Not something he intended to do, I’m sure. …”

“Voldemort put a bit of himself in me?” Harry said, thunder-struck.

“It certainly seems so.”

“So I should be in Slytherin,” Harry said, looking desperately into Dumbledore’s face. “The Sorting Hat could see Slytherin’s power in me, and it —”

“Put you in Gryffindor,” said Dumbledore calmly. “Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. His own very rare gift, Parsel-tongue — resourcefulness — determination — a certain disregard for rules,” he

added, his mustache quivering again. "Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think."

"It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry in a defeated voice, "because I asked not to go in Slytherin. …"

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, beaming once more. "Which makes you very different from Tom Riddle. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." Harry sat mo-tionless in his chair, stunned. "If you want proof, Harry, that you belong in Gryffindor, I suggest you look more closely at this."

Dumbledore reached across to Professor McGonagall's desk, picked up the blood-stained silver sword, and handed it to Harry. Dully, Harry turned it over, the rubies blazing in the firelight. And then he saw the name engraved just below the hilt.

Godric Gryffindor.

"Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that out of the hat, Harry," said Dumbledore simply.

For a minute, neither of them spoke. Then Dumbledore pulled open one of the drawers in Professor McGonagall's desk and took out a quill and a bottle of ink.

"What you need, Harry, is some food and sleep. I suggest you go down to the feast, while I write to Azkaban — we need our game-keeper back. And I must draft an advertisement for the Daily Prophet, too," he added thoughtfully. "We'll be needing a new De-fense Against the Dark Arts teacher. … Dear me, we do seem to run through them, don't we?"

Harry got up and crossed to the door. He had just reached for the handle, however, when the door burst open so violently that it bounced back off the wall.

Lucius Malfoy stood there, fury in his face. And cowering be-hind his legs, heavily wrapped in bandages, was Dobby.

“Good evening, Lucius,” said Dumbledore pleasantly.

Mr. Malfoy almost knocked Harry over as he swept into the room. Dobby went scurrying in after him, crouching at the hem of his cloak, a look of abject terror on his face.

The elf was carrying a stained rag with which he was attempting to finish cleaning Mr. Malfoy’s shoes. Apparently Mr. Malfoy had set out in a great hurry, for not only were his shoes half-polished, but his usually sleek hair was disheveled. Ignoring the elf bobbing apologetically around his ankles, he fixed his cold eyes upon Dumbledore.

“So!” he said “You’ve come back. The governors suspended you, but you still saw fit to return to Hogwarts.”

“Well, you see, Lucius,” said Dumbledore, smiling serenely, “the other eleven governors contacted me today. It was something like being caught in a hailstorm of owls, to tell the truth. They’d heard that Arthur Weasley’s daughter had been killed and wanted me back here at once. They seemed to think I was the best man for the job after all. Very strange tales they told me, too. … Several of them seemed to think that you had threatened to curse their fami-lies if they didn’t agree to suspend me in the first place.”

Mr. Malfoy went even paler than usual, but his eyes were still slits of fury.

“So — have you stopped the attacks yet?” he sneered. “Have you caught the culprit?”

“We have,” said Dumbledore, with a smile.

“Well?” said Mr. Malfoy sharply. “Who is it?”

“The same person as last time, Lucius,” said Dumbledore. “But this time, Lord Voldemort was acting through somebody else. By means of this diary.”

He held up the small black book with the large hole through the center, watching Mr. Malfoy closely. Harry, however, was watching Dobby.

The elf was doing something very odd. His great eyes fixed meaningfully on Harry, he kept pointing at the diary, then at Mr. Malfoy, and then hitting himself hard on the head with his fist.

“I see …” said Mr. Malfoy slowly to Dumbledore.

“A clever plan,” said Dumbledore in a level voice, still staring Mr. Malfoy straight in the eye. “Because if Harry here” — Mr. Malfoy shot Harry a swift, sharp look — “and his friend Ron hadn’t discovered this book, why — Ginny Weasley might have taken all the blame. No one would ever have been able to prove she hadn’t acted of her own free will. …”

Mr. Malfoy said nothing. His face was suddenly masklike.

“And imagine,” Dumbledore went on, “what might have hap-pened then. … The Weasleys are one of our most prominent pure-blood families. Imagine the effect on Arthur Weasley and his Muggle Protection Act, if his own daughter was discovered attack-ing and killing Muggle-borns. … Very fortunate the diary was dis-covered, and Riddle’s memories wiped from it. Who knows what the consequences might have been otherwise. …”

Mr. Malfoy forced himself to speak.

“Very fortunate,” he said stiffly.

And still, behind his back, Dobby was pointing, first to the di-ary, then to Lucius Malfoy, then punching himself in the head.

And Harry suddenly understood. He nodded at Dobby, and Dobby backed into a corner, now twisting his ears in punishment.

“Don’t you want to know how Ginny got hold of that diary, Mr. Malfoy?” said Harry.

Lucius Malfoy rounded on him.

“How should I know how the stupid little girl got hold of it?” he said.

“Because you gave it to her,” said Harry. “In Flourish and Blotts. You picked up her old Transfiguration book and slipped the diary inside it, didn’t you?”

He saw Mr. Malfoy’s white hands clench and unclench.

“Prove it,” he hissed.

“Oh, no one will be able to do that,” said Dumbledore, smiling at Harry. “Not now that Riddle has vanished from the book. On the other hand, I would advise you, Lucius, not to go giving out any more of Lord Voldemort’s old school things. If any more of them find their way into innocent hands, I think Arthur Weasley, for one, will make sure they are traced back to you. …”

Lucius Malfoy stood for a moment, and Harry distinctly saw his right hand twitch as though he was longing to reach for his wand. Instead, he turned to his house-elf.

“We’re going, Dobby!”

He wrenched open the door and as the elf came hurrying up to him, he kicked him right through it. They could hear Dobby squealing with pain all the way along the corridor. Harry stood for a moment, thinking hard. Then it came to him —“Professor Dumbledore,” he said hurriedly. “Can I give that di-ary back to Mr. Malfoy, please?”

“Certainly, Harry,” said Dumbledore calmly. “But hurry. The feast, remember. …”

Harry grabbed the diary and dashed out of the office. He could hear Dobby’s squeals of pain receding around the corner. Quickly, wondering if this plan could possibly work, Harry took off one of his shoes, pulled off his slimy, filthy sock, and stuffed the diary into it. Then he ran down the dark corridor.

He caught up with them at the top of the stairs.

“Mr. Malfoy,” he gasped, skidding to a halt, “I’ve got something for you —”

And he forced the smelly sock into Lucius Malfoy’s hand.

“What the — ?”

Mr. Malfoy ripped the sock off the diary, threw it aside, then looked furiously from the ruined book to Harry.

“You’ll meet the same sticky end as your parents one of these days, Harry Potter,” he said softly. “They were meddlesome fools, too.”

He turned to go.

“Come, Dobby. I said, come.”

But Dobby didn’t move. He was holding up Harry’s disgusting, slimy sock, and looking at it as though it were a priceless treasure.

“Master has given a sock,” said the elf in wonderment. “Master gave it to Dobby.”

“What’s that?” spat Mr. Malfoy. “What did you say?”

“Got a sock,” said Dobby in disbelief. “Master threw it, and Dobby caught it, and Dobby — Dobby is free.”

Lucius Malfoy stood frozen, staring at the elf. Then he lunged at Harry.

"You've lost me my servant, boy!"

But Dobby shouted, "You shall not harm Harry Potter!"

There was a loud bang, and Mr. Malfoy was thrown backward. He crashed down the stairs, three at a time, landing in a crumpled heap on the landing below. He got up, his face livid, and pulled out his wand, but Dobby raised a long, threatening finger.

"You shall go now," he said fiercely, pointing down at Mr. Mal-foy. "You shall not touch Harry Potter. You shall go now."

Lucius Malfoy had no choice. With a last, incensed stare at the pair of them, he swung his cloak around him and hurried out of sight.

"Harry Potter freed Dobby!" said the elf shrilly, gazing up at Harry, moonlight from the nearest window reflected in his orb-like eyes. "Harry Potter set Dobby free!"

"Least I could do, Dobby," said Harry, grinning. "Just promise never to try and save my life again."

The elf's ugly brown face split suddenly into a wide, toothy smile.

"I've just got one question, Dobby," said Harry as Dobby pulled on Harry's sock with shaking hands. "You told me all this had nothing to do with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, remember? Well —"

"It was a clue, sir," said Dobby, his eyes widening, as though this was obvious. "Was giving you a clue. The Dark Lord, before he changed his name, could be freely named, you see?"

"Right," said Harry weakly. "Well, I'd better go. There's a feast, and my friend Hermione should be awake by now. …"

Dobby threw his arms around Harry's middle and hugged him.

"Harry Potter is greater by far than Dobby knew!" he sobbed. "Farewell, Harry Potter!"

And with a final loud crack, Dobby disappeared.

Harry had been to several Hogwarts feasts, but never one quite like this. Everybody was in their pajamas, and the celebration lasted all night. Harry didn't know whether the best bit was Hermione run-ning toward him, screaming "You solved it! You solved it!" or Justin hurrying over from the Hufflepuff table to wring his hand and apologize endlessly for suspecting him, or Hagrid turning up at half past three, cuffing Harry and Ron so hard on the shoulders that they were knocked into their plates of trifle, or his and Ron's four hundred points for Gryffindor securing the House Cup for the second year running, or Professor McGonagall standing up to tell them all that the exams had been canceled as a school treat ("Oh, no!" said Hermione), or Dumbledore announcing that, un-fortunately, Professor Lockhart would be unable to return next year, owing to the fact that he needed to go away and get his mem-ory back. Quite a few of the teachers joined in the cheering that greeted this news.

"Shame," said Ron, helping himself to a jam doughnut. "He was starting to grow on me."

The rest of the final term passed in a haze of blazing sunshine. Hogwarts was back to normal with only a few, small differences — Defense Against the Dark Arts classes were canceled ("but we've had plenty of practice at that anyway," Ron told a disgruntled Hermione) and Lucius Malfoy had been sacked as a school gover-nor. Draco was no longer strutting around the school as though he owned the place. On the contrary, he looked resentful and sulky. On the other hand, Ginny Weasley was perfectly happy again.

Too soon, it was time for the journey home on the Hogwarts Ex-press. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Ginny got a com-partment

to themselves. They made the most of the last few hours in which they were allowed to do magic before the holidays. They played Exploding Snap, set off the very last of Fred and George's Filibuster fireworks, and practiced disarming each other by magic. Harry was getting very good at it.

They were almost at King's Cross when Harry remembered something.

"Ginny — what did you see Percy doing, that he didn't want you to tell anyone?"

"Oh, that," said Ginny, giggling. "Well — Percy's got a girlfriend."

Fred dropped a stack of books on George's head.

"What?"

"It's that Ravenclaw prefect, Penelope Clearwater," said Ginny. "That's who he was writing to all last summer. He's been meeting her all over the school in secret. I walked in on them kissing in an empty classroom one day. He was so upset when she was — you know — attacked. You won't tease him, will you?" she added anx-iously.

"Wouldn't dream of it," said Fred, who was looking like his birthday had come early.

"Definitely not," said George, sniggering.

The Hogwarts Express slowed and finally stopped.

Harry pulled out his quill and a bit of parchment and turned to Ron and Hermione.

"This is called a telephone number," he told Ron, scribbling it twice, tearing the parchment in two, and handing it to them. "I told your dad how to use a telephone last summer — he'll know. Call me at the

Dursleys', okay? I can't stand another two months with only Dudley to talk to. …"

"Your aunt and uncle will be proud, though, won't they?" said Hermione as they got off the train and joined the crowd thronging toward the enchanted barrier. "When they hear what you did this year?

"Proud?" said Harry. "Are you crazy? All those times I could've died, and I didn't manage it? They'll be furious. …"

And together they walked back through the gateway to the Muggle world.

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Chapter 1 Owl Post

Chapter 2 Aunt Marge's Big Mistake

Chapter 3 The Knight Bus

Chapter 4 The Leaky Cauldron

Chapter 5 The Dementor

Chapter 6 Talons and Tea Leaves

Chapter 7 The Boggart in the Wardrobe

Chapter 8 Flight of the Fat Lady

Chapter 9 Grim Defeat

Chapter 10 The Marauder's Map

Chapter 11 The Firebolt

Chapter 12 The Patronus

Chapter 13 Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw

Chapter 14 Snape's Grudge

Chapter 15 The Quidditch Final

Chapter 16 Professor Trelawney's Prediction

Chapter 17 Cat, Rat, and Dog

Chapter 18 Mooney, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs

Chapter 19 The Servant of Lord Voldemort

Chapter 20 The Dementor's Kiss

Chapter 21 Hermione's Secret

Chapter 22 Owl Post Again

Return to the Main Contents

Chapter 1 Owl Post

Harry Potter was a highly unusual boy in many ways. For one thing, he hated the summer holidays more than any other time of year. For another, he really wanted to do his home-work but was forced to do it in secret, in the dead of night. And he also happened to be a wizard.

It was nearly midnight, and he was lying on his stomach in bed, the blankets drawn right over his head like a tent, a flashlight in one hand and a large leather-bound book (A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot) propped open against the pillow. Harry moved the tip of his eagle-feather quill down the page, frowning as he looked for something that would help him write his essay, “Witch Burning in the Fourteenth Century Was Completely Pointless — discuss.”

The quill paused at the top of a likely-looking paragraph. Harry pushed his round glasses up the bridge of his nose, moved his flash-light closer to the book, and read:Non-magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in me-dieval times, but not very good at recognizing it. On the rare occasion that they did catch a real witch or wizard, burning had no effect whatsoever. The witch or wizard would perform a basic Flame Freezing Charm and then pretend to shriek with pain while enjoying a gentle, tickling sensation. Indeed, Wen-delin the Weird enjoyed being burned so much that she allowed herself to be caught no less than forty-seven times in various disguises.

Harry put his quill between his teeth and reached underneath his pillow for his ink bottle and a roll of parchment. Slowly and very carefully he unscrewed the ink bottle, dipped his quill into it, and began to write, pausing every now and then to listen, because if any of the Dursleys heard the scratching of his quill on their way to the bathroom, he’d probably find himself locked in the cup-board under the stairs for the rest of the summer.

The Dursley family of number four, Privet Drive, was the reason that Harry never enjoyed his summer holidays. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and their son, Dudley, were Harry's only rela-tives. They were Muggles, and they had a very medieval attitude toward magic. Harry's dead parents, who had been a witch and wizard themselves, were never mentioned under the Dursleys' roof. For years, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had hoped that if they kept Harry as downtrodden as possible, they would be able to squash the magic out of him. To their fury, they had been unsuc-cessful. These days they lived in terror of anyone finding out that Harry had spent most of the last two years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The most they could do, however, was to lock away Harry's spellbooks, wand, cauldron, and broomstick at the start of the summer break, and forbid him to talk to the neighbors.

This separation from his spellbooks had been a real problem for Harry, because his teachers at Hogwarts had given him a lot of holiday work. One of the essays, a particularly nasty one about shrinking potions, was for Harry's least favorite teacher, Professor Snape, who would be delighted to have an excuse to give Harry detention for a month. Harry had therefore seized his chance in the first week of the holidays. While Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley had gone out into the front garden to admire Uncle Vernon's new company car (in very loud voices, so that the rest of the street would notice it too), Harry had crept downstairs, picked the lock on the cupboard under the stairs, grabbed some of his books, and hidden them in his bedroom. As long as he didn't leave spots of ink on the sheets, the Dursleys need never know that he was studying magic by night.

Harry was particularly keen to avoid trouble with his aunt and uncle at the moment, as they were already in an especially bad mood with him, all because he'd received a telephone call from a fellow wizard one week into the school vacation.

Ron Weasley, who was one of Harry's best friends at Hogwarts, came from a whole family of wizards. This meant that he knew a lot of things Harry didn't, but had never used a telephone before. Most unluckily it had been Uncle Vernon who had answered the call.

"Vernon Dursley speaking."

Harry, who happened to be in the room at the time, froze as he heard Ron's voice answer.

"HELLO? HELLO? CAN YOU HEAR ME? I — WANT — TO — TALK — TO — HARRY — POTTER!"

Ron was yelling so loudly that Uncle Vernon jumped and held the receiver a foot away from his ear, staring at it with an expression of mingled fury and alarm.

"WHO IS THIS?" he roared in the direction of the mouthpiece. "WHO ARE YOU?"

"RON — WEASLEY!" Ron bellowed back, as though he and Uncle Vernon were speaking from opposite ends of a football field. "I'M — A — FRIEND — OF — HARRY'S — FROM — SCHOOL —"

Uncle Vernon's small eyes swiveled around to Harry, who was rooted to the spot.

"THERE IS NO HARRY POTTER HERE!" he roared, now holding the receiver at arm's length, as though frightened it might explode. "I DON'T KNOW WHAT SCHOOL YOU'RE TALK-ING ABOUT! NEVER CONTACT ME AGAIN! DON'T YOU COME NEAR MY FAMILY!"

And he threw the receiver back onto the telephone as if drop-ping a poisonous spider.

The fight that had followed had been one of the worst ever.

“HOW DARE YOU GIVE THIS NUMBER TO PEOPLE LIKE — PEOPLE LIKE YOU!” Uncle Vernon had roared, spray-ing Harry with spit.

Ron obviously realized that he’d gotten Harry into trouble, because he hadn’t called again. Harry’s other best friend from Hogwarts, Hermione Granger, hadn’t been in touch either. Harry suspected that Ron had warned Hermione not to call, which was a pity, because Hermione, the cleverest witch in Harry’s year, had Muggle parents, knew perfectly well how to use a telephone, and would probably have had enough sense not to say that she went to Hogwarts.

So Harry had had no word from any of his wizarding friends for five long weeks, and this summer was turning out to be almost as bad as the last one. There was just one very small improvement — after swearing that he wouldn’t use her to send letters to any of his friends, Harry had been allowed to let his owl, Hedwig, out at night. Uncle Vernon had given in because of the racket Hedwig made if she was locked in her cage all the time.

Harry finished writing about Wendelin the Weird and paused to listen again. The silence in the dark house was broken only by the distant, grunting snores of his enormous cousin, Dudley. It must be very late, Harry thought. His eyes were itching with tiredness. Per-haps he’d finish this essay tomorrow night. …He replaced the top of the ink bottle; pulled an old pillowcase from under his bed; put the flashlight, A History of Magic, his essay, quill, and ink inside it; got out of bed; and hid the lot under a loose floorboard under his bed. Then he stood up, stretched, and checked the time on the luminous alarm clock on his bedside table.

It was one o’clock in the morning. Harry’s stomach gave a funny jolt. He had been thirteen years old, without realizing it, for a whole hour.

Yet another unusual thing about Harry was how little he looked forward to his birthdays. He had never received a birthday card in his

life. The Dursleys had completely ignored his last two birthdays, and he had no reason to suppose they would remember this one.

Harry walked across the dark room, past Hedwig's large, empty cage, to the open window. He leaned on the sill, the cool night air pleasant on his face after a long time under the blankets. Hedwig had been absent for two nights now. Harry wasn't worried about her: she'd been gone this long before. But he hoped she'd be back soon — she was the only living creature in this house who didn't flinch at the sight of him.

Harry, though still rather small and skinny for his age, had grown a few inches over the last year. His jet-black hair, however, was just as it always had been — stubbornly untidy, whatever he did to it. The eyes behind his glasses were bright green, and on his forehead, clearly visible through his hair, was a thin scar, shaped like a bolt of lightning.

Of all the unusual things about Harry, this scar was the most extraordinary of all. It was not, as the Dursleys had pretended for ten years, a souvenir of the car crash that had killed Harry's parents, because Lily and James Potter had not died in a car crash. They had been murdered, murdered by the most feared Dark wizard for a hundred years, Lord Voldemort. Harry had escaped from the same attack with nothing more than a scar on his forehead, where Voldemort's curse, instead of killing him, had rebounded upon its originator. Barely alive, Voldemort had fled. …But Harry had come face-to-face with him at Hogwarts. Re-membering their last meeting as he stood at the dark window, Harry had to admit he was lucky even to have reached his thir-teenth birthday.

He scanned the starry sky for a sign of Hedwig, perhaps soaring back to him with a dead mouse dangling from her beak, expecting praise. Gazing absently over the rooftops, it was a few seconds be-fore Harry realized what he was seeing.

Silhouetted against the golden moon, and growing larger every moment, was a large, strangely lopsided creature, and it was flap-ping in Harry's direction. He stood quite still, watching it sink lower and lower. For a split second he hesitated, his hand on the window latch, wondering whether to slam it shut. But then the bizarre creature soared over one of the street lamps of Privet Drive, and Harry, realizing what it was, leapt aside.

Through the window soared three owls, two of them holding up the third, which appeared to be unconscious. They landed with a soft flump on Harry's bed, and the middle owl, which was large and gray, keeled right over and lay motionless. There was a large pack-age tied to its legs.

Harry recognized the unconscious owl at once — his name was Errol, and he belonged to the Weasley family. Harry dashed to the bed, untied the cords around Errol's legs, took off the par-cel, and then carried Errol to Hedwig's cage. Errol opened one bleary eye, gave a feeble hoot of thanks, and began to gulp some water.

Harry turned back to the remaining owls. One of them, the large snowy female, was his own Hedwig. She, too, was carrying a parcel and looked extremely pleased with herself. She gave Harry an affectionate nip with her beak as he removed her burden, then flew across the room to join Errol.

Harry didn't recognize the third owl, a handsome tawny one, but he knew at once where it had come from, because in addition to a third package, it was carrying a letter bearing the Hogwarts crest. When Harry relieved this owl of its burden, it ruffled its feathers importantly, stretched its wings, and took off through the window into the night.

Harry sat down on his bed and grabbed Errol's package, ripped off the brown paper, and discovered a present wrapped in gold, and his first ever birthday card. Fingers trembling slightly, he opened the

envelope. Two pieces of paper fell out — a letter and a news-paper clipping.

The clipping had clearly come out of the wizarding newspaper, the Daily Prophet, because the people in the black-and-white pic-ture were moving. Harry picked up the clipping, smoothed it out, and read:MINISTRY OF MAGIC EMPLOYEE

SCOOPS GRAND PRIZE

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Ar-tifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, has won the annual Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw.

A delighted Mr. Weasley told the Daily Prophet, “We will be spending the gold on a summer holi-day in Egypt, where our eldest son, Bill, works as a curse breaker for Gringotts Wizarding Bank.”

The Weasley family will be spending a month in Egypt, returning for the start of the new school year at Hogwarts, which five of the Weasley chil-dren currently attend.

Harry scanned the moving photograph, and a grin spread across his face as he saw all nine of the Weasleys waving furiously at him, standing in front of a large pyramid. Plump little Mrs. Weasley; tall, balding Mr. Weasley; six sons; and one daughter, all (though the black-and-white picture didn’t show it) with flaming-red hair. Right in the middle of the picture was Ron, tall and gangling, with his pet rat, Scabbers, on his shoulder and his arm around his little sister, Ginny.

Harry couldn’t think of anyone who deserved to win a large pile of gold more than the Weasleys, who were very nice and extremely poor. He picked up Ron’s letter and unfolded it.

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday!

Look, I'm really sorry about that telephone call. I hope the Muggles didn't give you a hard time. I asked Dad, and he reckons I shouldn't have shouted.

It's amazing here in Egypt. Bill's taken us around all the tombs and you wouldn't believe the curses those old Egyptian wizards put on them. Mum wouldn't let Ginny come in the last one. There were all these mutant skeletons in there, of Muggles who'd broken in and grown extra heads and stuff.

I couldn't believe it when Dad won the Daily Prophet Draw. Seven hundred galleons! Most of it's gone on this trip, but they're going to buy me a new wand for next year.

Harry remembered only too well the occasion when Ron's old wand had snapped. It had happened when the car the two of them had been flying to Hogwarts had crashed into a tree on the school grounds.

We'll be back about a week before term starts and we'll be going up to London to get my wand and our new books. Any chance of meeting you there?

Don't let the Muggles get you down!

Try and come to London,

Ron

PS. Percy's Head Boy. He got the letter last week.

Harry glanced back at the photograph. Percy, who was in his seventh and final year at Hogwarts, was looking particularly smug. He had pinned his Head Boy badge to the fez perched jauntily on top of his neat hair, his horn-rimmed glasses flashing in the Egyptian sun.

Harry now turned to his present and unwrapped it. Inside was what looked like a miniature glass spinning top. There was another note from Ron beneath it.

Harry — this is a Pocket Sneakoscope. If there's someone untrustworthy around, it's supposed to light up and spin. Bill says it's rubbish sold for wizard tourists and isn't reliable, because it kept lighting up at dinner last night. But he didn't realize Fred and George had put beetles in his soup.

Bye —

Ron

Harry put the Pocket Sneakoscope on his bedside table, where it stood quite still, balanced on its point, reflecting the luminous hands of his clock. He looked at it happily for a few seconds, then picked up the parcel Hedwig had brought.

Inside this, too, there was a wrapped present, a card, and a letter, this time from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

Ron wrote to me and told me about his phone call to your Uncle Vernon. I do hope you're all right.

I'm on holiday in France at the moment and I didn't know how I was going to send this to you — what if they'd opened it at customs? — but then Hedwig turned up! I think she wanted to make sure you got something for your birthday for a change. I bought your present by owl-order; there was an advertisement in the Daily Prophet (I've been getting it delivered; it's so good to keep up with what's going on in the wizarding world). Did you see that picture of Ron and his family a week ago? I bet he's learning loads. I'm really jealous — the ancient Egyptian wizards were fas-cinating.

There's some interesting local history of witchcraft here, too. I've rewritten my whole History of Magic essay to include some of the things I've found out. I hope it's not too long — it'stwo rolls of parchment more than Professor Binns asked for.

Ron says he's going to be in London in the last week of the holidays. Can you make it? Will your aunt and uncle let you come? I really hope you can. If not, I'll see you on the Hogwarts Express on September first!

Love from

Hermione

PS. Ron says Percy's Head Boy. I'll bet Percy's really pleased.

Ron doesn't seem too happy about it.

Harry laughed as he put Hermione's letter aside and picked up her present. It was very heavy. Knowing Hermione, he was sure it would be a large book full of very difficult spells — but it wasn't. His heart gave a huge bound as he ripped back the paper and saw a sleek black leather case, with silver words stamped across it, reading Broomstick Servicing Kit.

"Wow, Hermione!" Harry whispered, unzipping the case to look inside.

There was a large jar of Fleetwood's High-Finish Handle Polish, a pair of gleaming silver Tail-Twig Clippers, a tiny brass compass to clip on your broom for long journeys, and a Handbook of Do-It-Yourself Broomcare.

Apart from his friends, the thing that Harry missed most about Hogwarts was Quidditch, the most popular sport in the magical world — highly dangerous, very exciting, and played on broom-sticks. Harry happened to be a very good Quidditch player; he had been the

youngest person in a century to be picked for one of the Hogwarts House teams. One of Harry's most prized possessions was his Nimbus Two Thousand racing broom.

Harry put the leather case aside and picked up his last parcel. He recognized the untidy scrawl on the brown paper at once: this was from Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper. He tore off the top layer of paper and glimpsed something green and leathery, but be-fore he could unwrap it properly, the parcel gave a strange quiver, and whatever was inside it snapped loudly — as though it had jaws.

Harry froze. He knew that Hagrid would never send him any-thing dangerous on purpose, but then, Hagrid didn't have a normal person's view of what was dangerous. Hagrid had been known to befriend giant spiders, buy vicious, three-headed dogs from men in pubs, and sneak illegal dragon eggs into his cabin.

Harry poked the parcel nervously. It snapped loudly again. Harry reached for the lamp on his bedside table, gripped it firmly in one hand, and raised it over his head, ready to strike. Then he seized the rest of the wrapping paper in his other hand and pulled.

And out fell — a book. Harry just had time to register its hand-some green cover, emblazoned with the golden title The Monster Book of Monsters, before it flipped onto its edge and scuttled side-ways along the bed like some weird crab.

"Uh-oh," Harry muttered.

The book toppled off the bed with a loud clunk and shuffled rapidly across the room. Harry followed it stealthily. The book was hiding in the dark space under his desk. Praying that the Dursleys were still fast asleep, Harry got down on his hands and knees and reached toward it.

"Ouch!"

The book snapped shut on his hand and then flapped past him, still scuttling on its covers. Harry scrambled around, threw himself forward, and managed to flatten it. Uncle Vernon gave a loud, sleepy grunt in the room next door.

Hedwig and Errol watched interestedly as Harry clamped the struggling book tightly in his arms, hurried to his chest of drawers, and pulled out a belt, which he buckled tightly around it. The Monster Book shuddered angrily, but could no longer flap and snap, so Harry threw it down on the bed and reached for Hagrid's card.

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday!

Think you might find this useful for next year.

Won't say no more here. Tell you when I see you.

Hope the Muggles are treating you right.

All the best,

Hagrid

It struck Harry as ominous that Hagrid thought a biting book would come in useful, but he put Hagrid's card up next to Ron's and Hermione's, grinning more broadly than ever. Now there was only the letter from Hogwarts left.

Noticing that it was rather thicker than usual, Harry slit open the envelope, pulled out the first page of parchment within, and read:Dear Mr. Potter,

Please note that the new school year will begin on Septem-ber the first. The Hogwarts Express will leave from King's Cross station, platform nine and three-quarters, at eleven o'clock.

Third years are permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade on certain weekends. Please give the enclosed permission form to your parent or guardian to sign.

A list of books for next year is enclosed.

Yours sincerely,

Professor M. McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Harry pulled out the Hogsmeade permission form and looked at it, no longer grinning. It would be wonderful to visit Hogsmeade on weekends; he knew it was an entirely wizarding village, and he had never set foot there. But how on earth was he going to per-suade Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia to sign the form?

He looked over at the alarm clock. It was now two o'clock in the morning.

Deciding that he'd worry about the Hogsmeade form when he woke up, Harry got back into bed and reached up to cross off an-other day on the chart he'd made for himself, counting down the days left until his return to Hogwarts. Then he took off his glasses and lay down, eyes open, facing his three birthday cards.

Extremely unusual though he was, at that moment Harry Potter felt just like everyone else — glad, for the first time in his life, that it was his birthday.

Chapter 2 Aunt Marge's Big Mistake

Harry went down to breakfast the next morning to find the three Dursleys already sitting around the kitchen table. They were watching a brand-new television, a welcome-home-for-the-summer present for Dudley, who had been complaining loudly about the long walk between the fridge and the television in the liv-ing room. Dudley had spent most of the summer in the kitchen, his piggy little eyes fixed on the screen and his five chins wobbling as he ate continually.

Harry sat down between Dudley and Uncle Vernon, a large, beefy man with very little neck and a lot of mustache. Far from wishing Harry a happy birthday, none of the Dursleys made any sign that they had noticed Harry enter the room, but Harry was far too used to this to care. He helped himself to a piece of toast and then looked up at the reporter on the television, who was halfway through a report on an escaped convict:"… The public is warned that Black is armed and extremely dangerous. A special hot line has been set up, and any sighting of Black should be reported immediately."

"No need to tell us he's no good," snorted Uncle Vernon, staring over the top of his newspaper at the prisoner. "Look at the state of him, the filthy layabout! Look at his hair!"

He shot a nasty look sideways at Harry, whose untidy hair had always been a source of great annoyance to Uncle Vernon. Com-pared to the man on the television, however, whose gaunt face was surrounded by a matted, elbow-length tangle, Harry felt very well groomed indeed.

The reporter had reappeared.

"The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries will announce to-day —"

"Hang on!" barked Uncle Vernon, staring furiously at the re-porter. "You didn't tell us where that maniac's escaped from! What use is

that? Lunatic could be coming up the street right now!"

Aunt Petunia, who was bony and horse-faced, whipped around and peered intently out of the kitchen window. Harry knew Aunt Petunia would simply love to be the one to call the hot line num-ber. She was the nosiest woman in the world and spent most of her life spying on the boring, law-abiding neighbors.

"When will they learn," said Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his large purple fist, "that hanging's the only way to deal with these people?"

"Very true," said Aunt Petunia, who was still squinting into next door's runner beans.

Uncle Vernon drained his teacup, glanced at his watch, and added, "I'd better be off in a minute, Petunia. Marge's train gets in at ten."

Harry, whose thoughts had been upstairs with the Broomstick Servicing Kit, was brought back to earth with an unpleasant bump.

"Aunt Marge?" he blurted out. "Sh — she's not coming here, is she?"

Aunt Marge was Uncle Vernon's sister. Even though she was not a blood relative of Harry's (whose mother had been Aunt Petunia's sister), he had been forced to call her "Aunt" all his life. Aunt Marge lived in the country, in a house with a large garden, where she bred bulldogs. She didn't often stay at Privet Drive, because she couldn't bear to leave her precious dogs, but each of her visits stood out horribly vividly in Harry's mind.

At Dudley's fifth birthday party, Aunt Marge had whacked Harry around the shins with her walking stick to stop him from beating Dudley at musical statues. A few years later, she had turned up at Christmas with a computerized robot for Dudley and a box of dog biscuits for Harry. On her last visit, the year before Harry started at Hogwarts, Harry had accidentally trodden on the tail of her favorite

dog. Ripper had chased Harry out into the garden and up a tree, and Aunt Marge had refused to call him off until past midnight. The memory of this incident still brought tears of laugh-ter to Dudley's eyes.

"Marge'll be here for a week," Uncle Vernon snarled, "and while we're on the subject" — he pointed a fat finger threateningly at Harry — "we need to get a few things straight before I go and col-lect her."

Dudley smirked and withdrew his gaze from the television. Watching Harry being bullied by Uncle Vernon was Dudley's favorite form of entertainment.

"Firstly," growled Uncle Vernon, "you'll keep a civil tongue in your head when you're talking to Marge."

"All right," said Harry bitterly, "if she does when she's talking to me."

"Secondly," said Uncle Vernon, acting as though he had not heard Harry's reply, "as Marge doesn't know anything about your abnormality, I don't want any — any funny stuff while she's here. You behave yourself, got me?"

"I will if she does," said Harry through gritted teeth.

"And thirdly," said Uncle Vernon, his mean little eyes now slits in his great purple face, "we've told Marge you attend St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys."

"What?" Harry yelled.

"And you'll be sticking to that story, boy, or there'll be trouble," spat Uncle Vernon.

Harry sat there, white-faced and furious, staring at Uncle Vernon, hardly able to believe it. Aunt Marge coming for a week-long visit — it

was the worst birthday present the Dursleys had ever given him, including that pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks.

"Well, Petunia," said Uncle Vernon, getting heavily to his feet, "I'll be off to the station, then. Want to come along for the ride, Dudders?"

"No," said Dudley, whose attention had returned to the televi-sion now that Uncle Vernon had finished threatening Harry.

"Duddy's got to make himself smart for his auntie," said Aunt Petunia, smoothing Dudley's thick blond hair. "Mummy's bought him a lovely new bow tie."

Uncle Vernon clapped Dudley on his porky shoulder.

"See you in a bit, then," he said, and he left the kitchen.

Harry, who had been sitting in a kind of horrified trance, had a sudden idea. Abandoning his toast, he got quickly to his feet and followed Uncle Vernon to the front door.

Uncle Vernon was pulling on his car coat.

"I'm not taking you," he snarled as he turned to see Harry watch-ing him.

"Like I wanted to come," said Harry coldly. "I want to ask you something."

Uncle Vernon eyed him suspiciously.

"Third years at Hog — at my school are allowed to visit the vil-lage sometimes," said Harry.

"So?" snapped Uncle Vernon, taking his car keys from a hook next to the door.

"I need you to sign the permission form," said Harry in a rush.

“And why should I do that?” sneered Uncle Vernon.

“Well,” said Harry, choosing his words carefully, “it’ll be hard work, pretending to Aunt Marge I go to that St. Whatsits —”

“St. Brutus’s Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys!” bel-lowed Uncle Vernon, and Harry was pleased to hear a definite note of panic in Uncle Vernon’s voice.

“Exactly,” said Harry, looking calmly up into Uncle Vernon’s large, purple face. “It’s a lot to remember. I’ll have to make it sound convincing, won’t I? What if I accidentally let something slip?”

“You’ll get the stuffing knocked out of you, won’t you?” roared Un-cle Vernon, advancing on Harry with his fist raised. But Harry stood his ground.

“Knocking the stuffing out of me won’t make Aunt Marge for-get what I could tell her,” he said grimly.

Uncle Vernon stopped, his fist still raised, his face an ugly puce.

“But if you sign my permission form,” Harry went on quickly, “I swear I’ll remember where I’m supposed to go to school, and I’ll act like a Mug — like I’m normal and everything.”

Harry could tell that Uncle Vernon was thinking it over, even if his teeth were bared and a vein was throbbing in his temple.

“Right,” he snapped finally. “I shall monitor your behavior care-fully during Marge’s visit. If, at the end of it, you’ve toed the line and kept to the story, I’ll sign your ruddy form.”

He wheeled around, pulled open the front door, and slammed it so hard that one of the little panes of glass at the top fell out.

Harry didn't return to the kitchen. He went back upstairs to his bedroom. If he was going to act like a real Muggle, he'd better start now. Slowly and sadly he gathered up all his presents and his birthday cards and hid them under the loose floorboard with his homework. Then he went to Hedwig's cage. Errol seemed to have recovered; he and Hedwig were both asleep, heads under their wings. Harry sighed, then poked them both awake.

"Hedwig," he said gloomily, "you're going to have to clear off for a week. Go with Errol. Ron'll look after you. I'll write him a note, explaining. And don't look at me like that" — Hedwig's large am-ber eyes were reproachful — "it's not my fault. It's the only way I'll be allowed to visit Hogsmeade with Ron and Hermione."

Ten minutes later, Errol and Hedwig (who had a note to Ron bound to her leg) soared out of the window and out of sight. Harry, now feeling thoroughly miserable, put the empty cage away inside the wardrobe.

But Harry didn't have long to brood. In next to no time, Aunt Petunia was shrieking up the stairs for Harry to come down and get ready to welcome their guest.

"Do something about your hair!" Aunt Petunia snapped as he reached the hall.

Harry couldn't see the point of trying to make his hair lie flat. Aunt Marge loved criticizing him, so the untidier he looked, the happier she would be.

All too soon, there was a crunch of gravel outside as Uncle Vernon's car pulled back into the driveway, then the clunk of the car doors and footsteps on the garden path.

"Get the door!" Aunt Petunia hissed at Harry.

A feeling of great gloom in his stomach, Harry pulled the door open.

On the threshold stood Aunt Marge. She was very like Uncle Vernon: large, beefy, and purple-faced, she even had a mustache, though not as bushy as his. In one hand she held an enormous suit-case, and tucked under the other was an old and evil-tempered bulldog.

“Where’s my Dudders?” roared Aunt Marge. “Where’s my neffy-poo?”

Dudley came waddling down the hall, his blond hair plastered flat to his fat head, a bow tie just visible under his many chins. Aunt Marge thrust the suitcase into Harry’s stomach, knocking the wind out of him, seized Dudley in a tight one-armed hug, and planted a large kiss on his cheek.

Harry knew perfectly well that Dudley only put up with Aunt Marge’s hugs because he was well paid for it, and sure enough, when they broke apart, Dudley had a crisp twenty-pound note clutched in his fat fist.

“Petunia!” shouted Aunt Marge, striding past Harry as though he was a hat stand. Aunt Marge and Aunt Petunia kissed, or rather, Aunt Marge bumped her large jaw against Aunt Petunia’s bony cheekbone.

Uncle Vernon now came in, smiling jovially as he shut the door.

“Tea, Marge?” he said. “And what will Ripper take?”

“Ripper can have some tea out of my saucer,” said Aunt Marge as they all proceeded into the kitchen, leaving Harry alone in the hall with the suitcase. But Harry wasn’t complaining; any ex-cuse not to be with Aunt Marge was fine by him, so he began to heave the case upstairs into the spare bedroom, taking as long as he could.

By the time he got back to the kitchen, Aunt Marge had been supplied with tea and fruitcake, and Ripper was lapping noisily in the corner. Harry saw Aunt Petunia wince slightly as specks of tea and drool flecked her clean floor. Aunt Petunia hated animals.

“Who’s looking after the other dogs, Marge?” Uncle Vernon asked.

“Oh, I’ve got Colonel Fubster managing them,” boomed Aunt Marge. “He’s retired now, good for him to have something to do. But I couldn’t leave poor old Ripper. He pines if he’s away from me.”

Ripper began to growl again as Harry sat down. This directed Aunt Marge’s attention to Harry for the first time.

“So!” she barked. “Still here, are you?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

“Don’t you say ‘yes’ in that ungrateful tone,” Aunt Marge growled. “It’s damn good of Vernon and Petunia to keep you. Wouldn’t have done it myself. You’d have gone straight to an or-phanage if you’d been dumped on my doorstep.”

Harry was bursting to say that he’d rather live in an orphanage than with the Dursleys, but the thought of the Hogsmeade form stopped him. He forced his face into a painful smile.

“Don’t you smirk at me!” boomed Aunt Marge. “I can see you haven’t improved since I last saw you. I hoped school would knock some manners into you.” She took a large gulp of tea, wiped her mustache, and said, “Where is it that you send him, again, Vernon?”

“St. Brutus’s,” said Uncle Vernon promptly. “It’s a first-rate institution for hopeless cases.”

“I see,” said Aunt Marge. “Do they use the cane at St. Brutus’s, boy?” she barked across the table.

“Er —”

Uncle Vernon nodded curtly behind Aunt Marge’s back.

“Yes,” said Harry. Then, feeling he might as well do the thing properly, he added, “all the time.”

“Excellent,” said Aunt Marge. “I won’t have this namby-pamby, wishy-washy nonsense about not hitting people who deserve it. A good thrashing is what’s needed in ninety-nine cases out of a hun-dred. Have you been beaten often?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Harry, “loads of times.”

Aunt Marge narrowed her eyes.

“I still don’t like your tone, boy,” she said. “If you can speak of your beatings in that casual way, they clearly aren’t hitting you hard enough. Petunia, I’d write if I were you. Make it clear that you approve the use of extreme force in this boy’s case.”

Perhaps Uncle Vernon was worried that Harry might forget their bargain; in any case, he changed the subject abruptly.

“Heard the news this morning, Marge? What about that escaped prisoner, eh?”

As Aunt Marge started to make herself at home, Harry caught himself thinking almost longingly of life at number four without her. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia usually encouraged Harry to stay out of their way, which Harry was only too happy to do. Aunt Marge, on the other hand, wanted Harry under her eye at all times, so that she could boom out suggestions for his improvement. She delighted in comparing Harry with Dudley, and took huge plea-sure in buying Dudley expensive presents while glaring at Harry, as though daring him to ask why he hadn’t got a present too. She also kept throwing out dark hints about what made Harry such an un-satisfactory person.

“You mustn’t blame yourself for the way the boy’s turned out, Vernon,” she said over lunch on the third day. “If there’s something rotten on

the inside, there's nothing anyone can do about it."

Harry tried to concentrate on his food, but his hands shook and his face was starting to burn with anger. Remember the form, he told himself. Think about Hogsmeade. Don't say anything. Don't rise — Aunt Marge reached for her glass of wine.

"It's one of the basic rules of breeding," she said. "You see it all the time with dogs. If there's something wrong with the bitch, there'll be something wrong with the pup —"

At that moment, the wineglass Aunt Marge was holding ex-ploded in her hand. Shards of glass flew in every direction and Aunt Marge sputtered and blinked, her great ruddy face dripping.

"Marge!" squealed Aunt Petunia. "Marge, are you all right?"

"Not to worry," grunted Aunt Marge, mopping her face with her napkin. "Must have squeezed it too hard. Did the same thing at Colonel Fubster's the other day. No need to fuss, Petunia, I have a very firm grip …"

But Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were both looking at Harry suspiciously, so he decided he'd better skip dessert and escape from the table as soon as he could.

Outside in the hall, he leaned against the wall, breathing deeply. It had been a long time since he'd lost control and made something explode. He couldn't afford to let it happen again. The Hogsmeade form wasn't the only thing at stake — if he carried on like that, he'd be in trouble with the Ministry of Magic.

Harry was still an underage wizard, and he was forbidden by wizard law to do magic outside school. His record wasn't exactly clean either. Only last summer he'd gotten an official warning that had stated quite clearly that if the Ministry got wind of any more magic in Privet Drive, Harry would face expulsion from Hogwarts.

He heard the Dursleys leaving the table and hurried upstairs out of the way.

Harry got through the next three days by forcing himself to think about his Handbook of Do-It-Yourself Broomcare whenever Aunt Marge started on him. This worked quite well, though it seemed to give him a glazed look, because Aunt Marge started voicing the opinion that he was mentally subnormal.

At last, at long last, the final evening of Marge's stay arrived. Aunt Petunia cooked a fancy dinner and Uncle Vernon uncorked several bottles of wine. They got all the way through the soup and the salmon without a single mention of Harry's faults; during the lemon meringue pie, Uncle Vernon bored them all with a long talk about Grunnings, his drill-making company; then Aunt Petunia made coffee and Uncle Vernon brought out a bottle of brandy.

"Can I tempt you, Marge?"

Aunt Marge had already had quite a lot of wine. Her huge face was very red.

"Just a small one, then," she chuckled. "A bit more than that … and a bit more … that's the ticket."

Dudley was eating his fourth slice of pie. Aunt Petunia was sip-ping coffee with her little finger sticking out. Harry really wanted to disappear into his bedroom, but he met Uncle Vernon's angry little eyes and knew he would have to sit it out.

"Aah," said Aunt Marge, smacking her lips and putting the empty brandy glass back down. "Excellent nosh, Petunia. It's nor-mally just a fry-up for me of an evening, with twelve dogs to look after. …" She burped richly and patted her great tweed stomach. "Pardon me. But I do like to see a healthy-sized boy," she went on, winking at Dudley. "You'll be a proper-sized man, Dudders, like your father. Yes, I'll have a spot more brandy, Vernon. …"

“Now, this one here —”

She jerked her head at Harry, who felt his stomach clench. The Handbook, he thought quickly.

“This one’s got a mean, runty look about him. You get that with dogs. I had Colonel Fubster drown one last year. Ratty little thing it was. Weak. Underbred.”

Harry was trying to remember page twelve of his book: A Charm to Cure Reluctant Reversers.

“It all comes down to blood, as I was saying the other day. Bad blood will out. Now, I’m saying nothing against your family, Petunia” — she patted Aunt Petunia’s bony hand with her shovel-like one — “but your sister was a bad egg. They turn up in the best families. Then she ran off with a wastrel and here’s the result right in front of us.”

Harry was staring at his plate, a funny ringing in his ears. Grasp your broom firmly by the tail, he thought. But he couldn’t remember what came next. Aunt Marge’s voice seemed to be boring into him like one of Uncle Vernon’s drills.

“This Potter,” said Aunt Marge loudly, seizing the brandy bottle and splashing more into her glass and over the tablecloth, “you never told me what he did?”

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were looking extremely tense. Dudley had even looked up from his pie to gape at his parents.

“He — didn’t work,” said Uncle Vernon, with half a glance at Harry. “Unemployed.”

“As I expected!” said Aunt Marge, taking a huge swig of brandy and wiping her chin on her sleeve. “A no-account, good-for-nothing, lazy scrounger who —”

“He was not,” said Harry suddenly. The table went very quiet. Harry was shaking all over. He had never felt so angry in his life.

“MORE BRANDY!” yelled Uncle Vernon, who had gone very white. He emptied the bottle into Aunt Marge’s glass. “You, boy,” he snarled at Harry. “Go to bed, go on —”

“No, Vernon,” hiccuped Aunt Marge, holding up a hand, her tiny bloodshot eyes fixed on Harry’s. “Go on, boy, go on. Proud of your parents, are you? They go and get themselves killed in a car crash (drunk, I expect) —”

“They didn’t die in a car crash!” said Harry, who found himself on his feet.

“They died in a car crash, you nasty little liar, and left you to be a burden on their decent, hardworking relatives!” screamed Aunt Marge, swelling with fury. “You are an insolent, ungrateful little —”

But Aunt Marge suddenly stopped speaking. For a moment, it looked as though words had failed her. She seemed to be swelling with inexpressible anger — but the swelling didn’t stop. Her great red face started to expand, her tiny eyes bulged, and her mouth stretched too tightly for speech — next second, several buttons had just burst from her tweed jacket and pinged off the walls — she was inflating like a monstrous balloon, her stomach bursting free of her tweed waistband, each of her fingers blowing up like a salami —“MARGE!” yelled Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia together as Aunt Marge’s whole body began to rise off her chair toward the ceiling. She was entirely round, now, like a vast life buoy with piggy eyes, and her hands and feet stuck out weirdly as she drifted up into the air, making apoplectic popping noises. Ripper came skidding into the room, barking madly.

“NOOOOOOO!”

Uncle Vernon seized one of Marge's feet and tried to pull her down again, but was almost lifted from the floor himself. A second later, Ripper leapt forward and sank his teeth into Uncle Vernon's leg.

Harry tore from the dining room before anyone could stop him, heading for the cupboard under the stairs. The cupboard door burst magically open as he reached it. In seconds, he had heaved his trunk to the front door. He sprinted upstairs and threw himself under the bed, wrenching up the loose floorboard, and grabbed the pillowcase full of his books and birthday presents. He wriggled out, seized Hedwig's empty cage, and dashed back downstairs to his trunk, just as Uncle Vernon burst out of the dining room, his trouser leg in bloody tatters.

"COME BACK IN HERE!" he bellowed. "COME BACK AND PUT HER RIGHT!"

But a reckless rage had come over Harry. He kicked his trunk open, pulled out his wand, and pointed it at Uncle Vernon.

"She deserved it," Harry said, breathing very fast. "She deserved what she got. You keep away from me."

He fumbled behind him for the latch on the door.

"I'm going," Harry said. "I've had enough."

And in the next moment, he was out in the dark, quiet street, heaving his heavy trunk behind him, Hedwig's cage under his arm.

Chapter 3 The Knight Bus

Harry was several streets away before he collapsed onto a low wall in Magnolia Crescent, panting from the effort of dragging his trunk. He sat quite still, anger still surging through him, listening to the frantic thumping of his heart.

But after ten minutes alone in the dark street, a new emotion overtook him: panic. Whichever way he looked at it, he had never been in a worse fix. He was stranded, quite alone, in the dark Mug-gle world, with absolutely nowhere to go. And the worst of it was, he had just done serious magic, which meant that he was almost certainly expelled from Hogwarts. He had broken the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry so badly, he was surprised Ministry of Magic representatives weren't swooping down on him where he sat.

Harry shivered and looked up and down Magnolia Crescent. What was going to happen to him? Would he be arrested, or would he simply be outlawed from the wizarding world? He thought of Ron and Hermione, and his heart sank even lower. Harry was sure that, criminal or not, Ron and Hermione would want to help him now, but they were both abroad, and with Hedwig gone, he had no means of contacting them.

He didn't have any Muggle money, either. There was a little wiz-ard gold in the money bag at the bottom of his trunk, but the rest of the fortune his parents had left him was stored in a vault at Gringotts Wizarding Bank in London. He'd never be able to drag his trunk all the way to London. Unless …He looked down at his wand, which he was still clutching in his hand. If he was already expelled (his heart was now thumping painfully fast), a bit more magic couldn't hurt. He had the Invisi-bility Cloak he had inherited from his father — what if he bewitched the trunk to make it feather-light, tied it to his broom-stick, covered himself in the cloak, and flew to London? Then he

could get the rest of his money out of his vault and … begin his life as an outcast. It was a horrible prospect, but he couldn't sit on this wall forever, or he'd find himself trying to explain to Muggle police why he was out in the dead of night with a trunkful of spell-books and a broomstick.

Harry opened his trunk again and pushed the contents aside, looking for the Invisibility Cloak — but before he had found it, he straightened up suddenly, looking around him once more.

A funny prickling on the back of his neck had made Harry feel he was being watched, but the street appeared to be deserted, and no lights shone from any of the large square houses.

He bent over his trunk again, but almost immediately stood up once more, his hand clenched on his wand. He had sensed rather than heard it: someone or something was standing in the narrow gap between the garage and the fence behind him. Harry squinted at the black alleyway. If only it would move, then he'd know whether it was just a stray cat or — something else.

"Lumos," Harry muttered, and a light appeared at the end of his wand, almost dazzling him. He held it high over his head, and the pebble-dashed walls of number two suddenly sparkled; the garage door gleamed, and between them Harry saw, quite distinctly, the hulking outline of something very big, with wide, gleaming eyes.

Harry stepped backward. His legs hit his trunk and he tripped. His wand flew out of his hand as he flung out an arm to break his fall, and he landed, hard, in the gutter —There was a deafening BANG, and Harry threw up his hands to shield his eyes against a sudden blinding light —With a yell, he rolled back onto the pavement, just in time. A second later, a gigantic pair of wheels and headlights screeched to a halt exactly where Harry had just been lying. They belonged, as Harry saw when he raised his head, to a triple-decker, violently purple bus,

which had appeared out of thin air. Gold lettering over the windshield spelled The Knight Bus.

For a split second, Harry wondered if he had been knocked silly by his fall. Then a conductor in a purple uniform leapt out of the bus and began to speak loudly to the night.

“Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. Just stick out your wand hand, step on board, and we can take you anywhere you want to go. My name is Stan Shunpike, and I will be your conductor this eve —”

The conductor stopped abruptly. He had just caught sight of Harry, who was still sitting on the ground. Harry snatched up his wand again and scrambled to his feet. Close up, he saw that Stan Shunpike was only a few years older than he was, eighteen or nine-teen at most, with large, protruding ears and quite a few pimples.

“What were you doin’ down there?” said Stan, dropping his pro-fessional manner.

“Fell over,” said Harry.

“ ’Choo fall over for?” sniggered Stan.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” said Harry, annoyed. One of the knees in his jeans was torn, and the hand he had thrown out to break his fall was bleeding. He suddenly remembered why he had fallen over and turned around quickly to stare at the alleyway be-tween the garage and fence. The Knight Bus’s headlamps were flooding it with light, and it was empty.

“ ’Choo lookin’ at?” said Stan.

“There was a big black thing,” said Harry, pointing uncertainly into the gap. “Like a dog … but massive …”

He looked around at Stan, whose mouth was slightly open. With a feeling of unease, Harry saw Stan's eyes move to the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Woss that on your 'ead?" said Stan abruptly.

"Nothing," said Harry quickly, flattening his hair over his scar. If the Ministry of Magic was looking for him, he didn't want to make it too easy for them.

"Woss your name?" Stan persisted.

"Neville Longbottom," said Harry, saying the first name that came into his head. "So — so this bus," he went on quickly, hop-ing to distract Stan, "did you say it goes anywhere?"

"Yep," said Stan proudly, "anywhere you like, long's it's on land. Can't do nuffink underwater. 'Ere," he said, looking suspicious again, "you did flag us down, dincha? Stuck out your wand 'and, dincha?"

"Yes," said Harry quickly. "Listen, how much would it be to get to London?"

"Eleven Sickles," said Stan, "but for firteen you get 'ot chocolate, and for fifteen you get an 'ot water bottle an' a toofbrush in the color of your choice."

Harry rummaged once more in his trunk, extracted his money bag, and shoved some gold into Stan's hand. He and Stan then lifted his trunk, with Hedwig's cage balanced on top, up the steps of the bus.

There were no seats; instead, half a dozen brass bedsteads stood beside the curtained windows. Candles were burning in brackets beside each bed, illuminating the wood-paneled walls. A tiny wiz-ard in a nightcap at the rear of the bus muttered, "Not now, thanks, I'm pickling some slugs" and rolled over in his sleep.

“You ’ave this one,” Stan whispered, shoving Harry’s trunk un-der the bed right behind the driver, who was sitting in an armchair in front of the steering wheel. “This is our driver, Ernie Prang. This is Neville Longbottom, Ern.”

Ernie Prang, an elderly wizard wearing very thick glasses, nod-ded to Harry, who nervously flattened his bangs again and sat down on his bed.

“Take ’er away, Ern,” said Stan, sitting down in the armchair next to Ernie’s.

There was another tremendous BANG, and the next moment Harry found himself flat on his bed, thrown backward by the speed of the Knight Bus. Pulling himself up, Harry stared out of the dark window and saw that they were now bowling along a completely different street. Stan was watching Harry’s stunned face with great enjoyment.

“This is where we was before you flagged us down,” he said. “Where are we, Ern? Somewhere in Wales?”

“Ar,” said Ernie.

“How come the Muggles don’t hear the bus?” said Harry.

“Them!” said Stan contemptuously. “Don’ listen properly, do they? Don’ look properly either. Never notice nuffink, they don’.”

“Best go wake up Madam Marsh, Stan,” said Ern. “We’ll be in Abergavenny in a minute.”

Stan passed Harry’s bed and disappeared up a narrow wooden staircase. Harry was still looking out of the window, feeling in-creasingly nervous. Ernie didn’t seem to have mastered the use of a steering wheel. The Knight Bus kept mounting the pavement, but it didn’t hit anything; lines of lampposts, mailboxes, and trash cans

jumped out of its way as it approached and back into position once it had passed.

Stan came back downstairs, followed by a faintly green witch wrapped in a traveling cloak.

“ ’Ere you go, Madam Marsh,” said Stan happily as Ern stamped on the brake and the beds slid a foot or so toward the front of the bus. Madam Marsh clamped a handkerchief to her mouth and tot-tered down the steps. Stan threw her bag out after her and rammed the doors shut; there was another loud BANG, and they were thun-dering down a narrow country lane, trees leaping out of the way.

Harry wouldn’t have been able to sleep even if he had been trav-eling on a bus that didn’t keep banging loudly and jumping a hun-dred miles at a time. His stomach churned as he fell back to wondering what was going to happen to him, and whether the Dursleys had managed to get Aunt Marge off the ceiling yet.

Stan had unfurled a copy of the Daily Prophet and was now read-ing with his tongue between his teeth. A large photograph of a sunken-faced man with long, matted hair blinked slowly at Harry from the front page. He looked strangely familiar.

“That man!” Harry said, forgetting his troubles for a moment. “He was on the Muggle news!”

Stanley turned to the front page and chuckled.

“Sirius Black,” he said, nodding. “ ’Course ’e was on the Muggle news, Neville, where you been?”

He gave a superior sort of chuckle at the blank look on Harry’s face, removed the front page, and handed it to Harry.

“You oughta read the papers more, Neville.”

Harry held the paper up to the candlelight and read:BLACK STILL AT LARGE

Sirius Black, possibly the most infamous prisoner ever to be held in Azkaban fortress, is still eluding capture, the Ministry of Magic confirmed today.

“We are doing all we can to recapture Black,” said the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, this morning, “and we beg the magical community to remain calm.”

Fudge has been criticized by some members of the International Federation of Warlocks for in-forming the Muggle Prime Minister of the crisis.

“Well, really, I had to, don’t you know,” said an irritable Fudge. “Black is mad. He’s a danger to anyone who crosses him, magic or Muggle. I have the Prime Minister’s assurance that he will not breathe a word of Black’s true identity to anyone. And let’s face it — who’d believe him if he did?”

While Muggles have been told that Black is car-rying a gun (a kind of metal wand that Muggles use to kill each other), the magical community lives in fear of a massacre like that of twelve years ago, when Black murdered thirteen people with a single curse.

Harry looked into the shadowed eyes of Sirius Black, the only part of the sunken face that seemed alive. Harry had never met a vampire, but he had seen pictures of them in his Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, and Black, with his waxy white skin, looked just like one.

“Scary-lookin’ fing, inee?” said Stan, who had been watching Harry read.

“He murdered thirteen people?” said Harry, handing the page back to Stan, “with one curse?”

"Yep," said Stan, "in front of witnesses an' all. Broad daylight. Big trouble it caused, dinnit, Ern?"

"Ar," said Ern darkly.

Stan swiveled in his armchair, his hands on the back, the better to look at Harry.

"Black woz a big supporter of You-Know-'Oo," he said.

"What, Voldemort?" said Harry, without thinking.

Even Stan's pimples went white; Ern jerked the steering wheel so hard that a whole farmhouse had to jump aside to avoid the bus.

"You outta your tree?" yelped Stan. " 'Choo say 'is name for?"

"Sorry," said Harry hastily. "Sorry, I — I forgot —"

"Forgot!" said Stan weakly. "Blimey, my 'eart's goin' that fast …"

"So — so Black was a supporter of You-Know-Who?" Harry prompted apologetically.

"Yeah," said Stan, still rubbing his chest. "Yeah, that's right. Very close to You-Know-'Oo, they say. Anyway, when little 'Arry Potter got the better of You-Know-'Oo —"

Harry nervously flattened his bangs down again.

"— all You-Know-'Oo's supporters was tracked down, wasn't they, Ern? Most of 'em knew it was all over, wiv You-Know-'Oo gone, and they came quiet. But not Sirius Black. I 'eard he thought 'e'd be second-in-command once You-Know-'Oo 'ad taken over.

"Anyway, they cornered Black in the middle of a street full of Muggles an' Black took out 'is wand and 'e blasted 'alf the street apart, an' a wizard got it, an' so did a dozen Muggles what got in the way. 'Orrible,

eh? An’ you know what Black did then?” Stan continued in a dramatic whisper.

“What?” said Harry.

“Laughed,” said Stan. “Jus’ stood there an’ laughed. An’ when re-inforcements from the Ministry of Magic got there, ’e went wiv ’em quiet as anyfink, still laughing ’is ’ead off. ’Cos ’e’s mad, inee, Ern? Inee mad?”

“If he weren’t when he went to Azkaban, he will be now,” said Ern in his slow voice. “I’d blow meself up before I set foot in that place. Serves him right, mind you … after what he did. …”

“They ’ad a job coverin’ it up, din’ they, Ern?” Stan said. “ ’Ole street blown up an’ all them Muggles dead. What was it they said ’ad ’appened, Ern?”

“Gas explosion,” grunted Ernie.

“An’ now ’e’s out,” said Stan, examining the newspaper pic-ture of Black’s gaunt face again. “Never been a breakout from Azkaban before, ’as there, Ern? Beats me ’ow ’e did it. Frightenin’, eh? Mind, I don’t fancy ’is chances against them Azkaban guards, eh, Ern?”

Ernie suddenly shivered.

“Talk about summat else, Stan, there’s a good lad. Them Azka-ban guards give me the collywobbles.”

Stan put the paper away reluctantly, and Harry leaned against the window of the Knight Bus, feeling worse than ever. He couldn’t help imagining what Stan might be telling his passengers in a few nights’ time.

“ ’Ear about that ’Arry Potter? Blew up ’is aunt! We ’ad ’im ’ere on the Knight Bus, di’n’t we, Ern? ’E was tryin’ to run for it. …”

He, Harry, had broken wizard law just like Sirius Black. Was in-flating Aunt Marge bad enough to land him in Azkaban? Harry didn't know anything about the wizard prison, though everyone he'd ever heard speak of it did so in the same fearful tone. Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, had spent two months there only last year. Harry wouldn't soon forget the look of terror on Hagrid's face when he had been told where he was going, and Hagrid was one of the bravest people Harry knew.

The Knight Bus rolled through the darkness, scattering bushes and wastebaskets, telephone booths and trees, and Harry lay, restless and miserable, on his feather bed. After a while, Stan remembered that Harry had paid for hot chocolate, but poured it all over Harry's pillow when the bus moved abruptly from Angle-sey to Aberdeen. One by one, wizards and witches in dressing gowns and slippers descended from the upper floors to leave the bus. They all looked very pleased to go.

Finally, Harry was the only passenger left.

"Right then, Neville," said Stan, clapping his hands, "where-abouts in London?"

"Diagon Alley," said Harry.

"Righto," said Stan. " 'Old tight, then …"

BANG!

They were thundering along Charing Cross Road. Harry sat up and watched buildings and benches squeezing themselves out of the Knight Bus's way. The sky was getting a little lighter. He would lie low for a couple of hours, go to Gringotts the moment it opened, then set off — where, he didn't know.

Ern slammed on the brakes and the Knight Bus skidded to a halt in front of a small and shabby-looking pub, the Leaky Cauldron, behind

which lay the magical entrance to Diagon Alley.

“Thanks,” Harry said to Ern.

He jumped down the steps and helped Stan lower his trunk and Hedwig’s cage onto the pavement.

“Well,” said Harry. “ ’Bye then!”

But Stan wasn’t paying attention. Still standing in the doorway to the bus, he was goggling at the shadowy entrance to the Leaky Cauldron.

“There you are, Harry,” said a voice.

Before Harry could turn, he felt a hand on his shoulder. At the same time, Stan shouted, “Blimey! Ern, come ’ere! Come ’ere!”

Harry looked up at the owner of the hand on his shoulder and felt a bucketful of ice cascade into his stomach — he had walked right into Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself.

Stan leapt onto the pavement beside them.

“What didja call Neville, Minister?” he said excitedly.

Fudge, a portly little man in a long, pinstriped cloak, looked cold and exhausted.

“Neville?” he repeated, frowning. “This is Harry Potter.”

“I knew it!” Stan shouted gleefully. “Ern! Ern! Guess ’oo Neville is, Ern! ’E’s ’Arry Potter! I can see ’is scar!”

“Yes,” said Fudge testily, “well, I’m very glad the Knight Bus picked Harry up, but he and I need to step inside the Leaky Caul-dron now …”

Fudge increased the pressure on Harry's shoulder, and Harry found himself being steered inside the pub. A stooping figure bear-ing a lantern appeared through the door behind the bar. It was Tom, the wizened, toothless landlord.

"You've got him, Minister!" said Tom. "Will you be wanting anything? Beer? Brandy?"

"Perhaps a pot of tea," said Fudge, who still hadn't let go of Harry.

There was a loud scraping and puffing from behind them, and Stan and Ern appeared, carrying Harry's trunk and Hedwig's cage and looking around excitedly.

" 'Ow come you di'n't tell us 'oo you are, eh, Neville?" said Stan, beaming at Harry, while Ernie's owlish face peered interestedly over Stan's shoulder.

"And a private parlor, please, Tom," said Fudge pointedly.

" 'Bye," Harry said miserably to Stan and Ern as Tom beckoned Fudge toward the passage that led from the bar.

" 'Bye, Neville!" called Stan.

Fudge marched Harry along the narrow passage after Tom's lantern, and then into a small parlor. Tom clicked his fingers, a fire burst into life in the grate, and he bowed himself out of the room.

"Sit down, Harry," said Fudge, indicating a chair by the fire.

Harry sat down, feeling goose bumps rising up his arms despite the glow of the fire. Fudge took off his pinstriped cloak and tossed it aside, then hitched up the trousers of his bottle-green suit and sat down opposite Harry.

"I am Cornelius Fudge, Harry. The Minister of Magic."

Harry already knew this, of course; he had seen Fudge once be-fore, but as he had been wearing his father's Invisibility Cloak at the time, Fudge wasn't to know that.

Tom the innkeeper reappeared, wearing an apron over his night-shirt and bearing a tray of tea and crumpets. He placed the tray on a table between Fudge and Harry and left the parlor, closing the door behind him.

"Well, Harry," said Fudge, pouring out tea, "you've had us all in a right flap, I don't mind telling you. Running away from your aunt and uncle's house like that! I'd started to think … but you're safe, and that's what matters."

Fudge buttered himself a crumpet and pushed the plate toward Harry.

"Eat, Harry, you look dead on your feet. Now then … You will be pleased to hear that we have dealt with the unfortunate blowing-up of Miss Marjorie Dursley. Two members of the Ac-cidental Magic Reversal Squad were dispatched to Privet Drive a few hours ago. Miss Dursley has been punctured and her memory has been modified. She has no recollection of the incident at all. So that's that, and no harm done."

Fudge smiled at Harry over the rim of his teacup, rather like an uncle surveying a favorite nephew. Harry, who couldn't believe his ears, opened his mouth to speak, couldn't think of anything to say, and closed it again.

"Ah, you're worrying about the reaction of your aunt and un-cle?" said Fudge. "Well, I won't deny that they are extremely angry, Harry, but they are prepared to take you back next summer as long as you stay at Hogwarts for the Christmas and Easter holidays."

Harry unstuck his throat.

“I always stay at Hogwarts for the Christmas and Easter holi-days,” he said, “and I don’t ever want to go back to Privet Drive.”

“Now, now, I’m sure you’ll feel differently once you’ve calmed down,” said Fudge in a worried tone. “They are your family, after all, and I’m sure you are fond of each other — er — very deep down.”

It didn’t occur to Harry to put Fudge right. He was still waiting to hear what was going to happen to him now.

“So all that remains,” said Fudge, now buttering himself a sec-ond crumpet, “is to decide where you’re going to spend the last three weeks of your vacation. I suggest you take a room here at the Leaky Cauldron and —”

“Hang on,” blurted Harry. “What about my punishment?”

Fudge blinked.

“Punishment?”

“I broke the law!” Harry said. “The Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry!”

“Oh, my dear boy, we’re not going to punish you for a little thing like that!” cried Fudge, waving his crumpet impatiently. “It was an accident! We don’t send people to Azkaban just for blowing up their aunts!”

But this didn’t tally at all with Harry’s past dealings with the Ministry of Magic.

“Last year, I got an official warning just because a house-elf smashed a pudding in my uncle’s house!” he told Fudge, frowning. “The Ministry of Magic said I’d be expelled from Hogwarts if there was any more magic there!”

Unless Harry's eyes were deceiving him, Fudge was suddenly looking awkward.

"Circumstances change, Harry. … We have to take into ac-count … in the present climate … Surely you don't want to be ex-pelled?"

"Of course I don't," said Harry.

"Well then, what's all the fuss about?" laughed Fudge. "Now, have a crumpet, Harry, while I go and see if Tom's got a room for you."

Fudge strode out of the parlor and Harry stared after him. There was something extremely odd going on. Why had Fudge been waiting for him at the Leaky Cauldron, if not to punish him for what he'd done? And now Harry came to think of it, surely it wasn't usual for the Minister of Magic himself to get involved in matters of underage magic?

Fudge came back, accompanied by Tom the innkeeper.

"Room eleven's free, Harry," said Fudge. "I think you'll be very comfortable. Just one thing, and I'm sure you'll understand … I don't want you wandering off into Muggle London, all right? Keep to Diagon Alley. And you're to be back here before dark each night. Sure you'll understand. Tom will be keeping an eye on you for me."

"Okay," said Harry slowly, "but why — ?"

"Don't want to lose you again, do we?" said Fudge with a hearty laugh. "No, no … best we know where you are. … I mean …"

Fudge cleared his throat loudly and picked up his pinstriped cloak.

"Well, I'll be off, plenty to do, you know. …"

"Have you had any luck with Black yet?" Harry asked.

Fudge's finger slipped on the silver fastenings of his cloak.

"What's that? Oh, you've heard — well, no, not yet, but it's only a matter of time. The Azkaban guards have never yet failed … and they are angrier than I've ever seen them."

Fudge shuddered slightly.

"So, I'll say good-bye."

He held out his hand and Harry, shaking it, had a sudden idea.

"Er — Minister? Can I ask you something?"

"Certainly," said Fudge with a smile.

"Well, third years at Hogwarts are allowed to visit Hogsmeade, but my aunt and uncle didn't sign the permission form. D'you think you could — ?"

Fudge was looking uncomfortable.

"Ah," he said. "No, no, I'm very sorry, Harry, but as I'm not your parent or guardian —"

"But you're the Minister of Magic," said Harry eagerly. "If you gave me permission —"

"No, I'm sorry, Harry, but rules are rules," said Fudge flatly. "Perhaps you'll be able to visit Hogsmeade next year. In fact, I think it's best if you don't … yes … well, I'll be off. Enjoy your stay, Harry."

And with a last smile and shake of Harry's hand, Fudge left the room. Tom now moved forward, beaming at Harry.

"If you'll follow me, Mr. Potter," he said, "I've already taken your things up. …"

Harry followed Tom up a handsome wooden staircase to a door with a brass number eleven on it, which Tom unlocked and opened for

him.

Inside was a very comfortable-looking bed, some highly pol-ished oak furniture, a cheerfully crackling fire and, perched on top of the wardrobe —"Hedwig!" Harry gasped.

The snowy owl clicked her beak and fluttered down onto Harry's arm.

"Very smart owl you've got there," chuckled Tom. "Arrived about five minutes after you did. If there's anything you need, Mr. Potter, don't hesitate to ask."

He gave another bow and left.

Harry sat on his bed for a long time, absentmindedly stroking Hedwig. The sky outside the window was changing rapidly from deep, velvety blue to cold, steely gray and then, slowly, to pink shot with gold. Harry could hardly believe that he'd left Privet Drive only a few hours ago, that he wasn't expelled, and that he was now facing three Dursley-free weeks.

"It's been a very weird night, Hedwig," he yawned.

And without even removing his glasses, he slumped back onto his pillows and fell asleep.

Chapter 4 The Leaky Cauldron

It took Harry several days to get used to his strange new freedom. Never before had he been able to get up whenever he wanted or eat whatever he fancied. He could even go wherever he pleased, as long as it was in Diagon Alley, and as this long cobbled street was packed with the most fascinating wizarding shops in the world, Harry felt no desire to break his word to Fudge and stray back into the Muggle world.

Harry ate breakfast each morning in the Leaky Cauldron, where he liked watching the other guests: funny little witches from the country, up for a day's shopping; venerable-looking wizards argu-ing over the latest article in Transfiguration Today; wild-looking warlocks; raucous dwarfs; and once, what looked suspiciously like a hag, who ordered a plate of raw liver from behind a thick woollen balaclava.

After breakfast Harry would go out into the backyard, take out his wand, tap the third brick from the left above the trash bin, and stand back as the archway into Diagon Alley opened in the wall.

Harry spent the long sunny days exploring the shops and eating under the brightly colored umbrellas outside cafes, where his fellow diners were showing one another their purchases ("it's a lunascope, old boy — no more messing around with moon charts, see?") or else discussing the case of Sirius Black ("personally, I won't let any of the children out alone until he's back in Azkaban"). Harry didn't have to do his homework under the blankets by flashlight any-more; now he could sit in the bright sunshine outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, finishing all his essays with occasional help from Florean Fortescue himself, who, apart from knowing a great deal about medieval witch burnings, gave Harry free sundaes every half an hour.

Once Harry had refilled his money bag with gold Galleons, sil-ver Sickles, and bronze Knuts from his vault at Gringotts, he had to exercise a lot of self-control not to spend the whole lot at once. He had to keep reminding himself that he had five years to go at Hog-warts, and how it would feel to ask the Dursleys for money for spellbooks, to stop himself from buying a handsome set of solid gold Gobstones (a wizarding game rather like marbles, in which the stones squirt a nasty-smelling liquid into the other player's face when they lose a point). He was sorely tempted, too, by the perfect, moving model of the galaxy in a large glass ball, which would have meant he never had to take another Astronomy lesson. But the thing that tested Harry's resolution most appeared in his favorite shop, Quality Quidditch Supplies, a week after he'd arrived at the Leaky Cauldron.

Curious to know what the crowd in the shop was staring at, Harry edged his way inside and squeezed in among the excited witches and wizards until he glimpsed a newly erected podium, on which was mounted the most magnificent broom he had ever seen in his life.

"Just come out — prototype —" a square-jawed wizard was telling his companion.

"It's the fastest broom in the world, isn't it, Dad?" squeaked a boy younger than Harry, who was swinging off his father's arm.

"Irish International Side's just put in an order for seven of these beauties!" the proprietor of the shop told the crowd. "And they're favorites for the World Cup!"

A large witch in front of Harry moved, and he was able to read the sign next to the broom:THE FIREBOLT

This state-of-the-art racing broom sports a stream-lined, superfine handle of ash, treated with a diamond-hard polish and hand-numbered with its own registration number. Each individually selected birch twig in the broomtail has been honed to aerodynamic perfection, giving the Firebolt unsurpassable balance and pinpoint

precision. The Firebolt has an acceleration of 150 miles an hour in ten seconds and incorporates an unbreakable Braking Charm. Price on request.

Price on request … Harry didn't like to think how much gold the Firebolt would cost. He had never wanted anything as much in his whole life — but he had never lost a Quidditch match on his Nim-bus Two Thousand, and what was the point in emptying his Gringotts vault for the Firebolt, when he had a very good broom already? Harry didn't ask for the price, but he returned, almost every day after that, just to look at the Firebolt.

There were, however, things that Harry needed to buy. He went to the Apothecary to replenish his store of potions ingredients, and as his school robes were now several inches too short in the arm and leg, he visited Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions and bought new ones. Most important of all, he had to buy his new schoolbooks, which would include those for his two new subjects, Care of Magical Creatures and Divination.

Harry got a surprise as he looked in at the bookshop window. Instead of the usual display of gold-embossed spellbooks the size of paving slabs, there was a large iron cage behind the glass that held about a hundred copies of The Monster Book of Monsters. Torn pages were flying everywhere as the books grappled with each other, locked together in furious wrestling matches and snapping aggressively.

Harry pulled his booklist out of his pocket and consulted it for the first time. The Monster Book of Monsters was listed as the re-quired book for Care of Magical Creatures. Now Harry under-stood why Hagrid had said it would come in useful. He felt relieved; he had been wondering whether Hagrid wanted help with some terrifying new pet.

As Harry entered Flourish and Blotts, the manager came hurry-ing toward him.

"Hogwarts?" he said abruptly. "Come to get your new books?"

"Yes," said Harry, "I need —"

"Get out of the way," said the manager impatiently, brushing Harry aside. He drew on a pair of very thick gloves, picked up a large, knobbly walking stick, and proceeded toward the door of the Monster Books' cage.

"Hang on," said Harry quickly, "I've already got one of those."

"Have you?" A look of enormous relief spread over the manager's face. "Thank heavens for that. I've been bitten five times already this morning —"

A loud ripping noise rent the air; two of the Monster Books had seized a third and were pulling it apart.

"Stop it! Stop it!" cried the manager, poking the walking stick through the bars and knocking the books apart. "I'm never stocking them again, never! It's been bedlam! I thought we'd seen the worst when we bought two hundred copies of the Invisible Book of Invisi-bility — cost a fortune, and we never found them. … Well … is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Yes," said Harry, looking down his booklist, "I need Unfogging the Future by Cassandra Vablatsky."

"Ah, starting Divination, are you?" said the manager, stripping off his gloves and leading Harry into the back of the shop, where there was a corner devoted to fortune-telling. A small table was stacked with volumes such as Predicting the Unpredictable: Insulate Yourself Against Shocks and Broken Balls: When Fortunes Turn Foul.

"Here you are," said the manager, who had climbed a set of steps to take down a thick, black-bound book. "Unfogging the Future. Very good guide to all your basic fortune-telling methods — palm-istry, crystal balls, bird entrails —"

But Harry wasn't listening. His eyes had fallen on another book, which was among a display on a small table: Death Omens: What to Do When You Know the Worst Is Coming.

"Oh, I wouldn't read that if I were you," said the manager lightly, looking to see what Harry was staring at. "You'll start see-ing death omens everywhere. It's enough to frighten anyone to death."

But Harry continued to stare at the front cover of the book; it showed a black dog large as a bear, with gleaming eyes. It looked oddly familiar. …The manager pressed Unfogging the Future into Harry's hands.

"Anything else?" he said.

"Yes," said Harry, tearing his eyes away from the dog's and dazedly consulting his booklist. "Er — I need Intermediate Trans-figuration and The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Three."

Harry emerged from Flourish and Blotts ten minutes later with his new books under his arms and made his way back to the Leaky Cauldron, hardly noticing where he was going and bumping into several people.

He tramped up the stairs to his room, went inside, and tipped his books onto his bed. Somebody had been in to tidy; the win-dows were open and sun was pouring inside. Harry could hear the buses rolling by in the unseen Muggle street behind him and the sound of the invisible crowd below in Diagon Alley. He caught sight of himself in the mirror over the basin.

"It can't have been a death omen," he told his reflection defi-antly. "I was panicking when I saw that thing in Magnolia Crescent. … It was probably just a stray dog. …"

He raised his hand automatically and tried to make his hair lie flat.

“You’re fighting a losing battle there, dear,” said his mirror in a wheezy voice.

As the days slipped by, Harry started looking wherever he went for a sign of Ron or Hermione. Plenty of Hogwarts students were ar-riving in Diagon Alley now, with the start of term so near. Harry met Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, his fellow Gryffindors, in Quality Quidditch Supplies, where they too were ogling the Fire-bolt; he also ran into the real Neville Longbottom, a round-faced, forgetful boy, outside Flourish and Blotts. Harry didn’t stop to chat; Neville appeared to have mislaid his booklist and was being told off by his very formidable-looking grandmother. Harry hoped she never found out that he’d pretended to be Neville while on the run from the Ministry of Magic.

Harry woke on the last day of the holidays, thinking that he would at least meet Ron and Hermione tomorrow, on the Hog-warts Express. He got up, dressed, went for a last look at the Fire-bolt, and was just wondering where he’d have lunch, when someone yelled his name and he turned.

“Harry! HARRY!”

They were there, both of them, sitting outside Florean Fortes-cue’s Ice Cream Parlor — Ron looking incredibly freckly Her-mione very brown, both waving frantically at him.

“Finally!” said Ron, grinning at Harry as he sat down. “We went to the Leaky Cauldron, but they said you’d left, and we went to Flourish and Blotts, and Madam Malkin’s, and —”

“I got all my school stuff last week,” Harry explained. “And how come you knew I’m staying at the Leaky Cauldron?”

“Dad,” said Ron simply.

Mr. Weasley, who worked at the Ministry of Magic, would of course have heard the whole story of what had happened to Aunt Marge.

“Did you really blow up your aunt, Harry?” said Hermione in a very serious voice.

“I didn’t mean to,” said Harry while Ron roared with laughter. “I just — lost control.”

“It’s not funny, Ron,” said Hermione sharply. “Honestly, I’m amazed Harry wasn’t expelled.”

“So am I,” admitted Harry. “Forget expelled, I thought I was go-ing to be arrested.” He looked at Ron. “Your dad doesn’t know why Fudge let me off, does he?”

“Probably ’cause it’s you, isn’t it?” shrugged Ron, still chuckling. “Famous Harry Potter and all that. I’d hate to see what the Min-istry’d do to me if I blew up an aunt. Mind you, they’d have to dig me up first, because Mum would’ve killed me. Anyway, you can ask Dad yourself this evening. We’re staying at the Leaky Cauldron tonight too! So you can come to King’s Cross with us tomorrow! Hermione’s there as well!”

Hermione nodded, beaming. “Mum and Dad dropped me off this morning with all my Hogwarts things.”

“Excellent!” said Harry happily. “So, have you got all your new books and stuff?”

“Look at this,” said Ron, pulling a long thin box out of a bag and opening it. “Brand-new wand. Fourteen inches, willow, con-taining one unicorn tail-hair. And we’ve got all our books —” He pointed at a large bag under his chair. “What about those Monster Books, eh? The assistant nearly cried when we said we wanted two.”

“What’s all that, Hermione?” Harry asked, pointing at not one but three bulging bags in the chair next to her.

“Well, I’m taking more new subjects than you, aren’t I?” said Hermione. “Those are my books for Arithmancy, Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, Study of Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies —”

“What are you doing Muggle Studies for?” said Ron, rolling his eyes at Harry. “You’re Muggle-born! Your mum and dad are Mug-gles! You already know all about Muggles!”

“But it’ll be fascinating to study them from the wizarding point of view,” said Hermione earnestly.

“Are you planning to eat or sleep at all this year, Hermione?” asked Harry, while Ron sniggered. Hermione ignored them.

“I’ve still got ten Galleons,” she said, checking her purse. “It’s my birthday in September, and Mum and Dad gave me some money to get myself an early birthday present.”

“How about a nice book?” said Ron innocently.

“No, I don’t think so,” said Hermione composedly. “I really want an owl. I mean, Harry’s got Hedwig and you’ve got Errol —”

“I haven’t,” said Ron. “Errol’s a family owl. All I’ve got is Scab-bers.” He pulled his pet rat out of his pocket. “And I want to get him checked over,” he added, placing Scabbers on the table in front of them. “I don’t think Egypt agreed with him.”

Scabbers was looking thinner than usual, and there was a defi-nite droop to his whiskers.

“There’s a magical creature shop just over there,” said Harry, who knew Diagon Alley very well by now. “You could see if they’ve got anything for Scabbers, and Hermione can get her owl.”

So they paid for their ice cream and crossed the street to the Magical Menagerie.

There wasn't much room inside. Every inch of wall was hidden by cages. It was smelly and very noisy because the occupants of these cages were all squeaking, squawking, jabbering, or hissing. The witch behind the counter was already advising a wizard on the care of double-ended newts, so Harry, Ron, and Hermione waited, examining the cages.

A pair of enormous purple toads sat gulping wetly and feasting on dead blowflies. A gigantic tortoise with a jewel-encrusted shell was glittering near the window. Poisonous orange snails were ooz-ing slowly up the side of their glass tank, and a fat white rabbit kept changing into a silk top hat and back again with a loud popping noise. Then there were cats of every color, a noisy cage of ravens, a basket of funny custard-colored furballs that were humming loudly, and on the counter, a vast cage of sleek black rats that were playing some sort of skipping game using their long, bald tails.

The double-ended newt wizard left, and Ron approached the counter.

"It's my rat," he told the witch. "He been a bit off-color ever since I brought him back from Egypt."

"Bang him on the counter," said the witch, pulling a pair of heavy black spectacles out of her pocket.

Ron lifted Scabbers out of his inside pocket and placed him next to the cage of his fellow rats, who stopped their skipping tricks and scuffled to the wire for a better look.

Like nearly everything Ron owned, Scabbers the rat was second-hand (he had once belonged to Ron's brother Percy) and a bit battered. Next to the glossy rats in the cage, he looked especially woebegone.

“Hm,” said the witch, picking up Scabbers. “How old is this rat?”

“Dunno,” said Ron. “Quite old. He used to belong to my brother.”

“What powers does he have?” said the witch, examining Scab-bers closely.

“Er —” The truth was that Scabbers had never shown the faintest trace of interesting powers. The witch’s eyes moved from Scabbers’s tattered left ear to his front paw, which had a toe miss-ing, and tutted loudly.

“He’s been through the mill, this one,” she said.

“He was like that when Percy gave him to me,” said Ron defen-sively.

“An ordinary common or garden rat like this can’t be expected to live longer than three years or so,” said the witch. “Now, if you were looking for something a bit more hard-wearing, you might like one of these —”

She indicated the black rats, who promptly started skipping again. Ron muttered, “Show-offs.”

“Well, if you don’t want a replacement, you can try this rat tonic,” said the witch, reaching under the counter and bringing out a small red bottle.

“Okay,” said Ron. “How much — OUCH!”

Ron buckled as something huge and orange came soaring from the top of the highest cage, landed on his head, and then propelled itself, spitting madly, at Scabbers.

“NO, CROOKSHANKS, NO!” cried the witch, but Scabbers shot from between her hands like a bar of soap, landed splay-legged on the floor, and then scampered for the door.

"Scabbers!" Ron shouted, racing out of the shop after him; Harry followed.

It took them nearly ten minutes to catch Scabbers, who had taken refuge under a wastepaper bin outside Quality Quidditch Supplies. Ron stuffed the trembling rat back into his pocket and straightened up, massaging his head.

"What was that?"

"It was either a very big cat or quite a small tiger," said Harry.

"Where's Hermione?"

"Probably getting her owl —"

They made their way back up the crowded street to the Magical Menagerie. As they reached it, Hermione came out, but she wasn't carrying an owl. Her arms were clamped tightly around the enormous ginger cat.

"You bought that monster?" said Ron, his mouth hanging open.

"He's gorgeous, isn't he?" said Hermione, glowing.

That was a matter of opinion, thought Harry. The cat's ginger fur was thick and fluffy, but it was definitely a bit bowlegged and its face looked grumpy and oddly squashed, as though it had run headlong into a brick wall. Now that Scabbers was out of sight, however, the cat was purring contentedly in Hermione's arms.

"Hermione, that thing nearly scalped me!" said Ron.

"He didn't mean to, did you, Crookshanks?" said Hermione.

"And what about Scabbers?" said Ron, pointing at the lump in his chest pocket. "He needs rest and relaxation! How's he going to get it with that thing around?"

“That reminds me, you forgot your rat tonic,” said Hermione, slapping the small red bottle into Ron’s hand. “And stop worrying, Crookshanks will be sleeping in my dormitory and Scabbers in yours, what’s the problem? Poor Crookshanks, that witch said he’d been in there for ages; no one wanted him.”

“I wonder why,” said Ron sarcastically as they set off toward the Leaky Cauldron.

They found Mr. Weasley sitting in the bar, reading the Daily Prophet.

“Harry!” he said, smiling as he looked up. “How are you?”

“Fine, thanks,” said Harry as he, Ron, and Hermione joined Mr. Weasley with all their shopping.

Mr. Weasley put down his paper, and Harry saw the now famil-iar picture of Sirius Black staring up at him.

“They still haven’t caught him, then?” he asked.

“No,” said Mr. Weasley, looking extremely grave. “They’ve pulled us all off our regular jobs at the Ministry to try and find him, but no luck so far.”

“Would we get a reward if we caught him?” asked Ron. “It’d be good to get some more money —”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ron,” said Mr. Weasley, who on closer in-spection looked very strained. “Black’s not going to be caught by a thirteen-year-old wizard. It’s the Azkaban guards who’ll get him back, you mark my words.”

At that moment Mrs. Weasley entered the bar, laden with shop-ping bags and followed by the twins, Fred and George, who were about to start their fifth year at Hogwarts; the newly elected Head Boy, Percy; and the Weasleys’ youngest child and only girl, Ginny.

Ginny, who had always been very taken with Harry, seemed even more heartily embarrassed than usual when she saw him, per-haps because he had saved her life during their previous year at Hogwarts. She went very red and muttered “hello” without look-ing at him. Percy, however, held out his hand solemnly as though he and Harry had never met and said, “Harry. How nice to see you.”

“Hello, Percy,” said Harry, trying not to laugh.

“I hope you’re well?” said Percy pompously, shaking hands. It was rather like being introduced to the mayor.

“Very well, thanks —”

“Harry!” said Fred, elbowing Percy out of the way and bowing deeply. “Simply splendid to see you, old boy —”

“Marvelous,” said George, pushing Fred aside and seizing Harry’s hand in turn. “Absolutely spiffing.”

Percy scowled.

“That’s enough, now,” said Mrs. Weasley.

“Mum!” said Fred as though he’d only just spotted her and seiz-ing her hand too. “How really corking to see you —”

“I said, that’s enough,” said Mrs. Weasley, depositing her shop-ping in an empty chair. “Hello, Harry, dear. I suppose you’ve heard our exciting news?” She pointed to the brand-new silver badge on Percy’s chest. “Second Head Boy in the family!” she said, swelling with pride.

“And last,” Fred muttered under his breath.

“I don’t doubt that,” said Mrs. Weasley, frowning suddenly. “I notice they haven’t made you two prefects.”

“What do we want to be prefects for?” said George, looking re-volted at the very idea. “It’d take all the fun out of life.”

Ginny giggled.

“You want to set a better example for your sister!” snapped Mrs. Weasley.

“Ginny’s got other brothers to set her an example, Mother,” said Percy loftily. “I’m going up to change for dinner. …”

He disappeared and George heaved a sigh.

“We tried to shut him in a pyramid,” he told Harry. “But Mum spotted us.”

Dinner that night was a very enjoyable affair. Tom the innkeeper put three tables together in the parlor, and the seven Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione ate their way through five delicious courses.

“How’re we getting to King’s Cross tomorrow, Dad?” asked Fred as they dug into a sumptuous chocolate pudding.

“The Ministry’s providing a couple of cars,” said Mr. Weasley.

Everyone looked up at him.

“Why?” said Percy curiously.

“It’s because of you, Perce,” said George seriously. “And there’ll be little flags on the hoods, with HB on them —”

“— for Humongous Bighead,” said Fred.

Everyone except Percy and Mrs. Weasley snorted into their pud-ding.

“Why are the Ministry providing cars, Father?” Percy asked again, in a dignified voice.

"Well, as we haven't got one anymore," said Mr. Weasley, "— and as I work there, they're doing me a favor —"

His voice was casual, but Harry couldn't help noticing that Mr. Weasley's ears had gone red, just like Ron's did when he was under pressure.

"Good thing, too," said Mrs. Weasley briskly. "Do you realize how much luggage you've all got between you? A nice sight you'd be on the Muggle Underground. … You are all packed, aren't you?"

"Ron hasn't put all his new things in his trunk yet," said Percy, in a long-suffering voice. "He's dumped them on my bed."

"You'd better go and pack properly, Ron, because we won't have much time in the morning," Mrs. Weasley called down the table. Ron scowled at Percy.

After dinner everyone felt very full and sleepy. One by one they made their way upstairs to their rooms to check their things for the next day. Ron and Percy were next door to Harry. He had just closed and locked his own trunk when he heard angry voices through the wall, and went to see what was going on.

The door of number twelve was ajar and Percy was shouting.

"It was here, on the bedside table, I took it off for polishing —"

"I haven't touched it, all right?" Ron roared back.

"What's up?" said Harry.

"My Head Boy badge is gone," said Percy, rounding on Harry.

"So's Scabbers's rat tonic," said Ron, throwing things out of his trunk to look. "I think I might've left it in the bar —"

"You're not going anywhere till you've found my badge!" yelled Percy.

“I’ll get Scabbers’s stuff, I’m packed,” Harry said to Ron, and he went downstairs.

Harry was halfway along the passage to the bar, which was now very dark, when he heard another pair of angry voices coming from the parlor. A second later, he recognized them as Mr. and Mrs. Weasleys’. He hesitated, not wanting them to know he’d heard them arguing, when the sound of his own name made him stop, then move closer to the parlor door.

“… makes no sense not to tell him,” Mr. Weasley was saying heatedly. “Harry’s got a right to know. I’ve tried to tell Fudge, but he insists on treating Harry like a child. He’s thirteen years old and —”

“Arthur, the truth would terrify him!” said Mrs. Weasley shrilly. “Do you really want to send Harry back to school with that hang-ing over him? For heaven’s sake, he’s happy not knowing!”

“I don’t want to make him miserable, I want to put him on his guard!” retorted Mr. Weasley. “You know what Harry and Ron are like, wandering off by themselves — they’ve even ended up in the Forbidden Forest! But Harry mustn’t do that this year! When I think what could have happened to him that night he ran away from home! If the Knight Bus hadn’t picked him up, I’m prepared to bet he would have been dead before the Ministry found him.”

“But he’s not dead, he’s fine, so what’s the point —”

“Molly, they say Sirius Black’s mad, and maybe he is, but he was clever enough to escape from Azkaban, and that’s supposed to be impossible. It’s been a month, and no one’s seen hide nor hair of him, and I don’t care what Fudge keeps telling the Daily Prophet, we’re no nearer catching Black than inventing self-spelling wands. The only thing we know for sure is what Black’s after —”

“But Harry will be perfectly safe at Hogwarts.”

“We thought Azkaban was perfectly safe. If Black can break out of Azkaban, he can break into Hogwarts.”

“But no one’s really sure that Black’s after Harry —”

There was a thud on wood, and Harry was sure Mr. Weasley had banged his fist on the table.

“Molly, how many times do I have to tell you? They didn’t report it in the press because Fudge wanted it kept quiet, but Fudge went out to Azkaban the night Black escaped. The guards told Fudge that Black’s been talking in his sleep for a while now. Always the same words: ‘He’s at Hogwarts … he’s at Hogwarts.’ Black is de-ranged, Molly, and he wants Harry dead. If you ask me, he thinks murdering Harry will bring You-Know-Who back to power. Black lost everything the night Harry stopped You-Know-Who, and he’s had twelve years alone in Azkaban to brood on that. …”

There was a silence. Harry leaned still closer to the door, desper-ate to hear more.

“Well, Arthur, you must do what you think is right. But you’re forgetting Albus Dumbledore. I don’t think anything could hurt Harry at Hogwarts while Dumbledore’s headmaster. I suppose he knows about all this?”

“Of course he knows. We had to ask him if he minds the Azka-ban guards stationing themselves around the entrances to the school grounds. He wasn’t happy about it, but he agreed.”

“Not happy? Why shouldn’t he be happy, if they’re there to catch Black?”

“Dumbledore isn’t fond of the Azkaban guards,” said Mr. Weasley heavily. “Nor am I, if it comes to that … but when you’re dealing with a wizard like Black, you sometimes have to join forces with those you’d rather avoid.”

"If they save Harry —"

"— then I will never say another word against them," said Mr. Weasley wearily. "It's late, Molly, we'd better go up. …"

Harry heard chairs move. As quietly as he could, he hurried down the passage to the bar and out of sight. The parlor door opened, and a few seconds later footsteps told him that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were climbing the stairs.

The bottle of rat tonic was lying under the table they had sat at earlier. Harry waited until he heard Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's bed-room door close, then headed back upstairs with the bottle.

Fred and George were crouching in the shadows on the landing, heaving with laughter as they listened to Percy dismantling his and Ron's room in search of his badge.

"We've got it," Fred whispered to Harry. "We've been improv-ing it."

The badge now read Bighead Boy.

Harry forced a laugh, went to give Ron the rat tonic, then shut himself in his room and lay down on his bed.

So Sirius Black was after him. This explained everything. Fudge had been lenient with him because he was so relieved to find him alive. He'd made Harry promise to stay in Diagon Alley where there were plenty of wizards to keep an eye on him. And he was sending two Ministry cars to take them all to the station tomorrow, so that the Weasleys could look after Harry until he was on the train.

Harry lay listening to the muffled shouting next door and won-dered why he didn't feel more scared. Sirius Black had murdered thirteen people with one curse; Mr. and Mrs. Weasley obviously thought Harry would be panic-stricken if he knew the truth. But Harry happened to agree wholeheartedly with Mrs. Weasley that the safest place on

earth was wherever Albus Dumbledore hap-pened to be. Didn't people always say that Dumbledore was the only person Lord Voldemort had ever been afraid of? Surely Black, as Voldemort's right-hand man, would be just as frightened of him?

And then there were these Azkaban guards everyone kept talking about. They seemed to scare most people senseless, and if they were stationed all around the school, Black's chances of getting inside seemed very remote.

No, all in all, the thing that bothered Harry most was the fact that his chances of visiting Hogsmeade now looked like zero. No-body would want Harry to leave the safety of the castle until Black was caught; in fact, Harry suspected his every move would be care-fully watched until the danger had passed.

He scowled at the dark ceiling. Did they think he couldn't look after himself? He'd escaped Lord Voldemort three times; he wasn't completely useless. …Unbidden, the image of the beast in the shadows of Magnolia Crescent crossed his mind. What to do when you know the worst is coming. …"I'm not going to be murdered," Harry said out loud.

"That's the spirit, dear," said his mirror sleepily.

Chapter 5 The Dementor

Tom woke Harry the next morning with his usual toothless grin and a cup of tea. Harry got dressed and was just per-suading a disgruntled Hedwig to get back into her cage when Ron banged his way into the room, pulling a sweatshirt over his head and looking irritable.

“The sooner we get on the train, the better,” he said. “At least I can get away from Percy at Hogwarts. Now he’s accusing me of dripping tea on his photo of Penelope Clearwater. You know,” Ron grimaced, “his girlfriend. She’s hidden her face under the frame be-cause her nose has gone all blotchy. …”

“I’ve got something to tell you,” Harry began, but they were interrupted by Fred and George, who had looked in to congratulate Ron on infuriating Percy again.

They headed down to breakfast, where Mr. Weasley was reading the front page of the Daily Prophet with a furrowed brow and Mrs. Weasley was telling Hermione and Ginny about a love potion she’d made as a young girl. All three of them were rather giggly.

“What were you saying?” Ron asked Harry as they sat down.

“Later,” Harry muttered as Percy stormed in.

Harry had no chance to speak to Ron or Hermione in the chaos of leaving; they were too busy heaving all their trunks down the Leaky Cauldron’s narrow staircase and piling them up near the door, with Hedwig and Hermes, Percy’s screech owl, perched on top in their cages. A small wickerwork basket stood beside the heap of trunks, spitting loudly.

“It’s all right, Crookshanks,” Hermione cooed through the wicker-work. “I’ll let you out on the train.”

“You won’t,” snapped Ron. “What about poor Scabbers, eh?”

He pointed at his chest, where a large lump indicated that Scab-bers was curled up in his pocket.

Mr. Weasley, who had been outside waiting for the Ministry cars, stuck his head inside.

“They’re here,” he said. “Harry, come on.”

Mr. Weasley marched Harry across the short stretch of pave-ment toward the first of two old-fashioned dark green cars, each of which was driven by a furtive-looking wizard wearing a suit of emerald velvet.

“In you get, Harry,” said Mr. Weasley, glancing up and down the crowded street.

Harry got into the back of the car and was shortly joined by Hermione, Ron, and, to Ron’s disgust, Percy.

The journey to King’s Cross was very uneventful compared with Harry’s trip on the Knight Bus. The Ministry of Magic cars seemed almost ordinary, though Harry noticed that they could slide through gaps that Uncle Vernon’s new company car certainly couldn’t have managed. They reached King’s Cross with twenty minutes to spare; the Ministry drivers found them trolleys, un-loaded their trunks, touched their hats in salute to Mr. Weasley, and drove away, somehow managing to jump to the head of an un-moving line at the traffic lights.

Mr. Weasley kept close to Harry’s elbow all the way into the station.

“Right then,” he said, glancing around them. “Let’s do this in pairs, as there are so many of us. I’ll go through first with Harry.”

Mr. Weasley strolled toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten, pushing Harry's trolley and apparently very interested in the InterCity 125 that had just arrived at platform nine. With a meaningful look at Harry, he leaned casually against the barrier. Harry imitated him.

In a moment, they had fallen sideways through the solid metal onto platform nine and three-quarters and looked up to see the Hogwarts Express, a scarlet steam engine, puffing smoke over a platform packed with witches and wizards seeing their children onto the train.

Percy and Ginny suddenly appeared behind Harry. They were panting and had apparently taken the barrier at a run.

"Ah, there's Penelope!" said Percy, smoothing his hair and going pink again. Ginny caught Harry's eye, and they both turned away to hide their laughter as Percy strode over to a girl with long, curly hair, walking with his chest thrown out so that she couldn't miss his shiny badge.

Once the remaining Weasleys and Hermione had joined them, Harry and Ron led the way to the end of the train, past packed compartments, to a carriage that looked quite empty. They loaded the trunks onto it, stowed Hedwig and Crookshanks in the luggage rack, then went back outside to say good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

Mrs. Weasley kissed all her children, then Hermione, and finally, Harry. He was embarrassed, but really quite pleased, when she gave him an extra hug.

"Do take care, won't you, Harry?" she said as she straightened up, her eyes oddly bright. Then she opened her enormous handbag and said, "I've made you all sandwiches. … Here you are, Ron … no, they're not corned beef. … Fred? Where's Fred? Here you are, dear. …"

"Harry," said Mr. Weasley quietly, "come over here a mo-ment."

He jerked his head toward a pillar, and Harry followed him be-hind it, leaving the others crowded around Mrs. Weasley.

“There’s something I’ve got to tell you before you leave —” said Mr. Weasley, in a tense voice.

“It’s all right, Mr. Weasley,” said Harry. “I already know.”

“You know? How could you know?”

“I — er — I heard you and Mrs. Weasley talking last night. I couldn’t help hearing,” Harry added quickly. “Sorry —”

“That’s not the way I’d have chosen for you to find out,” said Mr. Weasley, looking anxious.

“No — honestly, it’s okay. This way, you haven’t broken your word to Fudge and I know what’s going on.”

“Harry, you must be very scared —”

“I’m not,” said Harry sincerely. “Really,” he added, because Mr. Weasley was looking disbelieving. “I’m not trying to be a hero, but seriously, Sirius Black can’t be worse than Voldemort, can he?”

Mr. Weasley flinched at the sound of the name but over-looked it.

“Harry, I knew you were, well, made of stronger stuff than Fudge seems to think, and I’m obviously pleased that you’re not scared, but —”

“Arthur!” called Mrs. Weasley, who was now shepherding the rest onto the train. “Arthur, what are you doing? It’s about to go!”

“He’s coming, Molly!” said Mr. Weasley but he turned back to Harry and kept talking in a lower and more hurried voice. “Listen, I want you to give me your word —”

"— that I'll be a good boy and stay in the castle?" said Harry gloomily.

"Not entirely," said Mr. Weasley, who looked more serious than Harry had ever seen him. "Harry, swear to me you won't go looking for Black."

Harry stared. "What?"

There was a loud whistle. Guards were walking along the train, slamming all the doors shut.

"Promise me, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, talking more quickly still, "that whatever happens —"

"Why would I go looking for someone I know wants to kill me?" said Harry blankly.

"Swear to me that whatever you might hear —"

"Arthur, quickly!" cried Mrs. Weasley.

Steam was billowing from the train; it had started to move. Harry ran to the compartment door and Ron threw it open and stood back to let him on. They leaned out of the window and waved at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley until the train turned a corner and blocked them from view.

"I need to talk to you in private," Harry muttered to Ron and Hermione as the train picked up speed.

"Go away, Ginny," said Ron.

"Oh, that's nice," said Ginny huffily, and she stalked off.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off down the corridor, looking for an empty compartment, but all were full except for the one at the very end of the train.

This had only one occupant, a man sitting fast asleep next to the window. Harry, Ron, and Hermione checked on the threshold. The Hogwarts Express was usually reserved for students and they had never seen an adult there before, except for the witch who pushed the food cart.

The stranger was wearing an extremely shabby set of wizard's robes that had been darned in several places. He looked ill and ex-hausted. Though quite young, his light brown hair was flecked with gray.

"Who d'you reckon he is?" Ron hissed as they sat down and slid the door shut, taking the seats farthest away from the window.

"Professor R. J. Lupin," whispered Hermione at once.

"How d'you know that?"

"It's on his case," she replied, pointing at the luggage rack over the man's head, where there was a small, battered case held to-gether with a large quantity of neatly knotted string. The name Professor R. J. Lupin was stamped across one corner in peeling letters.

"Wonder what he teaches?" said Ron, frowning at Professor Lupin's pallid profile.

"That's obvious," whispered Hermione. "There's only one va-cancy, isn't there? Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had already had two Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, both of whom had lasted only one year. There were rumors that the job was jinxed.

"Well, I hope he's up to it," said Ron doubtfully. "He looks like one good hex would finish him off, doesn't he? Anyway …" He turned to Harry. "What were you going to tell us?"

Harry explained all about Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's argument and the warning Mr. Weasley had just given him. When he'd finished, Ron looked thunderstruck, and Hermione had her hands over her mouth. She finally lowered them to say, "Sirius Black escaped to come after you? Oh, Harry … you'll have to be really, really care-ful. Don't go looking for trouble, Harry —"

"I don't go looking for trouble," said Harry, nettled. "Trouble usually finds me."

"How thick would Harry have to be, to go looking for a nutter who wants to kill him?" said Ron shakily.

They were taking the news worse than Harry had expected. Both Ron and Hermione seemed to be much more frightened of Black than he was.

"No one knows how he got out of Azkaban," said Ron uncom-fortably. "No one's ever done it before. And he was a top-security prisoner too."

"But they'll catch him, won't they?" said Hermione earnestly. "I mean, they've got all the Muggles looking out for him too. …"

"What's that noise?" said Ron suddenly.

A faint, tinny sort of whistle was coming from somewhere. They looked all around the compartment.

"It's coming from your trunk, Harry," said Ron, standing up and reaching into the luggage rack. A moment later he had pulled the Pocket Sneakoscope out from between Harry's robes. It was spin-ning very fast in the palm of Ron's hand and glowing brilliantly.

"Is that a Sneakoscope?" said Hermione interestedly, standing up for a better look.

"Yeah … mind you, it's a very cheap one," Ron said. "It went haywire just as I was tying it to Errol's leg to send it to Harry."

"Were you doing anything untrustworthy at the time?" said Hermione shrewdly.

"No! Well … I wasn't supposed to be using Errol. You know he's not really up to long journeys … but how else was I supposed to get Harry's present to him?"

"Stick it back in the trunk," Harry advised as the Sneakoscope whistled piercingly, "or it'll wake him up."

He nodded toward Professor Lupin. Ron stuffed the Sneako-scope into a particularly horrible pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks, which deadened the sound, then closed the lid of the trunk on it.

"We could get it checked in Hogsmeade," said Ron, sitting back down. "They sell that sort of thing in Dervish and Banges, magical instruments and stuff. Fred and George told me."

"Do you know much about Hogsmeade?" asked Hermione keenly. "I've read it's the only entirely non-Muggle settlement in Britain —"

"Yeah, I think it is," said Ron in an offhand sort of way, "but that's not why I want to go. I just want to get inside Honey-dukes!"

"What's that?" said Hermione.

"It's this sweetshop," said Ron, a dreamy look coming over his face, "where they've got everything. … Pepper Imps — they make you smoke at the mouth — and great fat Chocoballs full of straw-berry mousse and clotted cream, and really excellent sugar quills, which you can suck in class and just look like you're thinking what to write next —"

“But Hogsmeade’s a very interesting place, isn’t it?” Hermione pressed on eagerly. “In Sites of Historical Sorcery it says the inn was the headquarters for the 1612 goblin rebellion, and the Shrieking Shack’s supposed to be the most severely haunted building in Britain —”

“— and massive sherbet balls that make you levitate a few inches off the ground while you’re sucking them,” said Ron, who was plainly not listening to a word Hermione was saying.

Hermione looked around at Harry.

“Won’t it be nice to get out of school for a bit and explore Hogsmeade?”

“ ’Spect it will,” said Harry heavily. “You’ll have to tell me when you’ve found out.”

“What d’you mean?” said Ron.

“I can’t go. The Dursleys didn’t sign my permission form, and Fudge wouldn’t either.”

Ron looked horrified.

“You’re not allowed to come? But — no way — McGonagall or someone will give you permission —”

Harry gave a hollow laugh. Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor House, was very strict.

“— or we can ask Fred and George, they know every secret pas-sage out of the castle —”

“Ron!” said Hermione sharply. “I don’t think Harry should be sneaking out of school with Black on the loose —”

"Yeah, I expect that's what McGonagall will say when I ask for permission," said Harry bitterly.

"But if we're with him," said Ron spiritedly to Hermione, "Black wouldn't dare —"

"Oh, Ron, don't talk rubbish," snapped Hermione. "Black's al-ready murdered a whole bunch of people in the middle of a crowded street. Do you really think he's going to worry about at-tacking Harry just because we're there?"

She was fumbling with the straps of Crookshanks's basket as she spoke.

"Don't let that thing out!" Ron said, but too late; Crookshanks leapt lightly from the basket, stretched, yawned, and sprang onto Ron's knees; the lump in Ron's pocket trembled and he shoved Crookshanks angrily away.

"Get out of here!"

"Ron, don't!" said Hermione angrily.

Ron was about to answer back when Professor Lupin stirred. They watched him apprehensively, but he simply turned his head the other way, mouth slightly open, and slept on.

The Hogwarts Express moved steadily north and the scenery outside the window became wilder and darker while the clouds overhead thickened. People were chasing backward and forward past the door of their compartment. Crookshanks had now settled in an empty seat, his squashed face turned toward Ron, his yellow eyes on Ron's top pocket.

At one o'clock, the plump witch with the food cart arrived at the compartment door.

“D’you think we should wake him up?” Ron asked awkwardly, nodding toward Professor Lupin. “He looks like he could do with some food.”

Hermione approached Professor Lupin cautiously.

“Er — Professor?” she said. “Excuse me — Professor?”

He didn’t move.

“Don’t worry, dear,” said the witch as she handed Harry a large stack of Cauldron Cakes. “If he’s hungry when he wakes, I’ll be up front with the driver.”

“I suppose he is asleep?” said Ron quietly as the witch slid the compartment door closed. “I mean — he hasn’t died, has he?”

“No, no, he’s breathing,” whispered Hermione, taking the Caul-dron Cake Harry passed her.

He might not be very good company, but Professor Lupin’s pres-ence in their compartment had its uses. Midafternoon, just as it had started to rain, blurring the rolling hills outside the window, they heard footsteps in the corridor again, and their three least fa-vorite people appeared at the door: Draco Malfoy, flanked by his cronies, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle.

Draco Malfoy and Harry had been enemies ever since they had met on their very first train journey to Hogwarts. Malfoy, who had a pale, pointed, sneering face, was in Slytherin House; he played Seeker on the Slytherin Quidditch team, the same position that Harry played on the Gryffindor team. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to exist to do Malfoy’s bidding. They were both wide and musclely; Crabbe was taller, with a pudding-bowl haircut and a very thick neck; Goyle had short, bristly hair and long, gorilla-ish arms.

“Well, look who it is,” said Malfoy in his usual lazy drawl, pulling open the compartment door. “Potty and the Weasel.”

Crabbe and Goyle chuckled trollishly.

“I heard your father finally got his hands on some gold this sum-mer, Weasley,” said Malfoy. “Did your mother die of shock?”

Ron stood up so quickly he knocked Crookshanks’s basket to the floor. Professor Lupin gave a snort.

“Who’s that?” said Malfoy, taking an automatic step backward as he spotted Lupin.

“New teacher,” said Harry, who got to his feet, too, in case he needed to hold Ron back. “What were you saying, Malfoy?”

Malfoy’s pale eyes narrowed; he wasn’t fool enough to pick a fight right under a teacher’s nose.

“C’mon,” he muttered resentfully to Crabbe and Goyle, and they disappeared.

Harry and Ron sat down again, Ron massaging his knuckles.

“I’m not going to take any crap from Malfoy this year,” he said angrily. “I mean it. If he makes one more crack about my family, I’m going to get hold of his head and —”

Ron made a violent gesture in midair.

“Ron,” hissed Hermione, pointing at Professor Lupin, “be care-ful …”

But Professor Lupin was still fast asleep.

The rain thickened as the train sped yet farther north; the windows were now a solid, shimmering gray, which gradually darkened until lanterns flickered into life all along the corridors and over the luggage

racks. The train rattled, the rain hammered, the wind roared, but still, Professor Lupin slept.

“We must be nearly there,” said Ron, leaning forward to look past Professor Lupin at the now completely black window.

The words had hardly left him when the train started to slow down.

“Great,” said Ron, getting up and walking carefully past Profes-sor Lupin to try and see outside. “I’m starving. I want to get to the feast. …”

“We can’t be there yet,” said Hermione, checking her watch.

“So why’re we stopping?”

The train was getting slower and slower. As the noise of the pis-tons fell away, the wind and rain sounded louder than ever against the windows.

Harry, who was nearest the door, got up to look into the corri-dor. All along the carriage, heads were sticking curiously out of their compartments.

The train came to a stop with a jolt, and distant thuds and bangs told them that luggage had fallen out of the racks. Then, without warning, all the lamps went out and they were plunged into total darkness.

“What’s going on?” said Ron’s voice from behind Harry.

“Ouch!” gasped Hermione. “Ron, that was my foot!”

Harry felt his way back to his seat.

“D’you think we’ve broken down?”

“Dunno …”

There was a squeaking sound, and Harry saw the dim black outline of Ron, wiping a patch clean on the window and peer-ing out.

“There’s something moving out there,” Ron said. “I think people are coming aboard. …”

The compartment door suddenly opened and someone fell painfully over Harry’s legs.

“Sorry — d’you know what’s going on? — Ouch — sorry —”

“Hullo, Neville,” said Harry, feeling around in the dark and pulling Neville up by his cloak.

“Harry? Is that you? What’s happening?”

“No idea — sit down —”

There was a loud hissing and a yelp of pain; Neville had tried to sit on Crookshanks.

“I’m going to go and ask the driver what’s going on,” came Hermione’s voice. Harry felt her pass him, heard the door slide open again, and then a thud and two loud squeals of pain.

“Who’s that?”

“Who’s that?”

“Ginny?”

“Hermione?”

“What are you doing?”

“I was looking for Ron —”

“Come in and sit down —”

“Not here!” said Harry hurriedly. “I’m here!”

“Ouch!” said Neville.

“Quiet!” said a hoarse voice suddenly.

Professor Lupin appeared to have woken up at last. Harry could hear movements in his corner. None of them spoke.

There was a soft, crackling noise, and a shivering light filled the compartment. Professor Lupin appeared to be holding a handful of flames. They illuminated his tired, gray face, but his eyes looked alert and wary.

“Stay where you are,” he said in the same hoarse voice, and he got slowly to his feet with his handful of fire held out in front of him.

But the door slid slowly open before Lupin could reach it.

Standing in the doorway, illuminated by the shivering flames in Lupin’s hand, was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Its face was completely hidden beneath its hood. Harry’s eyes darted downward, and what he saw made his stomach contract. There was a hand protruding from the cloak and it was glistening, grayish, slimy-looking, and scabbed, like something dead that had decayed in water. …But it was visible only for a split second. As though the creature beneath the cloak sensed Harry’s gaze, the hand was suddenly with-drawn into the folds of its black cloak.

And then the thing beneath the hood, whatever it was, drew a long, slow, rattling breath, as though it were trying to suck some-thing more than air from its surroundings.

An intense cold swept over them all. Harry felt his own breath catch in his chest. The cold went deeper than his skin. It was inside his chest, it was inside his very heart. …Harry’s eyes rolled up into his head. He couldn’t see. He was drowning in cold. There was a rushing in his

ears as though of water. He was being dragged downward, the roaring growing louder …And then, from far away, he heard screaming, terrible, terrified, pleading screams. He wanted to help whoever it was, he tried to move his arms, but couldn't … a thick white fog was swirling around him, inside him —"Harry! Harry! Are you all right?"

Someone was slapping his face.

"W — what?"

Harry opened his eyes; there were lanterns above him, and the floor was shaking — the Hogwarts Express was moving again and the lights had come back on. He seemed to have slid out of his seat onto the floor. Ron and Hermione were kneeling next to him, and above them he could see Neville and Professor Lupin watching. Harry felt very sick; when he put up his hand to push his glasses back on, he felt cold sweat on his face.

Ron and Hermione heaved him back onto his seat.

"Are you okay?" Ron asked nervously.

"Yeah," said Harry, looking quickly toward the door. The hooded creature had vanished. "What happened? Where's that — that thing? Who screamed?"

"No one screamed," said Ron, more nervously still.

Harry looked around the bright compartment. Ginny and Neville looked back at him, both very pale.

"But I heard screaming —"

A loud snap made them all jump. Professor Lupin was breaking an enormous slab of chocolate into pieces.

“Here,” he said to Harry, handing him a particularly large piece. “Eat it. It’ll help.”

Harry took the chocolate but didn’t eat it.

“What was that thing?” he asked Lupin.

“A dementor,” said Lupin, who was now giving chocolate to everyone else. “One of the dementors of Azkaban.”

Everyone stared at him. Professor Lupin crumpled up the empty chocolate wrapper and put it in his pocket.

“Eat,” he repeated. “It’ll help. I need to speak to the driver, ex-cuse me …”

He strolled past Harry and disappeared into the corridor.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Harry?” said Hermione, watching Harry anxiously.

“I don’t get it. … What happened?” said Harry, wiping more sweat off his face.

“Well — that thing — the dementor — stood there and looked around (I mean, I think it did, I couldn’t see its face) — and you — you —”

“I thought you were having a fit or something,” said Ron, who still looked scared. “You went sort of rigid and fell out of your seat and started twitching —”

“And Professor Lupin stepped over you, and walked toward the dementor, and pulled out his wand,” said Hermione, “and he said, ‘None of us is hiding Sirius Black under our cloaks. Go.’ But the dementor didn’t move, so Lupin muttered something, and a silvery thing shot out of his wand at it, and it turned around and sort of glided away. …”

"It was horrible," said Neville, in a higher voice than usual. "Did you feel how cold it got when it came in?"

"I felt weird," said Ron, shifting his shoulders uncomfortably. "Like I'd never be cheerful again. …"

Ginny, who was huddled in her corner looking nearly as bad as Harry felt, gave a small sob; Hermione went over and put a com-forting arm around her.

"But didn't any of you — fall off your seats?" said Harry awk-wardly.

"No," said Ron, looking anxiously at Harry again. "Ginny was shaking like mad, though. …"

Harry didn't understand. He felt weak and shivery, as though he were recovering from a bad bout of flu; he also felt the beginnings of shame. Why had he gone to pieces like that, when no one else had?

Professor Lupin had come back. He paused as he entered, looked around, and said, with a small smile, "I haven't poisoned that chocolate, you know. …"

Harry took a bite and to his great surprise felt warmth spread suddenly to the tips of his fingers and toes.

"We'll be at Hogwarts in ten minutes," said Professor Lupin. "Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry didn't ask how Professor Lupin knew his name.

"Fine," he muttered, embarrassed.

They didn't talk much during the remainder of the journey. At long last, the train stopped at Hogsmeade station, and there was a great scramble to get outside; owls hooted, cats meowed, and Neville's pet

toad croaked loudly from under his hat. It was freez-ing on the tiny platform; rain was driving down in icy sheets.

“Firs’ years this way!” called a familiar voice. Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned and saw the gigantic outline of Hagrid at the other end of the platform, beckoning the terrified-looking new stu-dents forward for their traditional journey across the lake.

“All righ’, you three?” Hagrid yelled over the heads of the crowd. They waved at him, but had no chance to speak to him because the mass of people around them was shunting them away along the platform. Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed the rest of the school along the platform and out onto a rough mud track, where at least a hundred stagecoaches awaited the remaining students, each pulled, Harry could only assume, by an invisible horse, be-cause when they climbed inside and shut the door, the coach set off all by itself, bumping and swaying in procession.

The coach smelled faintly of mold and straw. Harry felt better since the chocolate, but still weak. Ron and Hermione kept look-ing at him sideways, as though frightened he might collapse again.

As the carriage trundled toward a pair of magnificent wrought iron gates, flanked with stone columns topped with winged boars, Harry saw two more towering, hooded dementors, standing guard on either side. A wave of cold sickness threatened to engulf him again; he leaned back into the lumpy seat and closed his eyes until they had passed the gates. The carriage picked up speed on the long, sloping drive up to the castle; Hermione was leaning out of the tiny window, watching the many turrets and towers draw nearer. At last, the carriage swayed to a halt, and Hermione and Ron got out.

As Harry stepped down, a drawling, delighted voice sounded in his ear.

“You fainted, Potter? Is Longbottom telling the truth? You actu-ally fainted?”

Malfoy elbowed past Hermione to block Harry's way up the stone steps to the castle, his face gleeful and his pale eyes glinting maliciously.

"Shove off, Malfoy," said Ron, whose jaw was clenched.

"Did you faint as well, Weasley?" said Malfoy loudly. "Did the scary old dementor frighten you too, Weasley?"

"Is there a problem?" said a mild voice. Professor Lupin had just gotten out of the next carriage.

Malfoy gave Professor Lupin an insolent stare, which took in the patches on his robes and the delapidated suitcase. With a tiny hint of sarcasm in his voice, he said, "Oh, no — er — Professor," then he smirked at Crabbe and Goyle and led them up the steps into the castle.

Hermione prodded Ron in the back to make him hurry, and the three of them joined the crowd swarming up the steps, through the giant oak front doors, into the cavernous entrance hall, which was lit with flaming torches, and housed a magnificent marble staircase that led to the upper floors.

The door into the Great Hall stood open at the right; Harry fol-lowed the crowd toward it, but had barely glimpsed the enchanted ceiling, which was black and cloudy tonight, when a voice called, "Potter! Granger! I want to see you both!"

Harry and Hermione turned around, surprised. Professor McGonagall, Transfiguration teacher and head of Gryffindor House, was calling over the heads of the crowd. She was a stern-looking witch who wore her hair in a tight bun; her sharp eyes were framed with square spectacles. Harry fought his way over to her with a feeling of foreboding: Professor McGonagall had a way of making him feel he must have done something wrong.

“There’s no need to look so worried — I just want a word in my office,” she told them. “Move along there, Weasley.”

Ron stared as Professor McGonagall ushered Harry and Hermione away from the chattering crowd; they accompanied her across the entrance hall, up the marble staircase, and along a corridor.

Once they were in her office, a small room with a large, wel-coming fire, Professor McGonagall motioned Harry and Her-mione to sit down. She settled herself behind her desk and said abruptly, “Professor Lupin sent an owl ahead to say that you were taken ill on the train, Potter.”

Before Harry could reply, there was a soft knock on the door and Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, came bustling in.

Harry felt himself going red in the face. It was bad enough that he’d passed out, or whatever he had done, without everyone mak-ing all this fuss.

“I’m fine,” he said, “I don’t need anything —”

“Oh, it’s you, is it?” said Madam Pomfrey, ignoring this and bending down to stare closely at him. “I suppose you’ve been doing something dangerous again?”

“It was a dementor, Poppy,” said Professor McGonagall.

They exchanged a dark look, and Madam Pomfrey clucked dis-approvingly.

“Setting dementors around a school,” she muttered, pushing back Harry’s hair and feeling his forehead. “He won’t be the last one who collapses. Yes, he’s all clammy. Terrible things, they are, and the effect they have on people who are already delicate —”

“I’m not delicate!” said Harry crossly.

“Of course you’re not,” said Madam Pomfrey absentmindedly, now taking his pulse.

“What does he need?” said Professor McGonagall crisply. “Bed rest? Should he perhaps spend tonight in the hospital wing?”

“I’m fine!” said Harry, jumping up. The thought of what Draco Malfoy would say if he had to go to the hospital wing was torture.

“Well, he should have some chocolate, at the very least,” said Madam Pomfrey, who was now trying to peer into Harry’s eyes.

“I’ve already had some,” said Harry. “Professor Lupin gave me some. He gave it to all of us.”

“Did he, now?” said Madam Pomfrey approvingly. “So we’ve fi-nally got a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who knows his remedies?”

“Are you sure you feel all right, Potter?” Professor McGonagall said sharply.

“Yes,” said Harry.

“Very well. Kindly wait outside while I have a quick word with Miss Granger about her course schedule, then we can go down to the feast together.”

Harry went back into the corridor with Madam Pomfrey, who left for the hospital wing, muttering to herself. He had to wait only a few minutes; then Hermione emerged looking very happy about something, followed by Professor McGonagall, and the three of them made their way back down the marble staircase to the Great Hall.

It was a sea of pointed black hats; each of the long House tables was lined with students, their faces glimmering by the light of thousands of candles, which were floating over the tables in mid-air. Professor

Flitwick, who was a tiny little wizard with a shock of white hair, was carrying an ancient hat and a three-legged stool out of the hall.

“Oh,” said Hermione softly, “we’ve missed the Sorting!”

New students at Hogwarts were sorted into Houses by trying on the Sorting Hat, which shouted out the House they were best suited to (Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, or Slytherin). Profes-sor McGonagall strode off toward her empty seat at the staff table, and Harry and Hermione set off in the other direction, as quietly as possible, toward the Gryffindor table. People looked around at them as they passed along the back of the hall, and a few of them pointed at Harry. Had the story of his collapsing in front of the de-mentor traveled that fast?

He and Hermione sat down on either side of Ron, who had saved them seats.

“What was all that about?” he muttered to Harry.

Harry started to explain in a whisper, but at that moment the headmaster stood up to speak, and he broke off.

Professor Dumbledore, though very old, always gave an impres-sion of great energy. He had several feet of long silver hair and beard, half-moon spectacles, and an extremely crooked nose. He was often described as the greatest wizard of the age, but that wasn’t why Harry respected him. You couldn’t help trusting Albus Dum-bledore, and as Harry watched him beaming around at the stu-dents, he felt really calm for the first time since the dementor had entered the train compartment.

“Welcome!” said Dumbledore, the candlelight shimmering on his beard. “Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! I have a few things to say to you all, and as one of them is very serious, I think it best to get it out of the way before you become befuddled by our excellent feast. …”

Dumbledore cleared his throat and continued, “As you will all be aware after their search of the Hogwarts Express, our school is presently playing host to some of the dementors of Azkaban, who are here on Ministry of Magic business.”

He paused, and Harry remembered what Mr. Weasley had said about Dumbledore not being happy with the dementors guarding the school.

“They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds,” Dumble-dore continued, “and while they are with us, I must make it plain that nobody is to leave school without permission. Dementors are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises — or even Invisibility Cloaks,” he added blandly, and Harry and Ron glanced at each other. “It is not in the nature of a dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you. I look to the prefects, and our new Head Boy and Girl, to make sure that no student runs afoul of the de-mentors,” he said.

Percy, who was sitting a few seats down from Harry, puffed out his chest again and stared around impressively. Dumbledore paused again; he looked very seriously around the hall, and nobody moved or made a sound.

“On a happier note,” he continued, “I am pleased to welcome two new teachers to our ranks this year.

“First, Professor Lupin, who has kindly consented to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

There was some scattered, rather unenthusiastic applause. Only those who had been in the compartment on the train with Profes-sor Lupin clapped hard, Harry among them. Professor Lupin looked particularly shabby next to all the other teachers in their best robes.

“Look at Snape!” Ron hissed in Harry’s ear.

Professor Snape, the Potions master, was staring along the staff table at Professor Lupin. It was common knowledge that Snape wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, but even Harry, who hated Snape, was startled at the expression twisting his thin, sallow face. It was beyond anger: it was loathing. Harry knew that expression only too well; it was the look Snape wore every time he set eyes on Harry.

“As to our second new appointment,” Dumbledore continued as the lukewarm applause for Professor Lupin died away. “Well, I am sorry to tell you that Professor Kettleburn, our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, retired at the end of last year in order to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs. However, I am delighted to say that his place will be filled by none other than Rubeus Hagrid, who has agreed to take on this teaching job in addition to his gamekeeping duties.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another, stunned. Then they joined in with the applause, which was tumultuous at the Gryffindor table in particular. Harry leaned forward to see Hagrid, who was ruby-red in the face and staring down at his enor-mous hands, his wide grin hidden in the tangle of his black beard.

“We should’ve known!” Ron roared, pounding the table. “Who else would have assigned us a biting book?”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were the last to stop clapping, and as Professor Dumbledore started speaking again, they saw that Hagrid was wiping his eyes on the tablecloth.

“Well, I think that’s everything of importance,” said Dumble-dore. “Let the feast begin!”

The golden plates and goblets before them filled suddenly with food and drink. Harry, suddenly ravenous, helped himself to everything he could reach and began to eat.

It was a delicious feast; the hall echoed with talk, laughter, and the clatter of knives and forks. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, how-ever, were eager for it to finish so that they could talk to Hagrid. They knew how much being made a teacher would mean to him. Hagrid wasn't a fully qualified wizard; he had been expelled from Hogwarts in his third year for a crime he had not committed. It had been Harry, Ron, and Hermione who had cleared Hagrid's name last year.

At long last, when the last morsels of pumpkin tart had melted from the golden platters, Dumbledore gave the word that it was time for them all to go to bed, and they got their chance.

"Congratulations, Hagrid!" Hermione squealed as they reached the teachers' table.

"All down ter you three," said Hagrid, wiping his shining face on his napkin as he looked up at them. "Can' believe it … great man, Dumbledore … came straight down to me hut after Professor Kettleburn said he'd had enough. … It's what I always wanted. …"

Overcome with emotion, he buried his face in his napkin, and Professor McGonagall shooed them away.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined the Gryffindors streaming up the marble staircase and, very tired now, along more corridors, up more and more stairs, to the hidden entrance to Gryffindor Tower. A large portrait of a fat lady in a pink dress asked them, "Pass-word?"

"Coming through, coming through!" Percy called from behind the crowd. "The new password's 'Fortuna Major'!"

"Oh no," said Neville Longbottom sadly. He always had trouble remembering the passwords.

Through the portrait hole and across the common room, the girls and boys divided toward their separate staircases. Harry climbed the spiral stair with no thought in his head except how glad he was to be

back. They reached their familiar, circular dormitory with its five four-poster beds, and Harry, looking around, felt he was home at last.

Chapter 6 Talons and Tea Leaves

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the Great Hall for breakfast the next day, the first thing they saw was Draco Malfoy, who seemed to be entertaining a large group of Slytherins with a very funny story. As they passed, Malfoy did a ridiculous impression of a swooning fit and there was a roar of laughter.

“Ignore him,” said Hermione, who was right behind Harry. “Just ignore him, it’s not worth it. …”

“Hey, Potter!” shrieked Pansy Parkinson, a Slytherin girl with a face like a pug. “Potter! The dementors are coming, Potter! Woooooooo!”

Harry dropped into a seat at the Gryffindor table, next to George Weasley.

“New third-year course schedules,” said George, passing them over. “What’s up with you, Harry?”

“Malfoy,” said Ron, sitting down on George’s other side and glaring over at the Slytherin table.

George looked up in time to see Malfoy pretending to faint with terror again.

“That little git,” he said calmly. “He wasn’t so cocky last night when the dementors were down at our end of the train. Came run-ning into our compartment, didn’t he, Fred?”

“Nearly wet himself,” said Fred, with a contemptuous glance at Malfoy.

“I wasn’t too happy myself,” said George. “They’re horrible things, those dementors. …”

“Sort of freeze your insides, don’t they?” said Fred.

“You didn’t pass out, though, did you?” said Harry in a low voice.

“Forget it, Harry,” said George bracingly. “Dad had to go out to Azkaban one time, remember, Fred? And he said it was the worst place he’d ever been, he came back all weak and shaking. … They suck the happiness out of a place, dementors. Most of the prison-ers go mad in there.”

“Anyway, we’ll see how happy Malfoy looks after our first Quid-ditch match,” said Fred. “Gryffindor versus Slytherin, first game of the season, remember?”

The only time Harry and Malfoy had faced each other in a Quidditch match, Malfoy had definitely come off worse. Feeling slightly more cheerful, Harry helped himself to sausages and fried tomatoes.

Hermione was examining her new schedule.

“Ooh, good, we’re starting some new subjects today,” she said happily.

“Hermione,” said Ron, frowning as he looked over her shoulder, “they’ve messed up your schedule. Look — they’ve got you down for about ten subjects a day. There isn’t enough time.”

“I’ll manage. I’ve fixed it all with Professor McGonagall.”

“But look,” said Ron, laughing, “see this morning? Nine o’clock, Divination. And underneath, nine o’clock, Muggle Studies. And” — Ron leaned closer to the schedule, disbelieving — “look — underneath that, Arithmancy, nine o’clock. I mean, I know you’re good, Hermione, but no one’s that good. How’re you supposed to be in three classes at once?”

"Don't be silly," said Hermione shortly. "Of course I won't be in three classes at once."

"Well, then —"

"Pass the marmalade," said Hermione.

"But —"

"Oh, Ron, what's it to you if my schedule's a bit full?" Hermione snapped. "I told you, I've fixed it all with Professor McGonagall."

Just then, Hagrid entered the Great Hall. He was wearing his long moleskin overcoat and was absentmindedly swinging a dead polecat from one enormous hand.

"All righ'?" he said eagerly, pausing on the way to the staff table. "Yer in my firs' ever lesson! Right after lunch! Bin up since five gettin' everythin' ready. … Hope it's okay. … Me, a teacher … hones'ly. …"

He grinned broadly at them and headed off to the staff table, still swinging the polecat.

"Wonder what he's been getting ready?" said Ron, a note of anx-iety in his voice.

The hall was starting to empty as people headed off toward their first lesson. Ron checked his course schedule.

"We'd better go, look, Divination's at the top of North Tower. It'll take us ten minutes to get there. …"

They finished their breakfasts hastily, said good-bye to Fred and George, and walked back through the hall. As they passed the Slytherin table, Malfoy did yet another impression of a faint-ing fit. The shouts of laughter followed Harry into the entrance hall.

The journey through the castle to North Tower was a long one. Two years at Hogwarts hadn't taught them everything about the castle, and they had never been inside North Tower before.

"There's — got — to — be — a — shortcut," Ron panted as they climbed their seventh long staircase and emerged on an unfa-miliar landing, where there was nothing but a large painting of a bare stretch of grass hanging on the stone wall.

"I think it's this way," said Hermione, peering down the empty passage to the right.

"Can't be," said Ron. "That's south, look, you can see a bit of the lake out of the window …"

Harry was watching the painting. A fat, dapple-gray pony had just ambled onto the grass and was grazing nonchalantly. Harry was used to the subjects of Hogwarts paintings moving around and leaving their frames to visit one another, but he always enjoyed watching it. A moment later, a short, squat knight in a suit of ar-mor clanked into the picture after his pony. By the look of the grass stains on his metal knees, he had just fallen off.

"Aha!" he yelled, seeing Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "What villains are these, that trespass upon my private lands! Come to scorn at my fall, perchance? Draw, you knaves, you dogs!"

They watched in astonishment as the little knight tugged his sword out of its scabbard and began brandishing it violently, hop-ping up and down in rage. But the sword was too long for him; a particularly wild swing made him overbalance, and he landed face-down in the grass.

"Are you all right?" said Harry, moving closer to the picture.

"Get back, you scurvy braggart! Back, you rogue!"

The knight seized his sword again and used it to push himself back up, but the blade sank deeply into the grass and, though he pulled with all his might, he couldn't get it out again. Finally, he had to flop back down onto the grass and push up his visor to mop his sweating face.

"Listen," said Harry, taking advantage of the knight's exhaus-tion, "we're looking for the North Tower. You don't know the way, do you?"

"A quest!" The knight's rage seemed to vanish instantly. He clanked to his feet and shouted, "Come follow me, dear friends, and we shall find our goal, or else shall perish bravely in the charge!"

He gave the sword another fruitless tug, tried and failed to mount the fat pony, gave up, and cried, "On foot then, good sirs and gentle lady! On! On!"

And he ran, clanking loudly, into the left side of the frame and out of sight.

They hurried after him along the corridor, following the sound of his armor. Every now and then they spotted him running through a picture ahead.

"Be of stout heart, the worst is yet to come!" yelled the knight, and they saw him reappear in front of an alarmed group of women in crinolines, whose picture hung on the wall of a narrow spiral staircase.

Puffing loudly, Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the tightly spiraling steps, getting dizzier and dizzier, until at last they heard the murmur of voices above them and knew they had reached the classroom.

"Farewell!" cried the knight, popping his head into a painting of some sinister-looking monks. "Farewell, my comrades-in-arms! If ever you have need of noble heart and steely sinew, call upon Sir Cadogan!"

“Yeah, we’ll call you,” muttered Ron as the knight disappeared, “if we ever need someone mental.”

They climbed the last few steps and emerged onto a tiny land-ing, where most of the class was already assembled. There were no doors off this landing, but Ron nudged Harry and pointed at the ceiling, where there was a circular trapdoor with a brass plaque on it.

“ ‘Sibyll Trelawney, Divination teacher,’ ” Harry read. “How’re we supposed to get up there?”

As though in answer to his question, the trapdoor suddenly opened, and a silvery ladder descended right at Harry’s feet. Every-one got quiet.

“After you,” said Ron, grinning, so Harry climbed the ladder first.

He emerged into the strangest-looking classroom he had ever seen. In fact, it didn’t look like a classroom at all, more like a cross between someone’s attic and an old-fashioned tea shop. At least twenty small, circular tables were crammed inside it, all sur-rounded by chintz armchairs and fat little poufs. Everything was lit with a dim, crimson light; the curtains at the windows were all closed, and the many lamps were draped with dark red scarves. It was stiflingly warm, and the fire that was burning under the crowded mantelpiece was giving off a heavy, sickly sort of perfume as it heated a large copper kettle. The shelves running around the circular walls were crammed with dusty-looking feathers, stubs of candles, many packs of tattered playing cards, countless silvery crystal balls, and a huge array of teacups.

Ron appeared at Harry’s shoulder as the class assembled around them, all talking in whispers.

“Where is she?” Ron said.

A voice came suddenly out of the shadows, a soft, misty sort of voice.

“Welcome,” it said. “How nice to see you in the physical world at last.”

Harry’s immediate impression was of a large, glittering insect. Professor Trelawney moved into the firelight, and they saw that she was very thin; her large glasses magnified her eyes to several times their natural size, and she was draped in a gauzy spangled shawl. Innumerable chains and beads hung around her spindly neck, and her arms and hands were encrusted with bangles and rings.

“Sit, my children, sit,” she said, and they all climbed awkwardly into armchairs or sank onto poufs. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat themselves around the same round table.

“Welcome to Divination,” said Professor Trelawney, who had seated herself in a winged armchair in front of the fire. “My name is Professor Trelawney. You may not have seen me before. I find that descending too often into the hustle and bustle of the main school clouds my Inner Eye.”

Nobody said anything to this extraordinary pronouncement. Professor Trelawney delicately rearranged her shawl and continued, “So you have chosen to study Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you. Books can take you only so far in this field. …”

At these words, both Harry and Ron glanced, grinning, at Hermione, who looked startled at the news that books wouldn’t be much help in this subject.

“Many witches and wizards, talented though they are in the area of loud bangs and smells and sudden disappearings, are yet unable to penetrate the veiled mysteries of the future,” Professor Trelawney went on, her enormous, gleaming eyes moving from face to nervous face. “It is a Gift granted to few. You, boy,” she said suddenly to Neville, who almost toppled off his pouf. “Is your grandmother well?”

“I think so,” said Neville tremulously.

“I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you, dear,” said Professor Trelawney, the firelight glinting on her long emerald earrings. Neville gulped. Professor Trelawney continued placidly. “We will be covering the basic methods of Divination this year. The first term will be devoted to reading the tea leaves. Next term we shall progress to palmistry. By the way, my dear,” she shot suddenly at Parvati Patil, “beware a red-haired man.”

Parvati gave a startled look at Ron, who was right behind her, and edged her chair away from him.

“In the second term,” Professor Trelawney went on, “we shall progress to the crystal ball — if we have finished with fire omens, that is. Unfortunately, classes will be disrupted in February by a nasty bout of flu. I myself will lose my voice. And around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever.”

A very tense silence followed this pronouncement, but Professor Trelawney seemed unaware of it.

“I wonder, dear,” she said to Lavender Brown, who was nearest and shrank back in her chair, “if you could pass me the largest sil-ver teapot?”

Lavender, looking relieved, stood up, took an enormous teapot from the shelf, and put it down on the table in front of Professor Trelawney.

“Thank you, my dear. Incidentally, that thing you are dreading — it will happen on Friday the sixteenth of October.”

Lavender trembled.

“Now, I want you all to divide into pairs. Collect a teacup from the shelf, come to me, and I will fill it. Then sit down and drink, drink until only the dregs remain. Swill these around the cup three times with the

left hand, then turn the cup upside down on its saucer, wait for the last of the tea to drain away, then give your cup to your partner to read. You will interpret the patterns using pages five and six of Unfogging the Future. I shall move among you, help-ing and instructing. Oh, and dear" — she caught Neville by the arm as he made to stand up — "after you've broken your first cup, would you be so kind as to select one of the blue patterned ones? I'm rather attached to the pink."

Sure enough, Neville had no sooner reached the shelf of tea-cups when there was a tinkle of breaking china. Professor Trelawney swept over to him holding a dustpan and brush and said, "One of the blue ones, then, dear, if you wouldn't mind … thank you. …"

When Harry and Ron had had their teacups filled, they went back to their table and tried to drink the scalding tea quickly. They swilled the dregs around as Professor Trelawney had instructed, then drained the cups and swapped over.

"Right," said Ron as they both opened their books at pages five and six. "What can you see in mine?"

"A load of soggy brown stuff," said Harry. The heavily perfumed smoke in the room was making him feel sleepy and stupid.

"Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!" Professor Trelawney cried through the gloom.

Harry tried to pull himself together.

"Right, you've got a crooked sort of cross …" He consulted Unfogging the Future. "That means you're going to have 'trials and suffering' — sorry about that — but there's a thing that could be the sun … hang on … that means 'great happiness' … so you're going to suffer but be very happy. …"

“You need your Inner Eye tested, if you ask me,” said Ron, and they both had to stifle their laughs as Professor Trelawney gazed in their direction.

“My turn …” Ron peered into Harry’s teacup, his forehead wrinkled with effort. “There’s a blob a bit like a bowler hat,” he said. “Maybe you’re going to work for the Ministry of Magic. …”

He turned the teacup the other way up.

“But this way it looks more like an acorn. … What’s that?” He scanned his copy of Unfogging the Future. “ ‘A windfall, unexpected gold.’ Excellent, you can lend me some … and there’s a thing here,” he turned the cup again, “that looks like an animal … yeah, if that was its head … it looks like a hippo … no, a sheep …”

Professor Trelawney whirled around as Harry let out a snort of laughter.

“Let me see that, my dear,” she said reprovingly to Ron, sweeping over and snatching Harry’s cup from him. Everyone went quiet to watch.

Professor Trelawney was staring into the teacup, rotating it counterclockwise.

“The falcon … my dear, you have a deadly enemy.”

“But everyone knows that,” said Hermione in a loud whisper. Professor Trelawney stared at her.

“Well, they do,” said Hermione. “Everybody knows about Harry and You-Know-Who.”

Harry and Ron stared at her with a mixture of amazement and admiration. They had never heard Hermione speak to a teacher like

that before. Professor Trelawney chose not to reply. She low-ered her huge eyes to Harry's cup again and continued to turn it.

"The club … an attack. Dear, dear, this is not a happy cup. …"

"I thought that was a bowler hat," said Ron sheepishly.

"The skull … danger in your path, my dear. …"

Everyone was staring, transfixed, at Professor Trelawney, who gave the cup a final turn, gasped, and then screamed.

There was another tinkle of breaking china; Neville had smashed his second cup. Professor Trelawney sank into a vacant armchair, her glittering hand at her heart and her eyes closed.

"My dear boy … my poor, dear boy … no … it is kinder not to say … no … don't ask me. …"

"What is it, Professor?" said Dean Thomas at once. Everyone had got to their feet, and slowly they crowded around Harry and Ron's table, pressing close to Professor Trelawney's chair to get a good look at Harry's cup.

"My dear," Professor Trelawney's huge eyes opened dramatically, "you have the Grim."

"The what?" said Harry.

He could tell that he wasn't the only one who didn't understand; Dean Thomas shrugged at him and Lavender Brown looked puz-zled, but nearly everybody else clapped their hands to their mouths in horror.

"The Grim, my dear, the Grim!" cried Professor Trelawney, who looked shocked that Harry hadn't understood. "The giant, spectral dog that haunts churchyards! My dear boy, it is an omen — the worst omen — of death!"

Harry's stomach lurched. That dog on the cover of Death Omens in Flourish and Blotts — the dog in the shadows of Magnolia Crescent … Lavender Brown clapped her hands to her mouth too. Everyone was looking at Harry, everyone except Hermione, who had gotten up and moved around to the back of Professor Trelawney's chair.

"I don't think it looks like a Grim," she said flatly.

Professor Trelawney surveyed Hermione with mounting dislike.

"You'll forgive me for saying so, my dear, but I perceive very lit-tle aura around you. Very little receptivity to the resonances of the future."

Seamus Finnigan was tilting his head from side to side.

"It looks like a Grim if you do this," he said, with his eyes almost shut, "but it looks more like a donkey from here," he said, leaning to the left.

"When you've all finished deciding whether I'm going to die or not!" said Harry, taking even himself by surprise. Now nobody seemed to want to look at him.

"I think we will leave the lesson here for today," said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest voice. "Yes … please pack away your things. …"

Silently the class took their teacups back to Professor Trelawney, packed away their books, and closed their bags. Even Ron was avoiding Harry's eyes.

"Until we meet again," said Professor Trelawney faintly, "fair for-tune be yours. Oh, and dear" — she pointed at Neville — "you'll be late next time, so mind you work extra-hard to catch up."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione descended Professor Trelawney's lad-der and the winding stair in silence, then set off for Professor Mc-

Gonagall's Transfiguration lesson. It took them so long to find her classroom that, early as they had left Divination, they were only just in time.

Harry chose a seat right at the back of the room, feeling as though he were sitting in a very bright spotlight; the rest of the class kept shooting furtive glances at him, as though he were about to drop dead at any moment. He hardly heard what Professor McGonagall was telling them about Animagi (wizards who could transform at will into animals), and wasn't even watching when she transformed herself in front of their eyes into a tabby cat with spec-tacle markings around her eyes.

"Really, what has got into you all today?" said Professor Mc-Gonagall, turning back into herself with a faint pop, and staring around at them all. "Not that it matters, but that's the first time my transformation's not got applause from a class."

Everybody's heads turned toward Harry again, but nobody spoke. Then Hermione raised her hand.

"Please, Professor, we've just had our first Divination class, and we were reading the tea leaves, and —"

"Ah, of course," said Professor McGonagall, suddenly frowning. "There is no need to say any more, Miss Granger. Tell me, which of you will be dying this year?"

Everyone stared at her.

"Me," said Harry, finally.

"I see," said Professor McGonagall, fixing Harry with her beady eyes. "Then you should know, Potter, that Sibyll Trelawney has predicted the death of one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them has died yet. Seeing death omens is her favorite way of

greeting a new class. If it were not for the fact that I never speak ill of my colleagues —”

Professor McGonagall broke off, and they saw that her nostrils had gone white. She went on, more calmly, “Divination is one of the most imprecise branches of magic. I shall not conceal from you that I have very little patience with it. True Seers are very rare, and Professor Trelawney —”

She stopped again, and then said, in a very matter-of-fact tone, “You look in excellent health to me, Potter, so you will excuse me if I don’t let you off homework today. I assure you that if you die, you need not hand it in.”

Hermione laughed. Harry felt a bit better. It was harder to feel scared of a lump of tea leaves away from the dim red light and be-fuddling perfume of Professor Trelawney’s classroom. Not everyone was convinced, however. Ron still looked worried, and Lavender whispered, “But what about Neville’s cup?”

When the Transfiguration class had finished, they joined the crowd thundering toward the Great Hall for lunch.

“Ron, cheer up,” said Hermione, pushing a dish of stew toward him. “You heard what Professor McGonagall said.”

Ron spooned stew onto his plate and picked up his fork but didn’t start.

“Harry,” he said, in a low, serious voice, “you haven’t seen a great black dog anywhere, have you?”

“Yeah, I have,” said Harry. “I saw one the night I left the Dursleys’.”

Ron let his fork fall with a clatter.

“Probably a stray,” said Hermione calmly.

Ron looked at Hermione as though she had gone mad.

“Hermione, if Harry’s seen a Grim, that’s — that’s bad,” he said. “My — my uncle Bilius saw one and — and he died twenty-four hours later!”

“Coincidence,” said Hermione airily, pouring herself some pumpkin juice.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” said Ron, starting to get angry. “Grims scare the living daylights out of most wizards!”

“There you are, then,” said Hermione in a superior tone. “They see the Grim and die of fright. The Grim’s not an omen, it’s the cause of death! And Harry’s still with us because he’s not stupid enough to see one and think, right, well, I’d better kick the bucket then!”

Ron mouthed wordlessly at Hermione, who opened her bag, took out her new Arithmancy book, and propped it open against the juice jug.

“I think Divination seems very woolly,” she said, searching for her page. “A lot of guesswork, if you ask me.”

“There was nothing woolly about the Grim in that cup!” said Ron hotly.

“You didn’t seem quite so confident when you were telling Harry it was a sheep,” said Hermione coolly.

“Professor Trelawney said you didn’t have the right aura! You just don’t like being bad at something for a change!”

He had touched a nerve. Hermione slammed her Arithmancy book down on the table so hard that bits of meat and carrot flew everywhere.

“If being good at Divination means I have to pretend to see death omens in a lump of tea leaves, I’m not sure I’ll be studying it much longer! That lesson was absolute rubbish compared with my Arithmancy class!”

She snatched up her bag and stalked away.

Ron frowned after her.

“What’s she talking about?” he said to Harry. “She hasn’t been to an Arithmancy class yet.”

Harry was pleased to get out of the castle after lunch. Yesterday’s rain had cleared; the sky was a clear, pale gray, and the grass was springy and damp underfoot as they set off for their first ever Care of Magical Creatures class.

Ron and Hermione weren’t speaking to each other. Harry walked beside them in silence as they went down the sloping lawns to Hagrid’s hut on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It was only when he spotted three only-too-familiar backs ahead of them that he real-ized they must be having these lessons with the Slytherins. Malfoy was talking animatedly to Crabbe and Goyle, who were chortling. Harry was quite sure he knew what they were talking about.

Hagrid was waiting for his class at the door of his hut. He stood in his moleskin overcoat, with Fang the boarhound at his heels, looking impatient to start.

“C’mon, now, get a move on!” he called as the class approached. “Got a real treat for yeh today! Great lesson comin’ up! Everyone here? Right, follow me!”

For one nasty moment, Harry thought that Hagrid was going to lead them into the forest; Harry had had enough unpleasant expe-riences in there to last him a lifetime. However, Hagrid strolled off around the

edge of the trees, and five minutes later, they found themselves outside a kind of paddock. There was nothing in there.

“Everyone gather ’round the fence here!” he called. “That’s it — make sure yeh can see — now, firs’ thing yeh’ll want ter do is open yer books —”

“How?” said the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy.

“Eh?” said Hagrid.

“How do we open our books?” Malfoy repeated. He took out his copy of The Monster Book of Monsters, which he had bound shut with a length of rope. Other people took theirs out too; some, like Harry, had belted their book shut; others had crammed them in-side tight bags or clamped them together with binder clips.

“Hasn’ — hasn’ anyone bin able ter open their books?” said Hagrid, looking crestfallen.

The class all shook their heads.

“Yeh’ve got ter stroke ’em,” said Hagrid, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. “Look —”

He took Hermione’s copy and ripped off the Spellotape that bound it. The book tried to bite, but Hagrid ran a giant forefinger down its spine, and the book shivered, and then fell open and lay quiet in his hand.

“Oh, how silly we’ve all been!” Malfoy sneered. “We should have stroked them! Why didn’t we guess!”

“I — I thought they were funny,” Hagrid said uncertainly to Hermione.

“Oh, tremendously funny!” said Malfoy. “Really witty, giving us books that try and rip our hands off!”

“Shut up, Malfoy,” said Harry quietly. Hagrid was looking downcast and Harry wanted Hagrid’s first lesson to be a success.

“Righ’ then,” said Hagrid, who seemed to have lost his thread, “so — so yeh’ve got yer books an’ — an’ — now yeh need the Magical Creatures. Yeah. So I’ll go an’ get ’em. Hang on …”

He strode away from them into the forest and out of sight.

“God, this place is going to the dogs,” said Malfoy loudly. “That oaf teaching classes, my father’ll have a fit when I tell him —”

“Shut up, Malfoy,” Harry repeated.

“Careful, Potter, there’s a dementor behind you —”

“Oooooooh!” squealed Lavender Brown, pointing toward the opposite side of the paddock.

Trotting toward them were a dozen of the most bizarre creatures Harry had ever seen. They had the bodies, hind legs, and tails of horses, but the front legs, wings, and heads of what seemed to be giant eagles, with cruel, steel-colored beaks and large, brilliantly orange eyes. The talons on their front legs were half a foot long and deadly looking. Each of the beasts had a thick leather collar around its neck, which was attached to a long chain, and the ends of all of these were held in the vast hands of Hagrid, who came jogging into the paddock behind the creatures.

“Gee up, there!” he roared, shaking the chains and urging the creatures toward the fence where the class stood. Everyone drew back slightly as Hagrid reached them and tethered the creatures to the fence.

“Hippogriffs!” Hagrid roared happily, waving a hand at them. “Beau’iful, aren’ they?”

Harry could sort of see what Hagrid meant. Once you got over the first shock of seeing something that was half horse, half bird, you started to appreciate the hippogriffs' gleaming coats, changing smoothly from feather to hair, each of them a different color: stormy gray, bronze, pinkish roan, gleaming chestnut, and inky black.

"So," said Hagrid, rubbing his hands together and beaming around, "if yeh wan' ter come a bit nearer —"

No one seemed to want to. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, how-ever, approached the fence cautiously.

"Now, firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud," said Hagrid. "Easily offended, hippogriffs are. Don't never insult one, 'cause it might be the last thing yeh do."

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle weren't listening; they were talking in an undertone and Harry had a nasty feeling they were plotting how best to disrupt the lesson.

"Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff ter make the firs' move," Hagrid continued. "It's polite, see? Yeh walk toward him, and yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed ter touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish, 'cause those talons hurt.

"Right — who wants ter go first?"

Most of the class backed farther away in answer. Even Harry, Ron, and Hermione had misgivings. The hippogriffs were tossing their fierce heads and flexing their powerful wings; they didn't seem to like being tethered like this.

"No one?" said Hagrid, with a pleading look.

"I'll do it," said Harry.

There was an intake of breath from behind him, and both Lavender and Parvati whispered, “Oooh, no, Harry, remember your tea leaves!”

Harry ignored them. He climbed over the paddock fence.

“Good man, Harry!” roared Hagrid. “Right then — let’s see how yeh get on with Buckbeak.”

He untied one of the chains, pulled the gray hippogriff away from its fellows, and slipped off its leather collar. The class on the other side of the paddock seemed to be holding its breath. Malfoy’s eyes were narrowed maliciously.

“Easy, now, Harry,” said Hagrid quietly. “Yeh’ve got eye contact, now try not ter blink. … Hippogriffs don’ trust yeh if yeh blink too much. …”

Harry’s eyes immediately began to water, but he didn’t shut them. Buckbeak had turned his great, sharp head and was staring at Harry with one fierce orange eye.

“Tha’s it,” said Hagrid. “Tha’s it, Harry … now, bow …”

Harry didn’t feel much like exposing the back of his neck to Buckbeak, but he did as he was told. He gave a short bow and then looked up.

The hippogriff was still staring haughtily at him. It didn’t move.

“Ah,” said Hagrid, sounding worried. “Right — back away, now, Harry, easy does it —”

But then, to Harry’s enormous surprise, the hippogriff suddenly bent its scaly front knees and sank into what was an unmistakable bow.

“Well done, Harry!” said Hagrid, ecstatic. “Right — yeh can touch him! Pat his beak, go on!”

Feeling that a better reward would have been to back away, Harry moved slowly toward the hippogriff and reached out toward it. He patted the beak several times and the hippogriff closed its eyes lazily, as though enjoying it.

The class broke into applause, all except for Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were looking deeply disappointed.

"Righ' then, Harry," said Hagrid. "I reckon he might' let yeh ride him!"

This was more than Harry had bargained for. He was used to a broomstick; but he wasn't sure a hippogriff would be quite the same.

"Yeh climb up there, jus' behind the wing joint," said Hagrid, "an' mind yeh don' pull any of his feathers out, he won' like that. …"

Harry put his foot on the top of Buckbeak's wing and hoisted himself onto its back. Buckbeak stood up. Harry wasn't sure where to hold on; everything in front of him was covered with feathers.

"Go on, then!" roared Hagrid, slapping the hippogriff's hind-quarters.

Without warning, twelve-foot wings flapped open on either side of Harry; he just had time to seize the hippogriff around the neck before he was soaring upward. It was nothing like a broomstick, and Harry knew which one he preferred; the hippogriff's wings beat uncomfortably on either side of him, catching him under his legs and making him feel he was about to be thrown off; the glossy feathers slipped under his fingers and he didn't dare get a stronger grip; instead of the smooth action of his Nimbus Two Thousand, he now felt himself rocking backward and forward as the hindquar-ters of the hippogriff rose and fell with its wings.

Buckbeak flew him once around the paddock and then headed back to the ground; this was the bit Harry had been dreading; he leaned back as the smooth neck lowered, feeling he was going to slip off over the beak, then felt a heavy thud as the four ill-assorted feet hit

the ground. He just managed to hold on and push himself straight again.

“Good work, Harry!” roared Hagrid as everyone except Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle cheered. “Okay, who else wants a go?”

Emboldened by Harry’s success, the rest of the class climbed cautiously into the paddock. Hagrid untied the hippogriffs one by one, and soon people were bowing nervously, all over the paddock. Neville ran repeatedly backward from his, which didn’t seem to want to bend its knees. Ron and Hermione practiced on the chest-nut, while Harry watched.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had taken over Buckbeak. He had bowed to Malfoy, who was now patting his beak, looking dis-dainful.

“This is very easy,” Malfoy drawled, loud enough for Harry to hear him. “I knew it must have been, if Potter could do it. … I bet you’re not dangerous at all, are you?” he said to the hippogriff. “Are you, you great ugly brute?”

It happened in a flash of steely talons; Malfoy let out a high-pitched scream and next moment, Hagrid was wrestling Buckbeak back into his collar as he strained to get at Malfoy, who lay curled in the grass, blood blossoming over his robes.

“I’m dying!” Malfoy yelled as the class panicked. “I’m dying, look at me! It’s killed me!”

“Yer not dyin’!” said Hagrid, who had gone very white. “Some-one help me — gotta get him outta here —”

Hermione ran to hold open the gate as Hagrid lifted Malfoy eas-ily. As they passed, Harry saw that there was a long, deep gash on Malfoy’s arm; blood splattered the grass and Hagrid ran with him, up the slope toward the castle.

Very shaken, the Care of Magical Creatures class followed at a walk. The Slytherins were all shouting about Hagrid.

“They should fire him straight away!” said Pansy Parkinson, who was in tears.

“It was Malfoy’s fault!” snapped Dean Thomas. Crabbe and Goyle flexed their muscles threateningly.

They all climbed the stone steps into the deserted entrance hall.

“I’m going to see if he’s okay!” said Pansy, and they all watched her run up the marble staircase. The Slytherins, still muttering about Hagrid, headed away in the direction of their dungeon common room; Harry, Ron, and Hermione proceeded upstairs to Gryffindor Tower.

“D’you think he’ll be all right?” said Hermione nervously.

“ ’Course he will. Madam Pomfrey can mend cuts in about a sec-ond,” said Harry, who had had far worse injuries mended magically by the nurse.

“That was a really bad thing to happen in Hagrid’s first class, though, wasn’t it?” said Ron, looking worried. “Trust Malfoy to mess things up for him. …”

They were among the first to reach the Great Hall at dinner-time, hoping to see Hagrid, but he wasn’t there.

“They wouldn’t fire him, would they?” said Hermione anxiously, not touching her steak-and-kidney pudding.

“They’d better not,” said Ron, who wasn’t eating either.

Harry was watching the Slytherin table. A large group including Crabbe and Goyle was huddled together, deep in conversation. Harry

was sure they were cooking up their own version of how Malfoy had been injured.

“Well, you can’t say it wasn’t an interesting first day back,” said Ron gloomily.

They went up to the crowded Gryffindor common room after dinner and tried to do the homework Professor McGonagall had given them, but all three of them kept breaking off and glancing out of the tower window.

“There’s a light on in Hagrid’s window,” Harry said suddenly.

Ron looked at his watch.

“If we hurried, we could go down and see him. It’s still quite early. …”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said slowly, and Harry saw her glance at him.

“I’m allowed to walk across the grounds,” he said pointedly. “Sirius Black hasn’t got past the dementors yet, has he?”

So they put their things away and headed out of the portrait hole, glad to meet nobody on their way to the front doors, as they weren’t entirely sure they were supposed to be out.

The grass was still wet and looked almost black in the twilight. When they reached Hagrid’s hut, they knocked, and a voice growled, “C’min.”

Hagrid was sitting in his shirtsleeves at his scrubbed wooden table; his boarhound, Fang, had his head in Hagrid’s lap. One look told them that Hagrid had been drinking a lot; there was a pewter tankard almost as big as a bucket in front of him, and he seemed to be having difficulty getting them into focus.

“ ’Spect it’s a record,” he said thickly, when he recognized them. “Don’ reckon they’ve ever had a teacher who lasted on’y a day be-fore.”

“You haven’t been fired, Hagrid!” gasped Hermione.

“Not yet,” said Hagrid miserably, taking a huge gulp of whatever was in the tankard. “But ’s only a matter o’ time, i’n’t it, after Malfoy …”

“How is he?” said Ron as they all sat down. “It wasn’t serious, was it?”

“Madam Pomfrey fixed him best she could,” said Hagrid dully, “but he’s sayin’ it’s still agony … covered in ban-dages … moanin’ …”

“He’s faking it,” said Harry at once. “Madam Pomfrey can mend anything. She regrew half my bones last year. Trust Malfoy to milk it for all it’s worth.”

“School gov’nors have bin told, o’ course,” said Hagrid miser-ably. “They reckon I started too big. Shoulda left hippogriffs fer later … done flobberworms or summat. … Jus’ thought it’d make a good firs’ lesson. … ’S all my fault. …”

“It’s all Malfoy’s fault, Hagrid!” said Hermione earnestly.

“We’re witnesses,” said Harry. “You said hippogriffs attack if you insult them. It’s Malfoy’s problem that he wasn’t listening. We’ll tell Dumbledore what really happened.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Hagrid, we’ll back you up,” said Ron.

Tears leaked out of the crinkled corners of Hagrid’s beetle-black eyes. He grabbed both Harry and Ron and pulled them into a bone-breaking hug.

“I think you’ve had enough to drink, Hagrid,” said Hermione firmly. She took the tankard from the table and went outside to empty it.

“Ar, maybe she’s right,” said Hagrid, letting go of Harry and Ron, who both staggered away, rubbing their ribs. Hagrid heaved himself out of his chair and followed Hermione unsteadily outside. They heard a loud splash.

“What’s he done?” said Harry nervously as Hermione came back in with the empty tankard.

“Stuck his head in the water barrel,” said Hermione, putting the tankard away.

Hagrid came back, his long hair and beard sopping wet, wiping the water out of his eyes.

“Tha’s better,” he said, shaking his head like a dog and drench-ing them all. “Listen, it was good of yeh ter come an’ see me, I really —”

Hagrid stopped dead, staring at Harry as though he’d only just realized he was there.

“WHAT D’YEH THINK YOU’RE DOIN’, EH?” he roared, so suddenly that they jumped a foot in the air. “YEH’RE NOT TO GO WANDERIN’ AROUND AFTER DARK, HARRY! AN’ YOU TWO! LETTIN’ HIM!”

Hagrid strode over to Harry, grabbed his arm, and pulled him to the door.

“C’mon!” Hagrid said angrily. “I’m takin’ yer all back up ter school, an’ don’ let me catch yeh walkin’ down ter see me after dark again. I’m not worth that!”

Chapter 7 The Boggart in the Wardrobe

Malfoy didn’t reappear in classes until late on Thursday morning, when the Slytherins and Gryffindors were halfway through double Potions. He swaggered into the dungeon, his right arm covered in bandages and bound up in a sling, acting, in Harry’s opinion, as though he were the heroic survivor of some dreadful battle.

“How is it, Draco?” simpered Pansy Parkinson. “Does it hurt much?”

“Yeah,” said Malfoy, putting on a brave sort of grimace. But Harry saw him wink at Crabbe and Goyle when Pansy had looked away.

“Settle down, settle down,” said Professor Snape idly.

Harry and Ron scowled at each other; Snape wouldn’t have said “settle down” if they’d walked in late, he’d have given them deten-tion. But Malfoy had always been able to get away with anything in Snape’s classes; Snape was head of Slytherin House, and generally favored his own students above all others.

They were making a new potion today, a Shrinking Solution. Malfoy set up his cauldron right next to Harry and Ron, so that they were preparing their ingredients on the same table.

“Sir,” Malfoy called, “sir, I’ll need help cutting up these daisy roots, because of my arm —”

“Weasley, cut up Malfoy’s roots for him,” said Snape without looking up.

Ron went brick red.

“There’s nothing wrong with your arm,” he hissed at Malfoy.

Malfoy smirked across the table.

“Weasley, you heard Professor Snape; cut up these roots.”

Ron seized his knife, pulled Malfoy’s roots toward him, and be-gan to chop them roughly, so that they were all different sizes.

“Professor,” drawled Malfoy, “Weasley’s mutilating my roots, sir.”

Snape approached their table, stared down his hooked nose at the roots, then gave Ron an unpleasant smile from beneath his long, greasy black hair.

“Change roots with Malfoy, Weasley.”

“But, sir — !”

Ron had spent the last quarter of an hour carefully shredding his own roots into exactly equal pieces.

“Now,” said Snape in his most dangerous voice.

Ron shoved his own beautifully cut roots across the table at Malfoy, then took up the knife again.

“And, sir, I’ll need this shrivelfig skinned,” said Malfoy, his voice full of malicious laughter.

“Potter, you can skin Malfoy’s shrivelfig,” said Snape, giving Harry the look of loathing he always reserved just for him.

Harry took Malfoy’s shrivelfig as Ron began trying to repair the damage to the roots he now had to use. Harry skinned the shriv-elfig as fast as he could and flung it back across the table at Malfoy without speaking. Malfoy was smirking more broadly than ever.

“Seen your pal Hagrid lately?” he asked them quietly.

“None of your business,” said Ron jerkily, without looking up.

“I’m afraid he won’t be a teacher much longer,” said Malfoy in a tone of mock sorrow. “Father’s not very happy about my injury —”

“Keep talking, Malfoy, and I’ll give you a real injury,” snarled Ron.

“— he’s complained to the school governors. And to the Min-istry of Magic. Father’s got a lot of influence, you know. And a last-ing injury like this” — he gave a huge, fake sigh — “who knows if my arm’ll ever be the same again?”

“So that’s why you’re putting it on,” said Harry, accidentally be-heading a dead caterpillar because his hand was shaking in anger. “To try to get Hagrid fired.”

“Well,” said Malfoy, lowering his voice to a whisper, “partly, Potter. But there are other benefits too. Weasley, slice my caterpil-lars for me.”

A few cauldrons away, Neville was in trouble. Neville regularly went to pieces in Potions lessons; it was his worst subject, and his great fear of Professor Snape made things ten times worse. His po-tion, which was supposed to be a bright, acid green, had turned —“Orange, Longbottom,” said Snape, ladling some up and allow-ing it to splash back into the cauldron, so that everyone could see. “Orange. Tell me, boy, does anything penetrate that thick skull of yours? Didn’t you hear me say, quite clearly, that only one rat spleen was needed? Didn’t I state plainly that a dash of leech juice would suffice? What do I have to do to make you understand, Longbottom?”

Neville was pink and trembling. He looked as though he was on the verge of tears.

“Please, sir,” said Hermione, “please, I could help Neville put it right —”

“I don’t remember asking you to show off, Miss Granger,” said Snape coldly, and Hermione went as pink as Neville. “Longbot-tom, at the end of this lesson we will feed a few drops of this potion to your toad

and see what happens. Perhaps that will encourage you to do it properly."

Snape moved away, leaving Neville breathless with fear.

"Help me!" he moaned to Hermione.

"Hey, Harry," said Seamus Finnigan, leaning over to borrow Harry's brass scales, "have you heard? Daily Prophet this morning — they reckon Sirius Black's been sighted."

"Where?" said Harry and Ron quickly. On the other side of the table, Malfoy looked up, listening closely.

"Not too far from here," said Seamus, who looked excited. "It was a Muggle who saw him. 'Course, she didn't really understand. The Muggles think he's just an ordinary criminal, don't they? So she phoned the telephone hot line. By the time the Ministry of Magic got there, he was gone."

"Not too far from here … ," Ron repeated, looking significantly at Harry. He turned around and saw Malfoy watching closely. "What, Malfoy? Need something else skinned?"

But Malfoy's eyes were shining malevolently, and they were fixed on Harry. He leaned across the table.

"Thinking of trying to catch Black single-handed, Potter?"

"Yeah, that's right," said Harry offhandedly.

Malfoy's thin mouth was curving in a mean smile.

"Of course, if it was me," he said quietly, "I'd have done some-thing before now. I wouldn't be staying in school like a good boy, I'd be out there looking for him."

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" said Ron roughly.

“Don’t you know, Potter?” breathed Malfoy, his pale eyes nar-rowed.

“Know what?”

Malfoy let out a low, sneering laugh.

“Maybe you’d rather not risk your neck,” he said. “Want to leave it to the dementors, do you? But if it was me, I’d want revenge. I’d hunt him down myself.”

“What are you talking about?” said Harry angrily, but at that moment Snape called, “You should have finished adding your ingredients by now; this potion needs to stew before it can be drunk, so clear away while it simmers and then we’ll test Long-bottom’s. …”

Crabbe and Goyle laughed openly, watching Neville sweat as he stirred his potion feverishly. Hermione was muttering instructions to him out of the corner of her mouth, so that Snape wouldn’t see. Harry and Ron packed away their unused ingredients and went to wash their hands and ladles in the stone basin in the corner.

“What did Malfoy mean?” Harry muttered to Ron as he stuck his hands under the icy jet that poured from the gargoyle’s mouth. “Why would I want revenge on Black? He hasn’t done anything to me — yet.”

“He’s making it up,” said Ron savagely. “He’s trying to make you do something stupid. …”

The end of the lesson in sight, Snape strode over to Neville, who was cowering by his cauldron.

“Everyone gather ’round,” said Snape, his black eyes glittering, “and watch what happens to Longbottom’s toad. If he has managed to produce a Shrinking Solution, it will shrink to a tadpole. If, as I don’t doubt, he has done it wrong, his toad is likely to be poi-soned.”

The Gryffindors watched fearfully. The Slytherins looked ex-cited. Snape picked up Trevor the toad in his left hand and dipped a small spoon into Neville's potion, which was now green. He trickled a few drops down Trevor's throat.

There was a moment of hushed silence, in which Trevor gulped; then there was a small pop, and Trevor the tadpole was wriggling in Snape's palm.

The Gryffindors burst into applause. Snape, looking sour, pulled a small bottle from the pocket of his robe, poured a few drops on top of Trevor, and he reappeared suddenly, fully grown.

"Five points from Gryffindor," said Snape, which wiped the smiles from every face. "I told you not to help him, Miss Granger. Class dismissed."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the steps to the entrance hall. Harry was still thinking about what Malfoy had said, while Ron was seething about Snape.

"Five points from Gryffindor because the potion was all right! Why didn't you lie, Hermione? You should've said Neville did it all by himself!"

Hermione didn't answer. Ron looked around.

"Where is she?"

Harry turned too. They were at the top of the steps now, watch-ing the rest of the class pass them, heading for the Great Hall and lunch.

"She was right behind us," said Ron, frowning.

Malfoy passed them, walking between Crabbe and Goyle. He smirked at Harry and disappeared.

“There she is,” said Harry.

Hermione was panting slightly, hurrying up the stairs; one hand clutched her bag, the other seemed to be tucking something down the front of her robes.

“How did you do that?” said Ron.

“What?” said Hermione, joining them.

“One minute you were right behind us, the next moment, you were back at the bottom of the stairs again.”

“What?” Hermione looked slightly confused. “Oh — I had to go back for something. Oh no —”

A seam had split on Hermione’s bag. Harry wasn’t surprised; he could see that it was crammed with at least a dozen large and heavy books.

“Why are you carrying all these around with you?” Ron asked her.

“You know how many subjects I’m taking,” said Hermione breathlessly. “Couldn’t hold these for me, could you?”

“But —” Ron was turning over the books she had handed him, looking at the covers. “You haven’t got any of these subjects today. It’s only Defense Against the Dark Arts this afternoon.”

“Oh yes,” said Hermione vaguely, but she packed all the books back into her bag just the same. “I hope there’s something good for lunch, I’m starving,” she added, and she marched off toward the Great Hall.

“D’you get the feeling Hermione’s not telling us something?” Ron asked Harry.

Professor Lupin wasn’t there when they arrived at his first Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. They all sat down, took out their books,

quills, and parchment, and were talking when he finally en-tered the room. Lupin smiled vaguely and placed his tatty old briefcase on the teacher's desk. He was as shabby as ever but looked healthier than he had on the train, as though he had had a few square meals.

"Good afternoon," he said. "Would you please put all your books back in your bags. Today's will be a practical lesson. You will need only your wands."

A few curious looks were exchanged as the class put away their books. They had never had a practical Defense Against the Dark Arts before, unless you counted the memorable class last year when their old teacher had brought a cageful of pixies to class and set them loose.

"Right then," said Professor Lupin, when everyone was ready. "If you'd follow me."

Puzzled but interested, the class got to its feet and followed Professor Lupin out of the classroom. He led them along the deserted corridor and around a corner, where the first thing they saw was Peeves the Poltergeist, who was floating upside down in midair and stuffing the nearest keyhole with chewing gum.

Peeves didn't look up until Professor Lupin was two feet away; then he wiggled his curly-toed feet and broke into song.

"Loony, loopy Lupin," Peeves sang. "Loony, loopy Lupin, loony, loopy Lupin —"

Rude and unmanageable as he almost always was, Peeves usually showed some respect toward the teachers. Everyone looked quickly at Professor Lupin to see how he would take this; to their surprise, he was still smiling.

"I'd take that gum out of the keyhole if I were you, Peeves," he said pleasantly. "Mr. Filch won't be able to get in to his brooms."

Filch was the Hogwarts caretaker, a bad-tempered, failed wizard who waged a constant war against the students and, indeed, Peeves. However, Peeves paid no attention to Professor Lupin's words, except to blow a loud wet raspberry.

Professor Lupin gave a small sigh and took out his wand.

"This is a useful little spell," he told the class over his shoulder. "Please watch closely."

He raised the wand to shoulder height, said, "Waddiwasi!" and pointed it at Peeves.

With the force of a bullet, the wad of chewing gum shot out of the keyhole and straight down Peeves's left nostril; he whirled up-right and zoomed away, cursing.

"Cool, sir!" said Dean Thomas in amazement.

"Thank you, Dean," said Professor Lupin, putting his wand away again. "Shall we proceed?"

They set off again, the class looking at shabby Professor Lupin with increased respect. He led them down a second corridor and stopped, right outside the staffroom door.

"Inside, please," said Professor Lupin, opening it and standing back.

The staffroom, a long, paneled room full of old, mismatched chairs, was empty except for one teacher. Professor Snape was sit-ting in a low armchair, and he looked around as the class filed in. His eyes were glittering and there was a nasty sneer playing around his mouth. As Professor Lupin came in and made to close the door behind him, Snape said, "Leave it open, Lupin. I'd rather not wit-ness this."

He got to his feet and strode past the class, his black robes bil-lowing behind him. At the doorway he turned on his heel and said, "Possibly

no one's warned you, Lupin, but this class contains Neville Longbottom. I would advise you not to entrust him with anything difficult. Not unless Miss Granger is hissing instructions in his ear."

Neville went scarlet. Harry glared at Snape; it was bad enough that he bullied Neville in his own classes, let alone doing it in front of other teachers.

Professor Lupin had raised his eyebrows.

"I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation," he said, "and I am sure he will perform it ad-mirably."

Neville's face went, if possible, even redder. Snape's lip curled, but he left, shutting the door with a snap.

"Now, then," said Professor Lupin, beckoning the class toward the end of the room, where there was nothing but an old wardrobe where the teachers kept their spare robes. As Professor Lupin went to stand next to it, the wardrobe gave a sudden wobble, banging off the wall.

"Nothing to worry about," said Professor Lupin calmly because a few people had jumped backward in alarm. "There's a boggart in there."

Most people seemed to feel that this was something to worry about. Neville gave Professor Lupin a look of pure terror, and Seamus Finnigan eyed the now rattling doorknob apprehensively.

"Boggarts like dark, enclosed spaces," said Professor Lupin. "Wardrobes, the gap beneath beds, the cupboards under sinks — I've even met one that had lodged itself in a grandfather clock. This one moved in yesterday afternoon, and I asked the headmaster if the staff would leave it to give my third years some practice.

"So, the first question we must ask ourselves is, what is a bog-gart?"

Hermione put up her hand.

“It’s a shape-shifter,” she said. “It can take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most.”

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” said Professor Lupin, and Hermione glowed. “So the boggart sitting in the darkness within has not yet assumed a form. He does not yet know what will frighten the person on the other side of the door. Nobody knows what a boggart looks like when he is alone, but when I let him out, he will immediately become whatever each of us most fears.

“This means,” said Professor Lupin, choosing to ignore Neville’s small sputter of terror, “that we have a huge advantage over the boggart before we begin. Have you spotted it, Harry?”

Trying to answer a question with Hermione next to him, bobbing up and down on the balls of her feet with her hand in the air, was very off-putting, but Harry had a go.

“Er — because there are so many of us, it won’t know what shape it should be?”

“Precisely,” said Professor Lupin, and Hermione put her hand down, looking a little disappointed. “It’s always best to have com-pany when you’re dealing with a boggart. He becomes confused. Which should he become, a headless corpse or a flesh-eating slug? I once saw a boggart make that very mistake — tried to frighten two people at once and turned himself into half a slug. Not re-motely frightening.

“The charm that repels a boggart is simple, yet it requires force of mind. You see, the thing that really finishes a boggart is laughter. What you need to do is force it to assume a shape that you find amusing.

“We will practice the charm without wands first. After me, please … riddikulus!”

“Riddikulus!” said the class together.

“Good,” said Professor Lupin. “Very good. But that was the easy part, I’m afraid. You see, the word alone is not enough. And this is where you come in, Neville.”

The wardrobe shook again, though not as much as Neville, who walked forward as though he were heading for the gallows.

“Right, Neville,” said Professor Lupin. “First things first: what would you say is the thing that frightens you most in the world?”

Neville’s lips moved, but no noise came out.

“Didn’t catch that, Neville, sorry,” said Professor Lupin cheer-fully.

Neville looked around rather wildly, as though begging someone to help him, then said, in barely more than a whisper, “Professor Snape.”

Nearly everyone laughed. Even Neville grinned apologetically. Professor Lupin, however, looked thoughtful.

“Professor Snape … hmmm … Neville, I believe you live with your grandmother?”

“Er — yes,” said Neville nervously. “But — I don’t want the boggart to turn into her either.”

“No, no, you misunderstand me,” said Professor Lupin, now smiling. “I wonder, could you tell us what sort of clothes your grandmother usually wears?”

Neville looked startled, but said, “Well … always the same hat. A tall one with a stuffed vulture on top. And a long dress … green, normally … and sometimes a fox-fur scarf.”

“And a handbag?” prompted Professor Lupin.

“A big red one,” said Neville.

"Right then," said Professor Lupin. "Can you picture those clothes very clearly, Neville? Can you see them in your mind's eye?"

"Yes," said Neville uncertainly, plainly wondering what was coming next.

"When the boggart bursts out of this wardrobe, Neville, and sees you, it will assume the form of Professor Snape," said Lupin. "And you will raise your wand — thus — and cry 'Riddikulus' — and concentrate hard on your grandmother's clothes. If all goes well, Professor Boggart Snape will be forced into that vulture-topped hat, and that green dress, with that big red handbag."

There was a great shout of laughter. The wardrobe wobbled more violently.

"If Neville is successful, the boggart is likely to shift his attention to each of us in turn," said Professor Lupin. "I would like all of you to take a moment now to think of the thing that scares you most, and imagine how you might force it to look comical. …"

The room went quiet. Harry thought … What scared him most in the world?

His first thought was Lord Voldemort — a Voldemort returned to full strength. But before he had even started to plan a possible counterattack on a boggart-Voldemort, a horrible image came floating to the surface of his mind. …A rotting, glistening hand, slithering back beneath a black cloak … a long, rattling breath from an unseen mouth … then a cold so penetrating it felt like drowning. …Harry shivered, then looked around, hoping no one had no-ticed. Many people had their eyes shut tight. Ron was muttering to himself, "Take its legs off." Harry was sure he knew what that was about. Ron's greatest fear was spiders.

"Everyone ready?" said Professor Lupin.

Harry felt a lurch of fear. He wasn't ready. How could you make a dementor less frightening? But he didn't want to ask for more time; everyone else was nodding and rolling up their sleeves.

"Neville, we're going to back away," said Professor Lupin. "Let you have a clear field, all right? I'll call the next person for-ward. … Everyone back, now, so Neville can get a clear shot —"

They all retreated, backed against the walls, leaving Neville alone beside the wardrobe. He looked pale and frightened, but he had pushed up the sleeves of his robes and was holding his wand ready.

"On the count of three, Neville," said Professor Lupin, who was pointing his own wand at the handle of the wardrobe. "One — two — three — now!"

A jet of sparks shot from the end of Professor Lupin's wand and hit the doorknob. The wardrobe burst open. Hook-nosed and menacing, Professor Snape stepped out, his eyes flashing at Neville.

Neville backed away, his wand up, mouthing wordlessly. Snape was bearing down upon him, reaching inside his robes.

"R — r — riddikulus!" squeaked Neville.

There was a noise like a whip crack. Snape stumbled; he was wear-ing a long, lace-trimmed dress and a towering hat topped with a moth-eaten vulture, and he was swinging a huge crimson handbag.

There was a roar of laughter; the boggart paused, confused, and Professor Lupin shouted, "Parvati! Forward!"

Parvati walked forward, her face set. Snape rounded on her. There was another crack, and where he had stood was a blood-stained, bandaged mummy; its sightless face was turned to Parvati and it began to walk toward her very slowly, dragging its feet, its stiff arms rising —"Riddikulus!" cried Parvati.

A bandage unraveled at the mummy's feet; it became entangled, fell face forward, and its head rolled off.

"Seamus!" roared Professor Lupin.

Seamus darted past Parvati.

Crack! Where the mummy had been was a woman with floor-length black hair and a skeletal, green-tinged face — a banshee. She opened her mouth wide and an unearthly sound filled the room, a long, wailing shriek that made the hair on Harry's head stand on end —"Riddikulus!" shouted Seamus.

The banshee made a rasping noise and clutched her throat; her voice was gone.

Crack! The banshee turned into a rat, which chased its tail in a circle, then — crack! — became a rattlesnake, which slithered and writhed before — crack! — becoming a single, bloody eyeball.

"It's confused!" shouted Lupin. "We're getting there! Dean!"

Dean hurried forward.

Crack! The eyeball became a severed hand, which flipped over and began to creep along the floor like a crab.

"Riddikulus!" yelled Dean.

There was a snap, and the hand was trapped in a mousetrap.

"Excellent! Ron, you next!"

Ron leapt forward.

Crack!

Quite a few people screamed. A giant spider, six feet tall and covered in hair, was advancing on Ron, clicking its pincers menac-ingly. For a moment, Harry thought Ron had frozen. Then —“Riddikulus!” bellowed Ron, and the spider’s legs vanished; it rolled over and over; Lavender Brown squealed and ran out of its way and it came to a halt at Harry’s feet. He raised his wand, ready, but —“Here!” shouted Professor Lupin suddenly, hurrying forward.

Crack!

The legless spider had vanished. For a second, everyone looked wildly around to see where it was. Then they saw a silvery-white orb hanging in the air in front of Lupin, who said, “Riddikulus!” al-most lazily.

Crack!

“Forward, Neville, and finish him off!” said Lupin as the boggart landed on the floor as a cockroach. Crack! Snape was back. This time Neville charged forward looking determined.

“Riddikulus!” he shouted, and they had a split second’s view of Snape in his lacy dress before Neville let out a great “Ha!” of laugh-ter, and the boggart exploded, burst into a thousand tiny wisps of smoke, and was gone.

“Excellent!” cried Professor Lupin as the class broke into applause. “Excellent, Neville. Well done, everyone. … Let me see … five points to Gryffindor for every person to tackle the bog-gart — ten for Neville because he did it twice … and five each to Hermione and Harry.”

“But I didn’t do anything,” said Harry.

“You and Hermione answered my questions correctly at the start of the class, Harry,” Lupin said lightly. “Very well, everyone, an excellent lesson. Homework, kindly read the chapter on boggarts and summarize it for me … to be handed in on Monday. That will be all.”

Talking excitedly, the class left the staffroom. Harry, however, wasn't feeling cheerful. Professor Lupin had deliberately stopped him from tackling the boggart. Why? Was it because he'd seen Harry collapse on the train, and thought he wasn't up to much? Had he thought Harry would pass out again?

But no one else seemed to have noticed anything.

"Did you see me take that banshee?" shouted Seamus.

"And the hand!" said Dean, waving his own around.

"And Snape in that hat!"

"And my mummy!"

"I wonder why Professor Lupin's frightened of crystal balls?" said Lavender thoughtfully.

"That was the best Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson we've ever had, wasn't it?" said Ron excitedly as they made their way back to the classroom to get their bags.

"He seems like a very good teacher," said Hermione approvingly. "But I wish I could have had a turn with the boggart —"

"What would it have been for you?" said Ron, sniggering. "A piece of homework that only got nine out of ten?"

Chapter 8 Flight of the Fat Lady

In no time at all, Defense Against the Dark Arts had become most people's favorite class. Only Draco Malfoy and his gang of Slytherins had anything bad to say about Professor Lupin.

"Look at the state of his robes," Malfoy would say in a loud whisper as Professor Lupin passed. "He dresses like our old house-elf."

But no one else cared that Professor Lupin's robes were patched and frayed. His next few lessons were just as interesting as the first. After boggarts, they studied Red Caps, nasty little goblinlike creatures that lurked wherever there had been bloodshed: in the dungeons of castles and the potholes of deserted battlefields, waiting to bludgeon those who had gotten lost. From Red Caps they moved on to kappas, creepy water-dwellers that looked like scaly monkeys, with webbed hands itching to strangle unwitting waders in their ponds.

Harry only wished he was as happy with some of his other classes. Worst of all was Potions. Snape was in a particularly vin-dictive mood these days, and no one was in any doubt why. The story of the boggart assuming Snape's shape, and the way that Neville had dressed it in his grandmother's clothes, had traveled through the school like wildfire. Snape didn't seem to find it funny. His eyes flashed menacingly at the very mention of Professor Lupin's name, and he was bullying Neville worse than ever.

Harry was also growing to dread the hours he spent in Professor Trelawney's stifling tower room, deciphering lopsided shapes and symbols, trying to ignore the way Professor Trelawney's enormous eyes filled with tears every time she looked at him. He couldn't like Professor Trelawney, even though she was treated with respect bordering on reverence by many of the class. Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown had taken to haunting Professor Trelawney's tower room at lunchtimes, and always returned with annoyingly superior looks on

their faces, as though they knew things the others didn't. They had also started using hushed voices whenever they spoke to Harry, as though he were on his deathbed.

Nobody really liked Care of Magical Creatures, which, after the action-packed first class, had become extremely dull. Hagrid seemed to have lost his confidence. They were now spending lesson after lesson learning how to look after flobberworms, which had to be some of the most boring creatures in existence.

"Why would anyone bother looking after them?" said Ron, after yet another hour of poking shredded lettuce down the flobber-worms' slimy throats.

At the start of October, however, Harry had something else to occupy him, something so enjoyable it more than made up for his unsatisfactory classes. The Quidditch season was approaching, and Oliver Wood, Captain of the Gryffindor team, called a meeting one Thursday evening to discuss tactics for the new season.

There were seven people on a Quidditch team: three Chasers, whose job it was to score goals by putting the Quaffle (a red, soccer-sized ball) through one of the fifty-foot-high hoops at each end of the field; two Beaters, who were equipped with heavy bats to repel the Bludgers (two heavy black balls that zoomed around trying to attack the players); a Keeper, who defended the goal posts, and the Seeker, who had the hardest job of all, that of catch-ing the Golden Snitch, a tiny, winged, walnut-sized ball, whose capture ended the game and earned the Seeker's team an extra one hundred and fifty points.

Oliver Wood was a burly seventeen-year-old, now in his seventh and final year at Hogwarts. There was a quiet sort of desperation in his voice as he addressed his six fellow team members in the chilly locker rooms on the edge of the darkening Quidditch field.

"This is our last chance — my last chance — to win the Quid-ditch Cup," he told them, striding up and down in front of them. "I'll be

leaving at the end of this year. I'll never get another shot at it.

"Gryffindor hasn't won for seven years now. Okay, so we've had the worst luck in the world — injuries — then the tournament getting called off last year. …" Wood swallowed, as though the memory still brought a lump to his throat. "But we also know we've got the best — ruddy — team — in — the — school," he said, punching a fist into his other hand, the old manic glint back in his eye.

"We've got three superb Chasers."

Wood pointed at Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson, and Katie Bell.

"We've got two unbeatable Beaters."

"Stop it, Oliver, you're embarrassing us," said Fred and George Weasley together, pretending to blush.

"And we've got a Seeker who has never failed to win us a match!" Wood rumbled, glaring at Harry with a kind of furious pride. "And me," he added as an afterthought.

"We think you're very good too, Oliver," said George.

"Spanking good Keeper," said Fred.

"The point is," Wood went on, resuming his pacing, "the Quid-ditch Cup should have had our name on it these last two years. Ever since Harry joined the team, I've thought the thing was in the bag. But we haven't got it, and this year's the last chance we'll get to finally see our name on the thing. …"

Wood spoke so dejectedly that even Fred and George looked sympathetic.

"Oliver, this year's our year," said Fred.

"We'll do it, Oliver!" said Angelina.

“Definitely,” said Harry.

Full of determination, the team started training sessions, three evenings a week. The weather was getting colder and wetter, the nights darker, but no amount of mud, wind, or rain could tarnish Harry’s wonderful vision of finally winning the huge, silver Quid-ditch Cup.

Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room one evening after training, cold and stiff but pleased with the way practice had gone, to find the room buzzing excitedly.

“What’s happened?” he asked Ron and Hermione, who were sit-ting in two of the best chairs by the fireside and completing some star charts for Astronomy.

“First Hogsmeade weekend,” said Ron, pointing at a notice that had appeared on the battered old bulletin board. “End of October. Halloween.”

“Excellent,” said Fred, who had followed Harry through the por-trait hole. “I need to visit Zonko’s. I’m nearly out of Stink Pellets.”

Harry threw himself into a chair beside Ron, his high spirits ebbing away. Hermione seemed to read his mind.

“Harry, I’m sure you’ll be able to go next time,” she said. “They’re bound to catch Black soon. He’s been sighted once already”

“Black’s not fool enough to try anything in Hogsmeade,” said Ron. “Ask McGonagall if you can go this time, Harry. The next one might not be for ages —”

“Ron!” said Hermione. “Harry’s supposed to stay in school —”

“He can’t be the only third year left behind,” said Ron. “Ask McGonagall, go on, Harry —”

“Yeah, I think I will,” said Harry, making up his mind.

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but at that moment Crookshanks leapt lightly onto her lap. A large, dead spider was dangling from his mouth.

“Does he have to eat that in front of us?” said Ron, scowling.

“Clever Crookshanks, did you catch that all by yourself?” said Hermione.

Crookshanks slowly chewed up the spider, his yellow eyes fixed insolently on Ron.

“Just keep him over there, that’s all,” said Ron irritably, turning back to his star chart. “I’ve got Scabbers asleep in my bag.”

Harry yawned. He really wanted to go to bed, but he still had his own star chart to complete. He pulled his bag toward him, took out parchment, ink, and quill, and started work.

“You can copy mine, if you like,” said Ron, labeling his last star with a flourish and shoving the chart toward Harry.

Hermione, who disapproved of copying, pursed her lips but didn’t say anything. Crookshanks was still staring unblinkingly at Ron, flicking the end of his bushy tail. Then, without warning, he pounced.

“OY!” Ron roared, seizing his bag as Crookshanks sank four sets of claws deep inside it and began tearing ferociously. “GET OFF, YOU STUPID ANIMAL!”

Ron tried to pull the bag away from Crookshanks, but Crook-shanks clung on, spitting and slashing.

“Ron, don’t hurt him!” squealed Hermione; the whole common room was watching; Ron whirled the bag around, Crookshanks still clinging

to it, and Scabbers came flying out of the top —"CATCH THAT CAT!" Ron yelled as Crookshanks freed him-self from the remnants of the bag, sprang over the table, and chased after the terrified Scabbers.

George Weasley made a lunge for Crookshanks but missed; Scabbers streaked through twenty pairs of legs and shot beneath an old chest of drawers. Crookshanks skidded to a halt, crouched low on his bandy legs, and started making furious swipes beneath it with his front paw.

Ron and Hermione hurried over; Hermione grabbed Crook-shanks around the middle and heaved him away; Ron threw him-self onto his stomach and, with great difficulty, pulled Scabbers out by the tail.

"Look at him!" he said furiously to Hermione, dangling Scab-bers in front of her. "He's skin and bone! You keep that cat away from him!"

"Crookshanks doesn't understand it's wrong!" said Hermione, her voice shaking. "All cats chase rats, Ron!"

"There's something funny about that animal!" said Ron, who was trying to persuade a frantically wiggling Scabbers back into his pocket. "It heard me say that Scabbers was in my bag!"

"Oh, what rubbish," said Hermione impatiently. "Crookshanks could smell him, Ron, how else d'you think —"

"That cat's got it in for Scabbers!" said Ron, ignoring the people around him, who were starting to giggle. "And Scabbers was here first, and he's ill!"

Ron marched through the common room and out of sight up the stairs to the boys' dormitories.

Ron was still in a bad mood with Hermione next day. He barely talked to her all through Herbology, even though he, Harry, and Hermione were working together on the same puffapod.

“How’s Scabbers?” Hermione asked timidly as they stripped fat pink pods from the plants and emptied the shining beans into a wooden pail.

“He’s hiding at the bottom of my bed, shaking,” said Ron an-grily, missing the pail and scattering beans over the greenhouse floor.

“Careful, Weasley, careful!” cried Professor Sprout as the beans burst into bloom before their very eyes.

They had Transfiguration next. Harry, who had resolved to ask Professor McGonagall after the lesson whether he could go into Hogsmeade with the rest, joined the line outside the class trying to decide how he was going to argue his case. He was distracted, however, by a disturbance at the front of the line.

Lavender Brown seemed to be crying. Parvati had her arm around her and was explaining something to Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, who were looking very serious.

“What’s the matter, Lavender?” said Hermione anxiously as she, Harry, and Ron went to join the group.

“She got a letter from home this morning,” Parvati whispered. “It’s her rabbit, Binky. He’s been killed by a fox.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, “I’m sorry, Lavender.”

“I should have known!” said Lavender tragically. “You know what day it is?”

“Er —”

“The sixteenth of October! ‘That thing you’re dreading, it will happen on the sixteenth of October!’ Remember? She was right, she was right!”

The whole class was gathered around Lavender now. Seamus shook his head seriously. Hermione hesitated; then she said, “You — you were dreading Binky being killed by a fox?”

“Well, not necessarily by a fox,” said Lavender, looking up at Hermione with streaming eyes, “but I was obviously dreading him dying, wasn’t I?”

“Oh,” said Hermione. She paused again. Then —“Was Binky an old rabbit?”

“N — no!” sobbed Lavender. “H — he was only a baby!”

Parvati tightened her arm around Lavender’s shoulders.

“But then, why would you dread him dying?” said Hermione.

Parvati glared at her.

“Well, look at it logically,” said Hermione, turning to the rest of the group. “I mean, Binky didn’t even die today, did he? Lavender just got the news today —” Lavender wailed loudly. “— and she can’t have been dreading it, because it’s come as a real shock —”

“Don’t mind Hermione, Lavender,” said Ron loudly, “she doesn’t think other people’s pets matter very much.”

Professor McGonagall opened the classroom door at that mo-ment, which was perhaps lucky; Hermione and Ron were looking daggers at each other, and when they got into class, they seated themselves on either side of Harry and didn’t talk to each other for the whole class.

Harry still hadn’t decided what he was going to say to Professor McGonagall when the bell rang at the end of the lesson, but it was she who brought up the subject of Hogsmeade first.

“One moment, please!” she called as the class made to leave. “As you’re all in my House, you should hand Hogsmeade permission forms to me before Halloween. No form, no visiting the village, so don’t forget!”

Neville put up his hand.

“Please, Professor, I — I think I’ve lost —”

“Your grandmother sent yours to me directly, Longbottom,” said Professor McGonagall. “She seemed to think it was safer. Well, that’s all, you may leave.”

“Ask her now,” Ron hissed at Harry.

“Oh, but —” Hermione began.

“Go for it, Harry,” said Ron stubbornly.

Harry waited for the rest of the class to disappear, then headed nervously for Professor McGonagall’s desk.

“Yes, Potter?”

Harry took a deep breath.

“Professor, my aunt and uncle — er — forgot to sign my form,” he said.

Professor McGonagall looked over her square spectacles at him but didn’t say anything.

“So — er — d’you think it would be all right — I mean, will it be okay if I — if I go to Hogsmeade?”

Professor McGonagall looked down and began shuffling papers on her desk.

“I’m afraid not, Potter,” she said. “You heard what I said. No form, no visiting the village. That’s the rule.”

“But — Professor, my aunt and uncle — you know, they’re Muggles, they don’t really understand about — about Hogwarts forms and stuff,” Harry said, while Ron egged him on with vigor-ous nods. “If you said I could go —”

“But I don’t say so,” said Professor McGonagall, standing up and piling her papers neatly into a drawer. “The form clearly states that the parent or guardian must give permission.” She turned to look at him, with an odd expression on her face. Was it pity? “I’m sorry, Potter, but that’s my final word. You had better hurry, or you’ll be late for your next lesson.”

There was nothing to be done. Ron called Professor McGonagall a lot of names that greatly annoyed Hermione; Hermione assumed an “all-for-the-best” expression that made Ron even angrier, and Harry had to endure everyone in the class talking loudly and hap-pily about what they were going to do first, once they got into Hogsmeade.

“There’s always the feast,” said Ron, in an effort to cheer Harry up. “You know, the Halloween feast, in the evening.”

“Yeah,” said Harry gloomily, “great.”

The Halloween feast was always good, but it would taste a lot better if he was coming to it after a day in Hogsmeade with everyone else. Nothing anyone said made him feel any better about being left behind. Dean Thomas, who was good with a quill, had offered to forge Uncle Vernon’s signature on the form, but as Harry had already told Professor McGonagall he hadn’t had it signed, that was no good. Ron halfheartedly suggested the Invisibility Cloak, but Hermione stamped on that one, reminding Ron what Dumb-ledore had told them about the dementors being able to see through them. Percy had what were possibly the least helpful words of comfort.

“They make a fuss about Hogsmeade, but I assure you, Harry, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” he said seriously. “All right, the sweetshop’s rather good, and Zonko’s Joke Shop’s frankly danger-ous, and yes, the Shrieking Shack’s always worth a visit, but really, Harry, apart from that, you’re not missing anything.”

On Halloween morning, Harry awoke with the rest and went down to breakfast, feeling thoroughly depressed, though doing his best to act normally.

“We’ll bring you lots of sweets back from Honeydukes,” said Hermione, looking desperately sorry for him.

“Yeah, loads,” said Ron. He and Hermione had finally forgotten their squabble about Crookshanks in the face of Harry’s difficul-ties.

“Don’t worry about me,” said Harry, in what he hoped was an offhand voice, “I’ll see you at the feast. Have a good time.”

He accompanied them to the entrance hall, where Filch, the caretaker, was standing inside the front doors, checking off names against a long list, peering suspiciously into every face, and making sure that no one was sneaking out who shouldn’t be going.

“Staying here, Potter?” shouted Malfoy, who was standing in line with Crabbe and Goyle. “Scared of passing the dementors?”

Harry ignored him and made his solitary way up the marble staircase, through the deserted corridors, and back to Gryffindor Tower.

“Password?” said the Fat Lady, jerking out of a doze.

“Fortuna Major,” said Harry listlessly.

The portrait swung open and he climbed through the hole into the common room. It was full of chattering first and second years, and a

few older students, who had obviously visited Hogsmeade so often the novelty had worn off.

“Harry! Harry! Hi, Harry!”

It was Colin Creevey, a second year who was deeply in awe of Harry and never missed an opportunity to speak to him.

“Aren’t you going to Hogsmeade, Harry? Why not? Hey” — Colin looked eagerly around at his friends — “you can come and sit with us, if you like, Harry!”

“Er — no, thanks, Colin,” said Harry, who wasn’t in the mood to have a lot of people staring avidly at the scar on his forehead. “I — I’ve got to go to the library, got to get some work done.”

After that, he had no choice but to turn right around and head back out of the portrait hole again.

“What was the point waking me up?” the Fat Lady called grumpily after him as he walked away.

Harry wandered dispiritedly toward the library, but halfway there he changed his mind; he didn’t feel like working. He turned around and came face-to-face with Filch, who had obviously just seen off the last of the Hogsmeade visitors.

“What are you doing?” Filch snarled suspiciously.

“Nothing,” said Harry truthfully.

“Nothing!” spat Filch, his jowls quivering unpleasantly. “A likely story! Sneaking around on your own — why aren’t you in Hogsmeade buying Stink Pellets and Belch Powder and Whizzing Worms like the rest of your nasty little friends?”

Harry shrugged.

“Well, get back to your common room where you belong!” snapped Filch, and he stood glaring until Harry had passed out of sight.

But Harry didn’t go back to the common room; he climbed a staircase, thinking vaguely of visiting the Owlery to see Hedwig, and was walking along another corridor when a voice from inside one of the rooms said, “Harry?”

Harry doubled back to see who had spoken and met Professor Lupin, looking around his office door.

“What are you doing?” said Lupin, though in a very different voice from Filch. “Where are Ron and Hermione?”

“Hogsmeade,” said Harry, in a would-be casual voice.

“Ah,” said Lupin. He considered Harry for a moment. “Why don’t you come in? I’ve just taken delivery of a grindylow for our next lesson.”

“A what?” said Harry.

He followed Lupin into his office. In the corner stood a very large tank of water. A sickly green creature with sharp little horns had its face pressed against the glass, pulling faces and flexing its long, spindly fingers.

“Water demon,” said Lupin, surveying the grindylow thought-fully. “We shouldn’t have much difficulty with him, not after the kappas. The trick is to break his grip. You notice the abnormally long fingers? Strong, but very brittle.”

The grindylow bared its green teeth and then buried itself in a tangle of weeds in a corner.

“Cup of tea?” Lupin said, looking around for his kettle. “I was just thinking of making one.”

“All right,” said Harry awkwardly.

Lupin tapped the kettle with his wand and a blast of steam issued suddenly from the spout.

“Sit down,” said Lupin, taking the lid off a dusty tin. “I’ve only got teabags, I’m afraid — but I daresay you’ve had enough of tea leaves?”

Harry looked at him. Lupin’s eyes were twinkling.

“How did you know about that?” Harry asked.

“Professor McGonagall told me,” said Lupin, passing Harry a chipped mug of tea. “You’re not worried, are you?”

“No,” said Harry.

He thought for a moment of telling Lupin about the dog he’d seen in Magnolia Crescent but decided not to. He didn’t want Lupin to think he was a coward, especially since Lupin already seemed to think he couldn’t cope with a boggart.

Something of Harry’s thoughts seemed to have shown on his face, because Lupin said, “Anything worrying you, Harry?”

“No,” Harry lied. He drank a bit of tea and watched the grindy-low brandishing a fist at him. “Yes,” he said suddenly, putting his tea down on Lupin’s desk. “You know that day we fought the bog-gart?

“Yes,” said Lupin slowly.

“Why didn’t you let me fight it?” said Harry abruptly.

Lupin raised his eyebrows.

“I would have thought that was obvious, Harry,” he said, sound-ing surprised.

Harry, who had expected Lupin to deny that he'd done any such thing, was taken aback.

"Why?" he said again.

"Well," said Lupin, frowning slightly, "I assumed that if the bog-gart faced you, it would assume the shape of Lord Voldemort."

Harry stared. Not only was this the last answer he'd expected, but Lupin had said Voldemort's name. The only person Harry had ever heard say the name aloud (apart from himself) was Professor Dumbledore.

"Clearly, I was wrong," said Lupin, still frowning at Harry. "But I didn't think it a good idea for Lord Voldemort to materialize in the staffroom. I imagined that people would panic."

"I didn't think of Voldemort," said Harry honestly. "I — I remembered those dementors."

"I see," said Lupin thoughtfully. "Well, well … I'm impressed." He smiled slightly at the look of surprise on Harry's face. "That suggests that what you fear most of all is — fear. Very wise, Harry."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, so he drank some more tea.

"So you've been thinking that I didn't believe you capable of fighting the boggart?" said Lupin shrewdly.

"Well … yeah," said Harry. He was suddenly feeling a lot hap-pier. "Professor Lupin, you know the dementors —"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in," called Lupin.

The door opened, and in came Snape. He was carrying a goblet, which was smoking faintly, and stopped at the sight of Harry, his

black eyes narrowing.

“Ah, Severus,” said Lupin, smiling. “Thanks very much. Could you leave it here on the desk for me?”

Snape set down the smoking goblet, his eyes wandering between Harry and Lupin.

“I was just showing Harry my grindylow,” said Lupin pleasantly, pointing at the tank.

“Fascinating,” said Snape, without looking at it. “You should drink that directly, Lupin.”

“Yes, yes, I will,” said Lupin.

“I made an entire cauldronful,” Snape continued. “If you need more.”

“I should probably take some again tomorrow. Thanks very much, Severus.”

“Not at all,” said Snape, but there was a look in his eye Harry didn’t like. He backed out of the room, unsmiling and watchful.

Harry looked curiously at the goblet. Lupin smiled.

“Professor Snape has very kindly concocted a potion for me,” he said. “I have never been much of a potion-brewer and this one is particularly complex.” He picked up the goblet and sniffed it. “Pity sugar makes it useless,” he added, taking a sip and shuddering.

“Why — ?” Harry began. Lupin looked at him and answered the unfinished question.

“I’ve been feeling a bit off-color,” he said. “This potion is the only thing that helps. I am very lucky to be working alongside Pro-fessor Snape; there aren’t many wizards who are up to making it.”

Professor Lupin took another sip and Harry had a crazy urge to knock the goblet out of his hands.

“Professor Snape’s very interested in the Dark Arts,” he blurted out.

“Really?” said Lupin, looking only mildly interested as he took another gulp of potion.

“Some people reckon —” Harry hesitated, then plunged reck-lessly on, “some people reckon he’d do anything to get the Defense Against the Dark Arts job.”

Lupin drained the goblet and pulled a face.

“Disgusting,” he said. “Well, Harry, I’d better get back to work. I’ll see you at the feast later.”

“Right,” said Harry, putting down his empty teacup.

The empty goblet was still smoking.

“There you go,” said Ron. “We got as much as we could carry.”

A shower of brilliantly colored sweets fell into Harry’s lap. It was dusk, and Ron and Hermione had just turned up in the common room, pink-faced from the cold wind and looking as though they’d had the time of their lives.

“Thanks,” said Harry, picking up a packet of tiny black Pepper Imps. “What’s Hogsmeade like? Where did you go?”

By the sound of it — everywhere. Dervish and Banges, the wiz-arding equipment shop, Zonko’s Joke Shop, into the Three Broom-sticks for foaming mugs of hot butterbeer, and many places besides.

“The post office, Harry! About two hundred owls, all sitting on shelves, all color-coded depending on how fast you want your let-ter to get there!”

"Honeydukes has got a new kind of fudge; they were giving out free samples, there's a bit, look —"

"We think we saw an ogre, honestly, they get all sorts at the Three Broomsticks —"

"Wish we could have brought you some butterbeer, really warms you up —"

"What did you do?" said Hermione, looking anxious. "Did you get any work done?"

"No," said Harry. "Lupin made me a cup of tea in his office. And then Snape came in. …"

He told them all about the goblet. Ron's mouth fell open.

"Lupin drank it?" he gasped. "Is he mad?"

Hermione checked her watch.

"We'd better go down, you know, the feast'll be starting in five minutes. …" They hurried through the portrait hole and into the crowd, still discussing Snape.

"But if he — you know" — Hermione dropped her voice, glancing nervously around — "if he was trying to — to poison Lupin — he wouldn't have done it in front of Harry."

"Yeah, maybe," said Harry as they reached the entrance hall and crossed into the Great Hall. It had been decorated with hundreds and hundreds of candle-filled pumpkins, a cloud of fluttering live bats, and many flaming orange streamers, which were swimming lazily across the stormy ceiling like brilliant watersnakes.

The food was delicious; even Hermione and Ron, who were full to bursting with Honeydukes sweets, managed second helpings of

everything. Harry kept glancing at the staff table. Professor Lupin looked cheerful and as well as he ever did; he was talking animat-edly to tiny little Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher. Harry moved his eyes along the table, to the place where Snape sat. Was he imagining it, or were Snape's eyes flickering toward Lupin more often than was natural?

The feast finished with an entertainment provided by the Hog-warts ghosts. They popped out of the walls and tables to do a bit of formation gliding; Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, had a great success with a reenactment of his own botched be-heading.

It had been such a pleasant evening that Harry's good mood couldn't even be spoiled by Malfoy, who shouted through the crowd as they all left the hall, "The dementors send their love, Potter!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed the rest of the Gryffindors along the usual path to Gryffindor Tower, but when they reached the corridor that ended with the portrait of the Fat Lady, they found it jammed with students.

"Why isn't anyone going in?" said Ron curiously.

Harry peered over the heads in front of him. The portrait seemed to be closed.

"Let me through, please," came Percy's voice, and he came bustling importantly through the crowd. "What's the holdup here? You can't all have forgotten the password — excuse me, I'm Head Boy —"

And then a silence fell over the crowd, from the front first, so that a chill seemed to spread down the corridor. They heard Percy say, in a suddenly sharp voice, "Somebody get Professor Dumble-dore. Quick."

People's heads turned; those at the back were standing on tip-toe.

“What’s going on?” said Ginny, who had just arrived.

A moment later, Professor Dumbledore was there, sweeping toward the portrait; the Gryffindors squeezed together to let him through, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved closer to see what the trouble was.

“Oh, my —” Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm.

The Fat Lady had vanished from her portrait, which had been slashed so viciously that strips of canvas littered the floor; great chunks of it had been torn away completely.

Dumbledore took one quick look at the ruined painting and turned, his eyes somber, to see Professors McGonagall, Lupin, and Snape hurrying toward him.

“We need to find her,” said Dumbledore. “Professor McGona-gall, please go to Mr. Filch at once and tell him to search every painting in the castle for the Fat Lady.”

“You’ll be lucky!” said a cackling voice.

It was Peeves the Poltergeist, bobbing over the crowd and look-ing delighted, as he always did, at the sight of wreckage or worry.

“What do you mean, Peeves?” said Dumbledore calmly, and Peeves’s grin faded a little. He didn’t dare taunt Dumbledore. In-stead he adopted an oily voice that was no better than his cackle.

“Ashamed, Your Headship, sir. Doesn’t want to be seen. She’s a horrible mess. Saw her running through the landscape up on the fourth floor, sir, dodging between the trees. Crying something dreadful,” he said happily. “Poor thing,” he added unconvincingly.

“Did she say who did it?” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Oh yes, Professorhead,” said Peeves, with the air of one cradling a large bombshell in his arms. “He got very angry when she wouldn’t let him in, you see.” Peeves flipped over and grinned at Dumbledore from between his own legs. “Nasty temper he’s got, that Sirius Black.”

Chapter 9 Grim Defeat

Professor Dumbledore sent all the Gryffindors back to the Great Hall, where they were joined ten minutes later by the students from Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin, who all looked extremely confused.

“The teachers and I need to conduct a thorough search of the castle,” Professor Dumbledore told them as Professors McGonagall and Flitwick closed all doors into the hall. “I’m afraid that, for your own safety, you will have to spend the night here. I want the pre-fects to stand guard over the entrances to the hall and I am leaving the Head Boy and Girl in charge. Any disturbance should be re-ported to me immediately,” he added to Percy, who was looking immensely proud and important. “Send word with one of the ghosts.”

Professor Dumbledore paused, about to leave the hall, and said, “Oh, yes, you’ll be needing …”

One casual wave of his wand and the long tables flew to the edges of the hall and stood themselves against the walls; another wave, and the floor was covered with hundreds of squashy purple sleeping bags.

“Sleep well,” said Professor Dumbledore, closing the door be-hind him.

The hall immediately began to buzz excitedly; the Gryffindors were telling the rest of the school what had just happened.

“Everyone into their sleeping bags!” shouted Percy. “Come on, now, no more talking! Lights out in ten minutes!”

“C’mon,” Ron said to Harry and Hermione; they seized three sleeping bags and dragged them into a corner.

“Do you think Black’s still in the castle?” Hermione whispered anxiously.

“Dumbledore obviously thinks he might be,” said Ron.

“It’s very lucky he picked tonight, you know,” said Hermione as they climbed fully dressed into their sleeping bags and propped themselves on their elbows to talk. “The one night we weren’t in the tower. …”

“I reckon he’s lost track of time, being on the run,” said Ron. “Didn’t realize it was Halloween. Otherwise he’d have come burst-ing in here.”

Hermione shuddered.

All around them, people were asking one another the same question: “How did he get in?”

“Maybe he knows how to Apparate,” said a Ravenclaw a few feet away. “Just appear out of thin air, you know.”

“Disguised himself, probably,” said a Hufflepuff fifth year.

“He could’ve flown in,” suggested Dean Thomas.

“Honestly, am I the only person who’s ever bothered to read Hogwarts, A History?” said Hermione crossly to Harry and Ron.

“Probably,” said Ron. “Why?”

“Because the castle’s protected by more than walls, you know,” said Hermione. “There are all sorts of enchantments on it, to stop people entering by stealth. You can’t just Apparate in here. And I’d like to see the disguise that could fool those dementors. They’re guarding every single entrance to the grounds. They’d have seen him fly in too. And Filch knows all the secret passages, they’ll have them covered. …”

"The lights are going out now!" Percy shouted. "I want everyone in their sleeping bags and no more talking!"

The candles all went out at once. The only light now came from the silvery ghosts, who were drifting about talking seriously to the prefects, and the enchanted ceiling, which, like the sky outside, was scattered with stars. What with that, and the whispering that still filled the hall, Harry felt as though he were sleeping outdoors in a light wind.

Once every hour, a teacher would reappear in the hall to check that everything was quiet. Around three in the morning, when many students had finally fallen asleep, Professor Dumbledore came in. Harry watched him looking around for Percy, who had been prowling between the sleeping bags, telling people off for talking. Percy was only a short way away from Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who quickly pretended to be asleep as Dumbledore's footsteps drew nearer.

"Any sign of him, Professor?" asked Percy in a whisper.

"No. All well here?"

"Everything under control, sir."

"Good. There's no point moving them all now. I've found a tem-porary guardian for the Gryffindor portrait hole. You'll be able to move them back in tomorrow."

"And the Fat Lady, sir?"

"Hiding in a map of Argyllshire on the second floor. Apparently she refused to let Black in without the password, so he attacked. She's still very distressed, but once she's calmed down, I'll have Mr. Filch restore her."

Harry heard the door of the hall creak open again, and more footsteps.

"Headmaster?" It was Snape. Harry kept quite still, listening hard. "The whole of the third floor has been searched. He's not there. And Filch has done the dungeons; nothing there either."

"What about the Astronomy tower? Professor Trelawney's room? The Owlery?"

"All searched …"

"Very well, Severus. I didn't really expect Black to linger."

"Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?" asked Snape.

Harry raised his head very slightly off his arms to free his other ear.

"Many, Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next."

Harry opened his eyes a fraction and squinted up to where they stood; Dumbledore's back was to him, but he could see Percy's face, rapt with attention, and Snape's profile, which looked angry.

"You remember the conversation we had, Headmaster, just before — ah — the start of term?" said Snape, who was barely open-ing his lips, as though trying to block Percy out of the conversation.

"I do, Severus," said Dumbledore, and there was something like warning in his voice.

"It seems — almost impossible — that Black could have entered the school without inside help. I did express my concerns when you appointed —"

"I do not believe a single person inside this castle would have helped Black enter it," said Dumbledore, and his tone made it so clear that the subject was closed that Snape didn't reply. "I must go down to the dementors," said Dumbledore. "I said I would inform them when our search was complete."

"Didn't they want to help, sir?" said Percy.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore coldly. "But I'm afraid no dementor will cross the threshold of this castle while I am headmaster."

Percy looked slightly abashed. Dumbledore left the hall, walking quickly and quietly. Snape stood for a moment, watching the headmaster with an expression of deep resentment on his face; then he too left.

Harry glanced sideways at Ron and Hermione. Both of them had their eyes open too, reflecting the starry ceiling.

"What was all that about?" Ron mouthed.

The school talked of nothing but Sirius Black for the next few days. The theories about how he had entered the castle became wilder and wilder; Hannah Abbott, from Hufflepuff, spent much of their next Herbology class telling anyone who'd listen that Black could turn into a flowering shrub.

The Fat Lady's ripped canvas had been taken off the wall and replaced with the portrait of Sir Cadogan and his fat gray pony. Nobody was very happy about this. Sir Cadogan spent half his time challenging people to duels, and the rest thinking up ridiculously complicated passwords, which he changed at least twice a day.

"He's a complete lunatic," said Seamus Finnigan angrily to Percy. "Can't we get anyone else?"

"None of the other pictures wanted the job," said Percy. "Fright-ened of what happened to the Fat Lady. Sir Cadogan was the only one brave enough to volunteer."

Sir Cadogan, however, was the least of Harry's worries. He was now being closely watched. Teachers found excuses to walk along corridors with him, and Percy Weasley (acting, Harry suspected, on

his mother's orders) was tailing him everywhere like an ex-tremely pompous guard dog. To cap it all, Professor McGonagall summoned Harry into her office, with such a somber expression on her face Harry thought someone must have died.

"There's no point hiding it from you any longer, Potter," she said in a very serious voice. "I know this will come as a shock to you, but Sirius Black —"

"I know he's after me," said Harry wearily. "I heard Ron's dad telling his mum. Mr. Weasley works for the Ministry of Magic."

Professor McGonagall seemed very taken aback. She stared at Harry for a moment or two, then said, "I see! Well, in that case, Potter, you'll understand why I don't think it's a good idea for you to be practicing Quidditch in the evenings. Out on the field with only your team members, it's very exposed, Potter —"

"We've got our first match on Saturday!" said Harry, outraged. "I've got to train, Professor!"

Professor McGonagall considered him intently. Harry knew she was deeply interested in the Gryffindor team's prospects; it had been she, after all, who'd suggested him as Seeker in the first place. He waited, holding his breath.

"Hmm …" Professor McGonagall stood up and stared out of the window at the Quidditch field, just visible through the rain. "Well … goodness knows, I'd like to see us win the Cup at last … but all the same, Potter … I'd be happier if a teacher were present. I'll ask Madam Hooch to oversee your training sessions."

The weather worsened steadily as the first Quidditch match drew nearer. Undaunted, the Gryffindor team was training harder than ever under the eye of Madam Hooch. Then, at their final training session before Saturday's match, Oliver Wood gave his team some unwelcome news.

“We’re not playing Slytherin!” he told them, looking very angry. “Flint’s just been to see me. We’re playing Hufflepuff instead.”

“Why?” chorused the rest of the team.

“Flint’s excuse is that their Seeker’s arm’s still injured,” said Wood, grinding his teeth furiously. “But it’s obvious why they’re doing it. Don’t want to play in this weather. Think it’ll damage their chances. …”

There had been strong winds and heavy rain all day, and as Wood spoke, they heard a distant rumble of thunder.

“There’s nothing wrong with Malfoy’s arm!” said Harry furiously. “He’s faking it!”

“I know that, but we can’t prove it,” said Wood bitterly. “And we’ve been practicing all those moves assuming we’re playing Slytherin, and instead it’s Hufflepuff, and their style’s quite differ-ent. They’ve got a new Captain and Seeker, Cedric Diggory —”

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie suddenly giggled.

“What?” said Wood, frowning at this lighthearted behavior.

“He’s that tall, good-looking one, isn’t he?” said Angelina.

“Strong and silent,” said Katie, and they started to giggle again.

“He’s only silent because he’s too thick to string two words to-gether,” said Fred impatiently. “I don’t know why you’re worried, Oliver, Hufflepuff is a pushover. Last time we played them, Harry caught the Snitch in about five minutes, remember?”

“We were playing in completely different conditions!” Wood shouted, his eyes bulging slightly. “Diggory’s put a very strong side together! He’s an excellent Seeker! I was afraid you’d take it like this! We

mustn't relax! We must keep our focus! Slytherin is trying to wrong-foot us! We must win!"

"Oliver, calm down!" said Fred, looking slightly alarmed. "We're taking Hufflepuff very seriously. Seriously."

The day before the match, the winds reached howling point and the rain fell harder than ever. It was so dark inside the corridors and classrooms that extra torches and lanterns were lit. The Slytherin team was looking very smug indeed, and none more so than Malfoy.

"Ah, if only my arm was feeling a bit better!" he sighed as the gale outside pounded the windows.

Harry had no room in his head to worry about anything except the match tomorrow. Oliver Wood kept hurrying up to him be-tween classes and giving him tips. The third time this happened, Wood talked for so long that Harry suddenly realized he was ten minutes late for Defense Against the Dark Arts, and set off at a run with Wood shouting after him, "Diggory's got a very fast swerve, Harry, so you might want to try looping him —"

Harry skidded to a halt outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, pulled the door open, and dashed inside.

"Sorry I'm late, Professor Lupin, I —"

But it wasn't Professor Lupin who looked up at him from the teacher's desk; it was Snape.

"This lesson began ten minutes ago, Potter, so I think we'll make it ten points from Gryffindor. Sit down."

But Harry didn't move.

"Where's Professor Lupin?" he said.

“He says he is feeling too ill to teach today,” said Snape with a twisted smile. “I believe I told you to sit down?”

But Harry stayed where he was.

“What’s wrong with him?”

Snape’s black eyes glittered.

“Nothing life-threatening,” he said, looking as though he wished it were. “Five more points from Gryffindor, and if I have to ask you to sit down again, it will be fifty.”

Harry walked slowly to his seat and sat down. Snape looked around at the class.

“As I was saying before Potter interrupted, Professor Lupin has not left any record of the topics you have covered so far —”

“Please, sir, we’ve done boggarts, Red Caps, kappas, and grindy-lows,” said Hermione quickly, “and we’re just about to start —”

“Be quiet,” said Snape coldly. “I did not ask for information. I was merely commenting on Professor Lupin’s lack of organi-zation.”

“He’s the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we’ve ever had,” said Dean Thomas boldly, and there was a murmur of agreement from the rest of the class. Snape looked more menacing than ever.

“You are easily satisfied. Lupin is hardly overtaxing you — I would expect first years to be able to deal with Red Caps and grindylows. Today we shall discuss —”

Harry watched him flick through the textbook, to the very back chapter, which he must know they hadn’t covered.

“— werewolves,” said Snape.

“But, sir,” said Hermione, seemingly unable to restrain herself, “we’re not supposed to do werewolves yet, we’re due to start hinky-punks —”

“Miss Granger,” said Snape in a voice of deadly calm, “I was un-der the impression that I am teaching this lesson, not you. And I am telling you all to turn to page 394.” He glanced around again. “All of you! Now!”

With many bitter sidelong looks and some sullen muttering, the class opened their books.

“Which of you can tell me how we distinguish between the werewolf and the true wolf?” said Snape.

Everyone sat in motionless silence; everyone except Hermione, whose hand, as it so often did, had shot straight into the air.

“Anyone?” Snape said, ignoring Hermione. His twisted smile was back. “Are you telling me that Professor Lupin hasn’t even taught you the basic distinction between —”

“We told you,” said Parvati suddenly, “we haven’t got as far as werewolves yet, we’re still on —”

“Silence!” snarled Snape. “Well, well, well, I never thought I’d meet a third-year class who wouldn’t even recognize a werewolf when they saw one. I shall make a point of informing Professor Dumbledore how very behind you all are. …”

“Please, sir,” said Hermione, whose hand was still in the air, “the werewolf differs from the true wolf in several small ways. The snout of the werewolf —”

“That is the second time you have spoken out of turn, Miss Granger,” said Snape coolly. “Five more points from Gryffindor for being an insufferable know-it-all.”

Hermione went very red, put down her hand, and stared at the floor with her eyes full of tears. It was a mark of how much the class loathed Snape that they were all glaring at him, because every one of them had called Hermione a know-it-all at least once, and Ron, who told Hermione she was a know-it-all at least twice a week, said loudly, “You asked us a question and she knows the answer! Why ask if you don’t want to be told?”

The class knew instantly he’d gone too far. Snape advanced on Ron slowly, and the room held its breath.

“Detention, Weasley,” Snape said silkily, his face very close to Ron’s. “And if I ever hear you criticize the way I teach a class again, you will be very sorry indeed.”

No one made a sound throughout the rest of the lesson. They sat and made notes on werewolves from the textbook, while Snape prowled up and down the rows of desks, examining the work they had been doing with Professor Lupin.

“Very poorly explained … That is incorrect, the kappa is more commonly found in Mongolia. … Professor Lupin gave this eight out of ten? I wouldn’t have given it three. …”

When the bell rang at last, Snape held them back.

“You will each write an essay, to be handed in to me, on the ways you recognize and kill werewolves. I want two rolls of parchment on the subject, and I want them by Monday morning. It is time somebody took this class in hand. Weasley, stay behind, we need to arrange your detention.”

Harry and Hermione left the room with the rest of the class, who waited until they were well out of earshot, then burst into a furious tirade about Snape.

“Snape’s never been like this with any of our other Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, even if he did want the job,” Harry said to Hermione. “Why’s he got it in for Lupin? D’you think this is all because of the boggart?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione pensively. “But I really hope Pro-fessor Lupin gets better soon. …”

Ron caught up with them five minutes later, in a towering rage.

“D’you know what that —” (he called Snape something that made Hermione say “Ron!”) “— is making me do? I’ve got to scrub out the bedpans in the hospital wing. Without magic!” He was breathing deeply, his fists clenched. “Why couldn’t Black have hidden in Snape’s office, eh? He could have finished him off for us!”

Harry woke extremely early the next morning; so early that it was still dark. For a moment he thought the roaring of the wind had woken him. Then he felt a cold breeze on the back of his neck and sat bolt upright — Peeves the Poltergeist had been floating next to him, blowing hard in his ear.

“What did you do that for?” said Harry furiously.

Peeves puffed out his cheeks, blew hard, and zoomed backward out of the room, cackling.

Harry fumbled for his alarm clock and looked at it. It was half past four. Cursing Peeves, he rolled over and tried to get back to sleep, but it was very difficult, now that he was awake, to ignore the sounds of the thunder rumbling overhead, the pounding of the wind against the castle walls, and the distant creaking of the trees in the Forbidden Forest. In a few hours he would be out on the Quidditch field, battling through that gale. Finally, he gave up any thought of more sleep, got up, dressed, picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand, and walked quietly out of the dormitory.

As Harry opened the door, something brushed against his leg. He bent down just in time to grab Crookshanks by the end of his bushy tail and drag him outside.

"You know, I reckon Ron was right about you," Harry told Crookshanks suspiciously. "There are plenty of mice around this place — go and chase them. Go on," he added, nudging Crookshanks down the spiral staircase with his foot. "Leave Scabbers alone."

The noise of the storm was even louder in the common room. Harry knew better than to think the match would be canceled; Quidditch matches weren't called off for trifles like thunderstorms. Nevertheless, he was starting to feel very apprehensive. Wood had pointed out Cedric Diggory to him in the corridor; Diggory was a fifth year and a lot bigger than Harry. Seekers were usually light and speedy, but Diggory's weight would be an advantage in this weather because he was less likely to be blown off course.

Harry whiled away the hours until dawn in front of the fire, get-ting up every now and then to stop Crookshanks from sneaking up the boys' staircase again. At long last Harry thought it must be time for breakfast, so he headed through the portrait hole alone.

"Stand and fight, you mangy cur!" yelled Sir Cadogan.

"Oh, shut up," Harry yawned.

He revived a bit over a large bowl of porridge, and by the time he'd started on toast, the rest of the team had turned up.

"It's going to be a tough one," said Wood, who wasn't eating anything.

"Stop worrying, Oliver," said Alicia soothingly, "we don't mind a bit of rain."

But it was considerably more than a bit of rain. Such was the popularity of Quidditch that the whole school turned out to watch the

match as usual, but they ran down the lawns toward the Quid-ditch field, heads bowed against the ferocious wind, umbrellas be-ing whipped out of their hands as they went. Just before he entered the locker room, Harry saw Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, laughing and pointing at him from under an enormous umbrella on their way to the stadium.

The team changed into their scarlet robes and waited for Wood's usual pre-match pep talk, but it didn't come. He tried to speak several times, made an odd gulping noise, then shook his head hopelessly and beckoned them to follow him.

The wind was so strong that they staggered sideways as they walked out onto the field. If the crowd was cheering, they couldn't hear it over the fresh rolls of thunder. Rain was splattering over Harry's glasses. How on earth was he going to see the Snitch in this?

The Hufflepuffs were approaching from the opposite side of the field, wearing canary-yellow robes. The Captains walked up to each other and shook hands; Diggory smiled at Wood but Wood now looked as though he had lockjaw and merely nodded. Harry saw Madam Hooch's mouth form the words, "Mount your brooms." He pulled his right foot out of the mud with a squelch and swung it over his Nimbus Two Thousand. Madam Hooch put her whistle to her lips and gave it a blast that sounded shrill and distant — they were off.

Harry rose fast, but his Nimbus was swerving slightly with the wind. He held it as steady as he could and turned, squinting into the rain.

Within five minutes Harry was soaked to his skin and frozen, hardly able to see his teammates, let alone the tiny Snitch. He flew backward and forward across the field past blurred red and yellow shapes, with no idea of what was happening in the rest of the game. He couldn't hear the commentary over the wind. The crowd was hidden beneath a sea of cloaks and battered umbrellas. Twice Harry

came very close to being unseated by a Bludger; his vision was so clouded by the rain on his glasses he hadn't seen them coming.

He lost track of time. It was getting harder and harder to hold his broom straight. The sky was getting darker, as though night had decided to come early. Twice Harry nearly hit another player, with-out knowing whether it was a teammate or opponent; everyone was now so wet, and the rain so thick, he could hardly tell them apart. …With the first flash of lightning came the sound of Madam Hooch's whistle; Harry could just see the outline of Wood through the thick rain, gesturing him to the ground. The whole team splashed down into the mud.

"I called for time-out!" Wood roared at his team. "Come on, un-der here —"

They huddled at the edge of the field under a large umbrella; Harry took off his glasses and wiped them hurriedly on his robes.

"What's the score?"

"We're fifty points up," said Wood, "but unless we get the Snitch soon, we'll be playing into the night."

"I've got no chance with these on," Harry said exasperatedly, waving his glasses.

At that very moment, Hermione appeared at his shoulder; she was holding her cloak over her head and was, inexplicably, beam-ing.

"I've had an idea, Harry! Give me your glasses, quick!"

He handed them to her, and as the team watched in amazement, Hermione tapped them with her wand and said, "Impervius!"

"There!" she said, handing them back to Harry. "They'll repel water!"

Wood looked as though he could have kissed her.

“Brilliant!” he called hoarsely after her as she disappeared into the crowd. “Okay, team, let’s go for it!”

Hermione’s spell had done the trick. Harry was still numb with cold, still wetter than he’d ever been in his life, but he could see. Full of fresh determination, he urged his broom through the tur-bulent air, staring in every direction for the Snitch, avoiding a Bludger, ducking beneath Diggory, who was streaking in the oppo-site direction. … There was another clap of thunder, followed immediately by forked lightning. This was getting more and more dangerous. Harry needed to get the Snitch quickly —He turned, intending to head back toward the middle of the field, but at that moment, another flash of lightning illuminated the stands, and Harry saw something that distracted him completely — the silhouette of an enormous shaggy black dog, clearly imprinted against the sky, motionless in the topmost, empty row of seats.

Harry’s numb hands slipped on the broom handle and his Nim-bus dropped a few feet. Shaking his sodden bangs out of his eyes, he squinted back into the stands. The dog had vanished.

“Harry!” came Wood’s anguished yell from the Gryffindor goal posts. “Harry, behind you!”

Harry looked wildly around. Cedric Diggory was pelting up the field, and a tiny speck of gold was shimmering in the rain-filled air between them —With a jolt of panic, Harry threw himself flat to the broom-handle and zoomed toward the Snitch.

“Come on!” he growled at his Nimbus as the rain whipped his face. “Faster!”

But something odd was happening. An eerie silence was falling across the stadium. The wind, though as strong as ever, was forget-

ting to roar. It was as though someone had turned off the sound, as though Harry had gone suddenly deaf — what was going on?

And then a horribly familiar wave of cold swept over him, inside him, just as he became aware of something moving on the field below. … Before he'd had time to think, Harry had taken his eyes off the Snitch and looked down.

At least a hundred dementors, their hidden faces pointing up at him, were standing beneath him. It was as though freezing water were rising in his chest, cutting at his insides. And then he heard it again. … Someone was screaming, screaming inside his head … a woman …"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl … stand aside, now. …"

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead —"

Numbing, swirling white mist was filling Harry's brain. … What was he doing? Why was he flying? He needed to help her. … She was going to die. … She was going to be murdered. …He was falling, falling through the icy mist.

"Not Harry! Please … have mercy … have mercy. …"

A shrill voice was laughing, the woman was screaming, and Harry knew no more.

"Lucky the ground was so soft."

"I thought he was dead for sure."

"But he didn't even break his glasses."

Harry could hear the voices whispering, but they made no sense whatsoever. He didn't have a clue where he was, or how he'd got

there, or what he'd been doing before he got there. All he knew was that every inch of him was aching as though it had been beaten.

"That was the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life."

Scariest … the scariest thing … hooded black figures … cold … screaming …Harry's eyes snapped open. He was lying in the hospital wing. The Gryffindor Quidditch team, spattered with mud from head to foot, was gathered around his bed. Ron and Hermione were also there, looking as though they'd just climbed out of a swimming pool.

"Harry!" said Fred, who looked extremely white underneath the mud. "How're you feeling?"

It was as though Harry's memory was on fast forward. The light-ning — the Grim — the Snitch — and the dementors …"What happened?" he said, sitting up so suddenly they all gasped.

"You fell off," said Fred. "Must've been — what — fifty feet?"

"We thought you'd died," said Alicia, who was shaking.

Hermione made a small, squeaky noise. Her eyes were extremely bloodshot.

"But the match," said Harry. "What happened? Are we doing a replay?"

No one said anything. The horrible truth sank into Harry like a stone.

"We didn't — lose?"

"Diggory got the Snitch," said George. "Just after you fell. He didn't realize what had happened. When he looked back and saw you on the ground, he tried to call it off. Wanted a rematch. But they won fair and square … even Wood admits it."

"Where is Wood?" said Harry, suddenly realizing he wasn't there.

“Still in the showers,” said Fred. “We think he’s trying to drown himself.”

Harry put his face to his knees, his hands gripping his hair. Fred grabbed his shoulder and shook it roughly.

“C’mon, Harry, you’ve never missed the Snitch before.”

“There had to be one time you didn’t get it,” said George.

“It’s not over yet,” said Fred. “We lost by a hundred points, right? So if Hufflepuff loses to Ravenclaw and we beat Ravenclaw and Slytherin …”

“Hufflepuff’ll have to lose by at least two hundred points,” said George.

“But if they beat Ravenclaw …”

“No way, Ravenclaw is too good. But if Slytherin loses against Hufflepuff …”

“It all depends on the points — a margin of a hundred either way —”

Harry lay there, not saying a word. They had lost … for the first time ever, he had lost a Quidditch match.

After ten minutes or so, Madam Pomfrey came over to tell the team to leave him in peace.

“We’ll come and see you later,” Fred told him. “Don’t beat your-self up, Harry, you’re still the best Seeker we’ve ever had.”

The team trooped out, trailing mud behind them. Madam Pom-frey shut the door behind them, looking disapproving. Ron and Hermione moved nearer to Harry’s bed.

“Dumbledore was really angry,” Hermione said in a quaking voice. “I’ve never seen him like that before. He ran onto the field as you fell, waved his wand, and you sort of slowed down before you hit the ground. Then he whirled his wand at the dementors. Shot silver stuff at them. They left the stadium right away. … He was furious they’d come onto the grounds. We heard him —”

“Then he magicked you onto a stretcher,” said Ron. “And walked up to school with you floating on it. Everyone thought you were …”

His voice faded, but Harry hardly noticed. He was thinking about what the dementors had done to him … about the scream-ing voice. He looked up and saw Ron and Hermione looking at him so anxiously that he quickly cast around for something matter-of-fact to say.

“Did someone get my Nimbus?”

Ron and Hermione looked quickly at each other.

“Er —”

“What?” said Harry, looking from one to the other.

“Well … when you fell off, it got blown away,” said Hermione hesitantly.

“And?”

“And it hit — it hit — oh, Harry — it hit the Whomping Wil-low.”

Harry’s insides lurched. The Whomping Willow was a very vio-lent tree that stood alone in the middle of the grounds.

“And?” he said, dreading the answer.

“Well, you know the Whomping Willow,” said Ron. “It — it doesn’t like being hit.”

“Professor Flitwick brought it back just before you came around,” said Hermione in a very small voice.

Slowly, she reached down for a bag at her feet, turned it upside down, and tipped a dozen bits of splintered wood and twig onto the bed, the only remains of Harry’s faithful, finally beaten broom-stick.

Chapter 10 The Marauder's Map

Madam Pomfrey insisted on keeping Harry in the hospital wing for the rest of the weekend. He didn't argue or complain, but he wouldn't let her throw away the shattered rem-nants of his Nimbus Two Thousand. He knew he was being stupid, knew that the Nimbus was beyond repair, but Harry couldn't help it; he felt as though he'd lost one of his best friends.

He had a stream of visitors, all intent on cheering him up. Ha-grid sent him a bunch of earwiggy flowers that looked like yellow cabbages, and Ginny Weasley, blushing furiously, turned up with a get-well card she had made herself, which sang shrilly unless Harry kept it shut under his bowl of fruit. The Gryffindor team visited again on Sunday morning, this time accompanied by Wood, who told Harry (in a hollow, dead sort of voice) that he didn't blame him in the slightest. Ron and Hermione left Harry's bedside only at night. But nothing anyone said or did could make Harry feel any better, because they knew only half of what was troubling him.

He hadn't told anyone about the Grim, not even Ron and Hermione, because he knew Ron would panic and Hermione would scoff. The fact remained, however, that it had now appeared twice, and both appearances had been followed by near-fatal acci-dents; the first time, he had nearly been run over by the Knight Bus; the second, fallen fifty feet from his broomstick. Was the Grim going to haunt him until he actually died? Was he going to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder for the beast?

And then there were the dementors. Harry felt sick and humili-ated every time he thought of them. Everyone said the dementors were horrible, but no one else collapsed every time they went near one. No one else heard echoes in their head of their dying parents.

Because Harry knew who that screaming voice belonged to now. He had heard her words, heard them over and over again during the night hours in the hospital wing while he lay awake, staring at the strips of moonlight on the ceiling. When the dementors ap-proached him, he heard the last moments of his mother's life, her attempts to protect him, Harry, from Lord Voldemort, and Volde-mort's laughter before he murdered her. … Harry dozed fitfully, sinking into dreams full of clammy, rotted hands and petrified pleading, jerking awake to dwell again on his mother's voice.

It was a relief to return to the noise and bustle of the main school on Monday, where he was forced to think about other things, even if he had to endure Draco Malfoy's taunting. Malfoy was almost beside himself with glee at Gryffindor's defeat. He had finally taken off his bandages, and celebrated having the full use of both arms again by doing spirited imitations of Harry falling off his broom. Malfoy spent much of their next Potions class doing dementor im-itations across the dungeon; Ron finally cracked and flung a large, slippery crocodile heart at Malfoy, which hit him in the face and caused Snape to take fifty points from Gryffindor.

"If Snape's teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts again, I'm skiving off," said Ron as they headed toward Lupin's classroom af-ter lunch. "Check who's in there, Hermione."

Hermione peered around the classroom door.

"It's okay!"

Professor Lupin was back at work. It certainly looked as though he had been ill. His old robes were hanging more loosely on him and there were dark shadows beneath his eyes; nevertheless, he smiled at the class as they took their seats, and they burst at once into an explosion of complaints about Snape's behavior while Lupin had been ill.

"It's not fair, he was only filling in, why should he give us home-work?"

“We don’t know anything about werewolves —”

“— two rolls of parchment!”

“Did you tell Professor Snape we haven’t covered them yet?” Lupin asked, frowning slightly.

The babble broke out again.

“Yes, but he said we were really behind —”

“— he wouldn’t listen —”

“— two rolls of parchment!”

Professor Lupin smiled at the look of indignation on every face.

“Don’t worry. I’ll speak to Professor Snape. You don’t have to do the essay.”

“Oh no,” said Hermione, looking very disappointed. “I’ve al-ready finished it!”

They had a very enjoyable lesson. Professor Lupin had brought along a glass box containing a hinkypunk, a little one-legged crea-ture who looked as though he were made of wisps of smoke, rather frail and harmless-looking.

“Lures travelers into bogs,” said Professor Lupin as they took notes. “You notice the lantern dangling from his hand? Hops ahead — people follow the light — then —”

The hinkypunk made a horrible squelching noise against the glass.

When the bell rang, everyone gathered up their things and headed for the door, Harry among them, but —“Wait a moment, Harry,” Lupin called. “I’d like a word.”

Harry doubled back and watched Professor Lupin covering the hinkypunk's box with a cloth.

"I heard about the match," said Lupin, turning back to his desk and starting to pile books into his briefcase, "and I'm sorry about your broomstick. Is there any chance of fixing it?"

"No," said Harry. "The tree smashed it to bits."

Lupin sighed.

"They planted the Whomping Willow the same year that I arrived at Hogwarts. People used to play a game, trying to get near enough to touch the trunk. In the end, a boy called Davey Gudgeon nearly lost an eye, and we were forbidden to go near it. No broomstick would have a chance.

"Did you hear about the dementors too?" said Harry with diffi-culty.

Lupin looked at him quickly.

"Yes, I did. I don't think any of us have seen Professor Dumble-dore that angry. They have been growing restless for some time … furious at his refusal to let them inside the grounds. … I suppose they were the reason you fell?"

"Yes," said Harry. He hesitated, and then the question he had to ask burst from him before he could stop himself. "Why? Why do they affect me like that? Am I just — ?"

"It has nothing to do with weakness," said Professor Lupin sharply, as though he had read Harry's mind. "The dementors af-fect you worse than the others because there are horrors in your past that the others don't have."

A ray of wintery sunlight fell across the classroom, illuminating Lupin's gray hairs and the lines on his young face.

“Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and de-spair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them. Even Muggles feel their presence, though they can’t see them. Get too near a dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like it-self … soul-less and evil. You’ll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life. And the worst that happened to you, Harry, is enough to make anyone fall off their broom. You have nothing to feel ashamed of.”

“When they get near me —” Harry stared at Lupin’s desk, his throat tight. “I can hear Voldemort murdering my mum.”

Lupin made a sudden motion with his arm as though to grip Harry’s shoulder, but thought better of it. There was a moment’s si-lence, then —“Why did they have to come to the match?” said Harry bitterly.

“They’re getting hungry,” said Lupin coolly, shutting his briefcase with a snap. “Dumbledore won’t let them into the school, so their supply of human prey has dried up. … I don’t think they could resist the large crowd around the Quidditch field. All that excite-ment … emotions running high … it was their idea of a feast.”

“Azkaban must be terrible,” Harry muttered. Lupin nodded grimly.

“The fortress is set on a tiny island, way out to sea, but they don’t need walls and water to keep the prisoners in, not when they’re all trapped inside their own heads, incapable of a single cheerful thought. Most of them go mad within weeks.”

“But Sirius Black escaped from them,” Harry said slowly. “He got away. …”

Lupin’s briefcase slipped from the desk; he had to stoop quickly to catch it.

"Yes," he said, straightening up, "Black must have found a way to fight them. I wouldn't have believed it possible. … Dementors are supposed to drain a wizard of his powers if he is left with them too long. …"

"You made that dementor on the train back off," said Harry sud-denly.

"There are — certain defenses one can use," said Lupin. "But there was only one dementor on the train. The more there are, the more difficult it becomes to resist."

"What defenses?" said Harry at once. "Can you teach me?"

"I don't pretend to be an expert at fighting dementors, Harry … quite the contrary. …"

"But if the dementors come to another Quidditch match, I need to be able to fight them —"

Lupin looked into Harry's determined face, hesitated, then said, "Well … all right. I'll try and help. But it'll have to wait until next term, I'm afraid. I have a lot to do before the holidays. I chose a very inconvenient time to fall ill."

What with the promise of anti-dementor lessons from Lupin, the thought that he might never have to hear his mother's death again, and the fact that Ravenclaw flattened Hufflepuff in their Quid-ditch match at the end of November, Harry's mood took a definite upturn. Gryffindor were not out of the running after all, although they could not afford to lose another match. Wood became repos-sessed of his manic energy, and worked his team as hard as ever in the chilly haze of rain that persisted into December. Harry saw no hint of a dementor within the grounds. Dumbledore's anger seemed to be keeping them at their stations at the entrances.

Two weeks before the end of the term, the sky lightened sud-denly to a dazzling, opaline white and the muddy grounds were re-vealed one

morning covered in glittering frost. Inside the castle, there was a buzz of Christmas in the air. Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, had already decorated his classroom with shim-mering lights that turned out to be real, fluttering fairies. The stu-dents were all happily discussing their plans for the holidays. Both Ron and Hermione had decided to remain at Hogwarts, and though Ron said it was because he couldn't stand two weeks with Percy, and Hermione insisted she needed to use the library, Harry wasn't fooled; they were doing it to keep him company, and he was very grateful.

To everyone's delight except Harry's, there was to be another Hogsmeade trip on the very last weekend of the term.

"We can do all our Christmas shopping there!" said Hermione. "Mum and Dad would really love those Toothflossing Stringmints from Honeydukes!"

Resigned to the fact that he would be the only third year staying behind again, Harry borrowed a copy of Which Broomstick from Wood, and decided to spend the day reading up on the different makes. He had been riding one of the school brooms at team prac-tice, an ancient Shooting Star, which was very slow and jerky; he definitely needed a new broom of his own.

On the Saturday morning of the Hogsmeade trip, Harry bid good-bye to Ron and Hermione, who were wrapped in cloaks and scarves, then turned up the marble staircase alone, and headed back toward Gryffindor Tower. Snow had started to fall outside the win-dows, and the castle was very still and quiet.

"Psst — Harry!"

He turned, halfway along the third-floor corridor, to see Fred and George peering out at him from behind a statue of a hump-backed, one-eyed witch.

“What are you doing?” said Harry curiously. “How come you’re not going to Hogsmeade?”

“We’ve come to give you a bit of festive cheer before we go,” said Fred, with a mysterious wink. “Come in here. …”

He nodded toward an empty classroom to the left of the one-eyed statue. Harry followed Fred and George inside. George closed the door quietly and then turned, beaming, to look at Harry.

“Early Christmas present for you, Harry,” he said.

Fred pulled something from inside his cloak with a flourish and laid it on one of the desks. It was a large, square, very worn piece of parchment with nothing written on it. Harry, suspecting one of Fred and George’s jokes, stared at it.

“What’s that supposed to be?”

“This, Harry, is the secret of our success,” said George, patting the parchment fondly.

“It’s a wrench, giving it to you,” said Fred, “but we decided last night, your need’s greater than ours.”

“Anyway, we know it by heart,” said George. “We bequeath it to you. We don’t really need it anymore.”

“And what do I need with a bit of old parchment?” said Harry.

“A bit of old parchment!” said Fred, closing his eyes with a gri-mace as though Harry had mortally offended him. “Explain, George.”

“Well … when we were in our first year, Harry — young, care-free, and innocent —”

Harry snorted. He doubted whether Fred and George had ever been innocent.

“— well, more innocent than we are now — we got into a spot of bother with Filch.”

“We let off a Dungbomb in the corridor and it upset him for some reason —”

“So he hauled us off to his office and started threatening us with the usual —”

“— detention —”

“— disembowelment —”

“— and we couldn’t help noticing a drawer in one of his filing cabinets marked Confiscated and Highly Dangerous.”

“Don’t tell me —” said Harry, starting to grin.

“Well, what would you’ve done?” said Fred. “George caused a diversion by dropping another Dungbomb, I whipped the drawer open, and grabbed — this.”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds, you know,” said George. “We don’t reckon Filch ever found out how to work it. He probably suspected what it was, though, or he wouldn’t have confiscated it.”

“And you know how to work it?”

“Oh yes,” said Fred, smirking. “This little beauty’s taught us more than all the teachers in this school.”

“You’re winding me up,” said Harry, looking at the ragged old bit of parchment.

“Oh, are we?” said George.

He took out his wand, touched the parchment lightly, and said, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

And at once, thin ink lines began to spread like a spider's web from the point that George's wand had touched. They joined each other, they crisscrossed, they fanned into every corner of the parch-ment; then words began to blossom across the top, great, curly green words, that proclaimed:Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and ProngsPurveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makersare proud to present

The Marauder's Map

It was a map showing every detail of the Hogwarts castle and grounds. But the truly remarkable thing were the tiny ink dots moving around it, each labeled with a name in minuscule writing. Astounded, Harry bent over it. A labeled dot in the top left corner showed that Professor Dumbledore was pacing his study; the care-taker's cat, Mrs. Norris, was prowling the second floor; and Peeves the Poltergeist was currently bouncing around the trophy room. And as Harry's eyes traveled up and down the familiar corridors, he noticed something else.

This map showed a set of passages he had never entered. And many of them seemed to lead —"Right into Hogsmeade," said Fred, tracing one of them with his finger. "There are seven in all. Now, Filch knows about these four" — he pointed them out — "but we're sure we're the only ones who know about these. Don't bother with the one behind the mirror on the fourth floor. We used it until last winter, but it's caved in — completely blocked. And we don't reckon anyone's ever used this one, because the Whomping Willow's planted right over the entrance. But this one here, this one leads right into the cellar of Honeydukes. We've used it loads of times. And as you might've noticed, the entrance is right outside this room, through that one-eyed old crone's hump."

"Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," sighed George, pat-ting the heading of the map. "We owe them so much."

“Noble men, working tirelessly to help a new generation of law-breakers,” said Fred solemnly.

“Right,” said George briskly. “Don’t forget to wipe it after you’ve used it —”

“— or anyone can read it,” Fred said warningly.

“Just tap it again and say, ‘Mischief managed!’ And it’ll go blank.”

“So, young Harry,” said Fred, in an uncanny impersonation of Percy, “mind you behave yourself.”

“See you in Honeydukes,” said George, winking.

They left the room, both smirking in a satisfied sort of way.

Harry stood there, gazing at the miraculous map. He watched the tiny ink Mrs. Norris turn left and pause to sniff at something on the floor. If Filch really didn’t know … he wouldn’t have to pass the dementors at all. …But even as he stood there, flooded with excitement, something Harry had once heard Mr. Weasley say came floating out of his memory.

Never trust anything that can think for itself, if you can’t see where it keeps its brain.

This map was one of those dangerous magical objects Mr. Weasley had been warning against. … Aids for Magical Mischief-Makers … but then, Harry reasoned, he only wanted to use it to get into Hogsmeade, it wasn’t as though he wanted to steal any-thing or attack anyone … and Fred and George had been using it for years without anything horrible happening. …Harry traced the secret passage to Honeydukes with his finger.

Then, quite suddenly, as though following orders, he rolled up the map, stuffed it inside his robes, and hurried to the door of the

classroom. He opened it a couple of inches. There was no one outside. Very carefully, he edged out of the room and behind the statue of the one-eyed witch.

What did he have to do? He pulled out the map again and saw, to his astonishment, that a new ink figure had appeared upon it, la-beled Harry Potter. This figure was standing exactly where the real Harry was standing, about halfway down the third-floor corridor. Harry watched carefully. His little ink self appeared to be tapping the witch with his minute wand. Harry quickly took out his real wand and tapped the statue. Nothing happened. He looked back at the map. The tiniest speech bubble had appeared next to his figure. The word inside said, “Dissendium.”

“Dissendium!” Harry whispered, tapping the stone witch again.

At once, the statue’s hump opened wide enough to admit a fairly thin person. Harry glanced quickly up and down the corridor, then tucked the map away again, hoisted himself into the hole headfirst, and pushed himself forward.

He slid a considerable way down what felt like a stone slide, then landed on cold, damp earth. He stood up, looking around. It was pitch dark. He held up his wand, muttered, “Lumos!” and saw that he was in a very narrow, low, earthy passageway. He raised the map, tapped it with the tip of his wand, and muttered, “Mischief man-aged!” The map went blank at once. He folded it carefully, tucked it inside his robes, then, heart beating fast, both excited and appre-hensive, he set off.

The passage twisted and turned, more like the burrow of a giant rabbit than anything else. Harry hurried along it, stumbling now and then on the uneven floor, holding his wand out in front of him.

It took ages, but Harry had the thought of Honeydukes to sus-tain him. After what felt like an hour, the passage began to rise. Panting, Harry sped up, his face hot, his feet very cold.

Ten minutes later, he came to the foot of some worn stone steps, which rose out of sight above him. Careful not to make any noise, Harry began to climb. A hundred steps, two hundred steps, he lost count as he climbed, watching his feet. … Then, without warn-ing, his head hit something hard.

It seemed to be a trapdoor. Harry stood there, massaging the top of his head, listening. He couldn't hear any sounds above him. Very slowly, he pushed the trapdoor open and peered over the edge.

He was in a cellar, which was full of wooden crates and boxes. Harry climbed out of the trapdoor and replaced it — it blended so perfectly with the dusty floor that it was impossible to tell it was there. Harry crept slowly toward the wooden staircase that led up-stairs. Now he could definitely hear voices, not to mention the tin-kle of a bell and the opening and shutting of a door.

Wondering what he ought to do, he suddenly heard a door open much closer at hand; somebody was about to come downstairs.

"And get another box of Jelly Slugs, dear, they've nearly cleaned us out —" said a woman's voice.

A pair of feet was coming down the staircase. Harry leapt behind an enormous crate and waited for the footsteps to pass. He heard the man shifting boxes against the opposite wall. He might not get another chance —Quickly and silently, Harry dodged out from his hiding place and climbed the stairs; looking back, he saw an enormous backside and shiny bald head, buried in a box. Harry reached the door at the top of the stairs, slipped through it, and found himself behind the counter of Honeydukes — he ducked, crept sideways, and then straightened up.

Honeydukes was so crowded with Hogwarts students that no one looked twice at Harry. He edged among them, looking around, and suppressed a laugh as he imagined the look that would spread over Dudley's piggy face if he could see where Harry was now.

There were shelves upon shelves of the most succulent-looking sweets imaginable. Creamy chunks of nougat, shimmering pink squares of coconut ice, fat, honey-colored toffees; hundreds of different kinds of chocolate in neat rows; there was a large barrel of Every Flavor Beans, and another of Fizzing Whizbees, the levitat-ing sherbert balls that Ron had mentioned; along yet another wall were “Special Effects” sweets: Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum (which filled a room with bluebell-colored bubbles that refused to pop for days), the strange, splintery Toothflossing Stringmints, tiny black Pepper Imps (“breathe fire for your friends!”), Ice Mice (“hear your teeth chatter and squeak!”), peppermint creams shaped like toads (“hop realistically in the stomach!”), fragile sugar-spun quills, and exploding bonbons.

Harry squeezed himself through a crowd of sixth years and saw a sign hanging in the farthest corner of the shop (UNUSUAL TASTES). Ron and Hermione were standing underneath it, examining a tray of blood-flavored lollipops. Harry sneaked up behind them.

“Ugh, no, Harry won’t want one of those, they’re for vampires, I expect,” Hermione was saying.

“How about these?” said Ron, shoving a jar of Cockroach Clus-ters under Hermione’s nose.

“Definitely not,” said Harry.

Ron nearly dropped the jar.

“Harry!” squealed Hermione. “What are you doing here? How — how did you — ?”

“Wow!” said Ron, looking very impressed, “you’ve learned to Apparate!”

“ ’Course I haven’t,” said Harry. He dropped his voice so that none of the sixth years could hear him and told them all about the Marauder’s

Map.

“How come Fred and George never gave it to me!” said Ron, outraged. “I’m their brother!”

“But Harry isn’t going to keep it!” said Hermione, as though the idea were ludicrous. “He’s going to hand it in to Professor McGonagall, aren’t you, Harry?”

“No, I’m not!” said Harry.

“Are you mad?” said Ron, goggling at Hermione. “Hand in something that good?”

“If I hand it in, I’ll have to say where I got it! Filch would know Fred and George had nicked it!”

“But what about Sirius Black?” Hermione hissed. “He could be using one of the passages on that map to get into the castle! The teachers have got to know!”

“He can’t be getting in through a passage,” said Harry quickly. “There are seven secret tunnels on the map, right? Fred and George reckon Filch already knows about four of them. And of the other three — one of them’s caved in, so no one can get through it. One of them’s got the Whomping Willow planted over the entrance, so you can’t get out of it. And the one I just came through — well — it’s really hard to see the entrance to it down in the cellar, so unless he knew it was there …”

Harry hesitated. What if Black did know the passage was there? Ron, however, cleared his throat significantly, and pointed to a no-tice pasted on the inside of the sweetshop door.

— BY ORDER OF —

THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Customers are reminded that until further notice, dementors will be patrolling the streets of Hogsmeade every night after sundown. This measure has been put in place for the safety of Hogsmeade residents and will be lifted upon the recapture of Sirius Black. It is there-fore advisable that you complete your shopping well before nightfall.

Merry Christmas!

"See?" said Ron quietly. "I'd like to see Black try and break into Honeydukes with dementors swarming all over the village. Any-way, Hermione, the Honeydukes owners would hear a break-in, wouldn't they? They live over the shop!"

"Yes, but — but —" Hermoine seemed to be struggling to find another problem. "Look, Harry still shouldn't be coming into Hogsmeade. He hasn't got a signed form! If anyone finds out, he'll be in so much trouble! And it's not nightfall yet — what if Sirius Black turns up today? Now?"

"He'd have a job spotting Harry in this," said Ron, nodding through the mullioned windows at the thick, swirling snow. "Come on, Hermione, it's Christmas. Harry deserves a break."

Hermione bit her lip, looking extremely worried.

"Are you going to report me?" Harry asked her, grinning.

"Oh — of course not — but honestly, Harry —"

"Seen the Fizzing Whizbees, Harry?" said Ron, grabbing him and leading him over to their barrel. "And the Jelly Slugs? And the Acid Pops? Fred gave me one of those when I was seven — it burnt a hole right through my tongue. I remember Mum walloping him with her broomstick." Ron stared broodingly into the Acid Pop box. "Reckon Fred'd take a bit of Cockroach Cluster if I told him they were peanuts?"

When Ron and Hermione had paid for all their sweets, the three of them left Honeydukes for the blizzard outside.

Hogsmeade looked like a Christmas card; the little thatched cot-tages and shops were all covered in a layer of crisp snow; there were holly wreaths on the doors and strings of enchanted candles hang-ing in the trees.

Harry shivered; unlike the other two, he didn't have his cloak. They headed up the street, heads bowed against the wind, Ron and Hermione shouting through their scarves.

"That's the post office —"

"Zonko's is up there —"

"We could go up to the Shrieking Shack —"

"Tell you what," said Ron, his teeth chattering, "shall we go for a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks?"

Harry was more than willing; the wind was fierce and his hands were freezing, so they crossed the road, and in a few minutes were entering the tiny inn.

It was extremely crowded, noisy, warm, and smoky. A curvy sort of woman with a pretty face was serving a bunch of rowdy warlocks up at the bar.

"That's Madam Rosmerta," said Ron. "I'll get the drinks, shall I?" he added, going slightly red.

Harry and Hermione made their way to the back of the room, where there was a small, vacant table between the window and a handsome Christmas tree, which stood next to the fireplace. Ron came back five minutes later, carrying three foaming tankards of hot butterbeer.

“Merry Christmas!” he said happily, raising his tankard.

Harry drank deeply. It was the most delicious thing he’d ever tasted and seemed to heat every bit of him from the inside.

A sudden breeze ruffled his hair. The door of the Three Broom-sticks had opened again. Harry looked over the rim of his tankard and choked.

Professors McGonagall and Flitwick had just entered the pub with a flurry of snowflakes, shortly followed by Hagrid, who was deep in conversation with a portly man in a lime-green bowler hat and a pinstriped cloak — Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic.

In an instant, Ron and Hermione had both placed hands on the top of Harry’s head and forced him off his stool and under the table. Dripping with butterbeer and crouching out of sight, Harry clutched his empty tankard and watched the teachers’ and Fudge’s feet move toward the bar, pause, then turn and walk right toward him.

Somewhere above him, Hermione whispered, “Mobiliarbus!”

The Christmas tree beside their table rose a few inches off the ground, drifted sideways, and landed with a soft thump right in front of their table, hiding them from view. Staring through the dense lower branches, Harry saw four sets of chair legs move back from the table right beside theirs, then heard the grunts and sighs of the teachers and minister as they sat down.

Next he saw another pair of feet, wearing sparkly turquoise high heels, and heard a woman’s voice.

“A small gillywater —”

“Mine,” said Professor McGonagall’s voice.

“Four pints of mulled mead —”

“Ta, Rosmerta,” said Hagrid.

“A cherry syrup and soda with ice and umbrella —”

“Mmm!” said Professor Flitwick, smacking his lips.

“So you’ll be the red currant rum, Minister.”

“Thank you, Rosmerta, m’dear,” said Fudge’s voice. “Lovely to see you again, I must say. Have one yourself, won’t you? Come and join us. …”

“Well, thank you very much, Minister.”

Harry watched the glittering heels march away and back again. His heart was pounding uncomfortably in his throat. Why hadn’t it occurred to him that this was the last weekend of term for the teachers too? And how long were they going to sit there? He needed time to sneak back into Honeydukes if he wanted to return to school tonight. … Hermione’s leg gave a nervous twitch next to him.

“So, what brings you to this neck of the woods, Minister?” came Madam Rosmerta’s voice.

Harry saw the lower part of Fudge’s thick body twist in his chair as though he were checking for eavesdroppers. Then he said in a quiet voice, “What else, m’dear, but Sirius Black? I daresay you heard what happened up at the school at Halloween?”

“I did hear a rumor,” admitted Madam Rosmerta.

“Did you tell the whole pub, Hagrid?” said Professor McGona-gall exasperatedly.

“Do you think Black’s still in the area, Minister?” whispered Madam Rosmerta.

“I’m sure of it,” said Fudge shortly.

"You know that the dementors have searched the whole village twice?" said Madam Rosmerta, a slight edge to her voice. "Scared all my customers away. … It's very bad for business, Minister."

"Rosmerta, m'dear, I don't like them any more than you do," said Fudge uncomfortably. "Necessary precaution … unfortunate, but there you are. … I've just met some of them. They're in a fury against Dumbledore — he won't let them inside the castle grounds."

"I should think not," said Professor McGonagall sharply. "How are we supposed to teach with those horrors floating around?"

"Hear, hear!" squeaked tiny Professor Flitwick, whose feet were dangling a foot from the ground.

"All the same," demurred Fudge, "they are here to protect you all from something much worse. … We all know what Black's capa-ble of. …"

"Do you know, I still have trouble believing it," said Madam Rosmerta thoughtfully. "Of all the people to go over to the Dark Side, Sirius Black was the last I'd have thought … I mean, I re-member him when he was a boy at Hogwarts. If you'd told me then what he was going to become, I'd have said you'd had too much mead."

"You don't know the half of it, Rosmerta," said Fudge gruffly. "The worst he did isn't widely known."

"The worst?" said Madam Rosmerta, her voice alive with curios-ity. "Worse than murdering all those poor people, you mean?"

"I certainly do," said Fudge.

"I can't believe that. What could possibly be worse?"

"You say you remember him at Hogwarts, Rosmerta," murmured Professor McGonagall. "Do you remember who his best friend was?"

“Naturally,” said Madam Rosmerta, with a small laugh. “Never saw one without the other, did you? The number of times I had them in here — ooh, they used to make me laugh. Quite the dou-ble act, Sirius Black and James Potter!”

Harry dropped his tankard with a loud clunk. Ron kicked him.

“Precisely,” said Professor McGonagall. “Black and Potter. Ring-leaders of their little gang. Both very bright, of course — excep-tionally bright, in fact — but I don’t think we’ve ever had such a pair of troublemakers —”

“I dunno,” chuckled Hagrid. “Fred and George Weasley could give ’em a run fer their money.”

“You’d have thought Black and Potter were brothers!” chimed in Professor Flitwick. “Inseparable!”

“Of course they were,” said Fudge. “Potter trusted Black beyond all his other friends. Nothing changed when they left school. Black was best man when James married Lily. Then they named him god-father to Harry. Harry has no idea, of course. You can imagine how the idea would torment him.”

“Because Black turned out to be in league with You-Know-Who?” whispered Madam Rosmerta.

“Worse even than that, m’dear. …” Fudge dropped his voice and proceeded in a sort of low rumble. “Not many people are aware that the Potters knew You-Know-Who was after them. Dumbledore, who was of course working tirelessly against You-Know-Who, had a number of useful spies. One of them tipped him off, and he alerted James and Lily at once. He advised them to go into hiding. Well, of course, You-Know-Who wasn’t an easy person to hide from. Dumble-dore told them that their best chance was the Fidelius Charm.”

“How does that work?” said Madam Rosmerta, breathless with interest. Professor Flitwick cleared his throat.

“An immensely complex spell,” he said squeakily, “involving the magical concealment of a secret inside a single, living soul. The information is hidden inside the chosen person, or Secret-Keeper, and is henceforth impossible to find — unless, of course, the Secret-Keeper chooses to divulge it. As long as the Secret-Keeper refused to speak, You-Know-Who could search the village where Lily and James were staying for years and never find them, not even if he had his nose pressed against their sitting room window!”

“So Black was the Potters’ Secret-Keeper?” whispered Madam Rosmerta.

“Naturally,” said Professor McGonagall. “James Potter told Dumbledore that Black would die rather than tell where they were, that Black was planning to go into hiding himself … and yet, Dumbledore remained worried. I remember him offering to be the Potters’ Secret-Keeper himself.”

“He suspected Black?” gasped Madam Rosmerta.

“He was sure that somebody close to the Potters had been keep-ing You-Know-Who informed of their movements,” said Professor McGonagall darkly. “Indeed, he had suspected for some time that someone on our side had turned traitor and was passing a lot of information to You-Know-Who.”

“But James Potter insisted on using Black?”

“He did,” said Fudge heavily. “And then, barely a week after the Fidelius Charm had been performed —”

“Black betrayed them?” breathed Madam Rosmerta.

“He did indeed. Black was tired of his double-agent role, he was ready to declare his support openly for You-Know-Who, and he seems to have planned this for the moment of the Potters’ death. But, as we all know, You-Know-Who met his downfall in little Harry Potter. Powers gone, horribly weakened, he fled. And this left Black in a very nasty position indeed. His master had fallen at the very moment when he, Black, had shown his true colors as a traitor. He had no choice but to run for it —”

“Filthy, stinkin’ turncoat!” Hagrid said, so loudly that half the bar went quiet.

“Shh!” said Professor McGonagall.

“I met him!” growled Hagrid. “I musta bin the last ter see him before he killed all them people! It was me what rescued Harry from Lily an’ James’s house after they was killed! Jus’ got him outta the ruins, poor little thing, with a great slash across his forehead, an’ his parents dead … an’ Sirius Black turns up, on that flyin’ motorbike he used ter ride. Never occurred ter me what he was doin’ there. I didn’ know he’d bin Lily an’ James’s Secret-Keeper. Thought he’d jus’ heard the news o’ You-Know-Who’s attack an’ come ter see what he could do. White an’ shakin’, he was. An’ yeh know what I did? I COMFORTED THE MURDERIN’ TRAITOR!” Hagrid roared.

“Hagrid, please!” said Professor McGonagall. “Keep your voice down!”

“How was I ter know he wasn’ upset abou’ Lily an’ James? It was You-Know-Who he cared abou’! An’ then he says, ‘Give Harry ter me, Hagrid, I’m his godfather, I’ll look after him —’ Ha! But I’d had me orders from Dumbledore, an’ I told Black no, Dumbledore said Harry was ter go ter his aunt an’ uncle’s. Black argued, but in the end he gave in. Told me ter take his motorbike ter get Harry there. ‘I won’t need it anymore,’ he says.

"I shoulda known there was somethin' fishy goin' on then. He loved that motorbike, what was he givin' it ter me for? Why wouldn' he need it anymore? Fact was, it was too easy ter trace. Dumbledore knew he'd bin the Potters' Secret-Keeper. Black knew he was goin' ter have ter run fer it that night, knew it was a matter o' hours before the Ministry was after him.

"But what if I'd given Harry to him, eh? I bet he'd've pitched him off the bike halfway out ter sea. His bes' friends' son! But when a wizard goes over ter the Dark Side, there's nothin' and no one that matters to 'em anymore. …"

A long silence followed Hagrid's story. Then Madam Rosmerta said with some satisfaction, "But he didn't manage to disappear, did he? The Ministry of Magic caught up with him next day!"

"Alas, if only we had," said Fudge bitterly. "It was not we who found him. It was little Peter Pettigrew — another of the Potters' friends. Maddened by grief, no doubt, and knowing that Black had been the Potters' Secret-Keeper, he went after Black himself."

"Pettigrew … that fat little boy who was always tagging around after them at Hogwarts?" said Madam Rosmerta.

"Hero-worshipped Black and Potter," said Professor McGona-gall. "Never quite in their league, talent-wise. I was often rather sharp with him. You can imagine how I — how I regret that now. …" She sounded as though she had a sudden head cold.

"There, now, Minerva," said Fudge kindly, "Pettigrew died a hero's death. Eyewitnesses — Muggles, of course, we wiped their memories later — told us how Pettigrew cornered Black. They say he was sobbing, 'Lily and James, Sirius! How could you?' And then he went for his wand. Well, of course, Black was quicker. Blew Pettigrew to smithereens. …"

Professor McGonagall blew her nose and said thickly, “Stupid boy … foolish boy … he was always hopeless at dueling … should have left it to the Ministry. …”

“I tell yeh, if I’d got ter Black before little Pettigrew did, I wouldn’t’ve messed around with wands — I’d’ve ripped him limb — from — limb,” Hagrid growled.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Hagrid,” said Fudge sharply. “Nobody but trained Hit Wizards from the Magical Law Enforcement Squad would have stood a chance against Black once he was cornered. I was Junior Minister in the Department of Mag-ical Catastrophes at the time, and I was one of the first on the scene after Black murdered all those people. I — I will never forget it. I still dream about it sometimes. A crater in the middle of the street, so deep it had cracked the sewer below. Bodies everywhere. Mug-gles screaming. And Black standing there laughing, with what was left of Pettigrew in front of him … a heap of bloodstained robes and a few — a few fragments —”

Fudge’s voice stopped abruptly. There was the sound of five noses being blown.

“Well, there you have it, Rosmerta,” said Fudge thickly. “Black was taken away by twenty members of the Magical Law Enforce-ment Squad and Pettigrew received the Order of Merlin, First Class, which I think was some comfort to his poor mother. Black’s been in Azkaban ever since.”

Madam Rosmerta let out a long sigh.

“Is it true he’s mad, Minister?”

“I wish I could say that he was,” said Fudge slowly. “I certainly believe his master’s defeat unhinged him for a while. The murder of Pettigrew and all those Muggles was the action of a cornered and desperate man — cruel … pointless. Yet I met Black on my last inspection of

Azkaban. You know, most of the prisoners in there sit muttering to themselves in the dark; there's no sense in them … but I was shocked at how normal Black seemed. He spoke quite rationally to me. It was unnerving. You'd have thought he was merely bored — asked if I'd finished with my newspaper, cool as you please, said he missed doing the crossword. Yes, I was astounded at how little effect the dementors seemed to be having on him — and he was one of the most heavily guarded in the place, you know. Dementors outside his door day and night."

"But what do you think he's broken out to do?" said Madam Rosmerta. "Good gracious, Minister, he isn't trying to rejoin You-Know-Who, is he?"

"I daresay that is his — er — eventual plan," said Fudge eva-sively. "But we hope to catch Black long before that. I must say, You-Know-Who alone and friendless is one thing … but give him back his most devoted servant, and I shudder to think how quickly he'll rise again. …"

There was a small chink of glass on wood. Someone had set down their glass.

"You know, Cornelius, if you're dining with the headmaster, we'd better head back up to the castle," said Professor McGonagall.

One by one, the pairs of feet in front of Harry took the weight of their owners once more; hems of cloaks swung into sight, and Madam Rosemerta's glittering heels disappeared behind the bar. The door of the Three Broomsticks opened again, there was an-other flurry of snow, and the teachers had disappeared.

"Harry?"

Ron's and Hermione's faces appeared under the table. They were both staring at him, lost for words.

Chapter 11 The Firebolt

Harry didn't have a very clear idea of how he had managed to get back into the Honeydukes cellar, through the tun-nel, and into the castle once more. All he knew was that the return trip seemed to take no time at all, and that he hardly noticed what he was doing, because his head was still pounding with the conver-sation he had just heard.

Why had nobody ever told him? Dumbledore, Hagrid, Mr. Weasley, Cornelius Fudge … why hadn't anyone ever mentioned the fact that Harry's parents had died because their best friend had betrayed them?

Ron and Hermione watched Harry nervously all through din-ner, not daring to talk about what they'd overheard, because Percy was sitting close by them. When they went upstairs to the crowded common room, it was to find Fred and George had set off half a dozen Dungbombs in a fit of end-of-term high spirits. Harry, who didn't want Fred and George asking him whether he'd reached Hogsmeade or not, sneaked quietly up to the empty dormitory and headed straight for his bedside cabinet. He pushed his books aside and quickly found what he was looking for — the leather-bound photo album Hagrid had given him two years ago, which was full of wizard pictures of his mother and father. He sat down on his bed, drew the hangings around him, and started turning the pages, searching, until …He stopped on a picture of his parents' wedding day. There was his father waving up at him, beaming, the untidy black hair Harry had inherited standing up in all directions. There was his mother, alight with happiness, arm in arm with his dad. And there … that must be him. Their best man … Harry had never given him a thought before.

If he hadn't known it was the same person, he would never have guessed it was Black in this old photograph. His face wasn't sunken and waxy, but handsome, full of laughter. Had he already been working for Voldemort when this picture had been taken? Was he

already planning the deaths of the two people next to him? Did he realize he was facing twelve years in Azkaban, twelve years that would make him unrecognizable?

But the dementors don't affect him, Harry thought, staring into the handsome, laughing face. He doesn't have to hear my mum screaming if they get too close —Harry slammed the album shut, reached over and stuffed it back into his cabinet, took off his robe and glasses and got into bed, making sure the hangings were hiding him from view.

The dormitory door opened.

"Harry?" said Ron's voice uncertainly.

But Harry lay still, pretending to be asleep. He heard Ron leave again, and rolled over on his back, his eyes wide open.

A hatred such as he had never known before was coursing through Harry like poison. He could see Black laughing at him through the darkness, as though somebody had pasted the picture from the album over his eyes. He watched, as though somebody was playing him a piece of film, Sirius Black blasting Peter Petti-grew (who resembled Neville Longbottom) into a thousand pieces. He could hear (though having no idea what Black's voice might sound like) a low, excited mutter. "It has happened, My Lord … the Potters have made me their Secret-Keeper. …" And then came another voice, laughing shrilly, the same laugh that Harry heard inside his head whenever the dementors drew near. …"Harry, you — you look terrible."

Harry hadn't gotten to sleep until daybreak. He had awoken to find the dormitory deserted, dressed, and gone down the spiral stair-case to a common room that was completely empty except for Ron, who was eating a Peppermint Toad and massaging his stomach, and Hermione, who had spread her homework over three tables.

“Where is everyone?” said Harry.

“Gone! It’s the first day of the holidays, remember?” said Ron, watching Harry closely. “It’s nearly lunchtime; I was going to come and wake you up in a minute.”

Harry slumped into a chair next to the fire. Snow was still falling outside the windows. Crookshanks was spread out in front of the fire like a large, ginger rug.

“You really don’t look well, you know,” Hermione said, peering anxiously into his face.

“I’m fine,” said Harry.

“Harry, listen,” said Hermione, exchanging a look with Ron, “you must be really upset about what we heard yesterday. But the thing is, you mustn’t go doing anything stupid.”

“Like what?” said Harry.

“Like trying to go after Black,” said Ron sharply.

Harry could tell they had rehearsed this conversation while he had been asleep. He didn’t say anything.

“You won’t, will you, Harry?” said Hermione.

“Because Black’s not worth dying for,” said Ron.

Harry looked at them. They didn’t seem to understand at all.

“D’you know what I see and hear every time a dementor gets too near me?” Ron and Hermione shook their heads, looking apprehensive. “I can hear my mum screaming and pleading with Voldemort. And if you’d heard your mum screaming like that, just about to be killed, you wouldn’t forget it in a hurry. And if you found out

someone who was supposed to be a friend of hers betrayed her and sent Voldemort after her —"

"There's nothing you can do!" said Hermione, looking stricken. "The dementors will catch Black and he'll go back to Azkaban and — and serve him right!"

"You heard what Fudge said. Black isn't affected by Azkaban like normal people are. It's not a punishment for him like it is for the others."

"So what are you saying?" said Ron, looking very tense. "You want to — to kill Black or something?"

"Don't be silly," said Hermione in a panicky voice. "Harry doesn't want to kill anyone, do you, Harry?"

Again, Harry didn't answer. He didn't know what he wanted to do. All he knew was that the idea of doing nothing, while Black was at liberty, was almost more than he could stand.

"Malfoy knows," he said abruptly. "Remember what he said to me in Potions? 'If it was me, I'd hunt him down myself. … I'd want revenge.' "

"You're going to take Malfoy's advice instead of ours?" said Ron furiously. "Listen … you know what Pettigrew's mother got back after Black had finished with him? Dad told me — the Order of Merlin, First Class, and Pettigrew's finger in a box. That was the biggest bit of him they could find. Black's a madman, Harry, and he's dangerous —"

"Malfoy's dad must have told him," said Harry, ignoring Ron. "He was right in Voldemort's inner circle —"

"Say You-Know-Who, will you?" interjected Ron angrily.

"— so obviously, the Malfoys knew Black was working for Voldemort —"

"— and Malfoy'd love to see you blown into about a million pieces, like Pettigrew! Get a grip. Malfoy's just hoping you'll get yourself killed before he has to play you at Quidditch."

"Harry, please," said Hermione, her eyes now shining with tears, "please be sensible. Black did a terrible, terrible thing, but d-don't put yourself in danger, it's what Black wants. … Oh, Harry, you'd be playing right into Black's hands if you went looking for him. Your mum and dad wouldn't want you to get hurt, would they? They'd never want you to go looking for Black!"

"I'll never know what they'd have wanted, because thanks to Black, I've never spoken to them," said Harry shortly.

There was a silence in which Crookshanks stretched luxuriously, flexing his claws. Ron's pocket quivered.

"Look," said Ron, obviously casting around for a change of sub-ject, "it's the holidays! It's nearly Christmas! Let's — let's go down and see Hagrid. We haven't visited him for ages!"

"No!" said Hermione quickly. "Harry isn't supposed to leave the castle, Ron —"

"Yeah, let's go," said Harry, sitting up, "and I can ask him how come he never mentioned Black when he told me all about my parents!"

Further discussion of Sirius Black plainly wasn't what Ron had had in mind.

"Or we could have a game of chess," he said hastily, "or Gob-stones. Percy left a set —"

"No, let's visit Hagrid," said Harry firmly.

So they got their cloaks from their dormitories and set off through the portrait hole ("Stand and fight, you yellow-bellied mongrels!"), down through the empty castle and out through the oak front doors.

They made their way slowly down the lawn, making a shallow trench in the glittering, powdery snow, their socks and the hems of their cloaks soaked and freezing. The Forbidden Forest looked as though it had been enchanted, each tree smattered with silver, and Hagrid's cabin looked like an iced cake.

Ron knocked, but there was no answer.

"He's not out, is he?" said Hermione, who was shivering under her cloak.

Ron had his ear to the door.

"There's a weird noise," he said. "Listen — is that Fang?"

Harry and Hermione put their ears to the door too. From inside the cabin came a series of low, throbbing moans.

"Think we'd better go and get someone?" said Ron nervously.

"Hagrid!" called Harry, thumping the door. "Hagrid, are you in there?"

There was a sound of heavy footsteps, then the door creaked open. Hagrid stood there with his eyes red and swollen, tears splashing down the front of his leather vest.

"Yeh've heard?" he bellowed, and he flung himself onto Harry's neck.

Hagrid being at least twice the size of a normal man, this was no laughing matter. Harry, about to collapse under Hagrid's weight, was rescued by Ron and Hermione, who each seized Hagrid under an arm and heaved him back into the cabin. Hagrid allowed him-self to be steered into a chair and slumped over the table, sobbing

uncontrollably, his face glazed with tears that dripped down into his tangled beard.

“Hagrid, what is it?” said Hermione, aghast.

Harry spotted an official-looking letter lying open on the table.

“What’s this, Hagrid?”

Hagrid’s sobs redoubled, but he shoved the letter toward Harry, who picked it up and read aloud:Dear Mr. Hagrid,

Further to our inquiry into the attack by a hippogriff on a student in your class, we have accepted the assurances of Professor Dumbledore that you bear no responsibility for the regrettable incident.

“Well, that’s okay then, Hagrid!” said Ron, clapping Hagrid on the shoulder. But Hagrid continued to sob, and waved one of his gigantic hands, inviting Harry to read on.

However, we must register our concern about the hippogriff in question. We have decided to uphold the official complaint of Mr. Lucius Malfoy, and this matter will therefore be taken to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The hearing will take place on April 20th, and we ask you to present yourself and your hippogriff at the Committee’s offices in London on that date. In the meantime, the hippogriff should be kept tethered and isolated.

Yours in fellowship …

There followed a list of the school governors.

“Oh,” said Ron. “But you said Buckbeak isn’t a bad hippogriff, Hagrid. I bet he’ll get off—”

“Yeh don’ know them gargoyles at the Committee fer the Dis-posal o’ Dangerous Creatures!” choked Hagrid, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. “They’ve got it in fer interestin’ creatures!”

A sudden sound from the corner of Hagrid’s cabin made Harry, Ron, and Hermione whip around. Buckbeak the hippogriff was lying in the corner, chomping on something that was oozing blood all over the floor.

“I couldn’ leave him tied up out there in the snow!” choked Hagrid. “All on his own! At Christmas.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another. They had never seen eye to eye with Hagrid about what he called “interesting creatures” and other people called “terrifying monsters.” On the other hand, there didn’t seem to be any particular harm in Buck-beak. In fact, by Hagrid’s usual standards, he was positively cute.

“You’ll have to put up a good strong defense, Hagrid,” said Hermione, sitting down and laying a hand on Hagrid’s massive forearm. “I’m sure you can prove Buckbeak is safe.”

“Won’t make no diff’rence!” sobbed Hagrid. “Them Disposal devils, they’re all in Lucius Malfoy’s pocket! Scared o’ him! An’ if I lose the case, Buckbeak —”

Hagrid drew his finger swiftly across his throat, then gave a great wail and lurched forward, his face in his arms.

“What about Dumbledore, Hagrid?” said Harry.

“He’s done more’n enough fer me already,” groaned Hagrid. “Got enough on his plate what with keepin’ them dementors outta the castle, an’ Sirius Black lurkin’ around —”

Ron and Hermione looked quickly at Harry, as though expect-ing him to start berating Hagrid for not telling him the truth about Black. But

Harry couldn't bring himself to do it, not now that he saw Hagrid so miserable and scared.

"Listen, Hagrid," he said, "you can't give up. Hermione's right, you just need a good defense. You can call us as witnesses —"

"I'm sure I've read about a case of hippogriff-baiting," said Hermione thoughtfully, "where the hippogriff got off. I'll look it up for you, Hagrid, and see exactly what happened."

Hagrid howled still more loudly. Harry and Hermione looked at Ron to help them.

"Er — shall I make a cup of tea?" said Ron.

Harry stared at him.

"It's what my mum does whenever someone's upset," Ron mut-tered, shrugging.

At last, after many more assurances of help, with a steaming mug of tea in front of him, Hagrid blew his nose on a handkerchief the size of a tablecloth and said, "Yer right. I can' afford to go ter pieces. Gotta pull meself together. …"

Fang the boarhound came timidly out from under the table and laid his head on Hagrid's knee.

"I've not bin meself lately," said Hagrid, stroking Fang with one hand and mopping his face with the other. "Worried abou' Buck-beak, an' no one likin' me classes —"

"We do like them!" lied Hermione at once.

"Yeah, they're great!" said Ron, crossing his fingers under the table. "Er — how are the flobberworms?"

"Dead," said Hagrid gloomily. "Too much lettuce."

“Oh no!” said Ron, his lip twitching.

“An’ them dementors make me feel ruddy terrible an’ all,” said Hagrid, with a sudden shudder. “Gotta walk past ’em ev’ry time I want a drink in the Three Broomsticks. ’S like bein’ back in Azkaban —”

He fell silent, gulping his tea. Harry, Ron, and Hermione watched him breathlessly. They had never heard Hagrid talk about his brief spell in Azkaban before. After a pause, Hermione said timidly, “Is it awful in there, Hagrid?”

“Yeh’ve no idea,” said Hagrid quietly. “Never bin anywhere like it. Thought I was goin’ mad. Kep’ goin’ over horrible stuff in me mind … the day I got expelled from Hogwarts … day me dad died … day I had ter let Norbert go. …”

His eyes filled with tears. Norbert was the baby dragon Hagrid had once won in a game of cards.

“Yeh can’ really remember who yeh are after a while. An’ yeh can’ see the point o’ livin’ at all. I used ter hope I’d jus’ die in me sleep. … When they let me out, it was like bein’ born again, ev’ry-thin’ came floodin’ back, it was the bes’ feelin’ in the world. Mind, the dementors weren’t keen on lettin’ me go.”

“But you were innocent!” said Hermione.

Hagrid snorted.

“Think that matters to them? They don’ care. Long as they’ve got a couple o’ hundred humans stuck there with ’em, so they can leech all the happiness out of ’em, they don’ give a damn who’s guilty an’ who’s not.”

Hagrid went quiet for a moment, staring into his tea. Then he said quietly, “Thought o’ jus’ letting Buckbeak go … tryin’ ter make him fly away … but how d’yeh explain ter a hippogriff it’s gotta go inter hidin’?

An' — an' I'm scared o' breakin' the law. …" He looked up at them, tears leaking down his face again. "I don' ever want ter go back ter Azkaban."

The trip to Hagrid's, though far from fun, had nevertheless had the effect Ron and Hermione had hoped. Though Harry had by no means forgotten about Black, he couldn't brood constantly on re-venge if he wanted to help Hagrid win his case against the Com-mittee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. He, Ron, and Hermione went to the library the next day and returned to the empty common room laden with books that might help prepare a defense for Buckbeak. The three of them sat in front of the roaring fire, slowly turning the pages of dusty volumes about famous cases of marauding beasts, speaking occasionally when they ran across something relevant.

"Here's something … there was a case in 1722 … but the hip-pogriff was convicted — ugh, look what they did to it, that's dis-gusting —"

"This might help, look — a manticore savaged someone in 1296, and they let the manticore off — oh — no, that was only because everyone was too scared to go near it. …"

Meanwhile, in the rest of the castle, the usual magnificent Christmas decorations had been put up, despite the fact that hardly any of the students remained to enjoy them. Thick streamers of holly and mistletoe were strung along the corridors, mysterious lights shone from inside every suit of armor, and the Great Hall was filled with its usual twelve Christmas trees, glittering with golden stars. A powerful and delicious smell of cooking pervaded the cor-ridors, and by Christmas Eve, it had grown so strong that even Scabbers poked his nose out of the shelter of Ron's pocket to sniff hopefully at the air.

On Christmas morning, Harry was woken by Ron throwing his pillow at him.

"Oy! Presents!"

Harry reached for his glasses and put them on, squinting through the semi-darkness to the foot of his bed, where a small heap of parcels had appeared. Ron was already ripping the paper off his own presents.

“Another sweater from Mum … maroon again … see if you’ve got one.”

Harry had. Mrs. Weasley had sent him a scarlet sweater with the Gryffindor lion knitted on the front, also a dozen home-baked mince pies, some Christmas cake, and a box of nut brittle. As he moved all these things aside, he saw a long, thin package lying un-derneath.

“What’s that?” said Ron, looking over, a freshly unwrapped pair of maroon socks in his hand.

“Dunno …”

Harry ripped the parcel open and gasped as a magnificent, gleaming broomstick rolled out onto his bedspread. Ron dropped his socks and jumped off his bed for a closer look.

“I don’t believe it,” he said hoarsely.

It was a Firebolt, identical to the dream broom Harry had gone to see every day in Diagon Alley. Its handle glittered as he picked it up. He could feel it vibrating and let go; it hung in midair, unsup-ported, at exactly the right height for him to mount it. His eyes moved from the golden registration number at the top of the han-dle, right down to the perfectly smooth, streamlined birch twigs that made up the tail.

“Who sent it to you?” said Ron in a hushed voice.

“Look and see if there’s a card,” said Harry.

Ron ripped apart the Firebolt’s wrappings.

“Nothing! Blimey, who’d spend that much on you?”

“Well,” said Harry, feeling stunned, “I’m betting it wasn’t the Dursleys.”

“I bet it was Dumbledore,” said Ron, now walking around and around the Firebolt, taking in every glorious inch. “He sent you the Invisibility Cloak anonymously. …”

“That was my dad’s, though,” said Harry. “Dumbledore was just passing it on to me. He wouldn’t spend hundreds of Galleons on me. He can’t go giving students stuff like this —”

“That’s why he wouldn’t say it was from him!” said Ron. “In case some git like Malfoy said it was favoritism. Hey, Harry” — Ron gave a great whoop of laughter — “Malfoy! Wait till he sees you on this! He’ll be sick as a pig! This is an international standard broom, this is!”

“I can’t believe this,” Harry muttered, running a hand along the Firebolt, while Ron sank onto Harry’s bed, laughing his head off at the thought of Malfoy. “Who — ?”

“I know,” said Ron, controlling himself, “I know who it could’ve been — Lupin!”

“What?” said Harry, now starting to laugh himself. “Lupin? Lis-ten, if he had this much gold, he’d be able to buy himself some new robes.”

“Yeah, but he likes you,” said Ron. “And he was away when your Nimbus got smashed, and he might’ve heard about it and decided to visit Diagon Alley and get this for you —”

“What d’you mean, he was away?” said Harry. “He was ill when I was playing in that match.”

“Well, he wasn’t in the hospital wing,” said Ron. “I was there, cleaning out the bedpans on that detention from Snape, re-member?”

Harry frowned at Ron.

“I can’t see Lupin affording something like this.”

“What’re you two laughing about?”

Hermione had just come in, wearing her dressing gown and car-rying Crookshanks, who was looking very grumpy, with a string of tinsel tied around his neck.

“Don’t bring him in here!” said Ron, hurriedly snatching Scabbers from the depths of his bed and stowing him in his pajama pocket. But Hermione wasn’t listening. She dropped Crookshanks onto Seamus’s empty bed and stared, open-mouthed, at the Firebolt.

“Oh, Harry! Who sent you that?”

“No idea,” said Harry. “There wasn’t a card or anything with it.”

To his great surprise, Hermione did not appear either excited or intrigued by the news. On the contrary, her face fell, and she bit her lip.

“What’s the matter with you?” said Ron.

“I don’t know,” said Hermione slowly, “but it’s a bit odd, isn’t it? I mean, this is supposed to be quite a good broom, isn’t it?”

Ron sighed exasperatedly.

“It’s the best broom there is, Hermione,” he said.

“So it must’ve been really expensive. …”

“Probably cost more than all the Slytherins’ brooms put to-gether,” said Ron happily.

"Well … who'd send Harry something as expensive as that, and not even tell him they'd sent it?" said Hermione.

"Who cares?" said Ron impatiently. "Listen, Harry, can I have a go on it? Can I?"

"I don't think anyone should ride that broom just yet!" said Hermione shrilly.

Harry and Ron looked at her.

"What d'you think Harry's going to do with it — sweep the floor?" said Ron.

But before Hermione could answer, Crookshanks sprang from Seamus's bed, right at Ron's chest.

"GET — HIM — OUT — OF — HERE!" Ron bellowed as Crookshanks's claws ripped his pajamas and Scabbers attempted a wild escape over his shoulder. Ron seized Scabbers by the tail and aimed a misjudged kick at Crookshanks that hit the trunk at the end of Harry's bed, knocking it over and causing Ron to hop up and down, howling with pain.

Crookshanks's fur suddenly stood on end. A shrill, tinny whistling was filling the room. The Pocket Sneakoscope had be-come dislodged from Uncle Vernon's old socks and was whirling and gleaming on the floor.

"I forgot about that!" Harry said, bending down and picking up the Sneakoscope. "I never wear those socks if I can help it. …"

The Sneakoscope whirled and whistled in his palm. Crook-shanks was hissing and spitting at it.

"You'd better take that cat out of here, Hermione," said Ron fu-riously, sitting on Harry's bed nursing his toe. "Can't you shut that thing up?"

he added to Harry as Hermione strode out of the room, Crookshanks's yellow eyes still fixed maliciously on Ron.

Harry stuffed the Sneakoscope back inside the socks and threw it back into his trunk. All that could be heard now were Ron's sti-fled moans of pain and rage. Scabbers was huddled in Ron's hands. It had been a while since Harry had seen him out of Ron's pocket, and he was unpleasantly surprised to see that Scabbers, once so fat, was now very skinny; patches of fur seemed to have fallen out too.

"He's not looking too good, is he?" Harry said.

"It's stress!" said Ron. "He'd be fine if that big stupid furball left him alone!"

But Harry, remembering what the woman at the Magical Menagerie had said about rats living only three years, couldn't help feeling that unless Scabbers had powers he had never revealed, he was reaching the end of his life. And despite Ron's frequent com-plaints that Scabbers was both boring and useless, he was sure Ron would be very miserable if Scabbers died.

Christmas spirit was definitely thin on the ground in the Gryffindor common room that morning. Hermione had shut Crookshanks in her dormitory, but was furious with Ron for trying to kick him; Ron was still fuming about Crookshanks's fresh at-tempt to eat Scabbers. Harry gave up trying to make them talk to each other and devoted himself to examining the Firebolt, which he had brought down to the common room with him. For some reason this seemed to annoy Hermione as well; she didn't say any-thing, but she kept looking darkly at the broom as though it too had been criticizing her cat.

At lunchtime they went down to the Great Hall, to find that the House tables had been moved against the walls again, and that a sin-gle table, set for twelve, stood in the middle of the room. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Sprout, and Flitwick were there, along with Filch, the caretaker, who had taken off his usual brown

coat and was wearing a very old and rather moldy-looking tailcoat. There were only three other students, two extremely nervous-looking first years and a sullen-faced Slytherin fifth year.

“Merry Christmas!” said Dumbledore as Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached the table. “As there are so few of us, it seemed foolish to use the House tables. … Sit down, sit down!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down side by side at the end of the table.

“Crackers!” said Dumbledore enthusiastically, offering the end of a large silver noisemaker to Snape, who took it reluctantly and tugged. With a bang like a gunshot, the cracker flew apart to reveal a large, pointed witch’s hat topped with a stuffed vulture.

Harry, remembering the boggart, caught Ron’s eye and they both grinned; Snape’s mouth thinned and he pushed the hat toward Dumbledore, who swapped it for his wizard’s hat at once.

“Dig in!” he advised the table, beaming around.

As Harry was helping himself to roast potatoes, the doors of the Great Hall opened again. It was Professor Trelawney, gliding toward them as though on wheels. She had put on a green sequined dress in honor of the occasion, making her look more than ever like a glittering, oversized dragonfly.

“Sibyll, this is a pleasant surprise!” said Dumbledore, standing up.

“I have been crystal gazing, Headmaster,” said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest, most faraway voice, “and to my astonishment, I saw myself abandoning my solitary luncheon and coming to join you. Who am I to refuse the promptings of fate? I at once hastened from my tower, and I do beg you to forgive my lateness. …”

“Certainly, certainly,” said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. “Let me draw you up a chair —”

And he did indeed draw a chair in midair with his wand, which revolved for a few seconds before falling with a thud between Professors Snape and McGonagall. Professor Trelawney, however, did not sit down; her enormous eyes had been roving around the table, and she suddenly uttered a kind of soft scream.

“I dare not, Headmaster! If I join the table, we shall be thirteen! Nothing could be more unlucky! Never forget that when thirteen dine together, the first to rise will be the first to die!”

“We’ll risk it, Sibyll,” said Professor McGonagall impatiently. “Do sit down, the turkey’s getting stone cold.”

Professor Trelawney hesitated, then lowered herself into the empty chair, eyes shut and mouth clenched tight, as though ex-pecting a thunderbolt to hit the table. Professor McGonagall poked a large spoon into the nearest tureen.

“Tripe, Sibyll?”

Professor Trelawney ignored her. Eyes open again, she looked around once more and said, “But where is dear Professor Lupin?”

“I’m afraid the poor fellow is ill again,” said Dumbledore, indi-cating that everybody should start serving themselves. “Most un-fortunate that it should happen on Christmas Day.”

“But surely you already knew that, Sibyll?” said Professor McGonagall, her eyebrows raised.

Professor Trelawney gave Professor McGonagall a very cold look.

“Certainly I knew, Minerva,” she said quietly. “But one does not parade the fact that one is All-Knowing. I frequently act as though I

am not possessed of the Inner Eye, so as not to make others nervous."

"That explains a great deal," said Professor McGonagall tartly.

Professor Trelawney's voice suddenly became a good deal less misty.

"If you must know, Minerva, I have seen that poor Professor Lupin will not be with us for very long. He seems aware, himself, that his time is short. He positively fled when I offered to crystal gaze for him —"

"Imagine that," said Professor McGonagall dryly.

"I doubt," said Dumbledore, in a cheerful but slightly raised voice, which put an end to Professor McGonagall and Professor Trelawney's conversation, "that Professor Lupin is in any immedi-ate danger. Severus, you've made the potion for him again?"

"Yes, Headmaster," said Snape.

"Good," said Dumbledore. "Then he should be up and about in no time. … Derek, have you had any of these chipolatas? They're excellent."

The first-year boy went furiously red on being addressed directly by Dumbledore, and took the platter of sausages with trembling hands.

Professor Trelawney behaved almost normally until the very end of Christmas dinner, two hours later. Full to bursting with Christ-mas dinner and still wearing their party hats, Harry and Ron got up first from the table and she shrieked loudly.

"My dears! Which of you left his seat first? Which?"

"Dunno," said Ron, looking uneasily at Harry.

“I doubt it will make much difference,” said Professor McGona-gall coldly, “unless a mad axe-man is waiting outside the doors to slaughter the first into the entrance hall.”

Even Ron laughed. Professor Trelawney looked highly affronted.

“Coming?” Harry said to Hermione.

“No,” Hermione muttered, “I want a quick word with Professor McGonagall.”

“Probably trying to see if she can take any more classes,” yawned Ron as they made their way into the entrance hall, which was completely devoid of mad axe-men.

When they reached the portrait hole, they found Sir Cadogan enjoying a Christmas party with a couple of monks, several previ-ous headmasters of Hogwarts, and his fat pony. He pushed up his visor and toasted them with a flagon of mead.

“Merry — hic — Christmas! Password?”

“Scurvy cur,” said Ron.

“And the same to you, sir!” roared Sir Cadogan as the painting swung forward to admit them.

Harry went straight up to the dormitory, collected the Firebolt and the Broomstick Servicing Kit Hermione had given him for his birthday, brought them downstairs, and tried to find something to do to the Firebolt; however, there were no bent twigs to clip, and the handle was so shiny already it seemed pointless to polish it. He and Ron simply sat admiring it from every angle until the portrait hole opened, and Hermione came in, accompanied by Professor McGonagall.

Though Professor McGonagall was head of Gryffindor House, Harry had seen her in the common room only once before, and that had

been to make a very grave announcement. He and Ron stared at her, both holding the Firebolt. Hermione walked around them, sat down, picked up the nearest book, and hid her face be-hind it.

“So that’s it, is it?” said Professor McGonagall beadily, walking over to the fireside and staring at the Firebolt. “Miss Granger has just informed me that you have been sent a broomstick, Potter.”

Harry and Ron looked around at Hermione. They could see her forehead reddening over the top of her book, which was upside down.

“May I?” said Professor McGonagall, but she didn’t wait for an answer before pulling the Firebolt out of their hands. She exam-ined it carefully from handle to twig-ends. “Hmm. And there was no note at all, Potter? No card? No message of any kind?”

“No,” said Harry blankly.

“I see … ,” said Professor McGonagall. “Well, I’m afraid I will have to take this, Potter.”

“W — what?” said Harry, scrambling to his feet. “Why?”

“It will need to be checked for jinxes,” said Professor McGona-gall. “Of course, I’m no expert, but I daresay Madam Hooch and Professor Flitwick will strip it down —”

“Strip it down?” repeated Ron, as though Professor McGonagall was mad.

“It shouldn’t take more than a few weeks,” said Professor Mc-Gonagall. “You will have it back if we are sure it is jinx-free.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it!” said Harry, his voice shaking slightly. “Honestly, Professor —”

“You can’t know that, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, quite kindly, “not until you’ve flown it, at any rate, and I’m afraid that is out of the question until we are certain that it has not been tam-pered with. I shall keep you informed.”

Professor McGonagall turned on her heel and carried the Fire-bolt out of the portrait hole, which closed behind her. Harry stood staring after her, the tin of High-Finish Polish still clutched in his hands. Ron, however, rounded on Hermione.

“What did you go running to McGonagall for?”

Hermione threw her book aside. She was still pink in the face, but stood up and faced Ron defiantly.

“Because I thought — and Professor McGonagall agrees with me — that that broom was probably sent to Harry by Sirius Black!”

Chapter 12 The Patronus

Harry knew that Hermione had meant well, but that didn't stop him from being angry with her. He had been the owner of the best broom in the world for a few short hours, and now, because of her interference, he didn't know whether he would ever see it again. He was positive that there was nothing wrong with the Firebolt now, but what sort of state would it be in once it had been subjected to all sorts of anti-jinx tests?

Ron was furious with Hermione too. As far as he was concerned, the stripping-down of a brand-new Firebolt was nothing less than criminal damage. Hermione, who remained convinced that she had acted for the best, started avoiding the common room. Harry and Ron supposed she had taken refuge in the library and didn't try to persuade her to come back. All in all, they were glad when the rest of the school returned shortly after New Year, and Gryffindor Tower became crowded and noisy again.

Wood sought Harry out on the night before term started.

"Had a good Christmas?" he said, and then, without waiting for an answer, he sat down, lowered his voice, and said, "I've been do-ing some thinking over Christmas, Harry. After the last match, you know. If the dementors come to the next one … I mean … we can't afford you to — well —"

Wood broke off, looking awkward.

"I'm working on it," said Harry quickly. "Professor Lupin said he'd train me to ward off the dementors. We should be starting this week. He said he'd have time after Christmas."

"Ah," said Wood, his expression clearing. "Well, in that case — I really didn't want to lose you as Seeker, Harry. And have you ordered a new broom yet?"

“No,” said Harry.

“What! You’d better get a move on, you know — you can’t ride that Shooting Star against Ravenclaw!”

“He got a Firebolt for Christmas,” said Ron.

“A Firebolt? No! Seriously? A — a real Firebolt?”

“Don’t get excited, Oliver,” said Harry gloomily. “I haven’t got it anymore. It was confiscated.” And he explained all about how the Firebolt was now being checked for jinxes.

“Jinxed? How could it be jinxed?”

“Sirius Black,” Harry said wearily. “He’s supposed to be after me. So McGonagall reckons he might have sent it.”

Waving aside the information that a famous murderer was after his Seeker, Wood said, “But Black couldn’t have bought a Firebolt! He’s on the run! The whole country’s on the lookout for him! How could he just walk into Quality Quidditch Supplies and buy a broomstick?”

“I know,” said Harry, “but McGonagall still wants to strip it down —”

Wood went pale.

“I’ll go and talk to her, Harry,” he promised. “I’ll make her see reason. … A Firebolt … a real Firebolt, on our team … She wants Gryffindor to win as much as we do. … I’ll make her see sense. A Firebolt …”

Classes started again the next day. The last thing anyone felt like doing was spending two hours on the grounds on a raw January morning, but Hagrid had provided a bonfire full of salamanders for their enjoyment, and they spent an unusually good lesson collecting dry wood and leaves to keep the fire blazing while the flame-loving lizards scampered up and down the crumbling, white-hot logs. The

first Divination lesson of the new term was much less fun; Professor Trelawney was now teaching them palmistry, and she lost no time in informing Harry that he had the shortest life line she had ever seen.

It was Defense Against the Dark Arts that Harry was keen to get to; after his conversation with Wood, he wanted to get started on his anti-dementor lessons as soon as possible.

“Ah yes,” said Lupin, when Harry reminded him of his promise at the end of class. “Let me see … how about eight o’clock on Thursday evening? The History of Magic classroom should be large enough. … I’ll have to think carefully about how we’re going to do this. … We can’t bring a real dementor into the castle to practice on. …”

“Still looks ill, doesn’t he?” said Ron as they walked down the corridor, heading to dinner. “What d’you reckon’s the matter with him?”

There was a loud and impatient “tuh” from behind them. It was Hermione, who had been sitting at the feet of a suit of armor, repacking her bag, which was so full of books it wouldn’t close.

“And what are you tutting at us for?” said Ron irritably.

“Nothing,” said Hermione in a lofty voice, heaving her bag back over her shoulder.

“Yes, you were,” said Ron. “I said I wonder what’s wrong with Lupin, and you —”

“Well, isn’t it obvious?” said Hermione, with a look of madden-ing superiority.

“If you don’t want to tell us, don’t,” snapped Ron.

“Fine,” said Hermione haughtily, and she marched off.

“She doesn’t know,” said Ron, staring resentfully after Hermione. “She’s just trying to get us to talk to her again.”

At eight o’clock on Thursday evening, Harry left Gryffindor Tower for the History of Magic classroom. It was dark and empty when he arrived, but he lit the lamps with his wand and had waited only five minutes when Professor Lupin turned up, carrying a large packing case, which he heaved onto Professor Binns’ desk.

“What’s that?” said Harry.

“Another boggart,” said Lupin, stripping off his cloak. “I’ve been combing the castle ever since Tuesday, and very luckily, I found this one lurking inside Mr. Filch’s filing cabinet. It’s the nearest we’ll get to a real dementor. The boggart will turn into a dementor when he sees you, so we’ll be able to practice on him. I can store him in my office when we’re not using him; there’s a cupboard under my desk he’ll like.”

“Okay,” said Harry, trying to sound as though he wasn’t apprehensive at all and merely glad that Lupin had found such a good substitute for a real dementor.

“So …” Professor Lupin had taken out his own wand, and in-dicated that Harry should do the same. “The spell I am going to try and teach you is highly advanced magic, Harry — well beyond Ordinary Wizarding Level. It is called the Patronus Charm.”

“How does it work?” said Harry nervously.

“Well, when it works correctly, it conjures up a Patronus,” said Lupin, “which is a kind of anti-dementor — a guardian that acts as a shield between you and the dementor.”

Harry had a sudden vision of himself crouching behind a Hagrid-sized figure holding a large club. Professor Lupin continued, “The Patronus is a kind of positive force, a projection of the very things that the

dementor feeds upon — hope, happiness, the desire to survive — but it cannot feel despair, as real humans can, so the de-mentors can't hurt it. But I must warn you, Harry, that the charm might be too advanced for you. Many qualified wizards have diffi-culty with it."

"What does a Patronus look like?" said Harry curiously.

"Each one is unique to the wizard who conjures it."

"And how do you conjure it?"

"With an incantation, which will work only if you are concen-trating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory."

Harry cast his mind about for a happy memory. Certainly, nothing that had happened to him at the Dursleys' was going to do. Finally, he settled on the moment when he had first ridden a broomstick.

"Right," he said, trying to recall as exactly as possible the won-derful, soaring sensation of his stomach.

"The incantation is this —" Lupin cleared his throat. "Expecto patronum!"

"Expecto patronum," Harry repeated under his breath, "expecto patronum."

"Concentrating hard on your happy memory?"

"Oh — yeah —" said Harry, quickly forcing his thoughts back to that first broom ride. "Expecto patrono — no, patronum — sorry — expecto patronum, expecto patronum —"

Something whooshed suddenly out of the end of his wand; it looked like a wisp of silvery gas.

"Did you see that?" said Harry excitedly. "Something happened!"

“Very good,” said Lupin, smiling. “Right, then — ready to try it on a dementor?”

“Yes,” Harry said, gripping his wand very tightly, and moving into the middle of the deserted classroom. He tried to keep his mind on flying, but something else kept intruding. … Any second now, he might hear his mother again … but he shouldn’t think that, or he would hear her again, and he didn’t want to … or did he?

Lupin grasped the lid of the packing case and pulled.

A dementor rose slowly from the box, its hooded face turned toward Harry, one glistening, scabbed hand gripping its cloak. The lamps around the classroom flickered and went out. The dementor stepped from the box and started to sweep silently toward Harry, drawing a deep, rattling breath. A wave of piercing cold broke over him —“Expecto patronum!” Harry yelled. “Expecto patronum! Ex-pecto —”

But the classroom and the dementor were dissolving. … Harry was falling again through thick white fog, and his mother’s voice was louder than ever, echoing inside his head — “Not Harry! Not Harry! Please — I’ll do anything —”

“Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!”

“Harry!”

Harry jerked back to life. He was lying flat on his back on the floor. The classroom lamps were alight again. He didn’t have to ask what had happened.

“Sorry,” he muttered, sitting up and feeling cold sweat trickling down behind his glasses.

“Are you all right?” said Lupin.

“Yes …” Harry pulled himself up on one of the desks and leaned against it.

“Here —” Lupin handed him a Chocolate Frog. “Eat this before we try again. I didn’t expect you to do it your first time; in fact, I would have been astounded if you had.”

“It’s getting worse,” Harry muttered, biting off the Frog’s head. “I could hear her louder that time — and him — Voldemort —”

Lupin looked paler than usual.

“Harry, if you don’t want to continue, I will more than under-stand —”

“I do!” said Harry fiercely, stuffing the rest of the Chocolate Frog into his mouth. “I’ve got to! What if the dementors turn up at our match against Ravenclaw? I can’t afford to fall off again. If we lose this game we’ve lost the Quidditch Cup!”

“All right then … ,” said Lupin. “You might want to select another memory, a happy memory, I mean, to concentrate on. … That one doesn’t seem to have been strong enough. …”

Harry thought hard and decided his feelings when Gryffindor had won the House Championship last year had definitely quali-fied as very happy. He gripped his wand tightly again and took up his position in the middle of the classroom.

“Ready?” said Lupin, gripping the box lid.

“Ready,” said Harry, trying hard to fill his head with happy thoughts about Gryffindor winning, and not dark thoughts about what was going to happen when the box opened.

“Go!” said Lupin, pulling off the lid. The room went icily cold and dark once more. The dementor glided forward, drawing its breath; one

rotting hand was extending toward Harry —"Expecto patronum!" Harry yelled. "Expecto patronum! Expecto pat —"

White fog obscured his senses … big, blurred shapes were mov-ing around him … then came a new voice, a man's voice, shout-ing, panicking —"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off —"

The sounds of someone stumbling from a room — a door bursting open — a cackle of high-pitched laughter —"Harry! Harry … wake up. …"

Lupin was tapping Harry hard on the face. This time it was a minute before Harry understood why he was lying on a dusty class-room floor.

"I heard my dad," Harry mumbled. "That's the first time I've ever heard him — he tried to take on Voldemort himself, to give my mum time to run for it. …"

Harry suddenly realized that there were tears on his face min-gling with the sweat. He bent his face as low as possible, wiping them off on his robes, pretending to do up his shoelace, so that Lupin wouldn't see.

"You heard James?" said Lupin in a strange voice.

"Yeah …" Face dry, Harry looked up. "Why — you didn't know my dad, did you?"

"I — I did, as a matter of fact," said Lupin. "We were friends at Hogwarts. Listen, Harry — perhaps we should leave it here for tonight. This charm is ridiculously advanced. … I shouldn't have suggested putting you through this. …"

"No!" said Harry. He got up again. "I'll have one more go! I'm not thinking of happy enough things, that's what it is. … Hang on. …"

He racked his brains. A really, really happy memory … one that he could turn into a good, strong Patronus …The moment when he'd first found out he was a wizard, and would be leaving the Dursleys for Hogwarts! If that wasn't a happy memory, he didn't know what was. … Concentrating very hard on how he had felt when he'd realized he'd be leaving Privet Drive, Harry got to his feet and faced the packing case once more.

"Ready?" said Lupin, who looked as though he were doing this against his better judgment. "Concentrating hard? All right — go!"

He pulled off the lid of the case for the third time, and the de-mentor rose out of it; the room fell cold and dark —"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry bellowed. "EXPECTO PA-TRONUM!EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The screaming inside Harry's head had started again — except this time, it sounded as though it were coming from a badly tuned radio — softer and louder and softer again — and he could still see the dementor — it had halted — and then a huge, silver shadow came bursting out of the end of Harry's wand, to hover between him and the dementor, and though Harry's legs felt like water, he was still on his feet — though for how much longer, he wasn't sure —"Riddikulus!" roared Lupin, springing forward.

There was a loud crack, and Harry's cloudy Patronus vanished along with the dementor; he sank into a chair, feeling as exhausted as if he'd just run a mile, and felt his legs shaking. Out of the cor-ner of his eye, he saw Professor Lupin forcing the boggart back into the packing case with his wand; it had turned into a silvery orb again.

"Excellent!" Lupin said, striding over to where Harry sat. "Ex-cellent, Harry! That was definitely a start!"

"Can we have another go? Just one more go?"

"Not now," said Lupin firmly. "You've had enough for one night. Here —"

He handed Harry a large bar of Honeydukes' best chocolate.

"Eat the lot, or Madam Pomfrey will be after my blood. Same time next week?"

"Okay," said Harry. He took a bite of the chocolate and watched Lupin extinguishing the lamps that had rekindled with the disap-pearance of the dementor. A thought had just occurred to him.

"Professor Lupin?" he said. "If you knew my dad, you must've known Sirius Black as well."

Lupin turned very quickly.

"What gives you that idea?" he said sharply.

"Nothing — I mean, I just knew they were friends at Hogwarts too. …"

Lupin's face relaxed.

"Yes, I knew him," he said shortly. "Or I thought I did. You'd better be off, Harry, it's getting late."

Harry left the classroom, walking along the corridor and around a corner, then took a detour behind a suit of armor and sank down on its plinth to finish his chocolate, wishing he hadn't mentioned Black, as Lupin was obviously not keen on the subject. Then Harry's thoughts wandered back to his mother and father. …He felt drained and strangely empty, even though he was so full of chocolate. Terrible though it was to hear his parents' last mo-ments replayed inside his head, these were the only times Harry had heard their voices since he was a very small child. But he'd never be able to produce a proper Patronus if he half wanted to hear his parents again. …"They're dead," he told himself sternly. "They're dead and lis-tening to echoes of them won't bring them back. You'd better get a grip on yourself if you want that Quidditch Cup."

He stood up, crammed the last bit of chocolate into his mouth, and headed back to Gryffindor Tower.

Ravenclaw played Slytherin a week after the start of term. Slytherin won, though narrowly. According to Wood, this was good news for Gryffindor, who would take second place if they beat Ravenclaw too. He therefore increased the number of team practices to five a week. This meant that with Lupin's anti-dementor classes, which in themselves were more draining than six Quidditch practices, Harry had just one night a week to do all his homework. Even so, he wasn't showing the strain nearly as much as Hermione, whose immense workload finally seemed to be getting to her. Every night, without fail, Hermione was to be seen in a corner of the common room, several tables spread with books, Arithmancy charts, rune dictionaries, diagrams of Muggles lifting heavy objects, and file upon file of extensive notes; she barely spoke to anybody and snapped when she was interrupted.

"How's she doing it?" Ron muttered to Harry one evening as Harry sat finishing a nasty essay on Undetectable Poisons for Snape. Harry looked up. Hermione was barely visible behind a tot-tering pile of books.

"Doing what?"

"Getting to all her classes!" Ron said. "I heard her talking to Pro-fessor Vector, that Arithmancy witch, this morning. They were go-ing on about yesterday's lesson, but Hermione can't've been there, because she was with us in Care of Magical Creatures! And Ernie McMillan told me she's never missed a Muggle Studies class, but half of them are at the same time as Divination, and she's never missed one of them either!"

Harry didn't have time to fathom the mystery of Hermione's im-possible schedule at the moment; he really needed to get on with

Snape's essay. Two seconds later, however, he was interrupted again, this time by Wood.

"Bad news, Harry. I've just been to see Professor McGonagall about the Firebolt. She — er — got a bit shirty with me. Told me I'd got my priorities wrong. Seemed to think I cared more about winning the Cup than I do about you staying alive. Just because I told her I didn't care if it threw you off, as long as you caught the Snitch first." Wood shook his head in disbelief. "Honestly, the way she was yelling at me … you'd think I'd said something terri-ble. … Then I asked her how much longer she was going to keep it. …" He screwed up his face and imitated Professor McGona-gall's severe voice. " 'As long as necessary, Wood' … I reckon it's time you ordered a new broom, Harry. There's an order form at the back of Which Broomstick … you could get a Nimbus Two Thou-sand and One, like Malfoy's got."

"I'm not buying anything Malfoy thinks is good," said Harry flatly.

January faded imperceptibly into February, with no change in the bitterly cold weather. The match against Ravenclaw was drawing nearer and nearer, but Harry still hadn't ordered a new broom. He was now asking Professor McGonagall for news of the Firebolt af-ter every Transfiguration lesson, Ron standing hopefully at his shoulder, Hermione rushing past with her face averted.

"No, Potter, you can't have it back yet," Professor McGonagall told him the twelfth time this happened, before he'd even opened his mouth. "We've checked for most of the usual curses, but Pro-fessor Flitwick believes the broom might be carrying a Hurling Hex. I shall tell you once we've finished checking it. Now, please stop badgering me."

To make matters even worse, Harry's anti-dementor lessons were not going nearly as well as he had hoped. Several sessions on, he was able to produce an indistinct, silvery shadow every time the boggart-dementor approached him, but his Patronus was too feeble to drive

the dementor away. All it did was hover, like a semi-transparent cloud, draining Harry of energy as he fought to keep it there. Harry felt angry with himself, guilty about his secret desire to hear his parents' voices again.

"You're expecting too much of yourself," said Professor Lupin sternly in their fourth week of practice. "For a thirteen-year-old wizard, even an indistinct Patronus is a huge achievement. You aren't passing out anymore, are you?"

"I thought a Patronus would — charge the dementors down or something," said Harry dispiritedly. "Make them disappear —"

"The true Patronus does do that," said Lupin. "But you've achieved a great deal in a very short space of time. If the dementors put in an appearance at your next Quidditch match, you will be able to keep them at bay long enough to get back to the ground."

"You said it's harder if there are loads of them," said Harry.

"I have complete confidence in you," said Lupin, smiling. "Here — you've earned a drink — something from the Three Broomsticks. You won't have tried it before —"

He pulled two bottles out of his briefcase.

"Butterbeer!" said Harry, without thinking. "Yeah, I like that stuff!"

Lupin raised an eyebrow.

"Oh — Ron and Hermione brought me some back from Hogsmeade," Harry lied quickly.

"I see," said Lupin, though he still looked slightly suspicious. "Well — let's drink to a Gryffindor victory against Ravenclaw! Not that I'm supposed to take sides, as a teacher … ," he added hastily.

They drank the butterbeer in silence, until Harry voiced some-thing he'd been wondering for a while.

"What's under a dementor's hood?"

Professor Lupin lowered his bottle thoughtfully.

"Hmmm … well, the only people who really know are in no condition to tell us. You see, the dementor lowers its hood only to use its last and worst weapon."

"What's that?"

"They call it the Dementor's Kiss," said Lupin, with a slightly twisted smile. "It's what dementors do to those they wish to destroy utterly. I suppose there must be some kind of mouth under there, because they clamp their jaws upon the mouth of the victim and — and suck out his soul."

Harry accidentally spat out a bit of butterbeer.

"What — they kill — ?"

"Oh no," said Lupin. "Much worse than that. You can exist with-out your soul, you know, as long as your brain and heart are still working. But you'll have no sense of self anymore, no memory, no … anything. There's no chance at all of recovery. You'll just — exist. As an empty shell. And your soul is gone forever … lost."

Lupin drank a little more butterbeer, then said, "It's the fate that awaits Sirius Black. It was in the Daily Prophet this morning. The Ministry have given the dementors permission to perform it if they find him."

Harry sat stunned for a moment at the idea of someone having their soul sucked out through their mouth. But then he thought of Black.

"He deserves it," he said suddenly.

"You think so?" said Lupin lightly. "Do you really think anyone deserves that?"

"Yes," said Harry defiantly. "For … for some things …"

He would have liked to have told Lupin about the conversation he'd overheard about Black in the Three Broomsticks, about Black betraying his mother and father, but it would have involved reveal-ing that he'd gone to Hogsmeade without permission, and he knew Lupin wouldn't be very impressed by that. So he finished his but-terbeer, thanked Lupin, and left the History of Magic classroom.

Harry half wished that he hadn't asked what was under a de-mentor's hood, the answer had been so horrible, and he was so lost in unpleasant thoughts of what it would feel like to have your soul sucked out of you that he walked headlong into Professor McGo-nagall halfway up the stairs.

"Do watch where you're going, Potter!"

"Sorry, Professor —"

"I've just been looking for you in the Gryffindor common room. Well, here it is, we've done everything we could think of, and there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it at all. You've got a very good friend somewhere, Potter. …"

Harry's jaw dropped. She was holding out his Firebolt, and it looked as magnificent as ever.

"I can have it back?" Harry said weakly. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," said Professor McGonagall, and she was actually smiling. "I daresay you'll need to get the feel of it before Saturday's match, won't you? And Potter — do try and win, won't you? Or we'll be

out of the running for the eighth year in a row, as Profes-sor Snape was kind enough to remind me only last night. …”

Speechless, Harry carried the Firebolt back upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower. As he turned a corner, he saw Ron dashing toward him, grinning from ear to ear.

“She gave it to you? Excellent! Listen, can I still have a go on it? Tomorrow?”

“Yeah … anything … ,” said Harry, his heart lighter than it had been in a month. “You know what — we should make up with Hermione. … She was only trying to help. …”

“Yeah, all right,” said Ron. “She’s in the common room now — working, for a change —”

They turned into the corridor to Gryffindor Tower and saw Neville Longbottom, pleading with Sir Cadogan, who seemed to be refusing him entrance.

“I wrote them down!” Neville was saying tearfully. “But I must’ve dropped them somewhere!”

“A likely tale!” roared Sir Cadogan. Then, spotting Harry and Ron: “Good even, my fine young yeomen! Come clap this loon in irons. He is trying to force entry to the chambers within!”

“Oh, shut up,” said Ron as he and Harry drew level with Neville.

“I’ve lost the passwords!” Neville told them miserably. “I made him tell me what passwords he was going to use this week, because he keeps changing them, and now I don’t know what I’ve done with them!”

“Oddsbodikins,” said Harry to Sir Cadogan, who looked ex-tremely disappointed and reluctantly swung forward to let them into the

common room. There was a sudden, excited murmur as every head turned and the next moment, Harry was surrounded by people exclaiming over his Firebolt.

“Where’d you get it, Harry?”

“Will you let me have a go?”

“Have you ridden it yet, Harry?”

“Ravenclaw’ll have no chance, they’re all on Cleansweep Sevens!”

“Can I just hold it, Harry?”

After ten minutes or so, during which the Firebolt was passed around and admired from every angle, the crowd dispersed and Harry and Ron had a clear view of Hermione, the only person who hadn’t rushed over to them, bent over her work and carefully avoid-ing their eyes. Harry and Ron approached her table and at last, she looked up.

“I got it back,” said Harry, grinning at her and holding up the Firebolt.

“See, Hermione? There wasn’t anything wrong with it!” said Ron.

“Well — there might have been!” said Hermione. “I mean, at least you know now that it’s safe!”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” said Harry. “I’d better put it upstairs —”

“I’ll take it!” said Ron eagerly. “I’ve got to give Scabbers his rat tonic.”

He took the Firebolt and, holding it as if it were made of glass, carried it away up the boys’ staircase.

“Can I sit down, then?” Harry asked Hermione.

“I suppose so,” said Hermione, moving a great stack of parch-ment off a chair.

Harry looked around at the cluttered table, at the long Arith-mancy essay on which the ink was still glistening, at the even longer Muggle Studies essay ("Explain Why Muggles Need Electricity") and at the rune translation Hermione was now poring over.

"How are you getting through all this stuff?" Harry asked her.

"Oh, well — you know — working hard," said Hermione. Close-up, Harry saw that she looked almost as tired as Lupin.

"Why don't you just drop a couple of subjects?" Harry asked, watching her lifting books as she searched for her rune dictionary.

"I couldn't do that!" said Hermione, looking scandalized.

"Arithmancy looks terrible," said Harry, picking up a very complicated-looking number chart.

"Oh no, it's wonderful!" said Hermione earnestly. "It's my fa-vorite subject! It's —"

But exactly what was wonderful about Arithmancy, Harry never found out. At that precise moment, a strangled yell echoed down the boys' staircase. The whole common room fell silent, staring, petrified, at the entrance. Then came hurried footsteps, growing louder and louder — and then Ron came leaping into view, drag-ging with him a bedsheet.

"LOOK!" he bellowed, striding over to Hermione's table. "LOOK!" he yelled, shaking the sheets in her face.

"Ron, what — ?"

"SCABBERS! LOOK! SCABBERS!"

Hermione was leaning away from Ron, looking utterly bewil-dered. Harry looked down at the sheet Ron was holding. There was something red on it. Something that looked horribly like —"BLOOD!"

Ron yelled into the stunned silence. “HE’S GONE! AND YOU KNOW WHAT WAS ON THE FLOOR?”

“N — no,” said Hermione in a trembling voice.

Ron threw something down onto Hermione’s rune translation. Hermione and Harry leaned forward. Lying on top of the weird, spiky shapes were several long, ginger cat hairs.

Chapter 13 Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw

It looked like the end of Ron and Hermione's friendship. Each was so angry with the other that Harry couldn't see how they'd ever make up.

Ron was enraged that Hermione had never taken Crookshanks's attempts to eat Scabbers seriously, hadn't bothered to keep a close enough watch on him, and was still trying to pretend that Crookshanks was innocent by suggesting that Ron look for Scabbers under all the boys' beds. Hermione, meanwhile, maintained fiercely that Ron had no proof that Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers, that the ginger hairs might have been there since Christmas, and that Ron had been prejudiced against her cat ever since Crookshanks had landed on Ron's head in the Magical Menagerie.

Personally, Harry was sure that Crookshanks had eaten Scab-bers, and when he tried to point out to Hermione that the evidence all pointed that way, she lost her temper with Harry too.

"Okay, side with Ron, I knew you would!" she said shrilly. "First the Firebolt, now Scabbers, everything's my fault, isn't it! Just leave me alone, Harry, I've got a lot of work to do!"

Ron had taken the loss of his rat very hard indeed.

"Come on, Ron, you were always saying how boring Scabbers was," said Fred bracingly "And he's been off-color for ages, he was wasting away. It was probably better for him to snuff it quickly — one swallow — he probably didn't feel a thing."

"Fred!" said Ginny indignantly.

"All he did was eat and sleep, Ron, you said it yourself," said George.

"He bit Goyle for us once!" Ron said miserably. "Remember, Harry?"

“Yeah, that’s true,” said Harry.

“His finest hour,” said Fred, unable to keep a straight face. “Let the scar on Goyle’s finger stand as a lasting tribute to his memory. Oh, come on, Ron, get yourself down to Hogsmeade and buy a new rat, what’s the point of moaning?”

In a last-ditch attempt to cheer Ron up, Harry persuaded him to come along to the Gryffindor team’s final practice before the Ravenclaw match, so that he could have a ride on the Firebolt after they’d finished. This did seem to take Ron’s mind off Scabbers for a moment (“Great! Can I try and shoot a few goals on it?”) so they set off for the Quidditch field together.

Madam Hooch, who was still overseeing Gryffindor practices to keep an eye on Harry, was just as impressed with the Firebolt as everyone else had been. She took it in her hands before takeoff and gave them the benefit of her professional opinion.

“Look at the balance on it! If the Nimbus series has a fault, it’s a slight list to the tail end — you often find they develop a drag after a few years. They’ve updated the handle too, a bit slimmer than the Cleansweeps, reminds me of the old Silver Arrows — a pity they’ve stopped making them. I learned to fly on one, and a very fine old broom it was too. …”

She continued in this vein for some time, until Wood said, “Er — Madam Hooch? Is it okay if Harry has the Firebolt back? We need to practice. …”

“Oh — right — here you are, then, Potter,” said Madam Hooch. “I’ll sit over here with Weasley …”

She and Ron left the field to sit in the stadium, and the Gryffindor team gathered around Wood for his final instructions for tomorrow’s match.

“Harry, I’ve just found out who Ravenclaw is playing as Seeker. It’s Cho Chang. She’s a fourth year, and she’s pretty good. … I really hoped she wouldn’t be fit, she’s had some problems with in-juries. …” Wood scowled his displeasure that Cho Chang had made a full recovery, then said, “On the other hand, she rides a Comet Two Sixty, which is going to look like a joke next to the Firebolt.” He gave Harry’s broom a look of fervent admiration, then said, “Okay, everyone, let’s go —”

And at long last, Harry mounted his Firebolt, and kicked off from the ground.

It was better than he’d ever dreamed. The Firebolt turned with the lightest touch; it seemed to obey his thoughts rather than his grip; it sped across the field at such speed that the stadium turned into a green-and-gray blur; Harry turned it so sharply that Alicia Spinnet screamed, then he went into a perfectly controlled dive, brushing the grassy field with his toes before rising thirty, forty, fifty feet into the air again —“Harry, I’m letting the Snitch out!” Wood called.

Harry turned and raced a Bludger toward the goal posts; he out-stripped it easily, saw the Snitch dart out from behind Wood, and within ten seconds had caught it tightly in his hand.

The team cheered madly. Harry let the Snitch go again, gave it a minute’s head start, then tore after it, weaving in and out of the others; he spotted it lurking near Katie Bell’s knee, looped her eas-ily, and caught it again.

It was the best practice ever; the team, inspired by the presence of the Firebolt in their midst, performed their best moves fault-lessly, and by the time they hit the ground again, Wood didn’t have a single criticism to make, which, as George Weasley pointed out, was a first.

“I can’t see what’s going to stop us tomorrow!” said Wood. “Not unless — Harry, you’ve sorted out your dementor problem, haven’t you?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, thinking of his feeble Patronus and wishing it were stronger.

“The dementors won’t turn up again, Oliver. Dumbledore’d go ballistic,” said Fred confidently.

“Well, let’s hope not,” said Wood. “Anyway — good work, everyone. Let’s get back to the tower … turn in early —”

“I’m staying out for a bit; Ron wants a go on the Firebolt,” Harry told Wood, and while the rest of the team headed off to the locker rooms, Harry strode over to Ron, who vaulted the barrier to the stands and came to meet him. Madam Hooch had fallen asleep in her seat.

“Here you go,” said Harry, handing Ron the Firebolt.

Ron, an expression of ecstasy on his face, mounted the broom and zoomed off into the gathering darkness while Harry walked around the edge of the field, watching him. Night had fallen before Madam Hooch awoke with a start, told Harry and Ron off for not waking her, and insisted that they go back to the castle.

Harry shouldered the Firebolt and he and Ron walked out of the shadowy stadium, discussing the Firebolt’s superbly smooth action, its phenomenal acceleration, and its pinpoint turning. They were halfway toward the castle when Harry, glancing to his left, saw something that made his heart turn over — a pair of eyes, gleam-ing out of the darkness.

Harry stopped dead, his heart banging against his ribs.

“What’s the matter?” said Ron.

Harry pointed. Ron pulled out his wand and muttered, “Lumos!”

A beam of light fell across the grass, hit the bottom of a tree, and illuminated its branches; there, crouching among the budding leaves,

was Crookshanks.

“Get out of here!” Ron roared, and he stooped down and seized a stone lying on the grass, but before he could do anything else, Crookshanks had vanished with one swish of his long ginger tail.

“See?” Ron said furiously, chucking the stone down again. “She’s still letting him wander about wherever he wants — probably washing down Scabbers with a couple of birds now. …”

Harry didn’t say anything. He took a deep breath as relief seeped through him; he had been sure for a moment that those eyes had belonged to the Grim. They set off for the castle once more. Slightly ashamed of his moment of panic, Harry didn’t say any-thing to Ron — nor did he look left or right until they had reached the well-lit entrance hall.

Harry went down to breakfast the next morning with the rest of the boys in his dormitory, all of whom seemed to think the Firebolt deserved a sort of guard of honor. As Harry entered the Great Hall, heads turned in the direction of the Firebolt, and there was a good deal of excited muttering. Harry saw, with enormous satisfaction, that the Slytherin team were all looking thunder-struck.

“Did you see his face?” said Ron gleefully, looking back at Mal-foy. “He can’t believe it! This is brilliant!”

Wood, too, was basking in the reflected glory of the Firebolt.

“Put it here, Harry,” he said, laying the broom in the middle of the table and carefully turning it so that its name faced upward. People from the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables were soon coming over to look. Cedric Diggory came over to congratu-late Harry on having acquired such a superb replacement for his Nimbus, and Percy’s Ravenclaw girlfriend, Penelope Clearwater, asked if she could actually hold the Firebolt.

“Now, now, Penny, no sabotage!” said Percy heartily as she examined the Firebolt closely “Penelope and I have got a bet on,” he told the team. “Ten Galleons on the outcome of the match!”

Penelope put the Firebolt down again, thanked Harry, and went back to her table.

“Harry — make sure you win,” said Percy, in an urgent whisper. “I haven’t got ten Galleons. Yes, I’m coming, Penny!” And he bustled off to join her in a piece of toast.

“Sure you can manage that broom, Potter?” said a cold, drawling voice.

Draco Malfoy had arrived for a closer look, Crabbe and Goyle right behind him.

“Yeah, reckon so,” said Harry casually.

“Got plenty of special features, hasn’t it?” said Malfoy, eyes glit-tering maliciously. “Shame it doesn’t come with a parachute — in case you get too near a dementor.”

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered.

“Pity you can’t attach an extra arm to yours, Malfoy,” said Harry. “Then it could catch the Snitch for you.”

The Gryffindor team laughed loudly. Malfoy’s pale eyes nar-rowed, and he stalked away. They watched him rejoin the rest of the Slytherin team, who put their heads together, no doubt asking Malfoy whether Harry’s broom really was a Firebolt.

At a quarter to eleven, the Gryffindor team set off for the locker rooms. The weather couldn’t have been more different from their match against Hufflepuff. It was a clear, cool day with a very light breeze; there would be no visibility problems this time, and Harry,

though nervous, was starting to feel the excitement only a Quid-ditch match could bring. They could hear the rest of the school moving into the stadium beyond. Harry took off his black school robes, removed his wand from his pocket, and stuck it inside the T-shirt he was going to wear under his Quidditch robes. He only hoped he wouldn't need it. He wondered suddenly whether Profes-sor Lupin was in the crowd, watching.

"You know what we've got to do," said Wood as they prepared to leave the locker rooms. "If we lose this match, we're out of the run-ning. Just — just fly like you did in practice yesterday, and we'll be okay!"

They walked out onto the field to tumultuous applause. The Ravenclaw team, dressed in blue, were already standing in the mid-dle of the field. Their Seeker, Cho Chang, was the only girl on their team. She was shorter than Harry by about a head, and Harry couldn't help noticing, nervous as he was, that she was extremely pretty. She smiled at Harry as the teams faced each other behind their captains, and he felt a slight lurch in the region of his stom-ach that he didn't think had anything to do with nerves.

"Wood, Davies, shake hands," Madam Hooch said briskly, and Wood shook hands with the Ravenclaw Captain.

"Mount your brooms … on my whistle … three — two — one —"

Harry kicked off into the air and the Firebolt zoomed higher and faster than any other broom; he soared around the stadium and began squinting around for the Snitch, listening all the while to the commentary, which was being provided by the Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan.

"They're off, and the big excitement this match is the Firebolt that Harry Potter is flying for Gryffindor. According to Which Broomstick, the Firebolt's going to be the broom of choice for the national teams at this year's World Championship —"

“Jordan, would you mind telling us what’s going on in the match?” interrupted Professor McGonagall’s voice.

“Right you are, Professor — just giving a bit of background information — the Firebolt, incidentally, has a built-in auto-brake and —”

“Jordan!”

“Okay, okay, Gryffindor in possession, Katie Bell of Gryffindor heading for goal …”

Harry streaked past Katie in the opposite direction, gazing around for a glint of gold and noticing that Cho Chang was tailing him closely. She was undoubtedly a very good flier — she kept cut-ting across him, forcing him to change direction.

“Show her your acceleration, Harry!” Fred yelled as he whooshed past in pursuit of a Bludger that was aiming for Alicia.

Harry urged the Firebolt forward as they rounded the Raven-claw goal posts and Cho fell behind. Just as Katie succeeded in scoring the first goal of the match, and the Gryffindor end of the field went wild, he saw it — the Snitch was close to the ground, flitting near one of the barriers.

Harry dived; Cho saw what he was doing and tore after him — Harry was speeding up, excitement flooding him; dives were his speciality, he was ten feet away —Then a Bludger, hit by one of the Ravenclaw Beaters, came pelt-ing out of nowhere; Harry veered off course, avoiding it by an inch, and in those few, crucial seconds, the Snitch had vanished.

There was a great “Ooooooh” of disappointment from the Gryffindor supporters, but much applause for their Beater from the Ravenclaw end. George Weasley vented his feelings by hitting the second

Bludger directly at the offending Beater, who was forced to roll right over in midair to avoid it.

"Gryffindor leads by eighty points to zero, and look at that Firebolt go! Potter's really putting it through its paces now, see it turn — Chang's Comet is just no match for it, the Firebolt's precision-balance is really noticeable in these long —"

"JORDAN! ARE YOU BEING PAID TO ADVERTISE FIRE-BOLTS? GET ON WITH THE COMMENTARY!"

Ravenclaw was pulling back; they had now scored three goals, which put Gryffindor only fifty points ahead — if Cho got the Snitch before him, Ravenclaw would win. Harry dropped lower, narrowly avoiding a Ravenclaw Chaser, scanning the field franti-cally — a glint of gold, a flutter of tiny wings — the Snitch was circling the Gryffindor goal post —Harry accelerated, eyes fixed on the speck of gold ahead — but just then, Cho appeared out of thin air, blocking him —"HARRY, THIS IS NO TIME TO BE A GENTLEMAN!" Wood roared as Harry swerved to avoid a collision. "KNOCK HER OFF HER BROOM IF YOU HAVE TO!"

Harry turned and caught sight of Cho; she was grinning. The Snitch had vanished again. Harry turned his Firebolt upward and was soon twenty feet above the game. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cho following him. … She'd decided to mark him rather than search for the Snitch herself. … All right, then … if she wanted to tail him, she'd have to take the conse-quences. …He dived again, and Cho, thinking he'd seen the Snitch, tried to follow; Harry pulled out of the dive very sharply; she hurtled downward; he rose fast as a bullet once more, and then saw it, for the third time — the Snitch was glittering way above the field at the Ravenclaw end.

He accelerated; so, many feet below, did Cho. He was winning, gaining on the Snitch with every second — then —"Oh!" screamed Cho, pointing.

Distracted, Harry looked down.

Three dementors, three tall, black, hooded dementors, were looking up at him.

He didn't stop to think. Plunging a hand down the neck of his robes, he whipped out his wand and roared, "Expecto patronum!"

Something silver-white, something enormous, erupted from the end of his wand. He knew it had shot directly at the dementors but didn't pause to watch; his mind still miraculously clear, he looked ahead — he was nearly there. He stretched out the hand still grasp-ing his wand and just managed to close his fingers over the small, struggling Snitch.

Madam Hooch's whistle sounded. Harry turned around in midair and saw six scarlet blurs bearing down on him; next mo-ment, the whole team was hugging him so hard he was nearly pulled off his broom. Down below he could hear the roars of the Gryffindors in the crowd.

"That's my boy!" Wood kept yelling. Alicia, Angelina, and Katie had all kissed Harry; Fred had him in a grip so tight Harry felt as though his head would come off. In complete disarray, the team managed to make its way back to the ground. Harry got off his broom and looked up to see a gaggle of Gryffindor supporters sprinting onto the field, Ron in the lead. Before he knew it, he had been engulfed by the cheering crowd.

"Yes!" Ron yelled, yanking Harry's arm into the air. "Yes! Yes!"

"Well done, Harry!" said Percy, looking delighted. "Ten Galleons to me! Must find Penelope, excuse me —"

"Good for you, Harry!" roared Seamus Finnigan.

"Ruddy brilliant!" boomed Hagrid over the heads of the milling Gryffindors.

“That was quite some Patronus,” said a voice in Harry’s ear.

Harry turned around to see Professor Lupin, who looked both shaken and pleased.

“The dementors didn’t affect me at all!” Harry said excitedly. “I didn’t feel a thing!”

“That would be because they — er — weren’t dementors,” said Professor Lupin. “Come and see —”

He led Harry out of the crowd until they were able to see the edge of the field.

“You gave Mr. Malfoy quite a fright,” said Lupin.

Harry stared. Lying in a crumpled heap on the ground were Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Marcus Flint, the Slytherin team Cap-tain, all struggling to remove themselves from long, black, hooded robes. It looked as though Malfoy had been standing on Goyle’s shoulders. Standing over them, with an expression of the utmost fury on her face, was Professor McGonagall.

“An unworthy trick!” she was shouting. “A low and cowardly at-tempt to sabotage the Gryffindor Seeker! Detention for all of you, and fifty points from Slytherin! I shall be speaking to Professor Dumbledore about this, make no mistake! Ah, here he comes now!”

If anything could have set the seal on Gryffindor’s victory, it was this. Ron, who had fought his way through to Harry’s side, doubled up with laughter as they watched Malfoy fighting to extri-cate himself from the robe, Goyle’s head still stuck inside it.

“Come on, Harry!” said George, fighting his way over. “Party! Gryffindor common room, now!”

“Right,” said Harry, and feeling happier than he had in ages, he and the rest of the team led the way, still in their scarlet robes, out of the stadium and back up to the castle.

It felt as though they had already won the Quidditch Cup; the party went on all day and well into the night. Fred and George Weasley disappeared for a couple of hours and returned with arm-fuls of bottles of butterbeer, pumpkin fizz, and several bags full of Honeydukes sweets.

“How did you do that?” squealed Angelina Johnson as George started throwing Peppermint Toads into the crowd.

“With a little help from Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs,” Fred muttered in Harry’s ear.

Only one person wasn’t joining in the festivities. Hermione, in-credibly, was sitting in a corner, attempting to read an enormous book entitled Home Life and Social Habits of British Muggles. Harry broke away from the table where Fred and George had started jug-gling butterbeer bottles and went over to her.

“Did you even come to the match?” he asked her.

“Of course I did,” said Hermione in a strangely high-pitched voice, not looking up. “And I’m very glad we won, and I think you did really well, but I need to read this by Monday.”

“Come on, Hermione, come and have some food,” Harry said, looking over at Ron and wondering whether he was in a good enough mood to bury the hatchet.

“I can’t, Harry. I’ve still got four hundred and twenty-two pages to read!” said Hermione, now sounding slightly hysterical. “Any-way …” She glanced over at Ron too. “He doesn’t want me to join in.”

There was no arguing with this, as Ron chose that moment to say loudly, “If Scabbers hadn’t just been eaten, he could have had some of those Fudge Flies. He used to really like them —”

Hermione burst into tears. Before Harry could say or do any-thing, she tucked the enormous book under her arm, and, still sob-bing, ran toward the staircase to the girls’ dormitories and out of sight.

“Can’t you give her a break?” Harry asked Ron quietly.

“No,” said Ron flatly. “If she just acted like she was sorry — but she’ll never admit she’s wrong, Hermione. She’s still acting like Scabbers has gone on vacation or something.”

The Gryffindor party ended only when Professor McGonagall turned up in her tartan dressing gown and hair net at one in the morning, to insist that they all go to bed. Harry and Ron climbed the stairs to their dormitory, still discussing the match. At last, ex-hausted, Harry climbed into bed, twitched the hangings of his four-poster shut to block out a ray of moonlight, lay back, and felt himself almost instantly drifting off to sleep. …He had a very strange dream. He was walking through a forest, his Firebolt over his shoulder, following something silvery-white. It was winding its way through the trees ahead, and he could only catch glimpses of it between the leaves. Anxious to catch up with it, he sped up, but as he moved faster, so did his quarry. Harry broke into a run, and ahead he heard hooves gathering speed. Now he was running flat out, and ahead he could hear galloping. Then he turned a corner into a clearing and —“AAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGHHHHH! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Harry woke as suddenly as though he’d been hit in the face. Disoriented in the total darkness, he fumbled with his hangings — he could hear movements around him, and Seamus Finnigan’s voice from the other side of the room: “What’s going on?”

Harry thought he heard the dormitory door slam. At last finding the divide in his curtains, he ripped them back, and at the same moment, Dean Thomas lit his lamp.

Ron was sitting up in bed, the hangings torn from one side, a look of utmost terror on his face.

“Black! Sirius Black! With a knife!”

“What?”

“Here! Just now! Slashed the curtains! Woke me up!”

“You sure you weren’t dreaming, Ron?” said Dean.

“Look at the curtains! I tell you, he was here!”

They all scrambled out of bed; Harry reached the dormitory door first, and they sprinted back down the staircase. Doors opened behind them, and sleepy voices called after them.

“Who shouted?”

“What’re you doing?”

The common room was lit with the glow of the dying fire, still littered with the debris from the party. It was deserted.

“Are you sure you weren’t dreaming, Ron?”

“I’m telling you, I saw him!”

“What’s all the noise?”

“Professor McGonagall told us to go to bed!”

A few of the girls had come down their staircase, pulling on dressing gowns and yawning. Boys, too, were reappearing.

“Excellent, are we carrying on?” said Fred Weasley brightly.

“Everyone back upstairs!” said Percy, hurrying into the common room and pinning his Head Boy badge to his pajamas as he spoke.

“Perce — Sirius Black!” said Ron faintly. “In our dormitory! With a knife! Woke me up!”

The common room went very still.

“Nonsense!” said Percy, looking startled. “You had too much to eat, Ron — had a nightmare —”

“I’m telling you —”

“Now, really, enough’s enough!”

Professor McGonagall was back. She slammed the portrait be-hind her as she entered the common room and stared furiously around.

“I am delighted that Gryffindor won the match, but this is get-ting ridiculous! Percy, I expected better of you!”

“I certainly didn’t authorize this, Professor!” said Percy, puffing himself up indignantly. “I was just telling them all to get back to bed! My brother Ron here had a nightmare —”

“IT WASN’T A NIGHTMARE!” Ron yelled. “PROFESSOR, I WOKE UP, AND SIRIUS BLACK WAS STANDING OVER ME, HOLDING A KNIFE!”

Professor McGonagall stared at him.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Weasley, how could he possibly have got-ten through the portrait hole?”

“Ask him!” said Ron, pointing a shaking finger at the back of Sir Cadogan’s picture. “Ask him if he saw —”

Glaring suspiciously at Ron, Professor McGonagall pushed the portrait back open and went outside. The whole common room listened with bated breath.

“Sir Cadogan, did you just let a man enter Gryffindor Tower?”

“Certainly, good lady!” cried Sir Cadogan.

There was a stunned silence, both inside and outside the com-mon room.

“You — you did?” said Professor McGonagall. “But — but the password!”

“He had ’em!” said Sir Cadogan proudly. “Had the whole week’s, my lady! Read ’em off a little piece of paper!”

Professor McGonagall pulled herself back through the portrait hole to face the stunned crowd. She was white as chalk.

“Which person,” she said, her voice shaking, “which abysmally foolish person wrote down this week’s passwords and left them lying around?”

There was utter silence, broken by the smallest of terrified squeaks. Neville Longbottom, trembling from head to fluffy-slippered toes, raised his hand slowly into the air.

Chapter 14 Snape's Grudge

No one in Gryffindor Tower slept that night. They knew that the castle was being searched again, and the whole House stayed awake in the common room, waiting to hear whether Black had been caught. Professor McGonagall came back at dawn, to tell them that he had again escaped.

Throughout the day, everywhere they went they saw signs of tighter security; Professor Flitwick could be seen teaching the front doors to recognize a large picture of Sirius Black; Filch was sud-denly bustling up and down the corridors, boarding up everything from tiny cracks in the walls to mouse holes. Sir Cadogan had been fired. His portrait had been taken back to its lonely landing on the seventh floor, and the Fat Lady was back. She had been expertly restored, but was still extremely nervous, and had agreed to return to her job only on condition that she was given extra protection. A bunch of surly security trolls had been hired to guard her. They paced the corridor in a menacing group, talking in grunts and comparing the size of their clubs.

Harry couldn't help noticing that the statue of the one-eyed witch on the third floor remained unguarded and unblocked. It seemed that Fred and George had been right in thinking that they — and now Harry, Ron, and Hermione — were the only ones who knew about the hidden passageway within it.

"D'you reckon we should tell someone?" Harry asked Ron.

"We know he's not coming in through Honeyduke's," said Ron dismissively "We'd've heard if the shop had been broken into."

Harry was glad Ron took this view. If the one-eyed witch was boarded up too, he would never be able to go into Hogsmeade again.

Ron had become an instant celebrity. For the first time in his life, people were paying more attention to him than to Harry, and it was clear that Ron was rather enjoying the experience. Though still severely shaken by the night's events, he was happy to tell any-one who asked what had happened, with a wealth of detail.

"… I was asleep, and I heard this ripping noise, and I thought it was in my dream, you know? But then there was this draft … I woke up and one side of the hangings on my bed had been pulled down. … I rolled over … and I saw him standing over me … like a skeleton, with loads of filthy hair … holding this great long knife, must've been twelve inches … and he looked at me, and I looked at him, and then I yelled, and he scampered.

"Why, though?" Ron added to Harry as the group of second-year girls who had been listening to his chilling tale departed. "Why did he run?"

Harry had been wondering the same thing. Why had Black, having got the wrong bed, not silenced Ron and proceeded to Harry? Black had proved twelve years ago that he didn't mind mur-dering innocent people, and this time he had been facing five un-armed boys, four of whom were asleep.

"He must've known he'd have a job getting back out of the castle once you'd yelled and woken people up," said Harry thoughtfully. "He'd've had to kill the whole House to get back through the por-trait hole … then he would've met the teachers. …"

Neville was in total disgrace. Professor McGonagall was so furi-ous with him she had banned him from all future Hogsmeade vis-its, given him a detention, and forbidden anyone to give him the password into the tower. Poor Neville was forced to wait outside the common room every night for somebody to let him in, while the security trolls leered unpleasantly at him. None of these pun-ishments, however, came close to matching the one his grand-mother had in store for him. Two

days after Black’s break-in, she sent Neville the very worst thing a Hogwarts student could receive over breakfast — a Howler.

The school owls swooped into the Great Hall carrying the mail as usual, and Neville choked as a huge barn owl landed in front of him, a scarlet envelope clutched in its beak. Harry and Ron, who were sitting opposite him, recognized the letter as a Howler at once — Ron had got one from his mother the year before.

“Run for it, Neville,” Ron advised.

Neville didn’t need telling twice. He seized the envelope, and holding it before him like a bomb, sprinted out of the hall, while the Slytherin table exploded with laughter at the sight of him. They heard the Howler go off in the entrance hall — Neville’s grand-mother’s voice, magically magnified to a hundred times its usual volume, shrieking about how he had brought shame on the whole family.

Harry was too busy feeling sorry for Neville to notice immedi-ately that he had a letter too. Hedwig got his attention by nipping him sharply on the wrist.

“Ouch! Oh — thanks, Hedwig.”

Harry tore open the envelope while Hedwig helped herself to some of Neville’s cornflakes. The note inside said:Dear Harry and Ron,

How about having tea with me this afternoon ’round six?

I’ll come and collect you from the castle.

WAIT FOR ME IN THE ENTRANCE HALL;YOU’RE NOT ALLOWED OUT ON YOUR OWN.

Cheers,

Hagrid

“He probably wants to hear all about Black!” said Ron.

So at six o’clock that afternoon, Harry and Ron left Gryffindor Tower, passed the security trolls at a run, and headed down to the entrance hall.

Hagrid was already waiting for them.

“All right, Hagrid!” said Ron. “S’pose you want to hear about Saturday night, do you?”

“I’ve already heard all abou’ it,” said Hagrid, opening the front doors and leading them outside.

“Oh,” said Ron, looking slightly put out.

The first thing they saw on entering Hagrid’s cabin was Buck-beak, who was stretched out on top of Hagrid’s patchwork quilt, his enormous wings folded tight to his body, enjoying a large plate of dead ferrets. Averting his eyes from this unpleasant sight, Harry saw a gigantic, hairy brown suit and a very horrible yellow-and-orange tie hanging from the top of Hagrid’s wardrobe door.

“What are they for, Hagrid?” said Harry.

“Buckbeak’s case against the Committee fer the Disposal o’ Dan-gerous Creatures,” said Hagrid. “This Friday. Him an’ me’ll be goin’ down ter London together. I’ve booked two beds on the Knight Bus. …”

Harry felt a nasty pang of guilt. He had completely forgotten that Buckbeak’s trial was so near, and judging by the uneasy look on Ron’s face, he had too. They had also forgotten their promise about helping him prepare Buckbeak’s defense; the arrival of the Firebolt had driven it clean out of their minds.

Hagrid poured them tea and offered them a plate of Bath buns, but they knew better than to accept; they had had too much expe-rience with Hagrid's cooking.

"I got somethin' ter discuss with you two," said Hagrid, sitting himself between them and looking uncharacteristically serious.

"What?" said Harry.

"Hermione," said Hagrid.

"What about her?" said Ron.

"She's in a righ' state, that's what. She's bin comin' down ter visit me a lot since Chris'mas. Bin feelin' lonely. Firs' yeh weren' talking to her because o' the Firebolt, now yer not talkin' to her because her cat —"

"— ate Scabbers!" Ron interjected angrily.

"Because her cat acted like all cats do," Hagrid continued doggedly. "She's cried a fair few times, yeh know. Goin' through a rough time at the moment. Bitten off more'n she can chew, if yeh ask me, all the work she's tryin' ter do. Still found time ter help me with Buckbeak's case, mind. … She's found some really good stuff fer me … reckon he'll stand a good chance now. …"

"Hagrid, we should've helped as well — sorry —" Harry began awkwardly.

"I'm not blamin' yeh!" said Hagrid, waving Harry's apology aside. "Gawd knows yeh've had enough ter be gettin' on with. I've seen yeh practicin' Quidditch ev'ry hour o' the day an' night — but I gotta tell yeh, I thought you two'd value yer friend more'n broom-sticks or rats. Tha's all."

Harry and Ron exchanged uncomfortable looks.

“Really upset, she was, when Black nearly stabbed yeh, Ron. She’s got her heart in the right place, Hermione has, an’ you two not talkin’ to her —”

“If she’d just get rid of that cat, I’d speak to her again!” Ron said angrily. “But she’s still sticking up for it! It’s a maniac, and she won’t hear a word against it!”

“Ah, well, people can be a bit stupid abou’ their pets,” said Ha-grid wisely. Behind him, Buckbeak spat a few ferret bones onto Hagrid’s pillow.

They spent the rest of their visit discussing Gryffindor’s improved chances for the Quidditch Cup. At nine o’clock, Hagrid walked them back up to the castle.

A large group of people was bunched around the bulletin board when they returned to the common room.

“Hogsmeade, next weekend!” said Ron, craning over the heads to read the new notice. “What d’you reckon?” he added quietly to Harry as they went to sit down.

“Well, Filch hasn’t done anything about the passage into Hon-eydukes. …” Harry said, even more quietly.

“Harry!” said a voice in his right ear. Harry started and looked around at Hermione, who was sitting at the table right behind them and clearing a space in the wall of books that had been hid-ing her.

“Harry, if you go into Hogsmeade again … I’ll tell Professor McGonagall about that map!” said Hermione.

“Can you hear someone talking, Harry?” growled Ron, not looking at Hermione.

“Ron, how can you let him go with you? After what Sirius Black nearly did to you! I mean it, I’ll tell —”

“So now you’re trying to get Harry expelled!” said Ron furiously. “Haven’t you done enough damage this year?”

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but with a soft hiss, Crookshanks leapt onto her lap. Hermione took one frightened look at the expression on Ron’s face, gathered up Crookshanks, and hurried away toward the girls’ dormitories.

“So how about it?” Ron said to Harry as though there had been no interruption. “Come on, last time we went you didn’t see any-thing. You haven’t even been inside Zonko’s yet!”

Harry looked around to check that Hermione was well out of earshot.

“Okay,” he said. “But I’m taking the Invisibility Cloak this time.”

On Saturday morning, Harry packed his Invisibility Cloak in his bag, slipped the Marauder’s Map into his pocket, and went down to breakfast with everyone else. Hermione kept shooting suspicious looks down the table at him, but he avoided her eye and was care-ful to let her see him walking back up the marble staircase in the entrance hall as everybody else proceeded to the front doors.

“ ’Bye!” Harry called to Ron. “See you when you get back!”

Ron grinned and winked.

Harry hurried up to the third floor, slipping the Marauder’s Map out of his pocket as he went. Crouching behind the one-eyed witch, he smoothed it out. A tiny dot was moving in his direction. Harry squinted at it. The minuscule writing next to it read Neville Longbottom.

Harry quickly pulled out his wand, muttered, “Dissendium!” and shoved his bag into the statue, but before he could climb in himself,

Neville came around the corner.

“Harry! I forgot you weren’t going to Hogsmeade either!”

“Hi, Neville,” said Harry, moving swiftly away from the statue and pushing the map back into his pocket. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing,” shrugged Neville. “Want a game of Exploding Snap?”

“Er — not now — I was going to go to the library and do that vampire essay for Lupin —”

“I’ll come with you!” said Neville brightly. “I haven’t done it either!”

“Er — hang on — yeah, I forgot, I finished it last night!”

“Great, you can help me!” said Neville, his round face anxious. “I don’t understand that thing about the garlic at all — do they have to eat it, or —”

He broke off with a small gasp, looking over Harry’s shoulder.

It was Snape. Neville took a quick step behind Harry.

“And what are you two doing here?” said Snape, coming to a halt and looking from one to the other. “An odd place to meet —”

To Harry’s immense disquiet, Snape’s black eyes flicked to the doorways on either side of them, and then to the one-eyed witch.

“We’re not — meeting here,” said Harry. “We just — met here.”

“Indeed?” said Snape. “You have a habit of turning up in unex-pected places, Potter, and you are very rarely there for no good rea-son. … I suggest the pair of you return to Gryffindor Tower, where you belong.”

Harry and Neville set off without another word. As they turned the corner, Harry looked back. Snape was running one of his hands over

the one-eyed witch's head, examining it closely.

Harry managed to shake Neville off at the Fat Lady by tell-ing him the password, then pretending he'd left his vampire essay in the library and doubling back. Once out of sight of the secu-rity trolls, he pulled out the map again and held it close to his nose.

The third floor corridor seemed to be deserted. Harry scanned the map carefully and saw, with a leap of relief, that the tiny dot labeled Severus Snape was now back in its office.

He sprinted back to the one-eyed witch, opened her hump, heaved himself inside, and slid down to meet his bag at the bottom of the stone chute. He wiped the Marauder's Map blank again, then set off at a run.

Harry, completely hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, emerged into the sunlight outside Honeydukes and prodded Ron in the back.

"It's me," he muttered.

"What kept you?" Ron hissed.

"Snape was hanging around. …"

They set off up the High Street.

"Where are you?" Ron kept muttering out of the corner of his mouth. "Are you still there? This feels weird. …"

They went to the post office; Ron pretended to be checking the price of an owl to Bill in Egypt so that Harry could have a good look around. The owls sat hooting softly down at him, at least three hundred of them; from Great Grays right down to tiny little Scops owls ("Local Deliveries Only"), which were so small they could have sat in the palm of Harry's hand.

Then they visited Zonko's, which was so packed with students Harry had to exercise great care not to tread on anyone and cause a panic. There were jokes and tricks to fulfill even Fred's and George's wildest dreams; Harry gave Ron whispered orders and passed him some gold from under the cloak. They left Zonko's with their money bags considerably lighter than they had been on entering, but their pockets bulging with Dungbombs, Hiccup Sweets, Frog Spawn Soap, and a Nose-Biting Teacup apiece.

The day was fine and breezy, and neither of them felt like stay-ing indoors, so they walked past the Three Broomsticks and climbed a slope to visit the Shrieking Shack, the most haunted dwelling in Britain. It stood a little way above the rest of the village, and even in daylight was slightly creepy, with its boarded windows and dank overgrown garden.

"Even the Hogwarts ghosts avoid it," said Ron as they leaned on the fence, looking up at it. "I asked Nearly Headless Nick … he says he's heard a very rough crowd lives here. No one can get in. Fred and George tried, obviously, but all the entrances are sealed shut. …"

Harry, feeling hot from their climb, was just considering taking off the cloak for a few minutes when they heard voices nearby. Someone was climbing toward the house from the other side of the hill; moments later, Malfoy had appeared, followed closely by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy was speaking.

"… should have an owl from Father any time now. He had to go to the hearing to tell them about my arm … about how I couldn't use it for three months. …"

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered.

"I really wish I could hear that great hairy moron trying to de-fend himself … 'There's no 'arm in 'im, 'onest —' … that hip-pogriff's as good as dead —"

Malfoy suddenly caught sight of Ron. His pale face split in a malevolent grin.

“What are you doing, Weasley?”

Malfoy looked up at the crumbling house behind Ron.

“Suppose you’d love to live here, wouldn’t you, Weasley? Dream-ing about having your own bedroom? I heard your family all sleep in one room — is that true?”

Harry seized the back of Ron’s robes to stop him from leaping on Malfoy.

“Leave him to me,” he hissed in Ron’s ear.

The opportunity was too perfect to miss. Harry crept silently around behind Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, bent down, and scooped a large handful of mud out of the path.

“We were just discussing your friend Hagrid,” Malfoy said to Ron. “Just trying to imagine what he’s saying to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. D’you think he’ll cry when they cut off his hippogriff’s —”

SPLAT.

Malfoy’s head jerked forward as the mud hit him; his silver-blond hair was suddenly dripping in muck.

“What the — ?”

Ron had to hold onto the fence to keep himself standing, he was laughing so hard. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle spun stupidly on the spot, staring wildly around, Malfoy trying to wipe his hair clean.

“What was that? Who did that?”

“Very haunted up here, isn’t it?” said Ron, with the air of one commenting on the weather.

Crabbe and Goyle were looking scared. Their bulging muscles were no use against ghosts. Malfoy was staring madly around at the deserted landscape.

Harry sneaked along the path, where a particularly sloppy puddle yielded some foul-smelling, green sludge.

SPLATTER.

Crabbe and Goyle caught some this time. Goyle hopped furi-ously on the spot, trying to rub it out of his small, dull eyes.

“It came from over there!” said Malfoy, wiping his face, and star-ing at a spot some six feet to the left of Harry.

Crabbe blundered forward, his long arms outstretched like a zombie. Harry dodged around him, picked up a stick, and lobbed it at Crabbe’s back. Harry doubled up with silent laughter as Crabbe did a kind of pirouette in midair, trying to see who had thrown it. As Ron was the only person Crabbe could see, it was Ron he started toward, but Harry stuck out his leg. Crabbe stum-bled — and his huge, flat foot caught the hem of Harry’s cloak. Harry felt a great tug, then the cloak slid off his face.

For a split second, Malfoy stared at him.

“AAARGH!” he yelled, pointing at Harry’s head. Then he turned tail and ran, at breakneck speed, back down the hill, Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

Harry tugged the cloak up again, but the damage was done.

“Harry!” Ron said, stumbling forward and staring hopelessly at the point where Harry had disappeared, “you’d better run for it! If Malfoy

tells anyone — you'd better get back to the castle, quick —"

"See you later," said Harry, and without another word, he tore back down the path toward Hogsmeade.

Would Malfoy believe what he had seen? Would anyone believe Malfoy? Nobody knew about the Invisibility Cloak — nobody ex-cept Dumbledore. Harry's stomach turned over — Dumbledore would know exactly what had happened, if Malfoy said any-thing —Back into Honeydukes, back down the cellar steps, across the stone floor, through the trapdoor — Harry pulled off the cloak, tucked it under his arm, and ran, flat out, along the passage. … Malfoy would get back first … how long would it take him to find a teacher? Panting, a sharp pain in his side, Harry didn't slow down until he reached the stone slide. He would have to leave the cloak where it was, it was too much of a giveaway in case Malfoy had tipped off a teacher — he hid it in a shadowy corner, then started to climb, fast as he could, his sweaty hands slipping on the sides of the chute. He reached the inside of the witch's hump, tapped it with his wand, stuck his head through, and hoisted himself out; the hump closed, and just as Harry jumped out from behind the statue, he heard quick footsteps approaching.

It was Snape. He approached Harry at a swift walk, his black robes swishing, then stopped in front of him.

"So," he said.

There was a look of suppressed triumph about him. Harry tried to look innocent, all too aware of his sweaty face and his muddy hands, which he quickly hid in his pockets.

"Come with me, Potter," said Snape.

Harry followed him downstairs, trying to wipe his hands clean on the inside of his robes without Snape noticing. They walked down the stairs to the dungeons and then into Snape's office.

Harry had been in here only once before, and he had been in very serious trouble then too. Snape had acquired a few more slimy horrible things in jars since last time, all standing on shelves behind his desk, glinting in the firelight and adding to the threatening atmosphere.

“Sit,” said Snape.

Harry sat. Snape, however, remained standing.

“Mr. Malfoy has just been to see me with a strange story, Potter,” said Snape.

Harry didn’t say anything.

“He tells me that he was up by the Shrieking Shack when he ran into Weasley — apparently alone.”

Still, Harry didn’t speak.

“Mr. Malfoy states that he was standing talking to Weasley, when a large amount of mud hit him in the back of the head. How do you think that could have happened?”

Harry tried to look mildly surprised.

“I don’t know, Professor.”

Snape’s eyes were boring into Harry’s. It was exactly like trying to stare down a hippogriff. Harry tried hard not to blink.

“Mr. Malfoy then saw an extraordinary apparition. Can you imagine what it might have been, Potter?”

“No,” said Harry, now trying to sound innocently curious.

“It was your head, Potter. Floating in midair.”

There was a long silence.

“Maybe he’d better go to Madam Pomfrey,” said Harry. “If he’s seeing things like —”

“What would your head have been doing in Hogsmeade, Pot-ter?” said Snape softly. “Your head is not allowed in Hogsmeade. No part of your body has permission to be in Hogsmeade.”

“I know that,” said Harry, striving to keep his face free of guilt or fear. “It sounds like Malfoy’s having hallucin —”

“Malfoy is not having hallucinations,” snarled Snape, and he bent down, a hand on each arm of Harry’s chair, so that their faces were a foot apart. “If your head was in Hogsmeade, so was the rest of you.”

“I’ve been up in Gryffindor Tower,” said Harry. “Like you told —”

“Can anyone confirm that?”

Harry didn’t say anything. Snape’s thin mouth curled into a hor-rible smile.

“So,” he said, straightening up again. “Everyone from the Min-ister of Magic downward has been trying to keep famous Harry Potter safe from Sirius Black. But famous Harry Potter is a law unto himself. Let the ordinary people worry about his safety! Fa-mous Harry Potter goes where he wants to, with no thought for the consequences.”

Harry stayed silent. Snape was trying to provoke him into telling the truth. He wasn’t going to do it. Snape had no proof — yet.

“How extraordinarily like your father you are, Potter,” Snape said suddenly, his eyes glinting. “He too was exceedingly arrogant. A small amount of talent on the Quidditch field made him think he was a cut above the rest of us too. Strutting around the place with his friends and admirers … The resemblance between you is uncanny.”

“My dad didn’t strut,” said Harry, before he could stop himself. “And neither do I.”

“Your father didn’t set much store by rules either,” Snape went on, pressing his advantage, his thin face full of malice. “Rules were for lesser mortals, not Quidditch Cup-winners. His head was so swollen —”

“SHUT UP!”

Harry was suddenly on his feet. Rage such as he had not felt since his last night in Privet Drive was coursing through him. He didn’t care that Snape’s face had gone rigid, the black eyes flashing dangerously.

“What did you say to me, Potter?”

“I told you to shut up about my dad!” Harry yelled. “I know the truth, all right? He saved your life! Dumbledore told me! You wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for my dad!”

Snape’s sallow skin had gone the color of sour milk.

“And did the headmaster tell you the circumstances in which your father saved my life?” he whispered. “Or did he consider the details too unpleasant for precious Potter’s delicate ears?”

Harry bit his lip. He didn’t know what had happened and didn’t want to admit it — but Snape seemed to have guessed the truth.

“I would hate for you to run away with a false idea of your fa-ther, Potter,” he said, a terrible grin twisting his face. “Have you been imagining some act of glorious heroism? Then let me correct you — your saintly father and his friends played a highly amusing joke on me that would have resulted in my death if your father hadn’t got cold feet at the last moment. There was nothing brave about what he did. He

was saving his own skin as much as mine. Had their joke succeeded, he would have been expelled from Hog-warts."

Snape's uneven, yellowish teeth were bared.

"Turn out your pockets, Potter!" he spat suddenly.

Harry didn't move. There was a pounding in his ears.

"Turn out your pockets, or we go straight to the headmaster! Pull them out, Potter!"

Cold with dread, Harry slowly pulled out the bag of Zonko's tricks and the Marauder's Map.

Snap picked up the Zonko's bag.

"Ron gave them to me," said Harry, praying he'd get a chance to tip Ron off before Snape saw him. "He — brought them back from Hogsmeade last time —"

"Indeed? And you've been carrying them around ever since? How very touching … and what is this?"

Snape had picked up the map. Harry tried with all his might to keep his face impassive.

"Spare bit of parchment," he said with a shrug.

Snape turned it over, his eyes on Harry.

"Surely you don't need such a very old piece of parchment?" he said. "Why don't I just — throw this away?"

His hand moved toward the fire.

"No!" Harry said quickly.

“So!” said Snape, his long nostrils quivering. “Is this another treasured gift from Mr. Weasley? Or is it — something else? A let-ter, perhaps, written in invisible ink? Or — instructions to get into Hogsmeade without passing the dementors?”

Harry blinked. Snape’s eyes gleamed.

“Let me see, let me see … ,” he muttered, taking out his wand and smoothing the map out on his desk. “Reveal your secret!” he said, touching the wand to the parchment.

Nothing happened. Harry clenched his hands to stop them from shaking.

“Show yourself!” Snape said, tapping the map sharply.

It stayed blank. Harry was taking deep, calming breaths.

“Professor Severus Snape, master of this school, commands you to yield the information you conceal!” Snape said, hitting the map with his wand.

As though an invisible hand were writing upon it, words ap-peared on the smooth surface of the map.

“Mr. Moony presents his compliments to Professor Snape, and begs him to keep his abnormally large nose out of other people’s business.”

Snape froze. Harry stared, dumbstruck, at the message. But the map didn’t stop there. More writing was appearing beneath the first.

“Mr. Prongs agrees with Mr. Moony, and would like to add that Professor Snape is an ugly git.”

It would have been very funny if the situation hadn’t been so se-rious. And there was more. …“Mr. Padfoot would like to register his

astonishment that an idiot like that ever became a professor."

Harry closed his eyes in horror. When he'd opened them, the map had had its last word.

"Mr. Wormtail bids, Professor Snape good day, and advises him to wash his hair, the slimeball."

Harry waited for the blow to fall.

"So … ," said Snape softly. "We'll see about this. …"

He strode across to his fire, seized a fistful of glittering powder from a jar on the fireplace, and threw it into the flames.

"Lupin!" Snape called into the fire. "I want a word!"

Utterly bewildered, Harry stared at the fire. A large shape had appeared in it, revolving very fast. Seconds later, Professor Lupin was clambering out of the fireplace, brushing ash off his shabby robes.

"You called, Severus?" said Lupin mildly.

"I certainly did," said Snape, his face contorted with fury as he strode back to his desk. "I have just asked Potter to empty his pock-ets. He was carrying this."

Snape pointed at the parchment, on which the words of Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs were still shining. An odd, closed expression appeared on Lupin's face.

"Well?" said Snape.

Lupin continued to stare at the map. Harry had the impression that Lupin was doing some very quick thinking.

“Well?” said Snape again. “This parchment is plainly full of Dark Magic. This is supposed to be your area of expertise, Lupin. Where do you imagine Potter got such a thing?”

Lupin looked up and, by the merest half-glance in Harry’s direc-tion, warned him not to interrupt.

“Full of Dark Magic?” he repeated mildly. “Do you really think so, Severus? It looks to me as though it is merely a piece of parch-ment that insults anybody who reads it. Childish, but surely not dangerous? I imagine Harry got it from a joke shop —”

“Indeed?” said Snape. His jaw had gone rigid with anger. “You think a joke shop could supply him with such a thing? You don’t think it more likely that he got it directly from the manufac-turers?”

Harry didn’t understand what Snape was talking about. Nor, ap-parently, did Lupin.

“You mean, by Mr. Wormtail or one of these people?” he said. “Harry, do you know any of these men?”

“No,” said Harry quickly.

“You see, Severus?” said Lupin, turning back to Snape. “It looks like a Zonko product to me —”

Right on cue, Ron came bursting into the office. He was com-pletely out of breath, and stopped just short of Snape’s desk, clutching the stitch in his chest and trying to speak.

“I — gave — Harry — that — stuff,” he choked. “Bought — it … in Zonko’s … ages — ago …”

“Well!” said Lupin, clapping his hands together and looking around cheerfully. “That seems to clear that up! Severus, I’ll take this back, shall I?” He folded the map and tucked it inside his robes. “Harry,

Ron, come with me, I need a word about my vam-pire essay — excuse us, Severus —"

Harry didn't dare look at Snape as they left his office. He, Ron, and Lupin walked all the way back into the entrance hall before speaking. Then Harry turned to Lupin.

"Professor, I —"

"I don't want to hear explanations," said Lupin shortly. He glanced around the empty entrance hall and lowered his voice. "I happen to know that this map was confiscated by Mr. Filch many years ago. Yes, I know it's a map," he said as Harry and Ron looked amazed. "I don't want to know how it fell into your possession. I am, however, astounded that you didn't hand it in. Particularly after what happened the last time a student left information about the castle lying around. And I can't let you have it back, Harry."

Harry had expected that, and was too keen for explanations to protest.

"Why did Snape think I'd got it from the manufacturers?"

"Because … ," Lupin hesitated, "because these mapmakers would have wanted to lure you out of school. They'd think it ex-tremely entertaining."

"Do you know them?" said Harry, impressed.

"We've met," he said shortly. He was looking at Harry more seriously than ever before.

"Don't expect me to cover up for you again, Harry. I cannot make you take Sirius Black seriously. But I would have thought that what you have heard when the dementors draw near you would have had more of an effect on you. Your parents gave their lives to keep you alive,

Harry. A poor way to repay them — gam-bling their sacrifice for a bag of magic tricks."

He walked away, leaving Harry feeling worse by far than he had at any point in Snape's office. Slowly, he and Ron mounted the marble staircase. As Harry passed the one-eyed witch, he remem-bered the Invisibility Cloak — it was still down there, but he didn't dare go and get it.

"It's my fault," said Ron abruptly. "I persuaded you to go. Lupin's right, it was stupid, we shouldn't've done it —"

He broke off; they reached the corridor where the security trolls were pacing, and Hermione was walking toward them. One look at her face convinced Harry that she had heard what had happened. His heart plummeted — had she told Professor McGonagall?

"Come to have a good gloat?" said Ron savagely as she stopped in front of them. "Or have you just been to tell on us?"

"No," said Hermione. She was holding a letter in her hands and her lip was trembling. "I just thought you ought to know … Hagrid lost his case. Buckbeak is going to be executed."

Chapter 15 The Quidditch Final

“He — he sent me this,” Hermione said, holding out the letter.

Harry took it. The parchment was damp, and enormous tear-drops had smudged the ink so badly in places that it was very diffi-cult to read.

Dear Hermione,

We lost. I’m allowed to bring him back to Hogwarts.

Execution date to be fixed.

Beaky has enjoyed London.

I won’t forget all the help you gave us.

Hagrid

“They can’t do this,” said Harry. “They can’t. Buckbeak isn’t dangerous.”

“Malfoy’s dad’s frightened the Committee into it,” said Her-mione, wiping her eyes. “You know what he’s like. They’re a bunch of doddery old fools, and they were scared. There’ll be an appeal, though, there always is. Only I can’t see any hope. … Nothing will have changed.”

“Yeah, it will,” said Ron fiercely. “You won’t have to do all the work alone this time, Hermione. I’ll help.”

“Oh, Ron!”

Hermione flung her arms around Ron’s neck and broke down completely. Ron, looking quite terrified, patted her very awkwardly on the top of the head. Finally, Hermione drew away.

“Ron, I’m really, really sorry about Scabbers … ,” she sobbed.

“Oh — well — he was old,” said Ron, looking thoroughly re-lieved that she had let go of him. “And he was a bit useless. You never know, Mum and Dad might get me an owl now.”

The safety measures imposed on the students since Black’s second break-in made it impossible for Harry, Ron, and Hermione to go and visit Hagrid in the evenings. Their only chance of talking to him was during Care of Magical Creatures lessons.

He seemed numb with shock at the verdict.

“S’all my fault. Got all tongue-tied. They was all sittin’ there in black robes an’ I kep’ droppin’ me notes and forgettin’ all them dates yeh looked up fer me, Hermione. An’ then Lucius Malfoy stood up an’ said his bit, and the Committee jus’ did exac’ly what he told ’em. …”

“There’s still the appeal!” said Ron fiercely. “Don’t give up yet, we’re working on it!”

They were walking back up to the castle with the rest of the class. Ahead they could see Malfoy, who was walking with Crabbe and Goyle, and kept looking back, laughing derisively.

“S’no good, Ron,” said Hagrid sadly as they reached the castle steps. “That Committee’s in Lucius Malfoy’s pocket. I’m jus’ gonna make sure the rest o’ Beaky’s time is the happiest he’s ever had. I owe him that. …”

Hagrid turned around and hurried back toward his cabin, his face buried in his handkerchief.

“Look at him blubber!”

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had been standing just inside the castle doors, listening.

“Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?” said Malfoy. “And he’s supposed to be our teacher!”

Harry and Ron both made furious moves toward Malfoy, but Hermione got there first — SMACK!

She had slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster. Malfoy staggered. Harry, Ron, Crabbe, and Goyle stood flabbergasted as Hermione raised her hand again.

“Don’t you dare call Hagrid pathetic, you foul — you evil —”

“Hermione!” said Ron weakly, and he tried to grab her hand as she swung it back.

“Get off, Ron!”

Hermione pulled out her wand. Malfoy stepped backward. Crabbe and Goyle looked at him for instructions, thoroughly be-wildered.

“C’mon,” Malfoy muttered, and in a moment, all three of them had disappeared into the passageway to the dungeons.

“Hermione!” Ron said again, sounding both stunned and im-pressed.

“Harry, you’d better beat him in the Quidditch final!” Hermione said shrilly. “You just better had, because I can’t stand it if Slytherin wins!”

“We’re due in Charms,” said Ron, still goggling at Hermione. “We’d better go.”

They hurried up the marble staircase toward Professor Flitwick’s classroom.

“You’re late, boys!” said Professor Flitwick reprovingly as Harry opened the classroom door. “Come along, quickly, wands out, we’re experimenting with Cheering Charms today, we’ve already divided into pairs —”

Harry and Ron hurried to a desk at the back and opened their bags. Ron looked behind him.

“Where’s Hermione gone?”

Harry looked around too. Hermione hadn’t entered the class-room, yet Harry knew she had been right next to him when he had opened the door.

“That’s weird,” said Harry, staring at Ron. “Maybe — maybe she went to the bathroom or something?”

But Hermione didn’t turn up all lesson.

“She could’ve done with a Cheering Charm on her too,” said Ron as the class left for lunch, all grinning broadly — the Cheer-ing Charms had left them with a feeling of great contentment.

Hermione wasn’t at lunch either. By the time they had finished their apple pie, the after-effects of the Cheering Charms were wear-ing off, and Harry and Ron had started to get slightly worried.

“You don’t think Malfoy did something to her?” Ron said anx-iously as they hurried upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower.

They passed the security trolls, gave the Fat Lady the password (“Flibbertigibbet”), and scrambled through the portrait hole into the common room.

Hermione was sitting at a table, fast asleep, her head resting on an open Arithmancy book. They went to sit down on either side of her. Harry prodded her awake.

“Wh — what?” said Hermione, waking with a start and staring wildly around. “Is it time to go? W — which lesson have we got now?

“Divination, but it’s not for another twenty minutes,” said Harry. “Hermione, why didn’t you come to Charms?”

“What? Oh no!” Hermione squeaked. “I forgot to go to Charms!”

“But how could you forget?” said Harry. “You were with us till we were right outside the classroom!”

“I don’t believe it!” Hermione wailed. “Was Professor Flitwick angry? Oh, it was Malfoy, I was thinking about him and I lost track of things!”

“You know what, Hermione?” said Ron, looking down at the enormous Arithmancy book Hermione had been using as a pillow. “I reckon you’re cracking up. You’re trying to do too much.”

“No, I’m not!” said Hermione, brushing her hair out of her eyes and staring hopelessly around for her bag. “I just made a mistake, that’s all! I’d better go and see Professor Flitwick and say sorry. … I’ll see you in Divination!”

Hermione joined them at the foot of the ladder to Professor Trelawney’s classroom twenty minutes later, looking extremely harassed.

“I can’t believe I missed Cheering Charms! And I bet they come up in our exams; Professor Flitwick hinted they might!”

Together they climbed the ladder into the dim, stifling tower room. Glowing on every little table was a crystal ball full of pearly white mist. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down together at the same rickety table.

“I thought we weren’t starting crystal balls until next term,” Ron muttered, casting a wary eye around for Professor Trelawney, in case she was lurking nearby.

“Don’t complain, this means we’ve finished palmistry,” Harry muttered back. “I was getting sick of her flinching every time she looked at my hands.”

“Good day to you!” said the familiar, misty voice, and Professor Trelawney made her usual dramatic entrance out of the shadows. Parvati and Lavender quivered with excitement, their faces lit by the milky glow of their crystal ball.

“I have decided to introduce the crystal ball a little earlier than I had planned,” said Professor Trelawney, sitting with her back to the fire and gazing around. “The fates have informed me that your examination in June will concern the Orb, and I am anxious to give you sufficient practice.”

Hermione snorted.

“Well, honestly … ‘the fates have informed her’ … who sets the exam? She does! What an amazing prediction!” she said, not troubling to keep her voice low. Harry and Ron choked back laughs.

It was hard to tell whether Professor Trelawney had heard them, as her face was hidden in shadow. She continued, however, as though she had not.

“Crystal gazing is a particularly refined art,” she said dreamily. “I do not expect any of you to See when first you peer into the Orb’s infinite depths. We shall start by practicing relaxing the conscious mind and external eyes” — Ron began to snigger uncontrollably and had to stuff his fist in his mouth to stifle the noise — “so as to clear the Inner Eye and the superconscious. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some of you will See before the end of the class.”

And so they began. Harry, at least, felt extremely foolish, staring blankly at the crystal ball, trying to keep his mind empty when thoughts such as “this is stupid” kept drifting across it. It didn’t help that Ron kept breaking into silent giggles and Hermione kept tutting.

“Seen anything yet?” Harry asked them after a quarter of an hour’s quiet crystal gazing.

“Yeah, there’s a burn on this table,” said Ron, pointing. “Some-one’s spilled their candle.”

“This is such a waste of time,” Hermione hissed. “I could be practicing something useful. I could be catching up on Cheering Charms —”

Professor Trelawney rustled past.

“Would anyone like me to help them interpret the shadowy por-tents within their Orb?” she murmured over the clinking of her bangles.

“I don’t need help,” Ron whispered. “It’s obvious what this means. There’s going to be loads of fog tonight.”

Both Harry and Hermione burst out laughing.

“Now, really!” said Professor Trelawney as everyone’s heads turned in their direction. Parvati and Lavender were looking scandalized. “You are disturbing the clairvoyant vibrations!” She ap-proached their table and peered into their crystal ball. Harry felt his heart sinking. He was sure he knew what was coming —“There is something here!” Professor Trelawney whispered, low-ering her face to the ball, so that it was reflected twice in her huge glasses. “Something moving … but what is it?”

Harry was prepared to bet everything he owned, including his Firebolt, that it wasn’t good news, whatever it was. And sure enough —“My dear … ,” Professor Trelawney breathed, gazing up at Harry. “It is here, plainer than ever before … my dear, stalking toward you, growing ever closer … the Gr —”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake!” said Hermione loudly. “Not that ridicu-lous Grim again!”

Professor Trelawney raised her enormous eyes to Hermione's face. Parvati whispered something to Lavender, and they both glared at Hermione too. Professor Trelawney stood up, surveying Hermione with unmistakable anger.

"I am sorry to say that from the moment you have arrived in this class, my dear, it has been apparent that you do not have what the noble art of Divination requires. Indeed, I don't remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly mundane."

There was a moment's silence. Then —"Fine!" said Hermione suddenly, getting up and cramming Un-fogging the Future back into her bag. "Fine!" she repeated, swinging the bag over her shoulder and almost knocking Ron off his chair. "I give up! I'm leaving!"

And to the whole class's amazement, Hermione strode over to the trapdoor, kicked it open, and climbed down the ladder out of sight.

It took a few minutes for the class to settle down again. Profes-sor Trelawney seemed to have forgotten all about the Grim. She turned abruptly from Harry and Ron's table, breathing rather heav-ily as she tugged her gauzy shawl more closely to her.

"Ooooo!" said Lavender suddenly, making everyone start. "Oooooo, Professor Trelawney, I've just remembered! You saw her leaving, didn't you? Didn't you, Professor? 'Around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever!' You said it ages ago, Professor!"

Professor Trelawney gave her a dewy smile.

"Yes, my dear, I did indeed know that Miss Granger would be leaving us. One hopes, however, that one might have mistaken the Signs. … The Inner Eye can be a burden, you know. …"

Lavender and Parvati looked deeply impressed, and moved over so that Professor Trelawney could join their table instead.

“Some day Hermione’s having, eh?” Ron muttered to Harry, looking awed.

“Yeah …”

Harry glanced into the crystal ball but saw nothing but swirling white mist. Had Professor Trelawney really seen the Grim again? Would he? The last thing he needed was another near-fatal acci-dent, with the Quidditch final drawing ever nearer.

The Easter holidays were not exactly relaxing. The third years had never had so much homework. Neville Longbottom seemed close to a nervous collapse, and he wasn’t the only one.

“Call this a holiday!” Seamus Finnigan roared at the common room one afternoon. “The exams are ages away, what’re they play-ing at?”

But nobody had as much to do as Hermione. Even without Div-ination, she was taking more subjects than anybody else. She was usually last to leave the common room at night, first to arrive at the library the next morning; she had shadows like Lupin’s under her eyes, and seemed constantly close to tears.

Ron had taken over responsibility for Buckbeak’s appeal. When he wasn’t doing his own work, he was poring over enormously thick volumes with names like The Handbook of Hippogriff Psy-chology and Fowl or Foul? A Study of Hippogriff Brutality. He was so absorbed, he even forgot to be horrible to Crookshanks.

Harry, meanwhile, had to fit in his homework around Quid-ditch practice every day, not to mention endless discussions of tac-tics with Wood. The Gryffindor-Slytherin match would take place on the first Saturday after the Easter holidays. Slytherin was lead-ing the tournament by exactly two hundred points. This meant (as Wood constantly reminded his team) that they needed to win the match by more than that amount to win the Cup. It also meant that the burden

of winning fell largely on Harry, because capturing the Snitch was worth one hundred and fifty points.

“So you must catch it only if we’re more than fifty points up,” Wood told Harry constantly. “Only if we’re more than fifty points up, Harry, or we win the match but lose the Cup. You’ve got that, haven’t you? You must catch the Snitch only if we’re —”

“I KNOW, OLIVER!” Harry yelled.

The whole of Gryffindor House was obsessed with the coming match. Gryffindor hadn’t won the Quidditch Cup since the leg-endary Charlie Weasley (Ron’s second oldest brother) had been Seeker. But Harry doubted whether any of them, even Wood, wanted to win as much as he did. The enmity between Harry and Malfoy was at its highest point ever. Malfoy was still smarting about the mud-throwing incident in Hogsmeade and was even more furious that Harry had somehow wormed his way out of punishment. Harry hadn’t forgotten Malfoy’s attempt to sabotage him in the match against Ravenclaw, but it was the matter of Buck-beak that made him most determined to beat Malfoy in front of the entire school.

Never, in anyone’s memory, had a match approached in such a highly charged atmosphere. By the time the holidays were over, tension between the two teams and their Houses was at the break-ing point. A number of small scuffles broke out in the corridors, culminating in a nasty incident in which a Gryffindor fourth year and a Slytherin sixth year ended up in the hospital wing with leeks sprouting out of their ears.

Harry was having a particularly bad time of it. He couldn’t walk to class without Slytherins sticking out their legs and trying to trip him up; Crabbe and Goyle kept popping up wherever he went, and slouching away looking disappointed when they saw him sur-rounded by people. Wood had given instructions that Harry should be accompanied everywhere he went, in case the Slytherins tried to put

him out of action. The whole of Gryffindor House took up the challenge enthusiastically, so that it was impossible for Harry to get to classes on time because he was surrounded by a vast, chattering crowd. Harry was more concerned for his Firebolt's safety than his own. When he wasn't flying it, he locked it securely in his trunk and frequently dashed back up to Gryffindor Tower at break times to check that it was still there.

All usual pursuits were abandoned in the Gryffindor common room the night before the match. Even Hermione had put down her books.

"I can't work, I can't concentrate," she said nervously.

There was a great deal of noise. Fred and George Weasley were dealing with the pressure by being louder and more exuberant than ever. Oliver Wood was crouched over a model of a Quidditch field in the corner, prodding little figures across it with his wand and muttering to himself. Angelina, Alicia, and Katie were laughing at Fred's and George's jokes. Harry was sitting with Ron and Hermione, removed from the center of things, trying not to think about the next day, because every time he did, he had the horrible sensation that something very large was fighting to get out of his stomach.

"You're going to be fine," Hermione told him, though she looked positively terrified.

"You've got a Firebolt!" said Ron.

"Yeah … ," said Harry, his stomach writhing.

It came as a relief when Wood suddenly stood up and yelled, "Team! Bed!"

Harry slept badly. First he dreamed that he had overslept, and that Wood was yelling, "Where were you? We had to use Neville in-stead!" Then he dreamed that Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherin team arrived for the match riding dragons. He was flying at breakneck

speed, trying to avoid a spurt of flames from Malfoy's steed's mouth, when he realized he had forgotten his Firebolt. He fell through the air and woke with a start.

It was a few seconds before Harry remembered that the match hadn't taken place yet, that he was safe in bed, and that the Slytherin team definitely wouldn't be allowed to play on dragons. He was feeling very thirsty. Quietly as he could, he got out of his four-poster and went to pour himself some water from the silver jug beneath the window.

The grounds were still and quiet. No breath of wind disturbed the treetops in the Forbidden Forest; the Whomping Willow was motionless and innocent-looking. It looked as though the condi-tions for the match would be perfect.

Harry set down his goblet and was about to turn back to his bed when something caught his eye. An animal of some kind was prowling across the silvery lawn.

Harry dashed to his bedside table, snatched up his glasses, and put them on, then hurried back to the window. It couldn't be the Grim — not now — not right before the match —He peered out at the grounds again and, after a minute's frantic searching, spotted it. It was skirting the edge of the forest now. … It wasn't the Grim at all … it was a cat. … Harry clutched the window ledge in relief as he recognized the bottlebrush tail. It was only Crookshanks. …Or was it only Crookshanks? Harry squinted, pressing his nose flat against the glass. Crookshanks seemed to have come to a halt. Harry was sure he could see something else moving in the shadow of the trees too.

And just then, it emerged — a gigantic, shaggy black dog, moving stealthily across the lawn, Crookshanks trotting at its side. Harry stared. What did this mean? If Crookshanks could see the dog as well, how could it be an omen of Harry's death?

"Ron!" Harry hissed. "Ron! Wake up!"

"Huh?"

"I need you to tell me if you can see something!"

"S'all dark, Harry," Ron muttered thickly. "What're you on about?"

"Down here —"

Harry looked quickly back out of the window.

Crookshanks and the dog had vanished. Harry climbed onto the windowsill to look right down into the shadows of the castle, but they weren't there. Where had they gone?

A loud snore told him Ron had fallen asleep again.

Harry and the rest of the Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall the next day to enormous applause. Harry couldn't help grinning broadly as he saw that both the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables were applauding them too. The Slytherin table hissed loudly as they passed. Harry noticed that Malfoy looked even paler than usual.

Wood spent the whole of breakfast urging his team to eat, while touching nothing himself. Then he hurried them off to the field before anyone else had finished, so they could get an idea of the conditions. As they left the Great Hall, everyone applauded again.

"Good luck, Harry!" called Cho. Harry felt himself blushing.

"Okay — no wind to speak of — sun's a bit bright, that could impair your vision, watch out for it — ground's fairly hard, good, that'll give us a fast kickoff —"

Wood paced the field, staring around with the team behind him. Finally, they saw the front doors of the castle open in the distance and the rest of the school spilling onto the lawn.

"Locker rooms," said Wood tersely.

None of them spoke as they changed into their scarlet robes. Harry wondered if they were feeling like he was: as though he'd eaten something extremely wriggly for breakfast. In what seemed like no time at all, Wood was saying, "Okay, it's time, let's go —"

They walked out onto the field to a tidal wave of noise. Three-quarters of the crowd was wearing scarlet rosettes, waving scarlet flags with the Gryffindor lion upon them, or brandishing banners with slogans like "GO GRYFFINDOR!" and "LIONS FOR THE CUP!" Behind the Slytherin goal posts, however, two hundred people were wearing green; the silver serpent of Slytherin glittered on their flags, and Professor Snape sat in the very front row, wear-ing green like everyone else, and a very grim smile.

"And here are the Gryffindors!" yelled Lee Jordan, who was act-ing as commentator as usual. "Potter, Bell, Johnson, Spinnet, Weasley, Weasley, and Wood. Widely acknowledged as the best team Hogwarts has seen in a good few years —"

Lee's comments were drowned by a tide of "boos" from the Slytherin end.

"And here come the Slytherin team, led by Captain Flint. He's made some changes in the lineup and seems to be going for size rather than skill —"

More boos from the Slytherin crowd. Harry, however, thought Lee had a point. Malfoy was easily the smallest person on the Slytherin team; the rest of them were enormous.

"Captains, shake hands!" said Madam Hooch.

Flint and Wood approached each other and grasped each other's hand very tightly; it looked as though each was trying to break the other's fingers.

"Mount your brooms!" said Madam Hooch. "Three … two … one …"

The sound of her whistle was lost in the roar from the crowd as fourteen brooms rose into the air. Harry felt his hair fly back off his forehead; his nerves left him in the thrill of the flight; he glanced around, saw Malfoy on his tail, and sped off in search of the Snitch.

“And it’s Gryffindor in possession, Alicia Spinnet of Gryffindor with the Quaffle, heading straight for the Slytherin goal posts, looking good, Alicia! Argh, no — Quaffle intercepted by Warring-ton, Warrington of Slytherin tearing up the field — WHAM! — nice Bludger work there by George Weasley, Warrington drops the Quaffle, it’s caught by — Johnson, Gryffindor back in possession, come on, Angelina — nice swerve around Montague — duck, An-gelina, that’s a Bludger! — SHE SCORES! TEN–ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!”

Angelina punched the air as she soared around the end of the field; the sea of scarlet below was screaming its delight —“OUCH!”

Angelina was nearly thrown from her broom as Marcus Flint went smashing into her.

“Sorry!” said Flint as the crowd below booed. “Sorry, didn’t see her!”

A moment later, Fred Weasley chucked his Beater’s club at the back of Flint’s head. Flint’s nose smashed into the handle of his broom and began to bleed.

“That will do!” shrieked Madam Hooch, zooming between them. “Penalty shot to Gryffindor for an unprovoked attack on their Chaser! Penalty shot to Slytherin for deliberate damage to their Chaser!”

“Come off it, Miss!” howled Fred, but Madam Hooch blew her whistle and Alicia flew forward to take the penalty.

“Come on, Alicia!” yelled Lee into the silence that had de-scended on the crowd. “YES! SHE’S BEATEN THE KEEPER! TWENTY–ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry turned the Firebolt sharply to watch Flint, still bleeding freely, fly forward to take the Slytherin penalty. Wood was hovering in front of the Gryffindor goal posts, his jaw clenched.

“ ’Course, Wood’s a superb Keeper!” Lee Jordan told the crowd as Flint waited for Madam Hooch’s whistle. “Superb! Very difficult to pass — very difficult indeed — YES! I DON’T BELIEVE IT! HE’S SAVED IT!”

Relieved, Harry zoomed away, gazing around for the Snitch, but still making sure he caught every word of Lee’s commentary. It was essential that he hold Malfoy off the Snitch until Gryffindor was more than fifty points up —“Gryffindor in possession, no, Slytherin in possession — no! — Gryffindor back in possession and it’s Katie Bell, Katie Bell for Gryffindor with the Quaffle, she’s streaking up the field — THAT WAS DELIBERATE!”

Montague, a Slytherin Chaser, had swerved in front of Katie, and instead of seizing the Quaffle had grabbed her head. Katie cart-wheeled in the air, managed to stay on her broom, but dropped the Quaffle.

Madam Hooch’s whistle rang out again as she soared over to Montague and began shouting at him. A minute later, Katie had put another penalty past the Slytherin Seeker.

“THIRTY–ZERO! TAKE THAT, YOU DIRTY, CHEAT-ING —”

“Jordan, if you can’t commentate in an unbiased way — !”

“I’m telling it like it is, Professor!”

Harry felt a huge jolt of excitement. He had seen the Snitch — it was shimmering at the foot of one of the Gryffindor goal posts — but he mustn’t catch it yet — and if Malfoy saw it —Faking a look of sudden concentration, Harry pulled his Fire-bolt around and sped off toward

the Slytherin end — it worked. Malfoy went haring after him, clearly thinking Harry had seen the Snitch there. …WHOOSH.

One of the Bludgers came streaking past Harry's right ear, hit by the gigantic Slytherin Beater, Derrick. Then again —WHOOSH.

The second Bludger grazed Harry's elbow. The other Beater, Bole, was closing in.

Harry had a fleeting glimpse of Bole and Derrick zooming toward him, clubs raised —He turned the Firebolt upward at the last second, and Bole and Derrick collided with a sickening crunch.

"Ha haaa!" yelled Lee Jordan as the Slytherin Beaters lurched away from each other, clutching their heads. "Too bad, boys! You'll need to get up earlier than that to beat a Firebolt! And it's Gryf-findor in possession again, as Johnson takes the Quaffle — Flint alongside her — poke him in the eye, Angelina! — it was a joke, Professor, it was a joke — oh no — Flint in possession, Flint flying toward the Gryffindor goal posts, come on now, Wood, save — !"

But Flint had scored; there was an eruption of cheers from the Slytherin end, and Lee swore so badly that Professor McGonagall tried to tug the magical megaphone away from him.

"Sorry, Professor, sorry! Won't happen again! So, Gryffindor in the lead, thirty points to ten, and Gryffindor in possession —"

It was turning into the dirtiest game Harry had ever played in. Enraged that Gryffindor had taken such an early lead, the Slytherins were rapidly resorting to any means to take the Quaffle. Bole hit Alicia with his club and tried to say he'd thought she was a Bludger. George Weasley elbowed Bole in the face in retalia-tion. Madam Hooch awarded both teams penalties, and Wood pulled off another spectacular save, making the score forty-ten to Gryffindor.

The Snitch had disappeared again. Malfoy was still keeping close to Harry as he soared over the match, looking around for it — once Gryffindor was fifty points ahead —Katie scored. Fifty-ten. Fred and George Weasley were swoop-ing around her, clubs raised, in case any of the Slytherins were thinking of revenge. Bole and Derrick took advantage of Fred's and George's absence to aim both Bludgers at Wood; they caught him in the stomach, one after the other, and he rolled over in the air, clutching his broom, completely winded.

Madam Hooch was beside herself.

"YOU DO NOT ATTACK THE KEEPER UNLESS THE QUAFFLE IS WITHIN THE SCORING AREA!" she shrieked at Bole and Derrick. "Gryffindor penalty!"

And Angelina scored. Sixty-ten. Moments later, Fred Weasley pelted a Bludger at Warrington, knocking the Quaffle out of his hands; Alicia seized it and put it through the Slytherin goal — seventy-ten.

The Gryffindor crowd below was screaming itself hoarse — Gryffindor was sixty points in the lead, and if Harry caught the Snitch now, the Cup was theirs. Harry could almost feel hundreds of eyes following him as he soared around the field, high above the rest of the game, with Malfoy speeding along behind him.

And then he saw it. The Snitch was sparkling twenty feet above him.

Harry put on a huge burst of speed; the wind was roaring in his ears; he stretched out his hand, but suddenly, the Firebolt was slow-ing down —Horrified, he looked around. Malfoy had thrown himself for-ward, grabbed hold of the Firebolt's tail, and was pulling it back.

"You —"

Harry was angry enough to hit Malfoy, but couldn't reach — Malfoy was panting with the effort of holding onto the Firebolt, but his eyes

were sparkling maliciously. He had achieved what he'd wanted to do — the Snitch had disappeared again.

"Penalty! Penalty to Gryffindor! I've never seen such tactics!" Madam Hooch screeched, shooting up to where Malfoy was slid-ing back onto his Nimbus Two Thousand and One.

"YOU CHEATING SCUM!" Lee Jordan was howling into the megaphone, dancing out of Professor McGonagall's reach. "YOU FILTHY, CHEATING B —"

Professor McGonagall didn't even bother to tell him off. She was actually shaking her finger in Malfoy's direction, her hat had fallen off, and she too was shouting furiously.

Alicia took Gryffindor's penalty, but she was so angry she missed by several feet. The Gryffindor team was losing concentration and the Slytherins, delighted by Malfoy's foul on Harry, were being spurred on to greater heights.

"Slytherin in possession, Slytherin heading for goal — Montague scores —" Lee groaned. "Seventy-twenty to Gryf-findor. …"

Harry was now marking Malfoy so closely their knees kept hit-ting each other. Harry wasn't going to let Malfoy anywhere near the Snitch. …"Get out of it, Potter!" Malfoy yelled in frustration as he tried to turn and found Harry blocking him.

"Angelina Johnson gets the Quaffle for Gryffindor, come on, Angelina, COME ON!"

Harry looked around. Every single Slytherin player apart from Malfoy was streaking up the pitch toward Angelina, including the Slytherin Keeper — they were all going to block her —Harry wheeled the Firebolt around, bent so low he was lying flat along the handle, and kicked it forward. Like a bullet, he shot toward the Slytherins.

"AAAAAAARRRGH!"

They scattered as the Firebolt zoomed toward them; Angelina's way was clear.

"SHE SCORES! SHE SCORES! Gryffindor leads by eighty points to twenty!"

Harry, who had almost pelted headlong into the stands, skidded to a halt in midair, reversed, and zoomed back into the middle of the field.

And then he saw something to make his heart stand still. Malfoy was diving, a look of triumph on his face — there, a few feet above the grass below, was a tiny, golden glimmer —Harry urged the Firebolt downward, but Malfoy was miles ahead —"Go! Go! Go!" Harry urged his broom. He was gaining on Mal-foy — Harry flattened himself to the broom handle as Bole sent a Bludger at him — he was at Malfoy's ankles — he was level —Harry threw himself forward, took both hands off his broom. He knocked Malfoy's arm out of the way and —"YES!"

He pulled out of his dive, his hand in the air, and the stadium exploded. Harry soared above the crowd, an odd ringing in his ears. The tiny golden ball was held tight in his fist, beating its wings hopelessly against his fingers.

Then Wood was speeding toward him, half-blinded by tears; he seized Harry around the neck and sobbed unrestrainedly into his shoulder. Harry felt two large thumps as Fred and George hit them; then Angelina's, Alicia's, and Katie's voices, "We've won the Cup! We've won the Cup!" Tangled together in a many-armed hug, the Gryffindor team sank, yelling hoarsely, back to earth.

Wave upon wave of crimson supporters was pouring over the barriers onto the field. Hands were raining down on their backs. Harry had a confused impression of noise and bodies pressing in on him. Then he, and the rest of the team, were hoisted onto the shoulders of the

crowd. Thrust into the light, he saw Hagrid, plastered with crimson rosettes — "Yeh beat 'em, Harry, yeh beat 'em! Wait till I tell Buckbeak!" There was Percy, jumping up and down like a maniac, all dignity forgotten. Professor McGonagall was sob-bing harder even than Wood, wiping her eyes with an enormous Gryffindor flag; and there, fighting their way toward Harry, were Ron and Hermione. Words failed them. They simply beamed as Harry was borne toward the stands, where Dumbledore stood waiting with the enormous Quidditch Cup.

If only there had been a dementor around. … As a sobbing Wood passed Harry the Cup, as he lifted it into the air, Harry felt he could have produced the world's best Patronus.

Chapter 16 Professor Trelawney's Prediction

Harry's euphoria at finally winning the Quidditch Cup lasted at least a week. Even the weather seemed to be cel-ebrating; as June approached, the days became cloudless and sultry, and all anybody felt like doing was strolling onto the grounds and flopping down on the grass with several pints of iced pumpkin juice, perhaps playing a casual game of Gobstones or watching the giant squid propel itself dreamily across the surface of the lake.

But they couldn't. Exams were nearly upon them, and instead of lazing around outside, the students were forced to remain inside the castle, trying to bully their brains into concentrating while en-ticing wafts of summer air drifted in through the windows. Even Fred and George Weasley had been spotted working; they were about to take their O.W.L.s (Ordinary Wizarding Levels). Percy was getting ready to take his N.E.W.T.s (Nastily Exhausting Wiz-arding Tests), the highest qualification Hogwarts offered. As Percy hoped to enter the Ministry of Magic, he needed top grades. He was becoming increasingly edgy, and gave very severe punishments to anybody who disturbed the quiet of the common room in the evenings. In fact, the only person who seemed more anxious than Percy was Hermione.

Harry and Ron had given up asking her how she was managing to attend several classes at once, but they couldn't restrain them-selves when they saw the exam schedule she had drawn up for her-self. The first column read:Monday

9 o'clock, Arithmancy

9 o'clock, Transfiguration

Lunch

1 o'clock, Charms

1 o'clock, Ancient Runes

"Hermione?" Ron said cautiously, because she was liable to explode when interrupted these days. "Er — are you sure you've copied down these times right?"

"What?" snapped Hermione, picking up the exam schedule and examining it. "Yes, of course I have."

"Is there any point asking how you're going to sit for two exams at once?" said Harry.

"No," said Hermione shortly. "Have either of you seen my copy of Numerology and Gramatica?"

"Oh, yeah, I borrowed it for a bit of bedtime reading," said Ron, but very quietly. Hermione started shifting heaps of parchment around on her table, looking for the book. Just then, there was a rustle at the window and Hedwig fluttered through it, a note clutched tight in her beak.

"It's from Hagrid," said Harry, ripping the note open. "Buck-beak's appeal — it's set for the sixth."

"That's the day we finish our exams," said Hermione, still look-ing everywhere for her Arithmancy book.

"And they're coming up here to do it," said Harry, still reading from the letter. "Someone from the Ministry of Magic and — and an executioner."

Hermione looked up, startled.

"They're bringing the executioner to the appeal! But that sounds as though they've already decided!"

"Yeah, it does," said Harry slowly.

“They can’t!” Ron howled. “I’ve spent ages reading up on stuff for him; they can’t just ignore it all!”

But Harry had a horrible feeling that the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures had had its mind made up for it by Mr. Malfoy. Draco, who had been noticeably subdued since Gryffindor’s triumph in the Quidditch final, seemed to regain some of his old swagger over the next few days. From sneering comments Harry overheard, Malfoy was certain Buckbeak was go-ing to be killed, and seemed thoroughly pleased with himself for bringing it about. It was all Harry could do to stop himself imitat-ing Hermione and hitting Malfoy in the face on these occasions. And the worst thing of all was that they had no time or opportu-nity to go and see Hagrid, because the strict new security measures had not been lifted, and Harry didn’t dare retrieve his Invisibility Cloak from below the one-eyed witch.

* * *

Exam week began and an unnatural hush fell over the castle. The third years emerged from Transfiguration at lunchtime on Monday, limp and ashen-faced, comparing results and bemoaning the diffi-culty of the tasks they had been set, which had included turning a teapot into a tortoise. Hermione irritated the rest by fussing about how her tortoise had looked more like a turtle, which was the least of everyone else’s worries.

“Mine still had a spout for a tail, what a nightmare. …”

“Were the tortoises supposed to breathe steam?”

“It still had a willow-patterned shell, d’you think that’ll count against me?”

Then, after a hasty lunch, it was straight back upstairs for the Charms exam. Hermione had been right; Professor Flitwick did in-deed test them on Cheering Charms. Harry slightly overdid his out of nerves and Ron, who was partnering him, ended up in fits of hysterical

laughter and had to be led away to a quiet room for an hour before he was ready to perform the charm himself. After din-ner, the students hurried back to their common rooms, not to re-lax, but to start studying for Care of Magical Creatures, Potions, and Astronomy.

Hagrid presided over the Care of Magical Creatures exam the following morning with a very preoccupied air indeed; his heart didn't seem to be in it at all. He had provided a large tub of fresh flobberworms for the class, and told them that to pass the test, their flobberworm had to still be alive at the end of one hour. As flobberworms flourished best if left to their own devices, it was the easiest exam any of them had ever taken, and also gave Harry, Ron, and Hermione plenty of opportunity to speak to Hagrid.

"Beaky's gettin' a bit depressed," Hagrid told them, bending low on the pretense of checking that Harry's flobberworm was still alive. "Bin cooped up too long. But still … we'll know day after tomorrow — one way or the other —"

They had Potions that afternoon, which was an unqualified dis-aster. Try as Harry might, he couldn't get his Confusing Concoc-tion to thicken, and Snape, standing watch with an air of vindictive pleasure, scribbled something that looked suspiciously like a zero onto his notes before moving away.

Then came Astronomy at midnight, up on the tallest tower; History of Magic on Wednesday morning, in which Harry scribbled everything Florean Fortescue had ever told him about medieval witch-hunts, while wishing he could have had one of Fortescue's choco-nut sundaes with him in the stifling classroom. Wednesday afternoon meant Herbology, in the greenhouses under a baking-hot sun; then back to the common room once more, with sunburnt necks, thinking longingly of this time next day, when it would all be over.

Their second to last exam, on Thursday morning, was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Lupin had compiled the most un-

usual exam any of them had ever taken; a sort of obstacle course outside in the sun, where they had to wade across a deep paddling pool containing a grindylow, cross a series of potholes full of Red Caps, squish their way across a patch of marsh while ignoring misleading directions from a hinkypunk, then climb into an old trunk and battle with a new boggart.

“Excellent, Harry,” Lupin muttered as Harry climbed out of the trunk, grinning. “Full marks.”

Flushed with his success, Harry hung around to watch Ron and Hermione. Ron did very well until he reached the hinkypunk, which successfully confused him into sinking waist-high into the quagmire. Hermione did everything perfectly until she reached the trunk with the boggart in it. After about a minute inside it, she burst out again, screaming.

“Hermione!” said Lupin, startled. “What’s the matter?”

“P — P — Professor McGonagall!” Hermione gasped, pointing into the trunk. “Sh — she said I’d failed everything!”

It took a little while to calm Hermione down. When at last she had regained a grip on herself, she, Harry, and Ron went back to the castle. Ron was still slightly inclined to laugh at Hermione’s boggart, but an argument was averted by the sight that met them on the top of the steps.

Cornelius Fudge, sweating slightly in his pinstriped cloak, was standing there staring out at the grounds. He started at the sight of Harry.

“Hello there, Harry!” he said. “Just had an exam, I expect? Nearly finished?”

“Yes,” said Harry. Hermione and Ron, not being on speaking terms with the Minister of Magic, hovered awkwardly in the back-ground.

“Lovely day,” said Fudge, casting an eye over the lake. “Pity … pity …”

He sighed deeply and looked down at Harry.

“I’m here on an unpleasant mission, Harry. The Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures required a witness to the execution of a mad hippogriff. As I needed to visit Hogwarts to check on the Black situation, I was asked to step in.”

“Does that mean the appeal’s already happened?” Ron inter-rupted, stepping forward.

“No, no, it’s scheduled for this afternoon,” said Fudge, looking curiously at Ron.

“Then you might not have to witness an execution at all!” said Ron stoutly. “The hippogriff might get off!”

Before Fudge could answer, two wizards came through the castle doors behind him. One was so ancient he appeared to be withering before their very eyes; the other was tall and strapping, with a thin black mustache. Harry gathered that they were representatives of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, because the very old wizard squinted toward Hagrid’s cabin and said in a feeble voice, “Dear, dear, I’m getting too old for this. … Two o’clock, isn’t it, Fudge?”

The black-mustached man was fingering something in his belt; Harry looked and saw that he was running one broad thumb along the blade of a shining axe. Ron opened his mouth to say some-thing, but Hermione nudged him hard in the ribs and jerked her head toward the entrance hall.

“Why’d you stop me?” said Ron angrily as they entered the Great Hall for lunch. “Did you see them? They’ve even got the axe ready! This isn’t justice!”

“Ron, your dad works for the Ministry, you can’t go saying things like that to his boss!” said Hermione, but she too looked very upset. “As long as Hagrid keeps his head this time, and argues his case properly, they can’t possibly execute Buckbeak. …”

But Harry could tell Hermione didn’t really believe what she was saying. All around them, people were talking excitedly as they ate their lunch, happily anticipating the end of the exams that after-noon, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione, lost in worry about Hagrid and Buckbeak, didn’t join in.

Harry’s and Ron’s last exam was Divination; Hermione’s, Muggle Studies. They walked up the marble staircase together; Hermione left them on the first floor and Harry and Ron pro-ceeded all the way up to the seventh, where many of their class were sitting on the spiral staircase to Professor Trelawney’s classroom, trying to cram in a bit of last-minute studying.

“She’s seeing us all separately,” Neville informed them as they went to sit down next to him. He had his copy of Unfogging the Fu-ture open on his lap at the pages devoted to crystal gazing. “Have either of you ever seen anything in a crystal ball?” he asked them unhappily.

“Nope,” said Ron in an offhand voice. He kept checking his watch; Harry knew that he was counting down the time until Buckbeak’s appeal started.

The line of people outside the classroom shortened very slowly. As each person climbed back down the silver ladder, the rest of the class hissed, “What did she ask? Was it okay?”

But they all refused to say.

“She says the crystal ball’s told her that if I tell you, I’ll have a horrible accident!” squeaked Neville as he clambered back down the ladder toward Harry and Ron, who had now reached the landing.

“That’s convenient,” snorted Ron. “You know, I’m starting to think Hermione was right about her” — he jabbed his thumb toward the trapdoor overhead — “she’s a right old fraud.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, looking at his own watch. It was now two o’clock. “Wish she’d hurry up …”

Parvati came back down the ladder glowing with pride.

“She says I’ve got all the makings of a true Seer,” she informed Harry and Ron. “I saw loads of stuff. … Well, good luck!”

She hurried off down the spiral staircase toward Lavender.

“Ronald Weasley,” said the familiar, misty voice from over their heads. Ron grimaced at Harry and climbed the silver ladder out of sight. Harry was now the only person left to be tested. He settled himself on the floor with his back against the wall, listening to a fly buzzing in the sunny window, his mind across the grounds with Hagrid.

Finally, after about twenty minutes, Ron’s large feet reappeared on the ladder.

“How’d it go?” Harry asked him, standing up.

“Rubbish,” said Ron. “Couldn’t see a thing, so I made some stuff up. Don’t think she was convinced, though. …”

“Meet you in the common room,” Harry muttered as Professor Trelawney’s voice called, “Harry Potter!”

The tower room was hotter than ever before; the curtains were closed, the fire was alight, and the usual sickly scent made Harry cough as he stumbled through the clutter of chairs and tables to where Professor Trelawney sat waiting for him before a large crystal ball.

“Good day, my dear,” she said softly. “If you would kindly gaze into the Orb. … Take your time, now … then tell me what you see within it. …”

Harry bent over the crystal ball and stared, stared as hard as he could, willing it to show him something other than swirling white fog, but nothing happened.

“Well?” Professor Trelawney prompted delicately. “What do you see?”

The heat was overpowering and his nostrils were stinging with the perfumed smoke wafting from the fire beside them. He thought of what Ron had just said, and decided to pretend.

“Er —” said Harry, “a dark shape … um …”

“What does it resemble?” whispered Professor Trelawney. “Think, now …”

Harry cast his mind around and it landed on Buckbeak.

“A hippogriff,” he said firmly.

“Indeed!” whispered Professor Trelawney, scribbling keenly on the parchment perched upon her knees. “My boy, you may well be seeing the outcome of poor Hagrid’s trouble with the Ministry of Magic! Look closer. … Does the hippogriff appear to … have its head?”

“Yes,” said Harry firmly.

“Are you sure?” Professor Trelawney urged him. “Are you quite sure, dear? You don’t see it writhing on the ground, perhaps, and a shadowy figure raising an axe behind it?”

“No!” said Harry, starting to feel slightly sick.

“No blood? No weeping Hagrid?”

“No!” said Harry again, wanting more than ever to leave the room and the heat. “It looks fine, it’s — flying away. …”

Professor Trelawney sighed.

“Well, dear, I think we’ll leave it there. … A little disappoint-ing … but I’m sure you did your best.”

Relieved, Harry got up, picked up his bag and turned to go, but then a loud, harsh voice spoke behind him.

“It will happen tonight.”

Harry wheeled around. Professor Trelawney had gone rigid in her armchair; her eyes were unfocused and her mouth sagging.

“S — sorry?” said Harry.

But Professor Trelawney didn’t seem to hear him. Her eyes started to roll. Harry sat there in a panic. She looked as though she was about to have some sort of seizure. He hesitated, thinking of running to the hospital wing — and then Professor Trelawney spoke again, in the same harsh voice, quite unlike her own:“The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers. His servant has been chained these twelve years. Tonight, before midnight … the servant will break free and set out to rejoin his master. The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant’s aid, greater and more terrible than ever he was. Tonight … before midnight … the ser-vant … will set out … to rejoin … his master. …”

Professor Trelawney’s head fell forward onto her chest. She made a grunting sort of noise. Harry sat there, staring at her. Then, quite suddenly, Professor Trelawney’s head snapped up again.

“I’m so sorry, dear boy,” she said dreamily, “the heat of the day, you know … I drifted off for a moment. …”

Harry sat there, staring at her.

“Is there anything wrong, my dear?”

“You — you just told me that the — the Dark Lord’s going to rise again … that his servant’s going to go back to him. …”

Professor Trelawney looked thoroughly startled.

“The Dark Lord? He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? My dear boy, that’s hardly something to joke about. … Rise again, indeed —”

“But you just said it! You said the Dark Lord —”

“I think you must have dozed off too, dear!” said Professor Trelawney. “I would certainly not presume to predict anything quite as far-fetched as that!”

Harry climbed back down the ladder and the spiral staircase, wondering … had he just heard Professor Trelawney make a real prediction? Or had that been her idea of an impressive end to the test?

Five minutes later he was dashing past the security trolls outside the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, Professor Trelawney’s words still resounding in his head. People were striding past him in the oppo-site direction, laughing and joking, heading for the grounds and a bit of long-awaited freedom; by the time he had reached the por-trait hole and entered the common room, it was almost deserted. Over in the corner, however, sat Ron and Hermione.

“Professor Trelawney,” Harry panted, “just told me —”

But he stopped abruptly at the sight of their faces.

“Buckbeak lost,” said Ron weakly. “Hagrid’s just sent this.”

Hagrid's note was dry this time, no tears had splattered it, yet his hand seemed to have shaken so much as he wrote that it was hardly legible.

Lost appeal. They're going to execute at sunset.

Nothing you can do. Don't come down.

I don't want you to see it.

Hagrid

"We've got to go," said Harry at once. "He can't just sit there on his own, waiting for the executioner!"

"Sunset, though," said Ron, who was staring out the window in a glazed sort of way. "We'd never be allowed … 'specially you, Harry. …"

Harry sank his head into his hands, thinking.

"If we only had the Invisibility Cloak. …"

"Where is it?" said Hermione.

Harry told her about leaving it in the passageway under the one-eyed witch.

"… if Snape sees me anywhere near there again, I'm in serious trouble," he finished.

"That's true," said Hermione, getting to her feet. "If he sees you. … How do you open the witch's hump again?"

"You — you tap it and say, 'Dissendium,' " said Harry. "But —"

Hermione didn't wait for the rest of his sentence; she strode across the room, pushed open the Fat Lady's portrait and vanished from

sight.

“She hasn’t gone to get it?” Ron said, staring after her.

She had. Hermione returned a quarter of an hour later with the silvery cloak folded carefully under her robes.

“Hermione, I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately!” said Ron, astounded. “First you hit Malfoy, then you walk out on Pro-fessor Trelawney —”

Hermione looked rather flattered.

They went down to dinner with everybody else, but did not return to Gryffindor Tower afterward. Harry had the cloak hidden down the front of his robes; he had to keep his arms folded to hide the lump. They skulked in an empty chamber off the entrance hall, lis-tening, until they were sure it was deserted. They heard a last pair of people hurrying across the hall and a door slamming. Hermione poked her head around the door.

“Okay,” she whispered, “no one there — cloak on —”

Walking very close together so that nobody would see them, they crossed the hall on tiptoe beneath the cloak, then walked down the stone front steps into the grounds. The sun was already sinking behind the Forbidden Forest, gilding the top branches of the trees.

They reached Hagrid’s cabin and knocked. He was a minute in answering, and when he did, he looked all around for his visitor, pale-faced and trembling.

“It’s us,” Harry hissed. “We’re wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off.”

“Yeh shouldn’ve come!” Hagrid whispered, but he stood back, and they stepped inside. Hagrid shut the door quickly and Harry pulled off

the cloak.

Hagrid was not crying, nor did he throw himself upon their necks. He looked like a man who did not know where he was or what to do. This helplessness was worse to watch than tears.

"Wan' some tea?" he said. His great hands were shaking as he reached for the kettle.

"Where's Buckbeak, Hagrid?" said Hermione hesitantly.

"I — I took him outside," said Hagrid, spilling milk all over the table as he filled up the jug. "He's tethered in me pumpkin patch. Thought he oughta see the trees an' — an' smell fresh air — before —"

Hagrid's hand trembled so violently that the milk jug slipped from his grasp and shattered all over the floor.

"I'll do it, Hagrid," said Hermione quickly, hurrying over and starting to clean up the mess.

"There's another one in the cupboard," Hagrid said, sitting down and wiping his forehead on his sleeve. Harry glanced at Ron, who looked back hopelessly.

"Isn't there anything anyone can do, Hagrid?" Harry asked fiercely, sitting down next to him. "Dumbledore —"

"He's tried," said Hagrid. "He's got no power ter overrule the Committee. He told 'em Buckbeak's all right, but they're scared. … Yeh know what Lucius Malfoy's like … threatened 'em, I expect … an' the executioner, Macnair, he's an old pal o' Mal-foy's … but it'll be quick an' clean … an' I'll be beside him. …"

Hagrid swallowed. His eyes were darting all over the cabin as though looking for some shred of hope or comfort.

"Dumbledore's gonna come down while it — while it happens. Wrote me this mornin'. Said he wants ter — ter be with me. Great man, Dumbledore. …"

Hermione, who had been rummaging in Hagrid's cupboard for another milk jug, let out a small, quickly stifled sob. She straight-ened up with the new jug in her hands, fighting back tears.

"We'll stay with you too, Hagrid," she began, but Hagrid shook his shaggy head.

"Yeh're ter go back up ter the castle. I told yeh, I don' wan' yeh watchin'. An' yeh shouldn' be down here anyway. … If Fudge an' Dumbledore catch yeh out without permission, Harry, yeh'll be in big trouble."

Silent tears were now streaming down Hermione's face, but she hid them from Hagrid, bustling around making tea. Then, as she picked up the milk bottle to pour some into the jug, she let out a shriek.

"Ron! I — I don't believe it — it's Scabbers!"

Ron gaped at her.

"What are you talking about?"

Hermione carried the milk jug over to the table and turned it upside down. With a frantic squeak, and much scrambling to get back inside, Scabbers the rat came sliding out onto the table.

"Scabbers!" said Ron blankly. "Scabbers, what are you doing here?"

He grabbed the struggling rat and held him up to the light. Scabbers looked dreadful. He was thinner than ever, large tufts of hair had fallen out leaving wide bald patches, and he writhed in Ron's hands as though desperate to free himself.

“It’s okay, Scabbers!” said Ron. “No cats! There’s nothing here to hurt you!”

Hagrid suddenly stood up, his eyes fixed on the window. His normally ruddy face had gone the color of parchment.

“They’re comin’. …”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione whipped around. A group of men was walking down the distant castle steps. In front was Albus Dumbledore, his silver beard gleaming in the dying sun. Next to him trotted Cornelius Fudge. Behind them came the feeble old Committee member and the executioner, Macnair.

“Yeh gotta go,” said Hagrid. Every inch of him was trembling. “They mustn’ find yeh here. … Go now. …”

Ron stuffed Scabbers into his pocket and Hermione picked up the cloak.

“I’ll let yeh out the back way,” said Hagrid.

They followed him to the door into his back garden. Harry felt strangely unreal, and even more so when he saw Buckbeak a few yards away, tethered to a tree behind Hagrid’s pumpkin patch. Buckbeak seemed to know something was happening. He turned his sharp head from side to side and pawed the ground nervously.

“It’s okay, Beaky,” said Hagrid softly. “It’s okay …” He turned to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “Go on,” he said. “Get goin’.”

But they didn’t move.

“Hagrid, we can’t —”

“We’ll tell them what really happened —”

“They can’t kill him —”

“Go!” said Hagrid fiercely. “It’s bad enough without you lot in trouble an’ all!”

They had no choice. As Hermione threw the cloak over Harry and Ron, they heard voices at the front of the cabin. Hagrid looked at the place where they had just vanished from sight.

“Go quick,” he said hoarsely. “Don’ listen. …”

And he strode back into his cabin as someone knocked at the front door.

Slowly, in a kind of horrified trance, Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off silently around Hagrid’s house. As they reached the other side, the front door closed with a sharp snap.

“Please, let’s hurry,” Hermione whispered. “I can’t stand it, I can’t bear it. …”

They started up the sloping lawn toward the castle. The sun was sinking fast now; the sky had turned to a clear, purple-tinged grey, but to the west there was a ruby-red glow.

Ron stopped dead.

“Oh, please, Ron,” Hermione began.

“It’s Scabbers — he won’t — stay put —”

Ron was bent over, trying to keep Scabbers in his pocket, but the rat was going berserk; squeaking madly, twisting and flailing, try-ing to sink his teeth into Ron’s hand.

“Scabbers, it’s me, you idiot, it’s Ron,” Ron hissed.

They heard a door open behind them and men’s voices.

“Oh, Ron, please let’s move, they’re going to do it!” Hermione breathed.

“Okay — Scabbers, stay put —”

They walked forward; Harry, like Hermione, was trying not to listen to the rumble of voices behind them. Ron stopped again.

“I can’t hold him — Scabbers, shut up, everyone’ll hear us —”

The rat was squealing wildly, but not loudly enough to cover up the sounds drifting from Hagrid’s garden. There was a jumble of indistinct male voices, a silence, and then, without warning, the unmistakable swish and thud of an axe.

Hermione swayed on the spot.

“They did it!” she whispered to Harry. “I d — don’t believe it — they did it!”

Chapter 17 Cat, Rat, and Dog

Harry's mind had gone blank with shock. The three of them stood transfixed with horror under the Invisibility Cloak. The very last rays of the setting sun were casting a bloody light over the long-shadowed grounds. Then, behind them, they heard a wild howling.

"Hagrid," Harry muttered. Without thinking about what he was doing, he made to turn back, but both Ron and Hermione seized his arms.

"We can't," said Ron, who was paper-white. "He'll be in worse trouble if they know we've been to see him. …"

Hermione's breathing was shallow and uneven.

"How — could — they?" she choked. "How could they?"

"Come on," said Ron, whose teeth seemed to be chattering.

They set off back toward the castle, walking slowly to keep themselves hidden under the cloak. The light was fading fast now. By the time they reached open ground, darkness was settling like a spell around them.

"Scabbers, keep still," Ron hissed, clamping his hand over his chest. The rat was wriggling madly. Ron came to a sudden halt, try-ing to force Scabbers deeper into his pocket. "What's the matter with you, you stupid rat? Stay still — OUCH! He bit me!"

"Ron, be quiet!" Hermione whispered urgently. "Fudge'll be out here in a minute —"

"He won't — stay — put —"

Scabbers was plainly terrified. He was writhing with all his might, trying to break free of Ron's grip.

"What's the matter with him?"

But Harry had just seen — slinking toward them, his body low to the ground, wide yellow eyes glinting eerily in the darkness — Crookshanks. Whether he could see them or was following the sound of Scabbers's squeaks, Harry couldn't tell.

"Crookshanks!" Hermione moaned. "No, go away, Crook-shanks! Go away!"

But the cat was getting nearer —"Scabbers — NO!"

Too late — the rat had slipped between Ron's clutching fingers, hit the ground, and scampered away. In one bound, Crookshanks sprang after him, and before Harry or Hermione could stop him, Ron had thrown the Invisibility Cloak off himself and pelted away into the darkness.

"Ron!" Hermione moaned.

She and Harry looked at each other, then followed at a sprint; it was impossible to run full out under the cloak; they pulled it off and it streamed behind them like a banner as they hurtled after Ron; they could hear his feet thundering along ahead and his shouts at Crookshanks.

"Get away from him — get away — Scabbers, come here —"

There was a loud thud.

"Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat —"

Harry and Hermione almost fell over Ron; they skidded to a stop right in front of him. He was sprawled on the ground, but Scabbers was back in his pocket; he had both hands held tight over the quivering lump.

“Ron — come on — back under the cloak —” Hermione panted. “Dumbledore — the Minister — they’ll be coming back out in a minute —”

But before they could cover themselves again, before they could even catch their breath, they heard the soft pounding of gigantic paws. … Something was bounding toward them, quiet as a shadow — an enormous, pale-eyed, jet-black dog.

Harry reached for his wand, but too late — the dog had made an enormous leap and the front paws hit him on the chest; he keeled over backward in a whirl of hair; he felt its hot breath, saw inch-long teeth —But the force of its leap had carried it too far; it rolled off him. Dazed, feeling as though his ribs were broken, Harry tried to stand up; he could hear it growling as it skidded around for a new attack.

Ron was on his feet. As the dog sprang back toward them he pushed Harry aside; the dog’s jaws fastened instead around Ron’s outstretched arm. Harry lunged forward, he seized a handful of the brute’s hair, but it was dragging Ron away as easily as though he were a rag doll —Then, out of nowhere, something hit Harry so hard across the face he was knocked off his feet again. He heard Hermione shriek with pain and fall too.

Harry groped for his wand, blinking blood out of his eyes —“Lumos!” he whispered.

The wandlight showed him the trunk of a thick tree; they had chased Scabbers into the shadow of the Whomping Willow and its branches were creaking as though in a high wind, whipping back-ward and forward to stop them going nearer.

And there, at the base of the trunk, was the dog, dragging Ron backward into a large gap in the roots — Ron was fighting furi-ously, but his head and torso were slipping out of sight —“Ron!” Harry shouted, trying to follow, but a heavy branch whipped lethally through the air and he was forced backward again.

All they could see now was one of Ron's legs, which he had hooked around a root in an effort to stop the dog from pulling him farther underground — but a horrible crack cut the air like a gun-shot; Ron's leg had broken, and a moment later, his foot vanished from sight.

"Harry — we've got to go for help —" Hermione gasped; she was bleeding too; the Willow had cut her across the shoulder.

"No! That thing's big enough to eat him; we haven't got time —"

"Harry — we're never going to get through without help —"

Another branch whipped down at them, twigs clenched like knuckles.

"If that dog can get in, we can," Harry panted, darting here and there, trying to find a way through the vicious, swishing branches, but he couldn't get an inch nearer to the tree roots without being in range of the tree's blows.

"Oh, help, help," Hermione whispered frantically, dancing un-certainly on the spot, "please …"

Crookshanks darted forward. He slithered between the battering branches like a snake and placed his front paws upon a knot on the trunk.

Abruptly, as though the tree had been turned to marble, it stopped moving. Not a leaf twitched or shook.

"Crookshanks!" Hermione whispered uncertainly. She now grasped Harry's arm painfully hard. "How did he know — ?"

"He's friends with that dog," said Harry grimly. "I've seen them together. Come on — and keep your wand out —"

They covered the distance to the trunk in seconds, but before they had reached the gap in the roots, Crookshanks had slid into it with a

flick of his bottlebrush tail. Harry went next; he crawled for-ward, headfirst, and slid down an earthy slope to the bottom of a very low tunnel. Crookshanks was a little way along, his eyes flash-ing in the light from Harry's wand. Seconds later, Hermione slith-ered down beside him.

"Where's Ron?" she whispered in a terrified voice.

"This way," said Harry, setting off, bent-backed, after Crook-shanks.

"Where does this tunnel come out?" Hermione asked breath-lessly from behind him.

"I don't know. … It's marked on the Marauder's Map but Fred and George said no one's ever gotten into it. … It goes off the edge of the map, but it looked like it was heading for Hogsmeade. …"

They moved as fast as they could, bent almost double; ahead of them, Crookshanks's tail bobbed in and out of view. On and on went the passage; it felt at least as long as the one to Honey-dukes. … All Harry could think of was Ron and what the enor-mous dog might be doing to him. … He was drawing breath in sharp, painful gasps, running at a crouch. …And then the tunnel began to rise; moments later it twisted, and Crookshanks had gone. Instead, Harry could see a patch of dim light through a small opening.

He and Hermione paused, gasping for breath, edging forward. Both raised their wands to see what lay beyond.

It was a room, a very disordered, dusty room. Paper was peeling from the walls; there were stains all over the floor; every piece of furniture was broken as though somebody had smashed it. The windows were all boarded up.

Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked very frightened but nodded.

Harry pulled himself out of the hole, staring around. The room was deserted, but a door to their right stood open, leading to a shadowy hallway. Hermione suddenly grabbed Harry's arm again. Her wide eyes were traveling around the boarded windows.

"Harry," she whispered, "I think we're in the Shrieking Shack."

Harry looked around. His eyes fell on a wooden chair near them. Large chunks had been torn out of it; one of the legs had been ripped off entirely.

"Ghosts didn't do that," he said slowly.

At that moment, there was a creak overhead. Something had moved upstairs. Both of them looked up at the ceiling. Hermione's grip on Harry's arm was so tight he was losing feeling in his fingers. He raised his eyebrows at her; she nodded again and let go.

Quietly as they could, they crept out into the hall and up the crumbling staircase. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust except the floor, where a wide shiny stripe had been made by some-thing being dragged upstairs.

They reached the dark landing.

"Nox," they whispered together, and the lights at the end of their wands went out. Only one door was open. As they crept toward it, they heard movement from behind it; a low moan, and then a deep, loud purring. They exchanged a last look, a last nod.

Wand held tightly before him, Harry kicked the door wide open.

On a magnificent four-poster bed with dusty hangings lay Crookshanks, purring loudly at the sight of them. On the floor be-side him, clutching his leg, which stuck out at a strange angle, was Ron.

Harry and Hermione dashed across to him.

“Ron — are you okay?”

“Where’s the dog?”

“Not a dog,” Ron moaned. His teeth were gritted with pain. “Harry, it’s a trap —”

“What —”

“He’s the dog … he’s an Animagus. …”

Ron was staring over Harry’s shoulder. Harry wheeled around. With a snap, the man in the shadows closed the door behind them.

A mass of filthy, matted hair hung to his elbows. If eyes hadn’t been shining out of the deep, dark sockets, he might have been a corpse. The waxy skin was stretched so tightly over the bones of his face, it looked like a skull. His yellow teeth were bared in a grin. It was Sirius Black.

“Expelliarmus!” he croaked, pointing Ron’s wand at them.

Harry’s and Hermione’s wands shot out of their hands, high in the air, and Black caught them. Then he took a step closer. His eyes were fixed on Harry.

“I thought you’d come and help your friend,” he said hoarsely. His voice sounded as though he had long since lost the habit of us-ing it. “Your father would have done the same for me. Brave of you, not to run for a teacher. I’m grateful … it will make everything much easier. …”

The taunt about his father rang in Harry’s ears as though Black had bellowed it. A boiling hate erupted in Harry’s chest, leaving no place for fear. For the first time in his life, he wanted his wand back in his hand, not to defend himself, but to attack … to kill. With-out knowing what he was doing, he started forward, but there was a sudden

movement on either side of him and two pairs of hands grabbed him and held him back. … “No, Harry!” Hermione gasped in a petrified whisper; Ron, however, spoke to Black.

“If you want to kill Harry, you’ll have to kill us too!” he said fiercely, though the effort of standing upright was draining him of still more color, and he swayed slightly as he spoke.

Something flickered in Black’s shadowed eyes.

“Lie down,” he said quietly to Ron. “You will damage that leg even more.”

“Did you hear me?” Ron said weakly, though he was clinging painfully to Harry to stay upright. “You’ll have to kill all three of us!”

“There’ll be only one murder here tonight,” said Black, and his grin widened.

“Why’s that?” Harry spat, trying to wrench himself free of Ron and Hermione. “Didn’t care last time, did you? Didn’t mind slaughtering all those Muggles to get at Pettigrew. … What’s the matter, gone soft in Azkaban?”

“Harry!” Hermione whimpered. “Be quiet!”

“HE KILLED MY MUM AND DAD!” Harry roared, and with a huge effort he broke free of Hermione’s and Ron’s restraint and lunged forward —He had forgotten about magic — he had forgotten that he was short and skinny and thirteen, whereas Black was a tall, full-grown man — all Harry knew was that he wanted to hurt Black as badly as he could and that he didn’t care how much he got hurt in return —Perhaps it was the shock of Harry doing something so stupid, but Black didn’t raise the wands in time — one of Harry’s hands fastened over his wasted wrist, forcing the wand tips away; the knuckles of Harry’s other hand collided with the side of Black’s head and they fell, backward, into the wall —Hermione was screaming;

Ron was yelling; there was a blinding flash as the wands in Black's hand sent a jet of sparks into the air that missed Harry's face by inches; Harry felt the shrunken arm under his fingers twisting madly, but he clung on, his other hand punching every part of Black it could find.

But Black's free hand had found Harry's throat —"No," he hissed, "I've waited too long —"

The fingers tightened, Harry choked, his glasses askew.

Then he saw Hermione's foot swing out of nowhere. Black let go of Harry with a grunt of pain; Ron had thrown himself on Black's wand hand and Harry heard a faint clatter —He fought free of the tangle of bodies and saw his own wand rolling across the floor; he threw himself toward it but —"Argh!"

Crookshanks had joined the fray; both sets of front claws had sunk themselves deep into Harry's arm; Harry threw him off, but Crookshanks now darted toward Harry's wand —"NO YOU DON'T!" roared Harry, and he aimed a kick at Crookshanks that made the cat leap aside, spitting; Harry snatched up his wand and turned —"Get out of the way!" he shouted at Ron and Hermione.

They didn't need telling twice. Hermione, gasping for breath, her lip bleeding, scrambled aside, snatching up her and Ron's wands. Ron crawled to the four-poster and collapsed onto it, pant-ing, his white face now tinged with green, both hands clutching his broken leg.

Black was sprawled at the bottom of the wall. His thin chest rose and fell rapidly as he watched Harry walking slowly nearer, his wand pointing straight at Black's heart.

"Going to kill me, Harry?" he whispered.

Harry stopped right above him, his wand still pointing at Black's chest, looking down at him. A livid bruise was rising around Black's left eye

and his nose was bleeding.

“You killed my parents,” said Harry, his voice shaking slightly, but his wand hand quite steady.

Black stared up at him out of those sunken eyes.

“I don’t deny it,” he said very quietly. “But if you knew the whole story.”

“The whole story?” Harry repeated, a furious pounding in his ears. “You sold them to Voldemort. That’s all I need to know.”

“You’ve got to listen to me,” Black said, and there was a note of urgency in his voice now. “You’ll regret it if you don’t. … You don’t understand. …”

“I understand a lot better than you think,” said Harry, and his voice shook more than ever. “You never heard her, did you? My mum … trying to stop Voldemort killing me … and you did that … you did it. …”

Before either of them could say another word, something ginger streaked past Harry; Crookshanks leapt onto Black’s chest and settled himself there, right over Black’s heart. Black blinked and looked down at the cat.

“Get off,” he murmured, trying to push Crookshanks off him.

But Crookshanks sank his claws into Black’s robes and wouldn’t shift. He turned his ugly, squashed face to Harry and looked up at him with those great yellow eyes. To his right, Hermione gave a dry sob.

Harry stared down at Black and Crookshanks, his grip tighten-ing on the wand. So what if he had to kill the cat too? It was in league with Black. … If it was prepared to die, trying to protect Black, that wasn’t Harry’s business. … If Black wanted to save it, that only proved he

cared more for Crookshanks than for Harry's parents. …Harry raised the wand. Now was the moment to do it. Now was the moment to avenge his mother and father. He was going to kill Black. He had to kill Black. This was his chance. …The seconds lengthened. And still Harry stood frozen there, wand poised, Black staring up at him, Crookshanks on his chest. Ron's ragged breathing came from near the bed; Hermione was quite silent.

And then came a new sound —

Muffled footsteps were echoing up through the floor — some-one was moving downstairs.

"WE'RE UP HERE!" Hermione screamed suddenly. "WE'RE UP HERE — SIRIUS BLACK — QUICK!"

Black made a startled movement that almost dislodged Crook-shanks; Harry gripped his wand convulsively — Do it now! said a voice in his head — but the footsteps were thundering up the stairs and Harry still hadn't done it.

The door of the room burst open in a shower of red sparks and Harry wheeled around as Professor Lupin came hurtling into the room, his face bloodless, his wand raised and ready. His eyes flick-ered over Ron, lying on the floor, over Hermione, cowering next to the door, to Harry, standing there with his wand covering Black, and then to Black himself, crumpled and bleeding at Harry's feet.

"Expelliarmus!" Lupin shouted.

Harry's wand flew once more out of his hand; so did the two Hermione was holding. Lupin caught them all deftly, then moved into the room, staring at Black, who still had Crookshanks lying protectively across his chest.

Harry stood there, feeling suddenly empty. He hadn't done it. His nerve had failed him. Black was going to be handed back to the

dementors.

Then Lupin spoke, in a very tense voice.

“Where is he, Sirius?”

Harry looked quickly at Lupin. He didn’t understand what Lupin meant. Who was Lupin talking about? He turned to look at Black again.

Black’s face was quite expressionless. For a few seconds, he didn’t move at all. Then, very slowly, he raised his empty hand and pointed straight at Ron. Mystified, Harry glanced around at Ron, who looked bewildered.

“But then … ,” Lupin muttered, staring at Black so intently it seemed he was trying to read his mind, “… why hasn’t he shown himself before now? Unless” — Lupin’s eyes suddenly widened, as though he was seeing something beyond Black, something none of the rest could see, “— unless he was the one … unless you switched … without telling me?”

Very slowly, his sunken gaze never leaving Lupin’s face, Black nodded.

“Professor,” Harry interrupted loudly, “what’s going on — ?”

But he never finished the question, because what he saw made his voice die in his throat. Lupin was lowering his wand, gazing fixedly at Black. The Professor walked to Black’s side, seized his hand, pulled him to his feet so that Crookshanks fell to the floor, and embraced Black like a brother.

Harry felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach.

“I DON’T BELIEVE IT!” Hermione screamed.

Lupin let go of Black and turned to her. She had raised herself off the floor and was pointing at Lupin, wild-eyed. “You — you —”

“Hermione —”

“ — you and him!”

“Hermione, calm down —”

“I didn’t tell anyone!” Hermione shrieked. “I’ve been covering up for you —”

“Hermione, listen to me, please!” Lupin shouted. “I can ex-plain —”

Harry could feel himself shaking, not with fear, but with a fresh wave of fury.

“I trusted you,” he shouted at Lupin, his voice wavering out of control, “and all the time you’ve been his friend!”

“You’re wrong,” said Lupin. “I haven’t been Sirius’s friend, but I am now — Let me explain. …”

“NO!” Hermione screamed. “Harry, don’t trust him, he’s been helping Black get into the castle, he wants you dead too — he’s a werewolf!”

There was a ringing silence. Everyone’s eyes were now on Lupin, who looked remarkably calm, though rather pale.

“Not at all up to your usual standard, Hermione,” he said. “Only one out of three, I’m afraid. I have not been helping Sirius get into the castle and I certainly don’t want Harry dead. …” An odd shiver passed over his face. “But I won’t deny that I am a were-wolf.”

Ron made a valiant effort to get up again but fell back with a whimper of pain. Lupin made toward him, looking concerned, but Ron gasped,“Get away from me, werewolf!”

Lupin stopped dead. Then, with an obvious effort, he turned to Hermione and said, “How long have you known?”

“Ages,” Hermione whispered. “Since I did Professor Snape’s es-say. …”

“He’ll be delighted,” said Lupin coolly. “He assigned that essay hoping someone would realize what my symptoms meant. … Did you check the lunar chart and realize that I was always ill at the full moon? Or did you realize that the boggart changed into the moon when it saw me?”

“Both,” Hermione said quietly.

Lupin forced a laugh.

“You’re the cleverest witch of your age I’ve ever met, Hermione.”

“I’m not,” Hermione whispered. “If I’d been a bit cleverer, I’d have told everyone what you are!”

“But they already know,” said Lupin. “At least, the staff do.”

“Dumbledore hired you when he knew you were a werewolf?” Ron gasped. “Is he mad?”

“Some of the staff thought so,” said Lupin. “He had to work very hard to convince certain teachers that I’m trustworthy —”

“AND HE WAS WRONG!” Harry yelled. “YOU’VE BEEN HELPING HIM ALL THE TIME!” He was pointing at Black, who suddenly crossed to the four-poster bed and sank onto it, his face hidden in one shaking hand. Crookshanks leapt up beside him and stepped onto his lap, purring. Ron edged away from both of them, dragging his leg.

“I have not been helping Sirius,” said Lupin. “If you’ll give me a chance, I’ll explain. Look —”

He separated Harry’s, Ron’s and Hermione’s wands and threw each back to its owner; Harry caught his, stunned.

“There,” said Lupin, sticking his own wand back into his belt. “You’re armed, we’re not. Now will you listen?”

Harry didn’t know what to think. Was it a trick?

“If you haven’t been helping him,” he said, with a furious glance at Black, “how did you know he was here?”

“The map,” said Lupin. “The Marauder’s Map. I was in my of-fice examining it —”

“You know how to work it?” Harry said suspiciously.

“Of course I know how to work it,” said Lupin, waving his hand impatiently. “I helped write it. I’m Moony — that was my friends’ nickname for me at school.”

“You wrote — ?”

“The important thing is, I was watching it carefully this evening, because I had an idea that you, Ron, and Hermione might try and sneak out of the castle to visit Hagrid before his hippogriff was ex-ecuted. And I was right, wasn’t I?”

He had started to pace up and down, looking at them. Little patches of dust rose at his feet.

“You might have been wearing your father’s old cloak, Harry —”

“How d’you know about the cloak?”

“The number of times I saw James disappearing under it… ,” said Lupin, waving an impatient hand again. “The point is, even if you’re wearing an Invisibility Cloak, you still show up on the Marauder’s Map. I watched you cross the grounds and enter Hagrid’s hut. Twenty minutes later, you left Hagrid, and set off back toward the castle. But you were now accompanied by some-body else.”

“What?” said Harry. “No, we weren’t!”

“I couldn’t believe my eyes,” said Lupin, still pacing, and ignor-ing Harry’s interruption. “I thought the map must be malfunc-tioning. How could he be with you?”

“No one was with us!” said Harry.

“And then I saw another dot, moving fast toward you, labeled Sirius Black. … I saw him collide with you; I watched as he pulled two of you into the Whomping Willow —”

“One of us!” Ron said angrily.

“No, Ron,” said Lupin. “Two of you.”

He had stopped his pacing, his eyes moving over Ron.

“Do you think I could have a look at the rat?” he said evenly.

“What?” said Ron. “What’s Scabbers got to do with it?”

“Everything,” said Lupin. “Could I see him, please?”

Ron hesitated, then put a hand inside his robes. Scabbers emerged, thrashing desperately; Ron had to seize his long bald tail to stop him escaping. Crookshanks stood up on Black’s leg and made a soft hissing noise.

Lupin moved closer to Ron. He seemed to be holding his breath as he gazed intently at Scabbers.

"What?" Ron said again, holding Scabbers close to him, looking scared. "What's my rat got to do with anything?"

"That's not a rat," croaked Sirius Black suddenly.

"What d'you mean — of course he's a rat —"

"No, he's not," said Lupin quietly. "He's a wizard."

"An Animagus," said Black, "by the name of Peter Pettigrew."

Chapter 18 Mooney, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs

It took a few seconds for the absurdity of this statement to sink in. Then Ron voiced what Harry was thinking.

"You're both mental."

"Ridiculous!" said Hermione faintly.

"Peter Pettigrew's dead!" said Harry. "He killed him twelve years ago!" He pointed at Black, whose face twitched convulsively.

"I meant to," he growled, his yellow teeth bared, "but little Peter got the better of me … not this time, though!"

And Crookshanks was thrown to the floor as Black lunged at Scabbers; Ron yelled with pain as Black's weight fell on his broken leg.

"Sirius, NO!" Lupin yelled, launching himself forwards and dragging Black away from Ron again, "WAIT! You can't do it just like that — they need to understand — we've got to explain —"

"We can explain afterwards!" snarled Black, trying to throw Lupin off. One hand was still clawing the air as it tried to reach Scabbers, who was squealing like a piglet, scratching Ron's face and neck as he tried to escape.

"They've — got — a — right — to — know — everything!" Lupin panted, still trying to restrain Black. "Ron's kept him as a pet! There are parts of it even I don't understand! And Harry — you owe Harry the truth, Sirius!"

Black stopped struggling, though his hollowed eyes were still fixed on Scabbers, who was clamped tightly under Ron's bitten, scratched,

and bleeding hands.

“All right, then,” Black said, without taking his eyes off the rat. “Tell them whatever you like. But make it quick, Remus. I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for. …”

“You’re nutters, both of you,” said Ron shakily, looking round at Harry and Hermione for support. “I’ve had enough of this. I’m off.”

He tried to heave himself up on his good leg, but Lupin raised his wand again, pointing it at Scabbers.

“You’re going to hear me out, Ron,” he said quietly. “Just keep a tight hold on Peter while you listen.”

“HE’S NOT PETER, HE’S SCABBERS!” Ron yelled, trying to force the rat back into his front pocket, but Scabbers was fighting too hard; Ron swayed and overbalanced, and Harry caught him and pushed him back down to the bed. Then, ignoring Black, Harry turned to Lupin.

“There were witnesses who saw Pettigrew die,” he said. “A whole street full of them …”

“They didn’t see what they thought they saw!” said Black sav-agely, still watching Scabbers struggling in Ron’s hands.

“Everyone thought Sirius killed Peter,” said Lupin, nodding. “I believed it myself — until I saw the map tonight. Because the Ma-rauder’s map never lies … Peter’s alive. Ron’s holding him, Harry.”

Harry looked down at Ron, and as their eyes met, they agreed, silently: Black and Lupin were both out of their minds. Their story made no sense whatsoever. How could Scabbers be Peter Pettigrew? Azkaban must have unhinged Black after all — but why was Lupin playing along with him?

Then Hermione spoke, in a trembling, would-be calm sort of voice, as though trying to will Professor Lupin to talk sensibly.

"But Professor Lupin … Scabbers can't be Pettigrew … it just can't be true, you know it can't …"

"Why can't it be true?" Lupin said calmly, as though they were in class, and Hermione had simply spotted a problem in an experi-ment with grindylows.

"Because … because people would know if Peter Pettigrew had been an Animagus. We did Animagi in class with Professor McGonagall. And I looked them up when I did my homework — the Ministry of Magic keeps tabs on witches and wizards who can become animals; there's a register showing what animal they be-come, and their markings and things … and I went and looked Professor McGonagall up on the register, and there have been only seven Animagi this century, and Pettigrew's name wasn't on the list —"

Harry had barely had time to marvel inwardly at the effort Hermione put into her homework, when Lupin started to laugh. "Right again, Hermione!" he said. "But the Ministry never knew that there used to be three unregistered Animagi running around Hogwarts."

"If you're going to tell them the story, get a move on, Remus," snarled Black, who was still watching Scabbers's every desper-ate move. "I've waited twelve years, I'm not going to wait much longer."

"All right … but you'll need to help me, Sirius," said Lupin, "I only know how it began …"

Lupin broke off. There had been a loud creak behind him. The bedroom door had opened of its own accord. All five of them stared at it. Then Lupin strode toward it and looked out into the landing.

"No one there …"

“This place is haunted!” said Ron.

“It’s not,” said Lupin, still looking at the door in a puzzled way. “The Shrieking Shack was never haunted. … The screams and howls the villagers used to hear were made by me.”

He pushed his graying hair out of his eyes, thought for a mo-ment, then said, “That’s where all of this starts — with my becom-ing a werewolf. None of this could have happened if I hadn’t been bitten … and if I hadn’t been so foolhardy. …”

He looked sober and tired. Ron started to interrupt, but Her-mione said, “Shh!” She was watching Lupin very intently.

“I was a very small boy when I received the bite. My parents tried everything, but in those days there was no cure. The potion that Professor Snape has been making for me is a very recent dis-covery. It makes me safe, you see. As long as I take it in the week preceding the full moon, I keep my mind when I transform. … I am able to curl up in my office, a harmless wolf, and wait for the moon to wane again.

“Before the Wolfsbane Potion was discovered, however, I be-came a fully fledged monster once a month. It seemed impossible that I would be able to come to Hogwarts. Other parents weren’t likely to want their children exposed to me.

“But then Dumbledore became Headmaster, and he was sympa-thetic. He said that as long as we took certain precautions, there was no reason I shouldn’t come to school. …” Lupin sighed, and looked directly at Harry. “I told you, months ago, that the Whomp-ing Willow was planted the year I came to Hogwarts. The truth is that it was planted because I came to Hogwarts. This house” — Lupin looked miserably around the room, — “the tunnel that leads to it — they were built for my use. Once a month, I was smuggled out of the castle, into this place, to transform. The tree was placed at the tunnel mouth to stop anyone coming across me while I was dangerous.”

Harry couldn't see where this story was going, but he was listen-ing raptly all the same. The only sound apart from Lupin's voice was Scabbers's frightened squeaking.

"My transformations in those days were — were terrible. It is very painful to turn into a werewolf. I was separated from humans to bite, so I bit and scratched myself instead. The villagers heard the noise and the screaming and thought they were hearing partic-ularly violent spirits. Dumbledore encouraged the rumor. … Even now, when the house has been silent for years, the villagers don't dare approach it. …"But apart from my transformations, I was happier than I had ever been in my life. For the first time ever, I had friends, three great friends. Sirius Black … Peter Pettigrew … and, of course, your father, Harry — James Potter.

"Now, my three friends could hardly fail to notice that I disap-peared once a month. I made up all sorts of stories. I told them my mother was ill, and that I had to go home to see her. … I was terrified they would desert me the moment they found out what I was. But of course, they, like you, Hermione, worked out the truth. …"And they didn't desert me at all. Instead, they did something for me that would make my transformations not only bearable, but the best times of my life. They became Animagi."

"My dad too?" said Harry, astounded.

"Yes, indeed," said Lupin. "It took them the best part of three years to work out how to do it. Your father and Sirius here were the cleverest students in the school, and lucky they were, because the Animagus transformation can go horribly wrong — one reason the Ministry keeps a close watch on those attempting to do it. Peter needed all the help he could get from James and Sirius. Finally, in our fifth year, they managed it. They could each turn into a differ-ent animal at will."

"But how did that help you?" said Hermione, sounding puzzled.

“They couldn’t keep me company as humans, so they kept me company as animals,” said Lupin. “A werewolf is only a danger to people. They sneaked out of the castle every month under James’s Invisibility Cloak. They transformed … Peter, as the smallest, could slip beneath the Willow’s attacking branches and touch the knot that freezes it. They would then slip down the tunnel and join me. Under their influence, I became less dangerous. My body was still wolfish, but my mind seemed to become less so while I was with them.”

“Hurry up, Remus,” snarled Black, who was still watching Scab-bers with a horrible sort of hunger on his face.

“I’m getting there, Sirius, I’m getting there … well, highly ex-citing possibilities were open to us now that we could all transform. Soon we were leaving the Shrieking Shack and roaming the school grounds and the village by night. Sirius and James transformed into such large animals, they were able to keep a werewolf in check. I doubt whether any Hogwarts students ever found out more about the Hogwarts grounds and Hogsmeade than we did. … And that’s how we came to write the Marauder’s Map, and sign it with our nicknames. Sirius is Padfoot. Peter is Wormtail. James was Prongs.”

“What sort of animal — ?” Harry began, but Hermione cut him off.

“That was still really dangerous! Running around in the dark with a werewolf! What if you’d given the others the slip, and bitten somebody?”

“A thought that still haunts me,” said Lupin heavily. “And there were near misses, many of them. We laughed about them after-wards. We were young, thoughtless — carried away with our own cleverness.”

“I sometimes felt guilty about betraying Dumbledore’s trust, of course … he had admitted me to Hogwarts when no other head-master would have done so, and he had no idea I was breaking the rules he had set down for my own and others’ safety. He never knew I had led three fellow students into becoming Animagi ille-gally. But I always

managed to forget my guilty feelings every time we sat down to plan our next month's adventure. And I haven't changed …Lupin's face had hardened, and there was self-disgust in his voice. "All this year, I have been battling with myself, wondering whether I should tell Dumbledore that Sirius was an Animagus. But I didn't do it. Why? Because I was too cowardly. It would have meant admitting that I'd betrayed his trust while I was at school, admit-ting that I'd led others along with me … and Dumbledore's trust has meant everything to me. He let me into Hogwarts as a boy, and he gave me a job when I have been shunned all my adult life, un-able to find paid work because of what I am. And so I convinced myself that Sirius was getting into the school using dark arts he learned from Voldemort, that being an Animagus had nothing to do with it … so, in a way, Snape's been right about me all along."

"Snape?" said Black harshly, taking his eyes off Scabbers for the first time in minutes and looking up at Lupin. "What's Snape got to do with it?"

"He's here, Sirius," said Lupin heavily. "He's teaching here as well." He looked up at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"Professor Snape was at school with us. He fought very hard against my appointment to the Defense Against the Dark Arts job. He has been telling Dumbledore all year that I am not to be trusted. He has his reasons … you see, Sirius here played a trick on him which nearly killed him, a trick which involved me —"

Black made a derisive noise.

"It served him right," he sneered. "Sneaking around, trying to find out what we were up to … hoping he could get us ex-pelled. …"

"Severus was very interested in where I went every month." Lupin told Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "We were in the same year, you know, and we — er — didn't like each other very much. He especially disliked James. Jealous, I think, of James's talent on the Quidditch

field … anyway Snape had seen me crossing the grounds with Madam Pomfrey one evening as she led me toward the Whomping Willow to transform. Sirius thought it would be — er — amusing, to tell Snape all he had to do was prod the knot on the tree trunk with a long stick, and he'd be able to get in after me. Well, of course, Snape tried it — if he'd got as far as this house, he'd have met a fully grown werewolf — but your father, who'd heard what Sirius had done, went after Snape and pulled him back, at great risk to his life … Snape glimpsed me, though, at the end of the tunnel. He was forbidden by Dumbledore to tell anybody, but from that time on he knew what I was. …"

"So that's why Snape doesn't like you," said Harry slowly, "be-cause he thought you were in on the joke?"

"That's right," sneered a cold voice from the wall behind Lupin.

Severus Snape was pulling off the Invisibility Cloak, his wand pointing directly at Lupin.

Chapter 19 The Servant of Lord Voldemort

Hermione screamed. Black leapt to his feet. Harry felt as though he'd received a huge electric shock.

"I found this at the base of the Whomping Willow," said Snape, throwing the cloak aside, careful to keep this wand pointing di-rectly at Lupin's chest. "Very useful, Potter, I thank you. …"

Snape was slightly breathless, but his face was full of suppressed triumph. "You're wondering, perhaps, how I knew you were here?" he said, his eyes glittering. "I've just been to your office, Lupin. You forgot to take your potion tonight, so I took a gobletful along. And very lucky I did … lucky for me, I mean. Lying on your desk was a certain map. One glance at it told me all I needed to know. I saw you running along this passageway and out of sight."

"Severus —" Lupin began, but Snape overrode him.

"I've told the headmaster again and again that you're helping your old friend Black into the castle, Lupin, and here's the proof. Not even I dreamed you would have the nerve to use this old place as your hideout —"

"Severus, you're making a mistake," said Lupin urgently. "You haven't heard everything — I can explain — Sirius is not here to kill Harry —"

"Two more for Azkaban tonight," said Snape, his eyes now gleaming fanatically. "I shall be interested to see how Dumbledore takes this. … He was quite convinced you were harmless, you know, Lupin … a tame werewolf —"

"You fool," said Lupin softly. "Is a schoolboy grudge worth putting an innocent man back inside Azkaban?"

BANG! Thin, snakelike cords burst from the end of Snape's wand and twisted themselves around Lupin's mouth, wrists, and ankles; he overbalanced and fell to the floor, unable to move. With a roar of rage, Black started toward Snape, but Snape pointed his wand straight between Black's eyes.

"Give me a reason," he whispered. "Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will."

Black stopped dead. It would have been impossible to say which face showed more hatred.

Harry stood there, paralyzed, not knowing what to do or whom to believe. He glanced around at Ron and Hermione. Ron looked just as confused as he did, still fighting to keep hold on the strug-gling Scabbers. Hermione, however, took an uncertain step toward Snape and said, in a very breathless voice, "Professor Snape — it — it wouldn't hurt to hear what they've got to say, w — would it?"

"Miss Granger, you are already facing suspension from this school," Snape spat. "You, Potter, and Weasley are out-of-bounds, in the company of a convicted murderer and a werewolf. For once in your life, hold your tongue."

"But if — if there was a mistake —"

"KEEP QUIET, YOU STUPID GIRL!" Snape shouted, looking suddenly quite deranged. "DON'T TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND!" A few sparks shot out of the end of his wand, which was still pointed at Black's face. Hermione fell silent.

"Vengeance is very sweet," Snape breathed at Black. "How I hoped I would be the one to catch you. …"

"The joke's on you again, Severus," Black snarled. "As long as this boy brings his rat up to the castle" — he jerked his head at Ron — "I'll come quietly. …"

“Up to the castle?” said Snape silkily. “I don’t think we need to go that far. All I have to do is call the dementors once we get out of the Willow. They’ll be very pleased to see you, Black … pleased enough to give you a little kiss, I daresay. …”

What little color there was in Black’s face left it.

“You — you’ve got to hear me out,” he croaked. “The rat — look at the rat —”

But there was a mad glint in Snape’s eyes that Harry had never seen before. He seemed beyond reason.

“Come on, all of you,” he said. He clicked his fingers, and the ends of the cords that bound Lupin flew to his hands. “I’ll drag the werewolf. Perhaps the dementors will have a kiss for him too —”

Before he knew what he was doing, Harry had crossed the room in three strides and blocked the door.

“Get out of the way, Potter, you’re in enough trouble already,” snarled Snape. “If I hadn’t been here to save your skin —”

“Professor Lupin could have killed me about a hundred times this year,” Harry said. “I’ve been alone with him loads of times, having defense lessons against the dementors. If he was helping Black, why didn’t he just finish me off then?”

“Don’t ask me to fathom the way a werewolf’s mind works,” hissed Snape. “Get out of the way, Potter.”

“YOU’RE PATHETIC!” Harry yelled. “JUST BECAUSE THEY MADE A FOOL OF YOU AT SCHOOL YOU WON’T EVEN LISTEN —”

“SILENCE! I WILL NOT BE SPOKEN TO LIKE THAT!” Snape shrieked, looking madder than ever. “Like father, like son, Potter! I have just saved your neck; you should be thanking me on bended

knee! You would have been well served if he'd killed you! You'd have died like your father, too arrogant to believe you might be mistaken in Black — now get out of the way, or I will make you. GET OUT OF THE WAY, POTTER!"

Harry made up his mind in a split second. Before Snape could take even one step toward him, he had raised his wand.

"Expelliarmus!" he yelled — except that his wasn't the only voice that shouted. There was a blast that made the door rattle on its hinges; Snape was lifted off his feet and slammed into the wall, then slid down it to the floor, a trickle of blood oozing from under his hair. He had been knocked out.

Harry looked around. Both Ron and Hermione had tried to disarm Snape at exactly the same moment. Snape's wand soared in a high arc and landed on the bed next to Crookshanks.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Black, looking at Harry. "You should have left him to me. …"

Harry avoided Black's eyes. He wasn't sure, even now, that he'd done the right thing.

"We attacked a teacher. … We attacked a teacher … ," Her-mione whimpered, staring at the lifeless Snape with frightened eyes. "Oh, we're going to be in so much trouble —"

Lupin was struggling against his bonds. Black bent down quickly and untied him. Lupin straightened up, rubbing his arms where the ropes had cut into them.

"Thank you, Harry," he said.

"I'm still not saying I believe you," he told Lupin.

“Then it’s time we offered you some proof,” said Lupin. “You, boy — give me Peter, please. Now.”

Ron clutched Scabbers closer to his chest.

“Come off it,” he said weakly. “Are you trying to say he broke out of Azkaban just to get his hands on Scabbers? I mean …” He looked up at Harry and Hermione for support, “Okay, say Pettigrew could turn into a rat — there are millions of rats — how’s he supposed to know which one he’s after if he was locked up in Azkaban?”

“You know, Sirius, that’s a fair question,” said Lupin, turning to Black and frowning slightly. “How did you find out where he was?”

Black put one of his clawlike hands inside his robes and took out a crumpled piece of paper, which he smoothed flat and held out to show the others.

It was the photograph of Ron and his family that had appeared in the Daily Prophet the previous summer, and there, on Ron’s shoulder, was Scabbers.

“How did you get this?” Lupin asked Black, thunderstruck.

“Fudge,” said Black. “When he came to inspect Azkaban last year, he gave me his paper. And there was Peter, on the front page … on this boy’s shoulder. … I knew him at once … how many times had I seen him transform? And the caption said the boy would be going back to Hogwarts … to where Harry was. …”

“My God,” said Lupin softly, staring from Scabbers to the pic-ture in the paper and back again. “His front paw …”

“What about it?” said Ron defiantly.

“He’s got a toe missing,” said Black.

“Of course,” Lupin breathed. “So simple … so brilliant … he cut it off himself?”

“Just before he transformed,” said Black. “When I cornered him, he yelled for the whole street to hear that I’d betrayed Lily and James. Then, before I could curse him, he blew apart the street with the wand behind his back, killed everyone within twenty feet of himself — and sped down into the sewer with the other rats. …“Didn’t you ever hear, Ron?” said Lupin. “The biggest bit of Peter they found was his finger.”

“Look, Scabbers probably had a fight with another rat or some-thing! He’s been in my family for ages, right —”

“Twelve years, in fact,” said Lupin. “Didn’t you ever wonder why he was living so long?”

“We — we’ve been taking good care of him!” said Ron.

“Not looking too good at the moment, though, is he?” said Lupin. “I’d guess he’s been losing weight ever since he heard Sirius was on the loose again. …”

“He’s been scared of that mad cat!” said Ron, nodding toward Crookshanks, who was still purring on the bed.

But that wasn’t right, Harry thought suddenly. … Scabbers had been looking ill before he met Crookshanks … ever since Ron’s return from Egypt … since the time when Black had es-caped. …“This cat isn’t mad,” said Black hoarsely. He reached out a bony hand and stroked Crookshanks’s fluffy head. “He’s the most intel-ligent of his kind I’ve ever met. He recognized Peter for what he was right away. And when he met me, he knew I was no dog. It was a while before he trusted me. … Finally, I managed to communi-cate to him what I was after, and he’s been helping me. …”

“What do you mean?” breathed Hermione.

"He tried to bring Peter to me, but couldn't … so he stole the passwords into Gryffindor Tower for me. … As I understand it, he took them from a boy's bedside table. …"

Harry's brain seemed to be sagging under the weight of what he was hearing. It was absurd … and yet …"But Peter got wind of what was going on and ran for it. …" croaked Black. "This cat — Crookshanks, did you call him? — told me Peter had left blood on the sheets. … I supposed he bit himself. … Well, faking his own death had worked once. …"

These words jolted Harry to his senses.

"And why did he fake his death?" he said furiously. "Because he knew you were about to kill him like you killed my parents!"

"No," said Lupin, "Harry —"

"And now you've come to finish him off!"

"Yes, I have," said Black, with an evil look at Scabbers.

"Then I should've let Snape take you!" Harry shouted.

"Harry," said Lupin hurriedly, "don't you see? All this time we've thought Sirius betrayed your parents, and Peter tracked him down — but it was the other way around, don't you see? Peter be-trayed your mother and father — Sirius tracked Peter down —"

"THAT'S NOT TRUE!" Harry yelled. "HE WAS THEIR SECRET-KEEPER! HE SAID SO BEFORE YOU TURNED UP. HE SAID HE KILLED THEM!"

He was pointing at Black, who shook his head slowly; the sunken eyes were suddenly overbright.

"Harry … I as good as killed them," he croaked. "I persuaded Lily and James to change to Peter at the last moment, persuaded them to use him as Secret-Keeper instead of me. … I'm to blame, I know it. … The night they died, I'd arranged to check on Peter, make sure he was still safe, but when I arrived at his hiding place, he'd gone. Yet there was no sign of a struggle. It didn't feel right. I was scared. I set out for your parents' house straight away. And when I saw their house, destroyed, and their bodies … I realized what Peter must've done … what I'd done. …"

His voice broke. He turned away.

"Enough of this," said Lupin, and there was a steely note in his voice Harry had never heard before. "There's one certain way to prove what really happened. Ron, give me that rat."

"What are you going to do with him if I give him to you?" Ron asked Lupin tensely.

"Force him to show himself," said Lupin. "If he really is a rat, it won't hurt him."

Ron hesitated. Then at long last, he held out Scabbers and Lupin took him. Scabbers began to squeak without stopping, twisting and turning, his tiny black eyes bulging in his head.

"Ready, Sirius?" said Lupin.

Black had already retrieved Snape's wand from the bed. He approached Lupin and the struggling rat, and his wet eyes suddenly seemed to be burning in his face.

"Together?" he said quietly.

"I think so," said Lupin, holding Scabbers tightly in one hand and his wand in the other. "On the count of three. One — two — THREE!"

A flash of blue-white light erupted from both wands; for a mo-ment, Scabbers was frozen in midair, his small gray form twisting madly — Ron yelled — the rat fell and hit the floor. There was an-other blinding flash of light and then —It was like watching a speeded-up film of a growing tree. A head was shooting upward from the ground; limbs were sprouting; a moment later, a man was standing where Scabbers had been, cring-ing and wringing his hands. Crookshanks was spitting and snarling on the bed; the hair on his back was standing up.

He was a very short man, hardly taller than Harry and Hermione. His thin, colorless hair was unkempt and there was a large bald patch on top. He had the shrunken appearance of a plump man who has lost a lot of weight in a short time. His skin looked grubby, almost like Scabbers's fur, and something of the rat lingered around his pointed nose and his very small, watery eyes. He looked around at them all, his breathing fast and shallow. Harry saw his eyes dart to the door and back again.

"Well, hello, Peter," said Lupin pleasantly, as though rats fre-quently erupted into old school friends around him. "Long time, no see."

"S — Sirius … R — Remus …" Even Pettigrew's voice was squeaky. Again, his eyes darted toward the door. "My friends … my old friends …"

Black's wand arm rose, but Lupin seized him around the wrist, gave him a warning look, then turned again to Pettigrew, his voice light and casual.

"We've been having a little chat, Peter, about what happened the night Lily and James died. You might have missed the finer points while you were squeaking around down there on the bed —"

"Remus," gasped Pettigrew, and Harry could see beads of sweat breaking out over his pasty face, "you don't believe him, do you… ? He tried to kill me, Remus. …"

“So we’ve heard,” said Lupin, more coldly. “I’d like to clear up one or two little matters with you, Peter, if you’d be so —”

“He’s come to try and kill me again!” Pettigrew squeaked sud-denly, pointing at Black, and Harry saw that he used his middle finger, because his index was missing. “He killed Lily and James and now he’s going to kill me too. … You’ve got to help me, Remus. …”

Black’s face looked more skull-like than ever as he stared at Pettigrew with his fathomless eyes.

“No one’s going to try and kill you until we’ve sorted a few things out,” said Lupin.

“Sorted things out?” squealed Pettigrew, looking wildly about him once more, eyes taking in the boarded windows and, again, the only door. “I knew he’d come after me! I knew he’d be back for me! I’ve been waiting for this for twelve years!”

“You knew Sirius was going to break out of Azkaban?” said Lupin, his brow furrowed. “When nobody has ever done it be-fore?”

“He’s got dark powers the rest of us can only dream of!” Petti-grew shouted shrilly. “How else did he get out of there? I suppose He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named taught him a few tricks!”

Black started to laugh, a horrible, mirthless laugh that filled the whole room.

“Voldemort, teach me tricks?” he said.

Pettigrew flinched as though Black had brandished a whip at him.

“What, scared to hear your old master’s name?” said Black. “I don’t blame you, Peter. His lot aren’t very happy with you, are they?”

"Don't know what you mean, Sirius —" muttered Pettigrew, his breathing faster than ever. His whole face was shining with sweat now.

"You haven't been hiding from me for twelve years," said Black. "You've been hiding from Voldemort's old supporters. I heard things in Azkaban, Peter. … They all think you're dead, or you'd have to answer to them. … I've heard them screaming all sorts of things in their sleep. Sounds like they think the double-crosser double-crossed them. Voldemort went to the Potters' on your information … and Voldemort met his downfall there. And not all Voldemort's support-ers ended up in Azkaban, did they? There are still plenty out here, biding their time, pretending they've seen the error of their ways. … If they ever got wind that you were still alive, Peter —"

"Don't know … what you're talking about… ," said Pettigrew again, more shrilly than ever. He wiped his face on his sleeve and looked up at Lupin. "You don't believe this — this madness, Remus —"

"I must admit, Peter, I have difficulty in understanding why an innocent man would want to spend twelve years as a rat," said Lupin evenly.

"Innocent, but scared!" squealed Pettigrew. "If Voldemort's supporters were after me, it was because I put one of their best men in Azkaban — the spy, Sirius Black!"

Black's face contorted.

"How dare you," he growled, sounding suddenly like the bear-sized dog he had been. "I, a spy for Voldemort? When did I ever sneak around people who were stronger and more powerful than myself? But you, Peter — I'll never understand why I didn't see you were the spy from the start. You always liked big friends who'd look after you, didn't you? It used to be us … me and Remus … and James. …"

Pettigrew wiped his face again; he was almost panting for breath.

“Me, a spy … must be out of your mind … never … don’t know how you can say such a —”

“Lily and James only made you Secret-Keeper because I sug-gested it,” Black hissed, so venomously that Pettigrew took a step backward. “I thought it was the perfect plan … a bluff. … Volde-mort would be sure to come after me, would never dream they’d use a weak, talentless thing like you. … It must have been the finest moment of your miserable life, telling Voldemort you could hand him the Potters.”

Pettigrew was muttering distractedly; Harry caught words like “far-fetched” and “lunacy,” but he couldn’t help paying more at-tention to the ashen color of Pettigrew’s face and the way his eyes continued to dart toward the windows and door.

“Professor Lupin?” said Hermione timidly. “Can — can I say something?”

“Certainly, Hermione,” said Lupin courteously.

“Well — Scabbers — I mean, this — this man — he’s been sleep-ing in Harry’s dormitory for three years. If he’s working for You-Know-Who, how come he never tried to hurt Harry before now?”

“There!” said Pettigrew shrilly, pointing at Ron with his maimed hand. “Thank you! You see, Remus? I have never hurt a hair of Harry’s head! Why should I?”

“I’ll tell you why,” said Black. “Because you never did anything for anyone unless you could see what was in it for you. Voldemort’s been in hiding for fifteen years, they say he’s half dead. You weren’t about to commit murder right under Albus Dumbledore’s nose, for a wreck of a wizard who’d lost all of his power, were you? You’d want to be quite sure he was the biggest bully in the playground be-fore you went back to him, wouldn’t you? Why else did you find a wizard family to take you in? Keeping an ear out for news, weren’t you, Peter? Just

in case your old protector regained strength, and it was safe to rejoin him. …"

Pettigrew opened his mouth and closed it several times. He seemed to have lost the ability to talk.

"Er — Mr. Black — Sirius?" said Hermione.

Black jumped at being addressed like this and stared at Hermione as though he had never seen anything quite like her.

"If you don't mind me asking, how — how did you get out of Azkaban, if you didn't use Dark Magic?"

"Thank you!" gasped Pettigrew, nodding frantically at her. "Ex-actly! Precisely what I —"

But Lupin silenced him with a look. Black was frowning slightly at Hermione, but not as though he were annoyed with her. He seemed to be pondering his answer.

"I don't know how I did it," he said slowly. "I think the only rea-son I never lost my mind is that I knew I was innocent. That wasn't a happy thought, so the dementors couldn't suck it out of me … but it kept me sane and knowing who I am … helped me keep my powers … so when it all became … too much … I could trans-form in my cell … become a dog. Dementors can't see, you know. …" He swallowed. "They feel their way toward people by feeding off their emotions. … They could tell that my feelings were less — less human, less complex when I was a dog … but they thought, of course, that I was losing my mind like everyone else in there, so it didn't trouble them. But I was weak, very weak, and I had no hope of driving them away from me without a wand. …"But then I saw Peter in that picture … I realized he was at Hogwarts with Harry … perfectly positioned to act, if one hint reached his ears that the Dark Side was gathering strength again. …"

Pettigrew was shaking his head, mouthing noiselessly, but star-ing all the while at Black as though hypnotized.

"… ready to strike at the moment he could be sure of allies … and to deliver the last Potter to them. If he gave them Harry, who'd dare say he'd betrayed Lord Voldemort? He'd be welcomed back with honors. …"So you see, I had to do something. I was the only one who knew Peter was still alive. …"

Harry remembered what Mr. Weasley had told Mrs. Weasley. "The guards say he's been talking in his sleep … always the same words … 'He's at Hogwarts.' "

"It was as if someone had lit a fire in my head, and the dementors couldn't destroy it. … It wasn't a happy feeling … it was an obses-sion … but it gave me strength, it cleared my mind. So, one night when they opened my door to bring food, I slipped past them as a dog. … It's so much harder for them to sense animal emotions that they were confused. … I was thin, very thin … thin enough to slip through the bars. … I swam as a dog back to the mainland. … I journeyed north and slipped into the Hogwarts grounds as a dog. I've been living in the forest ever since, except when I came to watch the Quidditch, of course. You fly as well as your father did, Harry. …"

He looked at Harry, who did not look away.

"Believe me," croaked Black. "Believe me, Harry. I never betrayed James and Lily. I would have died before I betrayed them."

And at long last, Harry believed him. Throat too tight to speak, he nodded.

"No!"

Pettigrew had fallen to his knees as though Harry's nod had been his own death sentence. He shuffled forward on his knees, grovel-ing, his hands clasped in front of him as though praying.

“Sirius — it’s me … it’s Peter … your friend … you wouldn’t …”

Black kicked out and Pettigrew recoiled.

“There’s enough filth on my robes without you touching them,” said Black.

“Remus!” Pettigrew squeaked, turning to Lupin instead, writh-ing imploringly in front of him. “You don’t believe this … wouldn’t Sirius have told you they’d changed the plan?”

“Not if he thought I was the spy, Peter,” said Lupin. “I assume that’s why you didn’t tell me, Sirius?” he said casually over Petti-grew’s head.

“Forgive me, Remus,” said Black.

“Not at all, Padfoot, old friend,” said Lupin, who was now rolling up his sleeves. “And will you, in turn, forgive me for believ-ing you were the spy?”

“Of course,” said Black, and the ghost of a grin flitted across his gaunt face. He, too, began rolling up his sleeves. “Shall we kill him together?”

“Yes, I think so,” said Lupin grimly.

“You wouldn’t … you won’t… ,” gasped Pettigrew. And he scrambled around to Ron.

“Ron … haven’t I been a good friend … a good pet? You won’t let them kill me, Ron, will you … you’re on my side, aren’t you?”

But Ron was staring at Pettigrew with the utmost revulsion.

“I let you sleep in my bed!” he said.

“Kind boy … kind master …” Pettigrew crawled toward Ron, “you won’t let them do it. … I was your rat. … I was a good pet. …”

“If you made a better rat than a human, it’s not much to boast about, Peter,” said Black harshly. Ron, going still paler with pain, wrenched his broken leg out of Pettigrew’s reach. Pettigrew turned on his knees, staggered forward, and seized the hem of Hermione’s robes.

“Sweet girl … clever girl … you — you won’t let them. … Help me. …”

Hermione pulled her robes out of Pettigrew’s clutching hands and backed away against the wall, looking horrified.

Pettigrew knelt, trembling uncontrollably, and turned his head slowly toward Harry.

“Harry … Harry … you look just like your father … just like him. …”

“HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO HARRY?” roared Black. “HOW DARE YOU FACE HIM? HOW DARE YOU TALK ABOUT JAMES IN FRONT OF HIM?”

“Harry,” whispered Pettigrew, shuffling toward him, hands out-stretched. “Harry, James wouldn’t have wanted me killed. … James would have understood, Harry … he would have shown me mercy. …”

Both Black and Lupin strode forward, seized Pettigrew’s shoul-ders, and threw him backward onto the floor. He sat there, twitch-ing with terror, staring up at them.

“You sold Lily and James to Voldemort,” said Black, who was shaking too. “Do you deny it?”

Pettigrew burst into tears. It was horrible to watch, like an over-sized, balding baby, cowering on the floor.

“Sirius, Sirius, what could I have done? The Dark Lord … you have no idea … he has weapons you can’t imagine. … I was scared, Sirius, I was never brave like you and Remus and James. I never meant it to happen. … He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named forced me —”

“DON’T LIE!” bellowed Black. “YOU’D BEEN PASSING INFORMATION TO HIM FOR A YEAR BEFORE LILY AND JAMES DIED! YOU WERE HIS SPY!”

“He — he was taking over everywhere!” gasped Pettigrew. “Wh — what was there to be gained by refusing him?”

“What was there to be gained by fighting the most evil wizard who has ever existed?” said Black, with a terribly fury in his face. “Only innocent lives, Peter!”

“You don’t understand!” whined Pettigrew. “He would have killed me, Sirius!”

“THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED!” roared Black. “DIED RATHER THAN BETRAY YOUR FRIENDS, AS WE WOULD HAVE DONE FOR YOU!”

Black and Lupin stood shoulder to shoulder, wands raised.

“You should have realized,” said Lupin quietly, “if Voldemort didn’t kill you, we would. Good-bye, Peter.”

Hermione covered her face with her hands and turned to the wall.

“NO!” Harry yelled. He ran forward, placing himself in front of Pettigrew, facing the wands. “You can’t kill him,” he said breath-lessly. “You can’t.”

Black and Lupin both looked staggered.

“Harry, this piece of vermin is the reason you have no parents,” Black snarled. “This cringing bit of filth would have seen you die too, without turning a hair. You heard him. His own stinking skin meant more to him than your whole family.”

“I know,” Harry panted. “We’ll take him up to the castle. We’ll hand him over to the dementors. … He can go to Azkaban … but don’t kill him.”

“Harry!” gasped Pettigrew, and he flung his arms around Harry’s knees. “You — thank you — it’s more than I deserve — thank you —”

“Get off me,” Harry spat, throwing Pettigrew’s hands off him in disgust. “I’m not doing this for you. I’m doing it because — I don’t reckon my dad would’ve wanted them to become killers — just for you.”

No one moved or made a sound except Pettigrew, whose breath was coming in wheezes as he clutched his chest. Black and Lupin were looking at each other. Then, with one movement, they low-ered their wands.

“You’re the only person who has the right to decide, Harry,” said Black. “But think … think what he did. …”

“He can go to Azkaban,” Harry repeated. “If anyone deserves that place, he does. …”

Pettigrew was still wheezing behind him.

“Very well,” said Lupin. “Stand aside, Harry.”

Harry hesitated.

“I’m going to tie him up,” said Lupin. “That’s all, I swear.”

Harry stepped out of the way. Thin cords shot from Lupin's wand this time, and next moment, Pettigrew was wriggling on the floor, bound and gagged.

"But if you transform, Peter," growled Black, his own wand pointing at Pettigrew too, "we will kill you. You agree, Harry?"

Harry looked down at the pitiful figure on the floor and nodded so that Pettigrew could see him.

"Right," said Lupin, suddenly businesslike. "Ron, I can't mend bones nearly as well as Madam Pomfrey, so I think it's best if we just strap your leg up until we can get you to the hospital wing."

He hurried over to Ron, bent down, tapped Ron's leg with his wand, and muttered, "Ferula." Bandages spun up Ron's leg, strapping it tightly to a splint. Lupin helped him to his feet; Ron put his weight gingerly on the leg and didn't wince.

"That's better," he said. "Thanks."

"What about Professor Snape?" said Hermione in a small voice, looking down at Snape's prone figure.

"There's nothing seriously wrong with him," said Lupin, bend-ing over Snape and checking his pulse. "You were just a little — overenthusiastic. Still out cold. Er — perhaps it will be best if we don't revive him until we're safely back in the castle. We can take him like this. …"

He muttered, "Mobilicorpus." As though invisible strings were tied to Snape's wrists, neck, and knees, he was pulled into a stand-ing position, head still lolling unpleasantly, like a grotesque pup-pet. He hung a few inches above the ground, his limp feet dangling. Lupin picked up the Invisibility Cloak and tucked it safely into his pocket.

“And two of us should be chained to this,” said Black, nudging Pettigrew with his toe. “Just to make sure.”

“I’ll do it,” said Lupin.

“And me,” said Ron savagely, limping forward.

Black conjured heavy manacles from thin air; soon Pettigrew was upright again, left arm chained to Lupin’s right, right arm to Ron’s left. Ron’s face was set. He seemed to have taken Scabbers’s true identity as a personal insult. Crookshanks leapt lightly off the bed and led the way out of the room, his bottlebrush tail held jaun-tily high.

Chapter 20 The Dementor's Kiss

Harry had never been part of a stranger group. Crook-shanks led the way down the stairs; Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron went next, looking like entrants in a six-legged race. Next came Professor Snape, drifting creepily along, his toes hitting each stair as they descended, held up by his own wand, which was being pointed at him by Sirius. Harry and Hermione brought up the rear.

Getting back into the tunnel was difficult. Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron had to turn sideways to manage it; Lupin still had Pettigrew covered with his wand. Harry could see them edging awkwardly along the tunnel in single file. Crookshanks was still in the lead. Harry went right after Black, who was still making Snape drift along ahead of them; he kept bumping his lolling head on the low ceiling. Harry had the impression Black was making no effort to prevent this.

“You know what this means?” Black said abruptly to Harry as they made their slow progress along the tunnel. “Turning Pettigrew in?”

“You’re free,” said Harry.

“Yes … ,” said Black. “But I’m also — I don’t know if anyone ever told you — I’m your godfather.”

“Yeah, I knew that,” said Harry.

“Well … your parents appointed me your guardian,” said Black stiffly. “If anything happened to them …”

Harry waited. Did Black mean what he thought he meant?

“I’ll understand, of course, if you want to stay with your aunt and uncle,” said Black. “But … well … think about it. Once my name’s cleared … if you wanted a … a different home …”

Some sort of explosion took place in the pit of Harry's stomach.

"What — live with you?" he said, accidentally cracking his head on a bit of rock protruding from the ceiling. "Leave the Dursleys?"

"Of course, I thought you wouldn't want to," said Black quickly. "I understand, I just thought I'd —"

"Are you insane?" said Harry, his voice easily as croaky as Black's. "Of course I want to leave the Dursleys! Have you got a house? When can I move in?"

Black turned right around to look at him; Snape's head was scraping the ceiling but Black didn't seem to care.

"You want to?" he said. "You mean it?"

"Yeah, I mean it!" said Harry.

Black's gaunt face broke into the first true smile Harry had seen upon it. The difference it made was startling, as though a person ten years younger were shining through the starved mask; for a mo-ment, he was recognizable as the man who had laughed at Harry's parents' wedding.

They did not speak again until they had reached the end of the tunnel. Crookshanks darted up first; he had evidently pressed his paw to the knot on the trunk, because Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron clambered upward without any sound of savaging branches.

Black saw Snape up through the hole, then stood back for Harry and Hermione to pass. At last, all of them were out.

The grounds were very dark now; the only light came from the distant windows of the castle. Without a word, they set off. Petti-grew was still wheezing and occasionally whimpering. Harry's mind was buzzing. He was going to leave the Dursleys. He was go-ing to live

with Sirius Black, his parents' best friend. … He felt dazed. … What would happen when he told the Dursleys he was going to live with the convict they'd seen on television… !

"One wrong move, Peter," said Lupin threateningly ahead. His wand was still pointed sideways at Pettigrew's chest.

Silently they tramped through the grounds, the castle lights growing slowly larger. Snape was still drifting weirdly ahead of Black, his chin bumping on his chest. And then —A cloud shifted. There were suddenly dim shadows on the ground. Their party was bathed in moonlight.

Snape collided with Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron, who had stopped abruptly. Black froze. He flung out one arm to make Harry and Hermione stop.

Harry could see Lupin's silhouette. He had gone rigid. Then his limbs began to shake.

"Oh, my —" Hermione gasped. "He didn't take his potion tonight! He's not safe!"

"Run," Black whispered. "Run. Now."

But Harry couldn't run. Ron was chained to Pettigrew and Lupin. He leapt forward but Black caught him around the chest and threw him back.

"Leave it to me — RUN!"

There was a terrible snarling noise. Lupin's head was lengthening. So was his body. His shoulders were hunching. Hair was sprouting visibly on his face and hands, which were curling into clawed paws. Crookshanks's hair was on end again; he was backing away —As the werewolf reared, snapping its long jaws, Sirius disap-peared from Harry's side. He had transformed. The enormous, bearlike dog

bounded forward. As the werewolf wrenched itself free of the manacle binding it, the dog seized it about the neck and pulled it backward, away from Ron and Pettigrew. They were locked, jaw to jaw, claws ripping at each other —Harry stood, transfixed by the sight, too intent upon the battle to notice anything else. It was Hermione's scream that alerted him —Pettigrew had dived for Lupin's dropped wand. Ron, unsteady on his bandaged leg, fell. There was a bang, a burst of light — and Ron lay motionless on the ground. Another bang — Crookshanks flew into the air and back to the earth in a heap.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry yelled, pointing his own wand at Petti-grew; Lupin's wand flew high into the air and out of sight. "Stay where you are!" Harry shouted, running forward.

Too late. Pettigrew had transformed. Harry saw his bald tail whip through the manacle on Ron's outstretched arm and heard a scurrying through the grass.

There was a howl and a rumbling growl; Harry turned to see the werewolf taking flight; it was galloping into the forest —"Sirius, he's gone, Pettigrew transformed!" Harry yelled.

Black was bleeding; there were gashes across his muzzle and back, but at Harry's words he scrambled up again, and in an instant, the sound of his paws faded to silence as he pounded away across the grounds.

Harry and Hermione dashed over to Ron.

"What did he do to him?" Hermione whispered. Ron's eyes were only half-closed, his mouth hung open; he was definitely alive, they could hear him breathing, but he didn't seem to recognize them.

"I don't know. …"

Harry looked desperately around. Black and Lupin both gone … they had no one but Snape for company, still hanging, unconscious, in midair.

“We’d better get them up to the castle and tell someone,” said Harry, pushing his hair out of his eyes, trying to think straight. Come —”

But then, from beyond the range of their vision, they heard a yelping, a whining: a dog in pain. …“Sirius,” Harry muttered, staring into the darkness.

He had a moment’s indecision, but there was nothing they could do for Ron at the moment, and by the sound of it, Black was in trouble — Harry set off at a run, Hermione right behind him. The yelping seemed to be coming from the ground near the edge of the lake. They pelted toward it, and Harry, running flat out, felt the cold without realizing what it must mean —The yelping stopped abruptly. As they reached the lakeshore, they saw why — Sirius had turned back into a man. He was crouched on all fours, his hands over his head.

“Nooo,” he moaned. “Noooo … please.…”

And then Harry saw them. Dementors, at least a hundred of them, gliding in a black mass around the lake toward them. He spun around, the familiar, icy cold penetrating his insides, fog starting to obscure his vision; more were appearing out of the dark-ness on every side; they were encircling them. …“Hermione, think of something happy!” Harry yelled, raising his wand, blinking furiously to try and clear his vision, shaking his head to rid it of the faint screaming that had started inside it —I’m going to live with my godfather. I’m leaving the Dursleys.

He forced himself to think of Black, and only Black, and began to chant: “Expecto patronum! Expecto patronum!”

Black gave a shudder, rolled over, and lay motionless on the ground, pale as death.

He'll be all right. I'm going to go and live with him.

"Expecto patronum! Hermione, help me! Expecto patronum!"

"Expecto —" Hermione whispered, "expecto — expecto —"

But she couldn't do it. The dementors were closing in, barely ten feet from them. They formed a solid wall around Harry and Hermione, and were getting closer. …"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry yelled, trying to blot the screaming from his ears. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

A thin wisp of silver escaped his wand and hovered like mist be-fore him. At the same moment, Harry felt Hermione collapse next to him. He was alone … completely alone. …"Expecto — expecto patronum —"

Harry felt his knees hit the cold grass. Fog was clouding his eyes. With a huge effort, he fought to remember — Sirius was inno-cent — innocent — We'll be okay — I'm going to live with him —"Expecto patronum!" he gasped.

By the feeble light of his formless Patronus, he saw a dementor halt, very close to him. It couldn't walk through the cloud of silver mist Harry had conjured. A dead, slimy hand slid out from under the cloak. It made a gesture as though to sweep the Patronus aside.

"No — no —" Harry gasped. "He's innocent … expecto — expecto patronum —"

He could feel them watching him, hear their rattling breath like an evil wind around him. The nearest dementor seemed to be con-sidering him. Then it raised both its rotting hands — and lowered its hood.

Where there should have been eyes, there was only thin, gray scabbed skin, stretched blankly over empty sockets. But there was a mouth … a gaping, shapeless hole, sucking the air with the sound of a death rattle.

A paralyzing terror filled Harry so that he couldn't move or speak. His Patronus flickered and died.

White fog was blinding him. He had to fight … expecto pa-tronum … he couldn't see … and in the distance, he heard the fa-miliar screaming … expecto patronum … he groped in the mist for Sirius, and found his arm … they weren't going to take him. …But a pair of strong, clammy hands suddenly attached them-selves around Harry's neck. They were forcing his face upward. … He could feel its breath. … It was going to get rid of him first. … He could feel its putrid breath. … His mother was screaming in his ears. … She was going to be the last thing he ever heard —And then, through the fog that was drowning him, he thought he saw a silvery light growing brighter and brighter. … He felt himself fall forward onto the grass. … Facedown, too weak to move, sick and shaking, Harry opened his eyes. The dementor must have released him. The blinding light was illuminating the grass around him. … The screaming had stopped, the cold was ebbing away. …Something was driving the dementors back. … It was circling around him and Black and Hermione. … They were leaving. … The air was warm again. …With every ounce of strength he could muster, Harry raised his head a few inches and saw an animal amid the light, galloping away across the lake. … Eyes blurred with sweat, Harry tried to make out what it was. … It was as bright as a unicorn. … Fighting to stay conscious, Harry watched it canter to a halt as it reached the opposite shore. For a moment, Harry saw, by its brightness, some-body welcoming it back … raising his hand to pat it … someone who looked strangely familiar … but it couldn't be … Harry didn't understand. He couldn't think anymore. He felt the last of his strength leave him, and his head hit the ground as he fainted.

Chapter 21 Hermione's Secret

“Shocking business … shocking … miracle none of them died … never heard the like … by thunder, it was lucky you were there, Snape. …”

“Thank you, Minister.”

“Order of Merlin, Second Class, I’d say. First Class, if I can wangle it!”

“Thank you very much indeed, Minister.”

“Nasty cut you’ve got there. … Black’s work, I suppose?”

“As a matter of fact, it was Potter, Weasley, and Granger, Minis-ter. …”

“No!”

“Black had bewitched them, I saw it immediately. A Confundus Charm, to judge by their behavior. They seemed to think there was a possibility he was innocent. They weren’t responsible for their ac-tions. On the other hand, their interference might have permitted Black to escape. … They obviously thought they were going to catch Black single-handed. They’ve got away with a great deal be-fore now. … I’m afraid it’s given them a rather high opinion of themselves … and of course Potter has always been allowed an ex-traordinary amount of license by the headmaster —”

“Ah, well, Snape … Harry Potter, you know … we’ve all got a bit of a blind spot where he’s concerned.”

“And yet — is it good for him to be given so much special treat-ment? Personally, I try and treat him like any other student. And any other student would be suspended — at the very least — for leading his friends into such danger. Consider, Minister — against all school

rules — after all the precautions put in place for his pro-tection — out-of-bounds, at night, consorting with a werewolf and a murderer — and I have reason to believe he has been visiting Hogsmeade illegally too —"

"Well, well … we shall see, Snape, we shall see. … The boy has undoubtedly been foolish. …"

Harry lay listening with his eyes tight shut. He felt very groggy. The words he was hearing seemed to be traveling very slowly from his ears to his brain, so that it was difficult to understand. … His limbs felt like lead; his eyelids too heavy to lift. … He wanted to lie here, on this comfortable bed, forever. …"What amazes me most is the behavior of the dementors … you've really no idea what made them retreat, Snape?"

"No, Minister … by the time I had come 'round they were heading back to their positions at the entrances. …"

"Extraordinary. And yet Black, and Harry, and the girl —"

"All unconscious by the time I reached them. I bound and gagged Black, naturally, conjured stretchers, and brought them all straight back to the castle."

There was a pause. Harry's brain seemed to be moving a little faster, and as it did, a gnawing sensation grew in the pit of his stom-ach. … He opened his eyes.

Everything was slightly blurred. Somebody had removed his glasses. He was lying in the dark hospital wing. At the very end of the ward, he could make out Madam Pomfrey with her back to him, bending over a bed. Harry squinted. Ron's red hair was visible beneath Madam Pomfrey's arm.

Harry moved his head over on the pillow. In the bed to his right lay Hermione. Moonlight was falling across her bed. Her eyes were open

too. She looked petrified, and when she saw that Harry was awake, pressed a finger to her lips, then pointed to the hospital wing door. It was ajar, and the voices of Cornelius Fudge and Snape were coming through it from the corridor outside.

Madam Pomfrey now came walking briskly up the dark ward to Harry's bed. He turned to look at her. She was carrying the largest block of chocolate he had ever seen in his life. It looked like a small boulder.

"Ah, you're awake!" she said briskly. She placed the chocolate on Harry's bedside table and began breaking it apart with a small hammer.

"How's Ron?" said Harry and Hermione together.

"He'll live," said Madam Pomfrey grimly. "As for you two … you'll be staying here until I'm satisfied you're — Potter, what do you think you're doing?"

Harry was sitting up, putting his glasses back on, and picking up his wand.

"I need to see the headmaster," he said.

"Potter," said Madam Pomfrey soothingly, "it's all right. They've got Black. He's locked away upstairs. The dementors will be per-forming the kiss any moment now —"

"WHAT?"

Harry jumped up out of bed; Hermione had done the same. But his shout had been heard in the corridor outside; next second, Cor-nelius Fudge and Snape had entered the ward.

"Harry, Harry, what's this?" said Fudge, looking agitated. "You should be in bed — has he had any chocolate?" he asked Madam Pomfrey

anxiously.

“Minister, listen!” Harry said. “Sirius Black’s innocent! Peter Pet-tigrew faked his own death! We saw him tonight! You can’t let the dementors do that thing to Sirius, he’s —”

But Fudge was shaking his head with a small smile on his face.

“Harry, Harry, you’re very confused, you’ve been through a dreadful ordeal, lie back down, now, we’ve got everything under control. …”

“YOU HAVEN’T!” Harry yelled. “YOU’VE GOT THE WRONG MAN!”

“Minister, listen, please,” Hermione said; she had hurried to Harry’s side and was gazing imploringly into Fudge’s face. “I saw him too. It was Ron’s rat, he’s an Animagus, Pettigrew, I mean, and —”

“You see, Minister?” said Snape. “Confunded, both of them. … Black’s done a very good job on them. …”

“WE’RE NOT CONFUNDED!” Harry roared.

“Minister! Professor!” said Madam Pomfrey angrily. “I must in-sist that you leave. Potter is my patient, and he should not be dis-tressed!”

“I’m not distressed, I’m trying to tell them what happened!” Harry said furiously. “If they’d just listen —”

But Madam Pomfrey suddenly stuffed a large chunk of choco-late into Harry’s mouth; he choked, and she seized the opportunity to force him back onto the bed.

“Now, please, Minister, these children need care. Please leave —”

The door opened again. It was Dumbledore. Harry swallowed his mouthful of chocolate with great difficulty and got up again.

“Professor Dumbledore, Sirius Black —”

“For heaven’s sake!” said Madam Pomfrey hysterically. “Is this a hospital wing or not? Headmaster, I must insist —”

“My apologies, Poppy, but I need a word with Mr. Potter and Miss Granger,” said Dumbledore calmly. “I have just been talking to Sirius Black —”

“I suppose he’s told you the same fairy tale he’s planted in Potter’s mind?” spat Snape. “Something about a rat, and Pettigrew being alive —”

“That, indeed, is Black’s story,” said Dumbledore, surveying Snape closely through his half-moon spectacles.

“And does my evidence count for nothing?” snarled Snape. “Peter Pettigrew was not in the Shrieking Shack, nor did I see any sign of him on the grounds.”

“That was because you were knocked out, Professor!” said Hermione earnestly. “You didn’t arrive in time to hear —”

“Miss Granger, HOLD YOUR TONGUE!”

“Now, Snape,” said Fudge, startled, “the young lady is disturbed in her mind, we must make allowances —”

“I would like to speak to Harry and Hermione alone,” said Dumbledore abruptly. “Cornelius, Severus, Poppy — please leave us.”

“Headmaster!” sputtered Madam Pomfrey “They need treat-ment, they need rest —”

“This cannot wait,” said Dumbledore. “I must insist.”

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips and strode away into her office at the end of the ward, slamming the door behind her. Fudge con-sulted the large gold pocket watch dangling from his waistcoat.

"The dementors should have arrived by now," he said. "I'll go and meet them. Dumbledore, I'll see you upstairs."

He crossed to the door and held it open for Snape, but Snape hadn't moved.

"You surely don't believe a word of Black's story?" Snape whispered, his eyes fixed on Dumbledore's face.

"I wish to speak to Harry and Hermione alone," Dumbledore repeated.

Snape took a step toward Dumbledore.

"Sirius Black showed he was capable of murder at the age of six-teen," he breathed. "You haven't forgotten that, Headmaster? You haven't forgotten that he once tried to kill me?"

"My memory is as good as it ever was, Severus," said Dumble-dore quietly.

Snape turned on his heel and marched through the door Fudge was still holding. It closed behind them, and Dumbledore turned to Harry and Hermione. They both burst into speech at the same time.

"Professor, Black's telling the truth — we saw Pettigrew —"

"— he escaped when Professor Lupin turned into a werewolf —"

"— he's a rat —"

"— Pettigrew's front paw, I mean, finger, he cut it off —"

"— Pettigrew attacked Ron, it wasn't Sirius —"

But Dumbledore held up his hand to stem the flood of explana-tions.

“It is your turn to listen, and I beg you will not interrupt me, be-cause there is very little time,” he said quietly. “There is not a shred of proof to support Black’s story, except your word — and the word of two thirteen-year-old wizards will not convince anybody. A street full of eyewitnesses swore they saw Sirius murder Pettigrew. I myself gave evidence to the Ministry that Sirius had been the Potters’ Secret-Keeper.”

“Professor Lupin can tell you —” Harry said, unable to stop himself.

“Professor Lupin is currently deep in the forest, unable to tell anyone anything. By the time he is human again, it will be too late, Sirius will be worse than dead. I might add that werewolves are so mistrusted by most of our kind that his support will count for very little — and the fact that he and Sirius are old friends —”

“But —”

“Listen to me, Harry. It is too late, you understand me? You must see that Professor Snape’s version of events is far more convincing than yours.”

“He hates Sirius,” Hermione said desperately. “All because of some stupid trick Sirius played on him —”

“Sirius has not acted like an innocent man. The attack on the Fat Lady — entering Gryffindor Tower with a knife — without Pettigrew, alive or dead, we have no chance of overturning Sirius’s sentence.”

“But you believe us.”

“Yes, I do,” said Dumbledore quietly. “But I have no power to make other men see the truth, or to overrule the Minister of Magic. …Harry stared up into the grave face and felt as though the ground beneath him were falling sharply away. He had grown used to the idea that Dumbledore could solve anything. He had expected Dumbledore to

pull some amazing solution out of the air. But no … their last hope was gone.

“What we need,” said Dumbledore slowly, and his light blue eyes moved from Harry to Hermione, “is more time.”

“But —” Hermione began. And then her eyes became very round. “OH!”

“Now, pay attention,” said Dumbledore, speaking very low, and very clearly. “Sirius is locked in Professor Flitwick’s office on the seventh floor. Thirteenth window from the right of the West Tower. If all goes well, you will be able to save more than one in-nocent life tonight. But remember this, both of you: you must not be seen. Miss Granger, you know the law — you know what is at stake. … You — must — not — be — seen.”

Harry didn’t have a clue what was going on. Dumbledore had turned on his heel and looked back as he reached the door.

“I am going to lock you in. It is —” he consulted his watch, “five minutes to midnight. Miss Granger, three turns should do it. Good luck.”

“Good luck?” Harry repeated as the door closed behind Dumbledore. “Three turns? What’s he talking about? What are we supposed to do?”

But Hermione was fumbling with the neck of her robes, pulling from beneath them a very long, very fine gold chain.

“Harry, come here,” she said urgently. “Quick!”

Harry moved toward her, completely bewildered. She was holding the chain out. He saw a tiny, sparkling hourglass hanging from it.

“Here —”

She had thrown the chain around his neck too.

“Ready?” she said breathlessly.

“What are we doing?” Harry said, completely lost.

Hermione turned the hourglass over three times.

The dark ward dissolved. Harry had the sensation that he was flying very fast, backward. A blur of colors and shapes rushed past him, his ears were pounding, he tried to yell but couldn’t hear his own voice — And then he felt solid ground beneath his feet, and everything came into focus again —He was standing next to Hermione in the deserted entrance hall and a stream of golden sunlight was falling across the paved floor from the open front doors. He looked wildly around at Hermione, the chain of the hourglass cutting into his neck.

“Hermione, what — ?”

“In here!” Hermione seized Harry’s arm and dragged him across the hall to the door of a broom closet; she opened it, pushed him inside among the buckets and mops, then slammed the door be-hind them.

“What — how — Hermione, what happened?”

“We’ve gone back in time,” Hermione whispered, lifting the chain off Harry’s neck in the darkness. “Three hours back …”

Harry found his own leg and gave it a very hard pinch. It hurt a lot, which seemed to rule out the possibility that he was having a very bizarre dream.

“But —”

“Shh! Listen! Someone’s coming! I think — I think it might be us!”

Hermione had her ear pressed against the cupboard door.

"Footsteps across the hall … yes, I think it's us going down to Hagrid's!"

"Are you telling me," Harry whispered, "that we're here in this cupboard and we're out there too?"

"Yes," said Hermione, her ear still glued to the cupboard door. "I'm sure it's us. It doesn't sound like more than three people … and we're walking slowly because we're under the Invisibility Cloak —"

She broke off, still listening intently.

"We've gone down the front steps. …"

Hermione sat down on an upturned bucket, looking desperately anxious, but Harry wanted a few questions answered.

"Where did you get that hourglass thing?"

"It's called a Time-Turner," Hermione whispered, "and I got it from Professor McGonagall on our first day back. I've been using it all year to get to all my lessons. Professor McGonagall made me swear I wouldn't tell anyone. She had to write all sorts of letters to the Ministry of Magic so I could have one. She had to tell them that I was a model student, and that I'd never, ever use it for anything except my studies. … I've been turning it back so I could do hours over again, that's how I've been doing several lessons at once, see? But …"Harry, I don't understand what Dumbledore wants us to do. Why did he tell us to go back three hours? How's that going to help Sirius?"

Harry stared at her shadowy face.

"There must be something that happened around now he wants us to change," he said slowly. "What happened? We were walking down to Hagrid's three hours ago. …"

“This is three hours ago, and we are walking down to Hagrid’s,” said Hermione. “We just heard ourselves leaving. …”

Harry frowned; he felt as though he were screwing up his whole brain in concentration.

“Dumbledore just said — just said we could save more than one innocent life. …” And then it hit him. “Hermione, we’re going to save Buckbeak!”

“But — how will that help Sirius?”

“Dumbledore said — he just told us where the window is — the window of Flitwick’s office! Where they’ve got Sirius locked up! We’ve got to fly Buckbeak up to the window and rescue Sirius! Sirius can escape on Buckbeak — they can escape to-gether!”

From what Harry could see of Hermione’s face, she looked terri-fied.

“If we manage that without being seen, it’ll be a miracle!”

“Well, we’ve got to try, haven’t we?” said Harry. He stood up and pressed his ear against the door.

“Doesn’t sound like anyone’s there. … Come on, let’s go. …”

Harry pushed open the closet door. The entrance hall was de-serted. As quietly and quickly as they could, they darted out of the closet and down the stone steps. The shadows were already length-ening, the tops of the trees in the Forbidden Forest gilded once more with gold.

“If anyone’s looking out of the window —” Hermione squeaked, looking up at the castle behind them.

“We’ll run for it,” said Harry determinedly. “Straight into the forest, all right? We’ll have to hide behind a tree or something and keep a lookout —”

“Okay, but we’ll go around by the greenhouses!” said Hermione breathlessly. “We need to keep out of sight of Hagrid’s front door, or we’ll see us! We must be nearly at Hagrid’s by now!”

Still working out what she meant, Harry set off at a sprint, Hermione behind him. They tore across the vegetable gardens to the greenhouses, paused for a moment behind them, then set off again, fast as they could, skirting around the Whomping Willow, tearing toward the shelter of the forest. …Safe in the shadows of the trees, Harry turned around; seconds later, Hermione arrived beside him, panting.

“Right,” she gasped. “We need to sneak over to Hagrid’s. … Keep out of sight, Harry. …”

They made their way silently through the trees, keeping to the very edge of the forest. Then, as they glimpsed the front of Hagrid’s house, they heard a knock upon his door. They moved quickly behind a wide oak trunk and peered out from either side. Hagrid had appeared in his doorway, shaking and white, looking around to see who had knocked. And Harry heard his own voice.

“It’s us. We’re wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off.”

“Yeh shouldn’ve come!” Hagrid whispered. He stood back, then shut the door quickly.

“This is the weirdest thing we’ve ever done,” Harry said fer-vently.

“Let’s move along a bit,” Hermione whispered. “We need to get nearer to Buckbeak!”

They crept through the trees until they saw the nervous hip-pogriff, tethered to the fence around Hagrid’s pumpkin patch.

“Now?” Harry whispered.

“No!” said Hermione. “If we steal him now, those Committee people will think Hagrid set him free! We’ve got to wait until they’ve seen he’s tied outside!”

“That’s going to give us about sixty seconds,” said Harry. This was starting to seem impossible.

At that moment, there was a crash of breaking china from inside Hagrid’s cabin.

“That’s Hagrid breaking the milk jug,” Hermione whispered. “I’m going to find Scabbers in a moment —”

Sure enough, a few minutes later, they heard Hermione’s shriek of surprise.

“Hermione,” said Harry suddenly, “what if we — we just run in there and grab Pettigrew —”

“No!” said Hermione in a terrified whisper. “Don’t you under-stand? We’re breaking one of the most important wizarding laws! Nobody’s supposed to change time, nobody! You heard Dumble-dore, if we’re seen —”

“We’d only be seen by ourselves and Hagrid!”

“Harry, what do you think you’d do if you saw yourself bursting into Hagrid’s house?” said Hermione.

“I’d — I’d think I’d gone mad,” said Harry, “or I’d think there was some Dark Magic going on —”

“Exactly! You wouldn’t understand, you might even attack your-self! Don’t you see? Professor McGonagall told me what awful things have happened when wizards have meddled with time. … Loads of them ended up killing their past or future selves by mis-take!”

“Okay!” said Harry. “It was just an idea, I just thought —”

But Hermione nudged him and pointed toward the castle. Harry moved his head a few inches to get a clear view of the distant front doors. Dumbledore, Fudge, the old Committee member, and Macnair the executioner were coming down the steps.

“We’re about to come out!” Hermione breathed.

And sure enough, moments later, Hagrid’s back door opened, and Harry saw himself, Ron, and Hermione walking out of it with Hagrid. It was, without a doubt, the strangest sensation of his life, standing behind the tree, and watching himself in the pumpkin patch.

“It’s okay, Beaky, it’s okay … ,” Hagrid said to Buckbeak. Then he turned to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “Go on. Get goin’.”

“Hagrid, we can’t —”

“We’ll tell them what really happened —”

“They can’t kill him —”

“Go! It’s bad enough without you lot in trouble an’ all!”

Harry watched the Hermione in the pumpkin patch throw the Invisibility Cloak over him and Ron.

“Go quick. Don’ listen. …”

There was a knock on Hagrid’s front door. The execution party had arrived. Hagrid turned around and headed back into his cabin, leaving the back door ajar. Harry watched the grass flatten in patches all around the cabin and heard three pairs of feet retreat-ing. He, Ron, and Hermione had gone … but the Harry and Hermione hidden in the trees could now hear what was happening inside the cabin through the back door.

“Where is the beast?” came the cold voice of Macnair.

“Out — outside,” Hagrid croaked.

Harry pulled his head out of sight as Macnair’s face appeared at Hagrid’s window, staring out at Buckbeak. Then they heard Fudge.

“We — er — have to read you the official notice of execution, Hagrid. I’ll make it quick. And then you and Macnair need to sign it. Macnair, you’re supposed to listen too, that’s procedure —”

Macnair’s face vanished from the window. It was now or never.

“Wait here,” Harry whispered to Hermione. “I’ll do it.”

As Fudge’s voice started again, Harry darted out from behind his tree, vaulted the fence into the pumpkin patch, and approached Buckbeak.

“It is the decision of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures that the hippogriff Buckbeak, hereafter called the condemned, shall be executed on the sixth of June at sundown —”

Careful not to blink, Harry stared up into Buckbeak’s fierce or-ange eyes once more and bowed. Buckbeak sank to his scaly knees and then stood up again. Harry began to fumble with the knot of rope tying Buckbeak to the fence.

“… sentenced to execution by beheading, to be carried out by the Committee’s appointed executioner, Walden Macnair …”

“Come on, Buckbeak,” Harry murmured, “come on, we’re go-ing to help you. Quietly … quietly …”

“… as witnessed below. Hagrid, you sign here. …”

Harry threw all his weight onto the rope, but Buckbeak had dug in his front feet.

“Well, let’s get this over with,” said the reedy voice of the Com-mittee member from inside Hagrid’s cabin. “Hagrid, perhaps it will be better if you stay inside —”

“No, I — I wan’ ter be with him. … I don’ wan’ him ter be alone —”

Footsteps echoed from within the cabin.

“Buckbeak, move!” Harry hissed.

Harry tugged harder on the rope around Buckbeak’s neck. The hippogriff began to walk, rustling its wings irritably. They were still ten feet away from the forest, in plain view of Hagrid’s back door.

“One moment, please, Macnair,” came Dumbledore’s voice. “You need to sign too.” The footsteps stopped. Harry heaved on the rope. Buckbeak snapped his beak and walked a little faster.

Hermione’s white face was sticking out from behind a tree.

“Harry, hurry!” she mouthed.

Harry could still hear Dumbledore’s voice talking from within the cabin. He gave the rope another wrench. Buckbeak broke into a grudging trot. They had reached the trees. …“Quick! Quick!” Hermione moaned, darting out from behind her tree, seizing the rope too and adding her weight to make Buck-beak move faster. Harry looked over his shoulder; they were now blocked from sight; they couldn’t see Hagrid’s garden at all.

“Stop!” he whispered to Hermione. “They might hear us —”

Hagrid’s back door had opened with a bang. Harry, Hermione, and Buckbeak stood quite still; even the hippogriff seemed to be listening intently.

Silence … then —

“Where is it?” said the reedy voice of the Committee member. “Where is the beast?”

“It was tied here!” said the executioner furiously. “I saw it! Just here!”

“How extraordinary,” said Dumbledore. There was a note of amusement in his voice.

“Beaky!” said Hagrid huskily.

There was a swishing noise, and the thud of an axe. The execu-tioner seemed to have swung it into the fence in anger. And then came the howling, and this time they could hear Hagrid’s words through his sobs.

“Gone! Gone! Bless his little beak, he’s gone! Musta pulled him-self free! Beaky, yeh clever boy!”

Buckbeak started to strain against the rope, trying to get back to Hagrid. Harry and Hermione tightened their grip and dug their heels into the forest floor to stop him.

“Someone untied him!” the executioner was snarling. “We should search the grounds, the forest —”

“Macnair, if Buckbeak has indeed been stolen, do you really think the thief will have led him away on foot?” said Dumbledore, still sounding amused. “Search the skies, if you will. … Hagrid, I could do with a cup of tea. Or a large brandy.”

“O’ — o’ course, Professor,” said Hagrid, who sounded weak with happiness. “Come in, come in. …”

Harry and Hermione listened closely. They heard footsteps, the soft cursing of the executioner, the snap of the door, and then si-lence once more.

“Now what?” whispered Harry, looking around.

“We’ll have to hide in here,” said Hermione, who looked very shaken. “We need to wait until they’ve gone back to the castle. Then we wait until it’s safe to fly Buckbeak up to Sirius’s window. He won’t be there for another couple of hours. … Oh, this is go-ing to be difficult. …”

She looked nervously over her shoulder into the depths of the forest. The sun was setting now.

“We’re going to have to move,” said Harry, thinking hard. “We’ve got to be able to see the Whomping Willow, or we won’t know what’s going on.”

“Okay,” said Hermione, getting a firmer grip on Buckbeak’s rope. “But we’ve got to keep out of sight, Harry, remember. …”

They moved around the edge of the forest, darkness falling thickly around them, until they were hidden behind a clump of trees through which they could make out the Willow.

“There’s Ron!” said Harry suddenly.

A dark figure was sprinting across the lawn and its shout echoed through the still night air.

“Get away from him — get away — Scabbers, come here —”

And then they saw two more figures materialize out of nowhere. Harry watched himself and Hermione chasing after Ron. Then he saw Ron dive.

“Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat —”

“There’s Sirius!” said Harry. The great shape of the dog had bounded out from the roots of the Willow. They saw him bowl Harry over, then seize Ron. …“Looks even worse from here, doesn’t it?” said Harry,

watching the dog pulling Ron into the roots. “Ouch — look, I just got wal-loped by the tree — and so did you — this is weird —”

The Whomping Willow was creaking and lashing out with its lower branches; they could see themselves darting here and there, trying to reach the trunk. And then the tree froze.

“That was Crookshanks pressing the knot,” said Hermione.

“And there we go … ,” Harry muttered. “We’re in.”

The moment they disappeared, the tree began to move again. Seconds later, they heard footsteps quite close by. Dumbledore, Macnair, Fudge, and the old Committee member were making their way up to the castle.

“Right after we’d gone down into the passage!” said Hermione. “If only Dumbledore had come with us …”

“Macnair and Fudge would’ve come too,” said Harry bitterly. “I bet you anything Fudge would’ve told Macnair to murder Sirius on the spot. …”

They watched the four men climb the castle steps and disappear from view. For a few minutes the scene was deserted. Then —“Here comes Lupin!” said Harry as they saw another figure sprinting down the stone steps and haring toward the Willow. Harry looked up at the sky. Clouds were obscuring the moon com-pletely.

They watched Lupin seize a broken branch from the ground and prod the knot on the trunk. The tree stopped fighting, and Lupin, too, disappeared into the gap in its roots.

“If he’d only grabbed the cloak,” said Harry. “It’s just lying there. …”

He turned to Hermione.

“If I just dashed out now and grabbed it, Snape’d never be able to get it and —”

“Harry, we mustn’t be seen!”

“How can you stand this?” he asked Hermione fiercely. “Just standing here and watching it happen?” He hesitated. “I’m going to grab the cloak!”

“Harry, no!”

Hermione seized the back of Harry’s robes not a moment too soon. Just then, they heard a burst of song. It was Hagrid, making his way up to the castle, singing at the top of his voice, and weav-ing slightly as he walked. A large bottle was swinging from his hands.

“See?” Hermione whispered. “See what would have happened? We’ve got to keep out of sight! No, Buckbeak!”

The hippogriff was making frantic attempts to get to Hagrid again; Harry seized his rope too, straining to hold Buckbeak back. They watched Hagrid meander tipsily up to the castle. He was gone. Buckbeak stopped fighting to get away. His head drooped sadly.

Barely two minutes later, the castle doors flew open yet again, and Snape came charging out of them, running toward the Willow.

Harry’s fists clenched as they watched Snape skid to a halt next to the tree, looking around. He grabbed the cloak and held it up.

“Get your filthy hands off it,” Harry snarled under his breath.

“Shh!”

Snape seized the branch Lupin had used to freeze the tree, prod-ded the knot, and vanished from view as he put on the cloak.

“So that’s it,” said Hermione quietly. “We’re all down there … and now we’ve just got to wait until we come back up again. …”

She took the end of Buckbeak’s rope and tied it securely around the nearest tree, then sat down on the dry ground, arms around her knees.

“Harry, there’s something I don’t understand. … Why didn’t the dementors get Sirius? I remember them coming, and then I think I passed out … there were so many of them. …”

Harry sat down too. He explained what he’d seen; how, as the nearest dementor had lowered its mouth to Harry’s, a large silver something had come galloping across the lake and forced the dementors to retreat.

Hermione’s mouth was slightly open by the time Harry had fin-ished.

“But what was it?”

“There’s only one thing it could have been, to make the demen-tors go,” said Harry. “A real Patronus. A powerful one.”

“But who conjured it?”

Harry didn’t say anything. He was thinking back to the person he’d seen on the other bank of the lake. He knew who he thought it had been … but how could it have been?

“Didn’t you see what they looked like?” said Hermione eagerly. “Was it one of the teachers?”

“No,” said Harry. “He wasn’t a teacher.”

“But it must have been a really powerful wizard, to drive all those dementors away. … If the Patronus was shining so brightly, didn’t it light him up? Couldn’t you see — ?”

“Yeah, I saw him,” said Harry slowly. “But … maybe I imag-ined it. … I wasn’t thinking straight. … I passed out right after-ward. …”

“Who did you think it was?”

“I think —” Harry swallowed, knowing how strange this was going to sound. “I think it was my dad.”

Harry glanced up at Hermione and saw that her mouth was fully open now. She was gazing at him with a mixture of alarm and pity.

“Harry, your dad’s — well — dead,” she said quietly.

“I know that,” said Harry quickly.

“You think you saw his ghost?”

“I don’t know … no … he looked solid. …”

“But then —”

“Maybe I was seeing things,” said Harry. “But … from what I could see … it looked like him. … I’ve got photos of him. …”

Hermione was still looking at him as though worried about his sanity.

“I know it sounds crazy,” said Harry flatly. He turned to look at Buckbeak, who was digging his beak into the ground, apparently searching for worms. But he wasn’t really watching Buckbeak.

He was thinking about his father and about his father’s three oldest friends … Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. … Had all four of them been out on the grounds tonight? Wormtail had reappeared this evening when everyone had thought he was dead. … Was it so impossible his father had done the same? Had he been seeing things across the lake? The figure had been too far away to see distinctly … yet he had felt sure, for a moment, before he’d lost consciousness. … The leaves overhead rustled faintly in the breeze. The moon drifted in

and out of sight behind the shifting clouds. Hermione sat with her face turned toward the Willow, waiting.

And then, at last, after over an hour …“Here we come!” Hermione whispered.

She and Harry got to their feet. Buckbeak raised his head. They saw Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron clambering awkwardly out of the hole in the roots … followed by the unconscious Snape, drifting weirdly upward. Next came Harry, Hermione, and Black. They all began to walk toward the castle.

Harry’s heart was starting to beat very fast. He glanced up at the sky. Any moment now, that cloud was going to move aside and show the moon. …“Harry,” Hermione muttered as though she knew exactly what he was thinking, “we’ve got to stay put. We mustn’t be seen. There’s nothing we can do. …”

“So we’re just going to let Pettigrew escape all over again. …” said Harry quietly.

“How do you expect to find a rat in the dark?” snapped Hermione. “There’s nothing we can do! We came back to help Sirius; we’re not supposed to be doing anything else!”

“All right!”

The moon slid out from behind its cloud. They saw the tiny fig-ures across the grounds stop. Then they saw movement —“There goes Lupin,” Hermione whispered. “He’s transforming —”

“Hermione!” said Harry suddenly. “We’ve got to move!”

“We mustn’t, I keep telling you —”

“Not to interfere! Lupin’s going to run into the forest, right at us!”

Hermione gasped.

"Quick!" she moaned, dashing to untie Buckbeak. "Quick! Where are we going to go? Where are we going to hide? The de-mentors will be coming any moment —"

"Back to Hagrid's!" Harry said. "It's empty now — come on!"

They ran as fast as they could, Buckbeak cantering along behind them. They could hear the werewolf howling behind them. …The cabin was in sight; Harry skidded to the door, wrenched it open, and Hermione and Buckbeak flashed past him; Harry threw himself in after them and bolted the door. Fang the boarhound barked loudly.

"Shh, Fang, it's us!" said Hermione, hurrying over and scratch-ing his ears to quieten him. "That was really close!" she said to Harry.

"Yeah …"

Harry was looking out of the window. It was much harder to see what was going on from here. Buckbeak seemed very happy to find himself back inside Hagrid's house. He lay down in front of the fire, folded his wings contentedly, and seemed ready for a good nap.

"I think I'd better go outside again, you know," said Harry slowly. "I can't see what's going on — we won't know when it's time —"

Hermione looked up. Her expression was suspicious.

"I'm not going to try and interfere," said Harry quickly. "But if we don't see what's going on, how're we going to know when it's time to rescue Sirius?"

"Well … okay, then … I'll wait here with Buckbeak … but Harry, be careful — there's a werewolf out there — and the de-mentors —"

Harry stepped outside again and edged around the cabin. He could hear yelping in the distance. That meant the dementors were closing in on Sirius. … He and Hermione would be running to him any moment. …Harry stared out toward the lake, his heart doing a kind of drumroll in his chest. … Whoever had sent that Patronus would be appearing at any moment. …For a fraction of a second he stood, irresolute, in front of Ha-grid's door. You must not be seen. But he didn't want to be seen. He wanted to do the seeing. … He had to know. …And there were the dementors. They were emerging out of the darkness from every direction, gliding around the edges of the lake. … They were moving away from where Harry stood, to the opposite bank. … He wouldn't have to get near them. …Harry began to run. He had no thought in his head except his father. … If it was him … if it really was him … he had to know, had to find out. …The lake was coming nearer and nearer, but there was no sign of anybody. On the opposite bank, he could see tiny glimmers of sil-ver — his own attempts at a Patronus —There was a bush at the very edge of the water. Harry threw himself behind it, peering desperately through the leaves. On the opposite bank, the glimmers of silver were suddenly extinguished. A terrified excitement shot through him — any moment now —"Come on!" he muttered, staring about. "Where are you? Dad, come on —"

But no one came. Harry raised his head to look at the circle of dementors across the lake. One of them was lowering its hood. It was time for the rescuer to appear — but no one was coming to help this time —And then it hit him — he understood. He hadn't seen his fa-ther — he had seen himself —Harry flung himself out from behind the bush and pulled out his wand.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" he yelled.

And out of the end of his wand burst, not a shapeless cloud of mist, but a blinding, dazzling, silver animal. He screwed up his eyes, trying to see what it was. It looked like a horse. It was gallop-ing silently away from him, across the black surface of the lake. He saw it lower

its head and charge at the swarming dementors. … Now it was galloping around and around the black shapes on the ground, and the dementors were falling back, scattering, retreating into the darkness. … They were gone.

The Patronus turned. It was cantering back toward Harry across the still surface of the water. It wasn't a horse. It wasn't a unicorn, either. It was a stag. It was shining brightly as the moon above … it was coming back to him. …It stopped on the bank. Its hooves made no mark on the soft ground as it stared at Harry with its large, silver eyes. Slowly, it bowed its antlered head. And Harry realized …"Prongs," he whispered.

But as his trembling fingertips stretched toward the creature, it vanished.

Harry stood there, hand still outstretched. Then, with a great leap of his heart, he heard hooves behind him — he whirled around and saw Hermione dashing toward him, dragging Buck-beak behind her.

"What did you do?" she said fiercely. "You said you were only go-ing to keep a lookout!"

"I just saved all our lives … ," said Harry. "Get behind here — behind this bush — I'll explain."

Hermione listened to what had just happened with her mouth open yet again.

"Did anyone see you?"

"Yes, haven't you been listening? I saw me but I thought I was my dad! It's okay!"

"Harry, I can't believe it. … You conjured up a Patronus that drove away all those dementors! That's very, very advanced magic. …"

“I knew I could do it this time,” said Harry, “because I’d already done it. … Does that make sense?”

“I don’t know — Harry, look at Snape!”

Together they peered around the bush at the other bank. Snape had regained consciousness. He was conjuring stretchers and lift-ing the limp forms of Harry, Hermione, and Black onto them. A fourth stretcher, no doubt bearing Ron, was already floating at his side. Then, wand held out in front of him, he moved them away toward the castle.

“Right, it’s nearly time,” said Hermione tensely, looking at her watch. “We’ve got about forty-five minutes until Dumbledore locks the door to the hospital wing. We’ve got to rescue Sirius and get back into the ward before anybody realizes we’re missing. …”

They waited, watching the moving clouds reflected in the lake, while the bush next to them whispered in the breeze. Buckbeak, bored, was ferreting for worms again.

“D’ you reckon he’s up there yet?” said Harry, checking his watch. He looked up at the castle and began counting the windows to the right of the West Tower.

“Look!” Hermione whispered. “Who’s that? Someone’s coming back out of the castle!”

Harry stared through the darkness. The man was hurrying across the grounds, toward one of the entrances. Something shiny glinted in his belt.

“Macnair!” said Harry. “The executioner! He’s gone to get the dementors! This is it, Hermione —”

Hermione put her hands on Buckbeak’s back and Harry gave her a leg up. Then he placed his foot on one of the lower branches of the

bush and climbed up in front of her. He pulled Buckbeak's rope back over his neck and tied it to the other side of his collar like reins.

"Ready?" he whispered to Hermione. "You'd better hold on to me —"

He nudged Buckbeak's sides with his heels.

Buckbeak soared straight into the dark air. Harry gripped his flanks with his knees, feeling the great wings rising powerfully be-neath them. Hermione was holding Harry very tight around the waist; he could hear her muttering, "Oh, no — I don't like this — oh, I really don't like this —"

Harry urged Buckbeak forward. They were gliding quietly toward the upper floors of the castle. … Harry pulled hard on the left-hand side of the rope, and Buckbeak turned. Harry was trying to count the windows flashing past —"Whoa!" he said, pulling backward as hard as he could.

Buckbeak slowed down and they found themselves at a stop, un-less you counted the fact that they kept rising up and down several feet as the hippogriff beat his wings to remain airborne.

"He's there!" Harry said, spotting Sirius as they rose up beside the window. He reached out, and as Buckbeak's wings fell, was able to tap sharply on the glass.

Black looked up. Harry saw his jaw drop. He leapt from his chair, hurried to the window and tried to open it, but it was locked.

"Stand back!" Hermione called to him, and she took out her wand, still gripping the back of Harry's robes with her left hand.

"Alohomora!"

The window sprang open.

“How — how — ?” said Black weakly, staring at the hippogriff.

“Get on — there’s not much time,” said Harry, gripping Buck-beak firmly on either side of his sleek neck to hold him steady. “You’ve got to get out of here — the dementors are coming — Macnair’s gone to get them.”

Black placed a hand on either side of the window frame and heaved his head and shoulders out of it. It was very lucky he was so thin. In seconds, he had managed to fling one leg over Buckbeak’s back and pull himself onto the hippogriff behind Hermione.

“Okay, Buckbeak, up!” said Harry, shaking the rope. “Up to the tower — come on!”

The hippogriff gave one sweep of its mighty wings and they were soaring upward again, high as the top of the West Tower. Buckbeak landed with a clatter on the battlements, and Harry and Hermione slid off him at once.

“Sirius, you’d better go, quick,” Harry panted. “They’ll reach Flitwick’s office any moment, they’ll find out you’re gone.”

Buckbeak pawed the ground, tossing his sharp head.

“What happened to the other boy? Ron?” croaked Sirius.

“He’s going to be okay. He’s still out of it, but Madam Pomfrey says she’ll be able to make him better. Quick — go —”

But Black was still staring down at Harry.

“How can I ever thank —”

“GO!” Harry and Hermione shouted together.

Black wheeled Buckbeak around, facing the open sky.

“We’ll see each other again,” he said. “You are — truly your fa-ther’s son, Harry. …”

He squeezed Buckbeak’s sides with his heels. Harry and Hermione jumped back as the enormous wings rose once more. … The hip-pogriff took off into the air. … He and his rider became smaller and smaller as Harry gazed after them … then a cloud drifted across the moon. … They were gone.

Chapter 22 Owl Post Again

“Harry!”

Hermione was tugging at his sleeve, staring at her watch. “We’ve got exactly ten minutes to get back down to the hos-pital wing without anybody seeing us — before Dumbledore locks the door —”

“Okay,” said Harry, wrenching his gaze from the sky, “let’s go. …”

They slipped through the doorway behind them and down a tightly spiraling stone staircase. As they reached the bottom of it, they heard voices. They flattened themselves against the wall and listened. It sounded like Fudge and Snape. They were walking quickly along the corridor at the foot of the staircase.

“… only hope Dumbledore’s not going to make difficulties,” Snape was saying. “The Kiss will be performed immediately?”

“As soon as Macnair returns with the dementors. This whole Black affair has been highly embarrassing. I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to informing the Daily Prophet that we’ve got him at last. … I daresay they’ll want to interview you, Snape … and once young Harry’s back in his right mind, I expect he’ll want to tell the Prophet exactly how you saved him. …”

Harry clenched his teeth. He caught a glimpse of Snape’s smirk as he and Fudge passed Harry and Hermione’s hiding place. Their footsteps died away. Harry and Hermione waited a few moments to make sure they’d really gone, then started to run in the opposite direction. Down one staircase, then another, along a new corridor — then they heard a cackling ahead.

“Peeves!” Harry muttered, grabbing Hermione’s wrist. “In here!”

They tore into a deserted classroom to their left just in time. Peeves seemed to be bouncing along the corridor in boisterous good spirits, laughing his head off.

“Oh, he’s horrible,” whispered Hermione, her ear to the door. “I bet he’s all excited because the dementors are going to finish off Sirius. …” She checked her watch. “Three minutes, Harry!”

They waited until Peeves’s gloating voice had faded into the distance, then slid back out of the room and broke into a run again.

“Hermione — what’ll happen — if we don’t get back inside — before Dumbledore locks the door?” Harry panted.

“I don’t want to think about it!” Hermione moaned, checking her watch again. “One minute!”

They had reached the end of the corridor with the hospital wing entrance. “Okay — I can hear Dumbledore,” said Hermione tensely. “Come on, Harry!”

They crept along the corridor. The door opened. Dumbledore’s back appeared.

“I am going to lock you in,” they heard him saying. “It is five minutes to midnight. Miss Granger, three turns should do it. Good luck.”

Dumbledore backed out of the room, closed the door, and took out his wand to magically lock it. Panicking, Harry and Hermione ran forward. Dumbledore looked up, and a wide smile appeared under the long silver mustache. “Well?” he said quietly.

“We did it!” said Harry breathlessly. “Sirius has gone, on Buck-beak. …”

Dumbledore beamed at them.

"Well done. I think —" He listened intently for any sound within the hospital wing. "Yes, I think you've gone too — get in-side — I'll lock you in —"

Harry and Hermione slipped back inside the dormitory. It was empty except for Ron, who was still lying motionless in the end bed. As the lock clicked behind them, Harry and Hermione crept back to their own beds, Hermione tucking the Time-Turner back under her robes. A moment later, Madam Pomfrey came striding back out of her office.

"Did I hear the headmaster leaving? Am I allowed to look after my patients now?"

She was in a very bad mood. Harry and Hermione thought it best to accept their chocolate quietly. Madam Pomfrey stood over them, making sure they ate it. But Harry could hardly swallow. He and Hermione were waiting, listening, their nerves jangling. … And then, as they both took a fourth piece of chocolate from Madam Pomfrey, they heard a distant roar of fury echoing from somewhere above them. …"What was that?" said Madam Pomfrey in alarm.

Now they could hear angry voices, growing louder and louder. Madam Pomfrey was staring at the door.

"Really — they'll wake everybody up! What do they think they're doing?"

Harry was trying to hear what the voices were saying. They were drawing nearer —"He must have Disapparated, Severus. We should have left somebody in the room with him. When this gets out —"

"HE DIDN'T DISAPPARATE!" Snape roared, now very close at hand. "YOU CAN'T APPARATE OR DISAPPARATE IN-SIDE THIS CASTLE! THIS — HAS — SOMETHING — TO — DO — WITH — POTTER!"

"Severus — be reasonable — Harry has been locked up —"

BAM.

The door of the hospital wing burst open.

Fudge, Snape, and Dumbledore came striding into the ward. Dumbledore alone looked calm. Indeed, he looked as though he was quite enjoying himself. Fudge appeared angry. But Snape was beside himself.

“OUT WITH IT, POTTER!” he bellowed. “WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“Professor Snape!” shrieked Madam Pomfrey. “Control your-self!”

“See here, Snape, be reasonable,” said Fudge. “This door’s been locked, we just saw —”

“THEY HELPED HIM ESCAPE, I KNOW IT!” Snape howled, pointing at Harry and Hermione. His face was twisted; spit was flying from his mouth.

“Calm down, man!” Fudge barked. “You’re talking nonsense!”

“YOU DON’T KNOW POTTER!” shrieked Snape. “HE DID IT, I KNOW HE DID IT —”

“That will do, Severus,” said Dumbledore quietly. “Think about what you are saying. This door has been locked since I left the ward ten minutes ago. Madam Pomfrey, have these students left their beds?”

“Of course not!” said Madam Pomfrey, bristling. “I would have heard them!”

“Well, there you have it, Severus,” said Dumbledore calmly. “Unless you are suggesting that Harry and Hermione are able to be in two places at once, I’m afraid I don’t see any point in troubling them further.”

Snape stood there, seething, staring from Fudge, who looked thoroughly shocked at his behavior, to Dumbledore, whose eyes were twinkling behind his glasses. Snape whirled about, robes swishing behind him, and stormed out of the ward.

"Fellow seems quite unbalanced," said Fudge, staring after him. "I'd watch out for him if I were you, Dumbledore."

"Oh, he's not unbalanced," said Dumbledore quietly. "He's just suffered a severe disappointment."

"He's not the only one!" puffed Fudge. "The Daily Prophet's go-ing to have a field day! We had Black cornered and he slipped through our fingers yet again! All it needs now is for the story of that hippogriff's escape to get out, and I'll be a laughingstock! Well … I'd better go and notify the Ministry. …"

"And the dementors?" said Dumbledore. "They'll be removed from the school, I trust?"

"Oh yes, they'll have to go," said Fudge, running his fingers distractedly through his hair. "Never dreamed they'd attempt to ad-minister the Kiss on an innocent boy. … Completely out of con-trol … no, I'll have them packed off back to Azkaban tonight. … Perhaps we should think about dragons at the school entrance. …"

"Hagrid would like that," said Dumbledore, smiling at Harry and Hermione. As he and Fudge left the dormitory, Madam Pom-frey hurried to the door and locked it again. Muttering angrily to herself, she headed back to her office.

There was a low moan from the other end of the ward. Ron had woken up. They could see him sitting up, rubbing his head, look-ing around.

"What — what happened?" he groaned. "Harry? Why are we in here? Where's Sirius? Where's Lupin? What's going on?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other.

“You explain,” said Harry, helping himself to some more choco-late.

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the hospital wing at noon the next day, it was to find an almost deserted castle. The swelter-ing heat and the end of the exams meant that everyone was taking full advantage of another Hogsmeade visit. Neither Ron nor Hermione felt like going, however, so they and Harry wandered onto the grounds, still talking about the extraordinary events of the previous night and wondering where Sirius and Buckbeak were now. Sitting near the lake, watching the giant squid waving its ten-tacles lazily above the water, Harry lost the thread of the conversa-tion as he looked across to the opposite bank. The stag had galloped toward him from there just last night. …A shadow fell across them and they looked up to see a very bleary-eyed Hagrid, mopping his sweaty face with one of his table-cloth-sized handkerchiefs and beaming down at them.

“Know I shouldn’ feel happy, after wha’ happened las’ night,” he said. “I mean, Black escapin’ again, an’ everythin’ — but guess what?”

“What?” they said, pretending to look curious.

“Beaky! He escaped! He’s free! Bin celebratin’ all night!”

“That’s wonderful!” said Hermione, giving Ron a reproving look because he looked as though he was close to laughing.

“Yeah … can’t’ve tied him up properly,” said Hagrid, gazing happily out over the grounds. “I was worried this mornin’, mind … thought he mighta met Professor Lupin on the grounds, but Lupin says he never ate anythin’ las’ night. …”

“What?” said Harry quickly.

“Blimey, haven’ yeh heard?” said Hagrid, his smile fading a little. He lowered his voice, even though there was nobody in sight. “Er — Snape told all the Slytherins this mornin’. … Thought everyone’d know by now … Professor Lupin’s a werewolf, see. An’ he was loose on the grounds las’ night. … He’s packin’ now, o’ course.”

“He’s packing?” said Harry, alarmed. “Why?”

“Leavin’, isn’ he?” said Hagrid, looking surprised that Harry had to ask. “Resigned firs’ thing this mornin’. Says he can’t risk it hap-penin’ again.”

Harry scrambled to his feet.

“I’m going to see him,” he said to Ron and Hermione.

“But if he’s resigned —”

“— doesn’t sound like there’s anything we can do —”

“I don’t care. I still want to see him. I’ll meet you back here.”

Lupin’s office door was open. He had already packed most of his things. The grindylow’s empty tank stood next to his battered old suitcase, which was open and nearly full. Lupin was bending over something on his desk and looked up only when Harry knocked on the door.

“I saw you coming,” said Lupin, smiling. He pointed to the parchment he had been poring over. It was the Marauder’s Map.

“I just saw Hagrid,” said Harry. “And he said you’d resigned. It’s not true, is it?”

“I’m afraid it is,” said Lupin. He started opening his desk draw-ers and taking out the contents.

“Why?” said Harry. “The Ministry of Magic don’t think you were helping Sirius, do they?”

Lupin crossed to the door and closed it behind Harry.

“No. Professor Dumbledore managed to convince Fudge that I was trying to save your lives.” He sighed. “That was the final straw for Severus. I think the loss of the Order of Merlin hit him hard. So he — er — accidentally let slip that I am a werewolf this morning at breakfast.”

“You’re not leaving just because of that!” said Harry.

Lupin smiled wryly.

“This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from par-ents. … They will not want a werewolf teaching their children, Harry. And after last night, I see their point. I could have bitten any of you. … That must never happen again.”

“You’re the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we’ve ever had!” said Harry. “Don’t go!”

Lupin shook his head and didn’t speak. He carried on emptying his drawers. Then, while Harry was trying to think of a good argu-ment to make him stay, Lupin said, “From what the headmaster told me this morning, you saved a lot of lives last night, Harry. If I’m proud of anything I’ve done this year, it’s how much you’ve learned. … Tell me about your Patronus.”

“How d’you know about that?” said Harry, distracted.

“What else could have driven the dementors back?”

Harry told Lupin what had happened. When he’d finished, Lupin was smiling again.

“Yes, your father was always a stag when he transformed,” he said. “You guessed right … that’s why we called him Prongs.”

Lupin threw his last few books into his case, closed the desk drawers, and turned to look at Harry.

“Here — I brought this from the Shrieking Shack last night,” he said, handing Harry back the Invisibility Cloak. “And …” He hes-itated, then held out the Marauder’s Map too. “I am no longer your teacher, so I don’t feel guilty about giving you back this as well. It’s no use to me, and I daresay you, Ron, and Hermione will find uses for it.”

Harry took the map and grinned.

“You told me Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs would’ve wanted to lure me out of school … you said they’d have thought it was funny.”

“And so we would have,” said Lupin, now reaching down to close his case. “I have no hesitation in saying that James would have been highly disappointed if his son had never found any of the se-cret passages out of the castle.”

There was a knock on the door. Harry hastily stuffed the Ma-rauder’s Map and the Invisibility Cloak into his pocket.

It was Professor Dumbledore. He didn’t look surprised to see Harry there.

“Your carriage is at the gates, Remus,” he said.

“Thank you, Headmaster.”

Lupin picked up his old suitcase and the empty grindylow tank.

“Well — good-bye, Harry,” he said, smiling. “It has been a real pleasure teaching you. I feel sure we’ll meet again some-time.

Headmaster, there is no need to see me to the gates, I can manage. …”

Harry had the impression that Lupin wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

“Good-bye, then, Remus,” said Dumbledore soberly. Lupin shifted the grindylow tank slightly so that he and Dumbledore could shake hands. Then, with a final nod to Harry and a swift smile, Lupin left the office.

Harry sat down in his vacated chair, staring glumly at the floor. He heard the door close and looked up. Dumbledore was still there.

“Why so miserable, Harry?” he said quietly. “You should be very proud of yourself after last night.”

“It didn’t make any difference,” said Harry bitterly. “Pettigrew got away.”

“Didn’t make any difference?” said Dumbledore quietly. “It made all the difference in the world, Harry. You helped uncover the truth. You saved an innocent man from a terrible fate.”

Terrible. Something stirred in Harry’s memory. Greater and more terrible than ever before … Professor Trelawney’s prediction!

“Professor Dumbledore — yesterday, when I was having my Divination exam, Professor Trelawney went very — very strange.”

“Indeed?” said Dumbledore. “Er — stranger than usual, you mean?”

“Yes … her voice went all deep and her eyes rolled and she said … she said Voldemort’s servant was going to set out to return to him before midnight. … She said the servant would help him come back to power.” Harry stared up at Dumbledore. “And then she sort of

became normal again, and she couldn't remem-ber anything she'd said. Was it — was she making a real predic-tion?

Dumbledore looked mildly impressed.

"Do you know, Harry, I think she might have been," he said thoughtfully. "Who'd have thought it? That brings her total of real predictions up to two. I should offer her a pay raise. …"

"But —" Harry looked at him, aghast. How could Dumbledore take this so calmly?

"But — I stopped Sirius and Professor Lupin from killing Petti-grew! That makes it my fault if Voldemort comes back!"

"It does not," said Dumbledore quietly. "Hasn't your experience with the Time-Turner taught you anything, Harry? The conse-quences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting the future is a very difficult business indeed. … Profes-sor Trelawney, bless her, is living proof of that. … You did a very noble thing, in saving Pettigrew's life."

"But if he helps Voldemort back to power — !"

"Pettigrew owes his life to you. You have sent Voldemort a deputy who is in your debt. … When one wizard saves another wizard's life, it creates a certain bond between them … and I'm much mistaken if Voldemort wants his servant in the debt of Harry Potter."

"I don't want a connection with Pettigrew!" said Harry. "He be-trayed my parents!"

"This is magic at its deepest, its most impenetrable, Harry. But trust me … the time may come when you will be very glad you saved Pettigrew's life."

Harry couldn't imagine when that would be. Dumbledore looked as though he knew what Harry was thinking.

"I knew your father very well, both at Hogwarts and later, Harry," he said gently. "He would have saved Pettigrew too, I am sure of it."

Harry looked up at him. Dumbledore wouldn't laugh — he could tell Dumbledore …"I thought it was my dad who'd conjured my Patronus. I mean, when I saw myself across the lake … I thought I was seeing him."

"An easy mistake to make," said Dumbledore softly. "I expect you'll tire of hearing it, but you do look extraordinarily like James. Except for the eyes … you have your mother's eyes."

Harry shook his head.

"It was stupid, thinking it was him," he muttered. "I mean, I knew he was dead."

"You think the dead we loved ever truly leave us? You think that we don't recall them more clearly than ever in times of great trou-ble? Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him. How else could you produce that particular Patronus? Prongs rode again last night."

It took a moment for Harry to realize what Dumbledore had said.

"Last night Sirius told me all about how they became Animagi," said Dumbledore, smiling. "An extraordinary achievement — not least, keeping it quiet from me. And then I remembered the most unusual form your Patronus took, when it charged Mr. Malfoy down at your Quidditch match against Ravenclaw. You know, Harry, in a way, you did see your father last night. … You found him inside yourself."

And Dumbledore left the office, leaving Harry to his very con-fused thoughts.

Nobody at Hogwarts now knew the truth of what had happened the night that Sirius, Buckbeak, and Pettigrew had vanished except Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Professor Dumbledore. As the end of term approached, Harry heard many different theories about what had really happened, but none of them came close to the truth.

Malfoy was furious about Buckbeak. He was convinced that Hagrid had found a way of smuggling the hippogriff to safety, and seemed outraged that he and his father had been outwitted by a gamekeeper. Percy Weasley, meanwhile, had much to say on the subject of Sirius's escape.

"If I manage to get into the Ministry, I'll have a lot of proposals to make about Magical Law Enforcement!" he told the only person who would listen — his girlfriend, Penelope.

Though the weather was perfect, though the atmosphere was so cheerful, though he knew they had achieved the near impossible in helping Sirius to freedom, Harry had never approached the end of a school year in worse spirits.

He certainly wasn't the only one who was sorry to see Professor Lupin go. The whole of Harry's Defense Against the Dark Arts class was miserable about his resignation.

"Wonder what they'll give us next year?" said Seamus Finnigan gloomily.

"Maybe a vampire," suggested Dean Thomas hopefully.

It wasn't only Professor Lupin's departure that was weighing on Harry's mind. He couldn't help thinking a lot about Professor Trelawney's prediction. He kept wondering where Pettigrew was now, whether he had sought sanctuary with Voldemort yet. But the thing that was lowering Harry's spirits most of all was the prospect of returning to the Dursleys. For maybe half an hour, a glorious half hour, he had believed he would be living with Sirius from now on … his

parents' best friend. … It would have been the next best thing to having his own father back. And while no news of Sirius was definitely good news, because it meant he had successfully gone into hiding, Harry couldn't help feeling miserable when he thought of the home he might have had, and the fact that it was now impossible.

The exam results came out on the last day of term. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had passed every subject. Harry was amazed that he had got through Potions. He had a shrewd suspicion that Dumble-dore might have stepped in to stop Snape failing him on purpose. Snape's behavior toward Harry over the past week had been quite alarming. Harry wouldn't have thought it possible that Snape's dislike for him could increase, but it certainly had. A muscle twitched unpleasantly at the corner of Snape's thin mouth every time he looked at Harry, and he was constantly flexing his fingers, as though itching to place them around Harry's throat.

Percy had got his top-grade N.E.W.T.s; Fred and George had scraped a handful of O.W.L.s each. Gryffindor House, meanwhile, largely thanks to their spectacular performance in the Quidditch Cup, had won the House championship for the third year running. This meant that the end of term feast took place amid decorations of scarlet and gold, and that the Gryffindor table was the noisiest of the lot, as everybody celebrated. Even Harry managed to forget about the journey back to the Dursleys the next day as he ate, drank, talked, and laughed with the rest.

As the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station the next morn-ing, Hermione gave Harry and Ron some surprising news.

"I went to see Professor McGonagall this morning, just before breakfast. I've decided to drop Muggle Studies."

"But you passed your exam with three hundred and twenty per-cent!" said Ron.

“I know,” sighed Hermione, “but I can’t stand another year like this one. That Time-Turner, it was driving me mad. I’ve handed it in. Without Muggle Studies and Divination, I’ll be able to have a normal schedule again.”

“I still can’t believe you didn’t tell us about it,” said Ron grumpily. “We’re supposed to be your friends.”

“I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone,” said Hermione severely. She looked around at Harry, who was watching Hogwarts disappear from view behind a mountain. Two whole months before he’d see it again. …“Oh, cheer up, Harry!” said Hermione sadly.

“I’m okay,” said Harry quickly. “Just thinking about the holi-days.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about them too,” said Ron. “Harry, you’ve got to come and stay with us. I’ll fix it up with Mum and Dad, then I’ll call you. I know how to use a fellytone now —”

“A telephone, Ron,” said Hermione. “Honestly, you should take Muggle Studies next year. …”

Ron ignored her.

“It’s the Quidditch World Cup this summer! How about it, Harry? Come and stay, and we’ll go and see it! Dad can usually get tickets from work.”

This proposal had the effect of cheering Harry up a great deal.

“Yeah … I bet the Dursleys’d be pleased to let me come … especially after what I did to Aunt Marge. …”

Feeling considerably more cheerful, Harry joined Ron and Hermione in several games of Exploding Snap, and when the witch with the tea cart arrived, he bought himself a very large lunch, though nothing with chocolate in it.

But it was late in the afternoon before the thing that made him truly happy turned up. …“Harry,” said Hermione suddenly, peering over his shoulder. “What’s that thing outside your window?”

Harry turned to look outside. Something very small and gray was bobbing in and out of sight beyond the glass. He stood up for a better look and saw that it was a tiny owl, carrying a letter that was much too big for it. The owl was so small, in fact, that it kept tumbling over in the air, buffeted this way and that in the train’s slipstream. Harry quickly pulled down the window, stretched out his arm, and caught it. It felt like a very fluffy Snitch. He brought it carefully inside. The owl dropped its letter onto Harry’s seat and began zooming around their compartment, apparently very pleased with itself for accomplishing its task. Hedwig clicked her beak with a sort of dignified disapproval. Crookshanks sat up in his seat, following the owl with his great yellow eyes. Ron, noticing this, snatched the owl safely out of harm’s way.

Harry picked up the letter. It was addressed to him. He ripped open the letter, and shouted, “It’s from Sirius!”

“What?” said Ron and Hermione excitedly. “Read it aloud!”

Dear Harry,

I hope this finds you before you reach your aunt and uncle. I don’t know whether they’re used to owl post.

Buckbeak and I are in hiding. I won’t tell you where, in case this owl falls into the wrong hands. I have some doubt about his reliability, but he is the best I could find, and he did seem eager for the job.

I believe the dementors are still searching for me, but they haven’t a hope of finding me here. I am planning to allow some Muggles to glimpse me soon, a long way from Hogwarts, so that the security on the castle will be lifted.

There is something I never got around to telling you during our brief meeting. It was I who sent you the Fire-bolt —“Ha!” said Hermione triumphantly. “See! I told you it was from him!”

“Yes, but he hadn’t jinxed it, had he?” said Ron. “Ouch!” The tiny owl, now hooting happily in his hand, had nibbled one of his fingers in what it seemed to think was an affectionate way.

Crookshanks took the order to the Owl Office for me. I used your name but told them to take the gold from my own Gringotts vault. Please consider it as thirteen birthdays’ worth of presents from your godfather.

I would also like to apologize for the fright I think I gave you that night last year when you left your uncle’s house. I had only hoped to get a glimpse of you before starting my journey north, but I think the sight of me alarmed you.

I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at Hogwarts more enjoyable.

If ever you need me, send word. Your owl will find me.

I’ll write again soon.

Sirius

Harry looked eagerly inside the envelope. There was another piece of parchment in there. He read it through quickly and felt suddenly as warm and contented as though he’d swallowed a bottle of hot butterbeer in one gulp.

I, Sirius Black, Harry Potter’s godfather, hereby give him permission to visit Hogsmeade on weekends.

“That’ll be good enough for Dumbledore!” said Harry happily. He looked back at Sirius’s letter.

“Hang on, there’s a P.S. …”

I thought your friend Ron might like to keep this owl, as it’s my fault he no longer has a rat.

Ron’s eyes widened. The minute owl was still hooting excitedly.

“Keep him?” he said uncertainly. He looked closely at the owl for a moment; then, to Harry’s and Hermione’s great surprise, he held him out for Crookshanks to sniff.

“What do’you reckon?” Ron asked the cat. “Definitely an owl?”

Crookshanks purred.

“That’s good enough for me,” said Ron happily. “He’s mine.”

Harry read and reread the letter from Sirius all the way back into King’s Cross station. It was still clutched tightly in his hand as he, Ron, and Hermione stepped back through the barrier of platform nine and three-quarters. Harry spotted Uncle Vernon at once. He was standing a good distance from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, eyeing them suspiciously, and when Mrs. Weasley hugged Harry in greet-ing, his worst suspicions about them seemed confirmed.

“I’ll call about the World Cup!” Ron yelled after Harry as Harry bid him and Hermione good-bye, then wheeled the trolley bearing his trunk and Hedwig’s cage toward Uncle Vernon, who greeted him in his usual fashion.

“What’s that?” he snarled, staring at the envelope Harry was still clutching in his hand. “If it’s another form for me to sign, you’ve got another —”

“It’s not,” said Harry cheerfully. “It’s a letter from my godfather.”

“Godfather?” sputtered Uncle Vernon. “You haven’t got a god-father!”

“Yes, I have,” said Harry brightly. “He was my mum and dad’s best friend. He’s a convicted murderer, but he’s broken out of wiz-ard prison and he’s on the run. He likes to keep in touch with me, though … keep up with my news … check if I’m happy. …”

And, grinning broadly at the look of horror on Uncle Vernon’s face, Harry set off toward the station exit, Hedwig rattling along in front of him, for what looked like a much better summer than the last.

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Chapter 1 The Riddle House

Chapter 2 The Scar

Chapter 3 The Invitation

Chapter 4 Back to the Burrow

Chapter 5 Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes

Chapter 6 The Portkey

Chapter 7 Bagman and Crouch

Chapter 8 The Quidditch World Cup

Chapter 9 The Dark Mark

Chapter 10 Mayhem at the Ministry

Chapter 11 Aboard the Hogwarts Express

Chapter 12 The Triwizard Tournament

Chapter 13 Mad-Eye Moody

Chapter 14 The Unforgivable Curses

Chapter 15 Beauxbatons and Durmstrang

Chapter 16 The Goblet of Fire

Chapter 17 The Four Champions

Chapter 18 The Weighing of the Wands

Chapter 19 The Hungarian Horntail

Chapter 20 The First Task

Chapter 21 The House-Elf Liberation Front

Chapter 22 The Unexpected Task

Chapter 23 The Yule Ball

Chapter 24 Rita Skeeter's Scoop

Chapter 25 The Egg and the Eye

Chapter 26 The Second Task

Chapter 27 Padfoot Returns

Chapter 28 The Madness of Mr. Crouch

Chapter 29 The Dream

Chapter 30 The Pensieve

Chapter 31 The Third Task

Chapter 32 Flesh, Blood, and Bone

Chapter 33 The Death Eaters

Chapter 34 Priori Incantatem

Chapter 35 Veritaserum

Chapter 36 The Parting of the Ways

Chapter 37 The Beginning

Return to the Main Contents

Chapter 1 The Riddle House

The villagers of Little Hangleton still called it “the Riddle House,” even though it had been many years since the Riddle family had lived there. It stood on a hill overlooking the village, some of its windows boarded, tiles missing from its roof, and ivy spreading unchecked over its face. Once a fine-looking manor, and easily the largest and grandest building for miles around, the Rid-dle House was now damp, derelict, and unoccupied.

The Little Hangletons all agreed that the old house was “creepy.” Half a century ago, something strange and horrible had happened there, something that the older inhabitants of the village still liked to discuss when topics for gossip were scarce. The story had been picked over so many times, and had been embroidered in so many places, that nobody was quite sure what the truth was anymore. Every version of the tale, however, started in the same place: Fifty years before, at daybreak on a fine summer’s morning, when the Riddle House had still been well kept and impressive, a maid had entered the drawing room to find all three Riddles dead.

The maid had run screaming down the hill into the village and roused as many people as she could.

“Lying there with their eyes wide open! Cold as ice! Still in their dinner things!”

The police were summoned, and the whole of Little Hangleton had seethed with shocked curiosity and ill-disguised excitement. Nobody wasted their breath pretending to feel very sad about the Riddles, for they had been most unpopular. Elderly Mr. and Mrs. Riddle had been rich, snobbish, and rude, and their grown-up son, Tom, had been, if anything, worse. All the villagers cared about was the identity of their murderer — for plainly, three apparently healthy people did not all drop dead of natural causes on the same night.

The Hanged Man, the village pub, did a roaring trade that night; the whole village seemed to have turned out to discuss the murders. They were rewarded for leaving their firesides when the Riddles' cook arrived dramatically in their midst and announced to the suddenly silent pub that a man called Frank Bryce had just been arrested.

"Frank!" cried several people. "Never!"

Frank Bryce was the Riddles' gardener. He lived alone in a run-down cottage on the grounds of the Riddle House. Frank had come back from the war with a very stiff leg and a great dislike of crowds and loud noises, and had been working for the Riddles ever since.

There was a rush to buy the cook drinks and hear more details.

"Always thought he was odd," she told the eagerly listening vil-lagers, after her fourth sherry. "Unfriendly, like. I'm sure if I've of-fered him a cuppa once, I've offered it a hundred times. Never wanted to mix, he didn't."

"Ah, now," said a woman at the bar, "he had a hard war, Frank. He likes the quiet life. That's no reason to —"

"Who else had a key to the back door, then?" barked the cook. "There's been a spare key hanging in the gardener's cottage far back as I can remember! Nobody forced the door last night! No broken windows! All Frank had to do was creep up to the big house while we was all sleeping. …"

The villagers exchanged dark looks.

"I always thought he had a nasty look about him, right enough," grunted a man at the bar.

"War turned him funny, if you ask me," said the landlord.

“Told you I wouldn’t like to get on the wrong side of Frank, didn’t I, Dot?” said an excited woman in the corner.

“Horrible temper,” said Dot, nodding fervently. “I remember, when he was a kid …”

By the following morning, hardly anyone in Little Hangleton doubted that Frank Bryce had killed the Riddles.

But over in the neighboring town of Great Hangleton, in the dark and dingy police station, Frank was stubbornly repeating, again and again, that he was innocent, and that the only person he had seen near the house on the day of the Riddles’ deaths had been a teenage boy, a stranger, dark-haired and pale. Nobody else in the village had seen any such boy, and the police were quite sure that Frank had invented him.

Then, just when things were looking very serious for Frank, the report on the Riddles’ bodies came back and changed everything.

The police had never read an odder report. A team of doctors had examined the bodies and had concluded that none of the Rid-dles had been poisoned, stabbed, shot, strangled, suffocated, or (as far as they could tell) harmed at all. In fact (the report continued, in a tone of unmistakable bewilderment), the Riddles all appeared to be in perfect health — apart from the fact that they were all dead. The doctors did note (as though determined to find some-thing wrong with the bodies) that each of the Riddles had a look of terror upon his or her face — but as the frustrated police said, whoever heard of three people being frightened to death?

As there was no proof that the Riddles had been murdered at all, the police were forced to let Frank go. The Riddles were buried in the Little Hangleton churchyard, and their graves remained objects of curiosity for a while. To everyone’s surprise, and amid a cloud of suspicion, Frank Bryce returned to his cottage on the grounds of the Riddle House.

“ ’S far as I’m concerned, he killed them, and I don’t care what the police say,” said Dot in the Hanged Man. “And if he had any decency, he’d leave here, knowing as how we knows he did it.”

But Frank did not leave. He stayed to tend the garden for the next family who lived in the Riddle House, and then the next — for neither family stayed long. Perhaps it was partly because of Frank that the new owners said there was a nasty feeling about the place, which, in the absence of inhabitants, started to fall into disrepair.

The wealthy man who owned the Riddle House these days neither lived there nor put it to any use; they said in the village that he kept it for “tax reasons,” though nobody was very clear what these might be. The wealthy owner continued to pay Frank to do the garden-ing, however. Frank was nearing his seventy-seventh birthday now, very deaf, his bad leg stiffer than ever, but could be seen pottering around the flower beds in fine weather, even though the weeds were starting to creep up on him, try as he might to suppress them.

Weeds were not the only things Frank had to contend with ei-ther. Boys from the village made a habit of throwing stones through the windows of the Riddle House. They rode their bicycles over the lawns Frank worked so hard to keep smooth. Once or twice, they broke into the old house for a dare. They knew that old Frank’s devotion to the house and grounds amounted almost to an obsession, and it amused them to see him limping across the gar-den, brandishing his stick and yelling croakily at them. Frank, for his part, believed the boys tormented him because they, like their parents and grandparents, thought him a murderer. So when Frank awoke one night in August and saw something very odd up at the old house, he merely assumed that the boys had gone one step fur-ther in their attempts to punish him.

It was Frank’s bad leg that woke him; it was paining him worse than ever in his old age. He got up and limped downstairs into the kitchen with the idea of refilling his hot-water bottle to ease the stiffness in his

knee. Standing at the sink, filling the kettle, he looked up at the Riddle House and saw lights glimmering in its up-per windows. Frank knew at once what was going on. The boys had broken into the house again, and judging by the flickering quality of the light, they had started a fire.

Frank had no telephone, and in any case, he had deeply mis-trusted the police ever since they had taken him in for questioning about the Riddles' deaths. He put down the kettle at once, hurried back upstairs as fast as his bad leg would allow, and was soon back in his kitchen, fully dressed and removing a rusty old key from its hook by the door. He picked up his walking stick, which was propped against the wall, and set off into the night.

The front door of the Riddle House bore no sign of being forced, nor did any of the windows. Frank limped around to the back of the house until he reached a door almost completely hid-den by ivy, took out the old key, put it into the lock, and opened the door noiselessly.

He let himself into the cavernous kitchen. Frank had not en-tered it for many years; nevertheless, although it was very dark, he remembered where the door into the hall was, and he groped his way toward it, his nostrils full of the smell of decay, ears pricked for any sound of footsteps or voices from overhead. He reached the hall, which was a little lighter owing to the large mullioned win-dows on either side of the front door, and started to climb the stairs, blessing the dust that lay thick upon the stone, because it muffled the sound of his feet and stick.

On the landing, Frank turned right, and saw at once where the intruders were: At the very end of the passage a door stood ajar, and a flickering light shone through the gap, casting a long sliver of gold across the black floor. Frank edged closer and closer, grasping his walking stick firmly. Several feet from the entrance, he was able to see a narrow slice of the room beyond.

The fire, he now saw, had been lit in the grate. This surprised him. Then he stopped moving and listened intently, for a man's voice spoke within the room; it sounded timid and fearful.

"There is a little more in the bottle, My Lord, if you are still hungry."

"Later," said a second voice. This too belonged to a man — but it was strangely high-pitched, and cold as a sudden blast of icy wind. Something about that voice made the sparse hairs on the back of Frank's neck stand up. "Move me closer to the fire, Wormtail."

Frank turned his right ear toward the door, the better to hear. There came the clink of a bottle being put down upon some hard surface, and then the dull scraping noise of a heavy chair being dragged across the floor. Frank caught a glimpse of a small man, his back to the door, pushing the chair into place. He was wearing a long black cloak, and there was a bald patch at the back of his head. Then he went out of sight again.

"Where is Nagini?" said the cold voice.

"I — I don't know, My Lord," said the first voice nervously. "She set out to explore the house, I think. …"

"You will milk her before we retire, Wormtail," said the second voice. "I will need feeding in the night. The journey has tired me greatly."

Brow furrowed, Frank inclined his good ear still closer to the door, listening very hard. There was a pause, and then the man called Wormtail spoke again.

"My Lord, may I ask how long we are going to stay here?"

"A week," said the cold voice. "Perhaps longer. The place is moderately comfortable, and the plan cannot proceed yet. It would be foolish to act before the Quidditch World Cup is over."

Frank inserted a gnarled finger into his ear and rotated it. Ow-ing, no doubt, to a buildup of earwax, he had heard the word “Quidditch,” which was not a word at all.

“The — the Quidditch World Cup, My Lord?” said Wormtail. (Frank dug his finger still more vigorously into his ear.) “Forgive me, but — I do not understand — why should we wait until the World Cup is over?”

“Because, fool, at this very moment wizards are pouring into the country from all over the world, and every meddler from the Min-istry of Magic will be on duty, on the watch for signs of unusual ac-tivity, checking and double-checking identities. They will be obsessed with security, lest the Muggles notice anything. So we wait.”

Frank stopped trying to clear out his ear. He had distinctly heard the words “Ministry of Magic,” “wizards,” and “Muggles.” Plainly, each of these expressions meant something secret, and Frank could think of only two sorts of people who would speak in code: spies and criminals. Frank tightened his hold on his walking stick once more, and listened more closely still.

“Your Lordship is still determined, then?” Wormtail said quietly.

“Certainly I am determined, Wormtail.” There was a note of menace in the cold voice now.

A slight pause followed — and then Wormtail spoke, the words tumbling from him in a rush, as though he was forcing himself to say this before he lost his nerve.

“It could be done without Harry Potter, My Lord.”

Another pause, more protracted, and then —“Without Harry Potter?” breathed the second voice softly. “I see …”

"My Lord, I do not say this out of concern for the boy!" said Wormtail, his voice rising squeakily. "The boy is nothing to me, nothing at all! It is merely that if we were to use another witch or wizard — any wizard — the thing could be done so much more quickly! If you allowed me to leave you for a short while — you know that I can disguise myself most effectively — I could be back here in as little as two days with a suitable person —"

"I could use another wizard," said the cold voice softly, "that is true. …"

"My Lord, it makes sense," said Wormtail, sounding thoroughly relieved now. "Laying hands on Harry Potter would be so difficult, he is so well protected —"

"And so you volunteer to go and fetch me a substitute? I won-der … perhaps the task of nursing me has become wearisome for you, "Wormtail? Could this suggestion of abandoning the plan be nothing more than an attempt to desert me?"

"My Lord! I — I have no wish to leave you, none at all —"

"Do not lie to me!" hissed the second voice. "I can always tell, Wormtail! You are regretting that you ever returned to me. I revolt you. I see you flinch when you look at me, feel you shudder when you touch me. …"

"No! My devotion to Your Lordship —"

"Your devotion is nothing more than cowardice. You would not be here if you had anywhere else to go. How am I to survive with-out you, when I need feeding every few hours? Who is to milk Nagini?"

"But you seem so much stronger, My Lord —"

"Liar," breathed the second voice. "I am no stronger, and a few days alone would be enough to rob me of the little health I have re-gained

under your clumsy care. Silence!"

Wormtail, who had been sputtering incoherently, fell silent at once. For a few seconds, Frank could hear nothing but the fire crackling. Then the second man spoke once more, in a whisper that was almost a hiss.

"I have my reasons for using the boy, as I have already explained to you, and I will use no other. I have waited thirteen years. A few more months will make no difference. As for the protection sur-rounding the boy, I believe my plan will be effective. All that is needed is a little courage from you, Wormtail — courage you will find, unless you wish to feel the full extent of Lord Voldemort's wrath —"

"My Lord, I must speak!" said Wormtail, panic in his voice now. "All through our journey I have gone over the plan in my head — My Lord, Bertha Jorkins's disappearance will not go unnoticed for long, and if we proceed, if I murder —"

"If?" whispered the second voice. "If? If you follow the plan, Wormtail, the Ministry need never know that anyone else has died. You will do it quietly and without fuss; I only wish that I could do it myself, but in my present condition … Come, Wormtail, one more death and our path to Harry Potter is clear. I am not asking you to do it alone. By that time, my faithful servant will have re-joined us —"

"I am a faithful servant," said Wormtail, the merest trace of sul-lenness in his voice.

"Wormtail, I need somebody with brains, somebody whose loy-alty has never wavered, and you, unfortunately, fulfill neither requirement."

"I found you," said Wormtail, and there was definitely a sulky edge to his voice now. "I was the one who found you. I brought you Bertha Jorkins."

“That is true,” said the second man, sounding amused. “A stroke of brilliance I would not have thought possible from you, Worm-tail — though, if truth be told, you were not aware how useful she would be when you caught her, were you?”

“I — I thought she might be useful, My Lord —”

“Liar,” said the second voice again, the cruel amusement more pronounced than ever. “However, I do not deny that her informa-tion was invaluable. Without it, I could never have formed our plan, and for that, you will have your reward, Wormtail. I will al-low you to perform an essential task for me, one that many of my followers would give their right hands to perform. …”

“R-really, My Lord? What — ?” Wormtail sounded terrified again.

“Ah, Wormtail, you don’t want me to spoil the surprise? Your part will come at the very end … but I promise you, you will have the honor of being just as useful as Bertha Jorkins.”

“You … you …” Wormtail’s voice suddenly sounded hoarse, as though his mouth had gone very dry. “You … are going … to kill me too?”

“Wormtail, Wormtail,” said the cold voice silkily, “why would I kill you? I killed Bertha because I had to. She was fit for nothing af-ter my questioning, quite useless. In any case, awkward questions would have been asked if she had gone back to the Ministry with the news that she had met you on her holidays. Wizards who are supposed to be dead would do well not to run into Ministry of Magic witches at wayside inns. …”

Wormtail muttered something so quietly that Frank could not hear it, but it made the second man laugh — an entirely mirthless laugh, cold as his speech.

“We could have modified her memory? But Memory Charms can be broken by a powerful wizard, as I proved when I questioned her. It would be an insult to her memory not to use the information I extracted from her, Wormtail.”

Out in the corridor, Frank suddenly became aware that the hand gripping his walking stick was slippery with sweat. The man with the cold voice had killed a woman. He was talking about it without any kind of remorse — with amusement. He was dangerous — a madman. And he was planning more murders — this boy, Harry Potter, whoever he was — was in danger —Frank knew what he must do. Now, if ever, was the time to go to the police. He would creep out of the house and head straight for the telephone box in the village … but the cold voice was speaking again, and Frank remained where he was, frozen to the spot, listen-ing with all his might.

“One more murder … my faithful servant at Hogwarts … Harry Potter is as good as mine, Wormtail. It is decided. There will be no more argument. But quiet … I think I hear Nagini. …”

And the second man’s voice changed. He started making noises such as Frank had never heard before; he was hissing and spitting without drawing breath. Frank thought he must be having some sort of fit or seizure.

And then Frank heard movement behind him in the dark passageway. He turned to look, and found himself paralyzed with fright.

Something was slithering toward him along the dark corridor floor, and as it drew nearer to the sliver of firelight, he realized with a thrill of terror that it was a gigantic snake, at least twelve feet long. Horrified, transfixed, Frank stared as its undulating body cut a wide, curving track through the thick dust on the floor, coming closer and closer — What was he to do? The only means of escape was into the room where two men sat plotting murder, yet if he stayed where he was the snake would surely kill him —But before he had made his decision,

the snake was level with him, and then, incredibly, miraculously, it was passing; it was fol-lowing the spitting, hissing noises made by the cold voice beyond the door, and in seconds, the tip of its diamond-patterned tail had vanished through the gap.

There was sweat on Frank's forehead now, and the hand on the walking stick was trembling. Inside the room, the cold voice was continuing to hiss, and Frank was visited by a strange idea, an impossible idea. … This man could talk to snakes.

Frank didn't understand what was going on. He wanted more than anything to be back in his bed with his hot-water bottle. The problem was that his legs didn't seem to want to move. As he stood there shaking and trying to master himself, the cold voice switched abruptly to English again.

"Nagini has interesting news, Wormtail," it said.

"In-indeed, My Lord?" said Wormtail.

"Indeed, yes," said the voice. "According to Nagini, there is an old Muggle standing right outside this room, listening to every word we say."

Frank didn't have a chance to hide himself. There were footsteps, and then the door of the room was flung wide open.

A short, balding man with graying hair, a pointed nose, and small, watery eyes stood before Frank, a mixture of fear and alarm in his face.

"Invite him inside, Wormtail. Where are your manners?"

The cold voice was coming from the ancient armchair before the fire, but Frank couldn't see the speaker. The snake, on the other hand, was curled up on the rotting hearth rug, like some horrible travesty of a pet dog.

Wormtail beckoned Frank into the room. Though still deeply shaken, Frank took a firmer grip upon his walking stick and limped over the threshold.

The fire was the only source of light in the room; it cast long, spidery shadows upon the walls. Frank stared at the back of the armchair; the man inside it seemed to be even smaller than his ser-vant, for Frank couldn't even see the back of his head.

"You heard everything, Muggle?" said the cold voice.

"What's that you're calling me?" said Frank defiantly, for now that he was inside the room, now that the time had come for some sort of action, he felt braver; it had always been so in the war.

"I am calling you a Muggle," said the voice coolly. "It means that you are not a wizard."

"I don't know what you mean by wizard," said Frank, his voice growing steadier. "All I know is I've heard enough to interest the police tonight, I have. You've done murder and you're planning more! And I'll tell you this too," he added, on a sudden inspiration, "my wife knows I'm up here, and if I don't come back —"

"You have no wife," said the cold voice, very quietly. "Nobody knows you are here. You told nobody that you were coming. Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, Muggle, for he knows … he always knows. …"

"Is that right?" said Frank roughly. "Lord, is it? Well, I don't think much of your manners, My Lord. Turn 'round and face me like a man, why don't you?"

"But I am not a man, Muggle," said the cold voice, barely audi-ble now over the crackling of the flames. "I am much, much more than a man. However … why not? I will face you. … Wormtail, come turn my chair around."

The servant gave a whimper.

“You heard me, Wormtail.”

Slowly, with his face screwed up, as though he would rather have done anything than approach his master and the hearth rug where the snake lay, the small man walked forward and began to turn the chair. The snake lifted its ugly triangular head and hissed slightly as the legs of the chair snagged on its rug.

And then the chair was facing Frank, and he saw what was sit-ting in it. His walking stick fell to the floor with a clatter. He opened his mouth and let out a scream. He was screaming so loudly that he never heard the words the thing in the chair spoke as it raised a wand. There was a flash of green light, a rushing sound, and Frank Bryce crumpled. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Two hundred miles away, the boy called Harry Potter woke with a start.

Chapter 2 The Scar

Harry lay flat on his back, breathing hard as though he had been running. He had awoken from a vivid dream with his hands pressed over his face. The old scar on his forehead, which was shaped like a bolt of lightning, was burning beneath his fingers as though someone had just pressed a white-hot wire to his skin.

He sat up, one hand still on his scar, the other reaching out in the darkness for his glasses, which were on the bedside table. He put them on and his bedroom came into clearer focus, lit by a faint, misty orange light that was filtering through the curtains from the street lamp outside the window.

Harry ran his fingers over the scar again. It was still painful. He turned on the lamp beside him, scrambled out of bed, crossed the room, opened his wardrobe, and peered into the mirror on the in-side of the door. A skinny boy of fourteen looked back at him, his bright green eyes puzzled under his untidy black hair. He examined the lightning-bolt scar of his reflection more closely. It looked normal, but it was still stinging.

Harry tried to recall what he had been dreaming about before he had awoken. It had seemed so real. … There had been two people he knew and one he didn't. … He concentrated hard, frowning, trying to remember. …The dim picture of a darkened room came to him. … There had been a snake on a hearth rug … a small man called Peter, nicknamed Wormtail … and a cold, high voice … the voice of Lord Voldemort. Harry felt as though an ice cube had slipped down into his stomach at the very thought. …He closed his eyes tightly and tried to remember what Volde-mort had looked like, but it was impossible. … All Harry knew was that at the moment when Voldemort's chair had swung around, and he, Harry, had seen what was sitting in it, he had felt a spasm of horror, which had awoken him … or had that been the pain in his scar?

And who had the old man been? For there had definitely been an old man; Harry had watched him fall to the ground. It was all be-coming confused. Harry put his face into his hands, blocking out his bedroom, trying to hold on to the picture of that dimly lit room, but it was like trying to keep water in his cupped hands; the details were now trickling away as fast as he tried to hold on to them. … Voldemort and Wormtail had been talking about some-one they had killed, though Harry could not remember the name … and they had been plotting to kill someone else … him!

Harry took his face out of his hands, opened his eyes, and stared around his bedroom as though expecting to see something unusual there. As it happened, there were an extraordinary number of un-usual things in this room. A large wooden trunk stood open at the foot of his bed, revealing a cauldron, broomstick, black robes, and assorted spellbooks. Rolls of parchment littered that part of his desk that was not taken up by the large, empty cage in which his snowy owl, Hedwig, usually perched. On the floor beside his bed a book lay open; Harry had been reading it before he fell asleep last night. The pictures in this book were all moving. Men in bright or-ange robes were zooming in and out of sight on broomsticks, throwing a red ball to one another.

Harry walked over to the book, picked it up, and watched one of the wizards score a spectacular goal by putting the ball through a fifty-foot-high hoop. Then he snapped the book shut. Even Quidditch — in Harry's opinion, the best sport in the world — couldn't distract him at the moment. He placed Flying with the Cannons on his bedside table, crossed to the window, and drew back the curtains to survey the street below.

Privet Drive looked exactly as a respectable suburban street would be expected to look in the early hours of Saturday morning. All the curtains were closed. As far as Harry could see through the darkness, there wasn't a living creature in sight, not even a cat.

And yet … and yet … Harry went restlessly back to the bed and sat down on it, running a finger over his scar again. It wasn't the pain that bothered him; Harry was no stranger to pain and in-jury. He had lost all the bones from his right arm once and had them painfully regrown in a night. The same arm had been pierced by a venomous foot-long fang not long afterward. Only last year Harry had fallen fifty feet from an airborne broomstick. He was used to bizarre accidents and injuries; they were unavoidable if you attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and had a knack for attracting a lot of trouble.

No, the thing that was bothering Harry was that the last time his scar had hurt him, it had been because Voldemort had been close by. … But Voldemort couldn't be here, now. … The idea of Voldemort lurking in Privet Drive was absurd, impossible. …Harry listened closely to the silence around him. Was he half-expecting to hear the creak of a stair or the swish of a cloak? And then he jumped slightly as he heard his cousin Dudley give a tremendous grunting snore from the next room.

Harry shook himself mentally; he was being stupid. There was no one in the house with him except Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley, and they were plainly still asleep, their dreams un-troubled and painless.

Asleep was the way Harry liked the Dursleys best; it wasn't as though they were ever any help to him awake. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley were Harry's only living relatives. They were Muggles who hated and despised magic in any form, which meant that Harry was about as welcome in their house as dry rot. They had explained away Harry's long absences at Hogwarts over the last three years by telling everyone that he went to St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys. They knew perfectly well that, as an underage wizard, Harry wasn't allowed to use magic out-side Hogwarts, but they were still apt to blame him for anything that went wrong about the house. Harry had never been able to confide in them

or tell them anything about his life in the wizard-ing world. The very idea of going to them when they awoke, and telling them about his scar hurting him, and about his worries about Voldemort, was laughable.

And yet it was because of Voldemort that Harry had come to live with the Dursleys in the first place. If it hadn't been for Voldemort, Harry would not have had the lightning scar on his forehead. If it hadn't been for Voldemort, Harry would still have had parents. …Harry had been a year old the night that Voldemort — the most powerful Dark wizard for a century, a wizard who had been gain-ing power steadily for eleven years — arrived at his house and killed his father and mother. Voldemort had then turned his wand on Harry; he had performed the curse that had disposed of many full-grown witches and wizards in his steady rise to power — and, incredibly, it had not worked. Instead of killing the small boy, the curse had rebounded upon Voldemort. Harry had survived with nothing but a lightning-shaped cut on his forehead, and Volde-mort had been reduced to something barely alive. His powers gone, his life almost extinguished, Voldemort had fled; the terror in which the secret community of witches and wizards had lived for so long had lifted, Voldemort's followers had disbanded, and Harry Potter had become famous.

It had been enough of a shock for Harry to discover, on his eleventh birthday, that he was a wizard; it had been even more dis-concerting to find out that everyone in the hidden wizarding world knew his name. Harry had arrived at Hogwarts to find that heads turned and whispers followed him wherever he went. But he was used to it now: At the end of this summer, he would be starting his fourth year at Hogwarts, and Harry was already counting the days until he would be back at the castle again.

But there was still a fortnight to go before he went back to school. He looked hopelessly around his room again, and his eye paused on the birthday cards his two best friends had sent him at the end of July.

What would they say if Harry wrote to them and told them about his scar hurting?

At once, Hermione Granger's voice seemed to fill his head, shrill and panicky.

"Your scar hurt? Harry, that's really serious. … Write to Professor Dumbledore!And I'll go and check Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions. … Maybe there's something in there about curse scars. …"

Yes, that would be Hermione's advice: Go straight to the head-master of Hogwarts, and in the meantime, consult a book. Harry stared out of the window at the inky blue-black sky. He doubted very much whether a book could help him now. As far as he knew, he was the only living person to have survived a curse like Volde-mort's; it was highly unlikely, therefore, that he would find his symptoms listed in Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions. As for informing the headmaster, Harry had no idea where Dumble-dore went during the summer holidays. He amused himself for a moment, picturing Dumbledore, with his long silver beard, full-length wizard's robes, and pointed hat, stretched out on a beach somewhere, rubbing suntan lotion onto his long crooked nose. Wherever Dumbledore was, though, Harry was sure that Hedwig would be able to find him; Harry's owl had never yet failed to de-liver a letter to anyone, even without an address. But what would he write?

Dear Professor Dumbledore, Sorry to bother you, but my scar hurt this morning. Yours sincerely, Harry Potter.

Even inside his head the words sounded stupid.

And so he tried to imagine his other best friend, Ron Weasley's, reaction, and in a moment, Ron's red hair and long-nosed, freckled face seemed to swim before Harry, wearing a bemused expression.

“Your scar hurt? But … but You-Know-Who can’t be near you now, can he?I mean … you’d know, wouldn’t you? He’d be trying to do you in again, wouldn’t he? I dunno, Harry, maybe curse scars always twinge a bit. … I’ll ask Dad. …”

Mr. Weasley was a fully qualified wizard who worked in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, but he didn’t have any particular expertise in the matter of curses, as far as Harry knew. In any case, Harry didn’t like the idea of the whole Weasley family knowing that he, Harry, was getting jumpy about a few moments’ pain. Mrs. Weasley would fuss worse than Hermione, and Fred and George, Ron’s sixteen-year-old twin brothers, might think Harry was losing his nerve. The Weasleys were Harry’s favorite family in the world; he was hoping that they might invite him to stay any time now (Ron had mentioned some-thing about the Quidditch World Cup), and he somehow didn’t want his visit punctuated with anxious inquiries about his scar.

Harry kneaded his forehead with his knuckles. What he really wanted (and it felt almost shameful to admit it to himself) was someone like — someone like a parent: an adult wizard whose ad-vice he could ask without feeling stupid, someone who cared about him, who had had experience with Dark Magic. …And then the solution came to him. It was so simple, and so ob-vious, that he couldn’t believe it had taken so long — Sirius.

Harry leapt up from the bed, hurried across the room, and sat down at his desk; he pulled a piece of parchment toward him, loaded his eagle-feather quill with ink, wrote Dear Sirius, then paused, wondering how best to phrase his problem, still marveling at the fact that he hadn’t thought of Sirius straight away. But then, perhaps it wasn’t so surprising — after all, he had only found out that Sirius was his godfather two months ago.

There was a simple reason for Sirius’s complete absence from Harry’s life until then — Sirius had been in Azkaban, the terrifying

wizard jail guarded by creatures called dementors, sightless, soul-sucking fiends who had come to search for Sirius at Hogwarts when he had escaped. Yet Sirius had been innocent — the murders for which he had been convicted had been committed by Worm-tail, Voldemort's supporter, whom nearly everybody now believed dead. Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew otherwise, however; they had come face-to-face with Wormtail only the previous year, though only Professor Dumbledore had believed their story.

For one glorious hour, Harry had believed that he was leaving the Dursleys at last, because Sirius had offered him a home once his name had been cleared. But the chance had been snatched away from him — Wormtail had escaped before they could take him to the Ministry of Magic, and Sirius had had to flee for his life. Harry had helped him escape on the back of a hippogriff called Buckbeak, and since then, Sirius had been on the run. The home Harry might have had if Wormtail had not escaped had been haunting him all summer. It had been doubly hard to return to the Dursleys know-ing that he had so nearly escaped them forever.

Nevertheless, Sirius had been of some help to Harry, even if he couldn't be with him. It was due to Sirius that Harry now had all his school things in his bedroom with him. The Dursleys had never allowed this before; their general wish of keeping Harry as miser-able as possible, coupled with their fear of his powers, had led them to lock his school trunk in the cupboard under the stairs every summer prior to this. But their attitude had changed since they had found out that Harry had a dangerous murderer for a god-father — for Harry had conveniently forgotten to tell them that Sirius was innocent.

Harry had received two letters from Sirius since he had been back at Privet Drive. Both had been delivered, not by owls (as was usual with wizards), but by large, brightly colored tropical birds. Hedwig had not approved of these flashy intruders; she had been most reluctant to allow them to drink from her water tray before flying off again. Harry, on the other hand, had liked them; they put him in mind of palm trees

and white sand, and he hoped that, wherever Sirius was (Sirius never said, in case the letters were inter-cepted), he was enjoying himself. Somehow, Harry found it hard to imagine dementors surviving for long in bright sunlight; perhaps that was why Sirius had gone south. Sirius's letters, which were now hidden beneath the highly useful loose floorboard under Harry's bed, sounded cheerful, and in both of them he had reminded Harry to call on him if ever Harry needed to. Well, he needed to now, all right. …Harry's lamp seemed to grow dimmer as the cold gray light that precedes sunrise slowly crept into the room. Finally, when the sun had risen, when his bedroom walls had turned gold, and when sounds of movement could be heard from Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's room, Harry cleared his desk of crumpled pieces of parch-ment and reread his finished letter.

Dear Sirius,

Thanks for your last letter. That bird was enormous; it could hardly get through my window.

Things are the same as usual here. Dudley's diet isn't going too well. My aunt found him smuggling doughnuts into his room yesterday. They told him they'd have to cut his pocket money if he keeps doing it, so he got really angry and chucked his PlayStation out of the window. That's a sort of computer thing you can play games on. Bit stupid really, now he hasn't even got Mega-Mutilation Part Three to take his mind off things.

I'm okay, mainly because the Dursleys are terrified you might turn up and turn them all into bats if I ask you to.

A weird thing happened this morning, though. My scar hurt again. Last time that happened it was because Voldemort was at Hogwarts. But I don't reckon he can be anywhere near me now, can he? Do you know if curse scars sometimes hurt years afterward?

I'll send this with Hedwig when she gets back; she's off hunting at the moment. Say hello to Buckbeak for me.

Harry

Yes, thought Harry, that looked all right. There was no point putting in the dream; he didn't want it to look as though he was too worried. He folded up the parchment and laid it aside on his desk, ready for when Hedwig returned. Then he got to his feet, stretched, and opened his wardrobe once more. Without glancing at his re-flection, he started to get dressed before going down to breakfast.

Chapter 3 The Invitation

By the time Harry arrived in the kitchen, the three Dursleys were already seated around the table. None of them looked up as he entered or sat down. Uncle Vernon's large red face was hidden behind the morning's Daily Mail, and Aunt Petunia was cutting a grapefruit into quarters, her lips pursed over her horselike teeth.

Dudley looked furious and sulky, and somehow seemed to be taking up even more space than usual. This was saying something, as he always took up an entire side of the square table by himself. When Aunt Petunia put a quarter of unsweetened grapefruit onto Dudley's plate with a tremulous "There you are, Diddy darling," Dudley glowered at her. His life had taken a most unpleasant turn since he had come home for the summer with his end-of-year report.

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had managed to find excuses for his bad marks as usual: Aunt Petunia always insisted that Dud-ley was a very gifted boy whose teachers didn't understand him, while Uncle Vernon maintained that "he didn't want some swotty little nancy boy for a son anyway." They also skated over the accu-sations of bullying in the report — "He's a boisterous little boy, but he wouldn't hurt a fly!" Aunt Petunia had said tearfully.

However, at the bottom of the report there were a few well-chosen comments from the school nurse that not even Uncle Ver-non and Aunt Petunia could explain away. No matter how much Aunt Petunia wailed that Dudley was big-boned, and that his poundage was really puppy fat, and that he was a growing boy who needed plenty of food, the fact remained that the school outfitters didn't stock knickerbockers big enough for him anymore. The school nurse had seen what Aunt Petunia's eyes — so sharp when it came to spotting fingerprints on her gleaming walls, and in ob-serving the comings and goings of the neighbors — simply refused to see: that far from

needing extra nourishment, Dudley had reached roughly the size and weight of a young killer whale.

So — after many tantrums, after arguments that shook Harry's bedroom floor, and many tears from Aunt Petunia — the new regime had begun. The diet sheet that had been sent by the Smelt-ings school nurse had been taped to the fridge, which had been emptied of all Dudley's favorite things — fizzy drinks and cakes, chocolate bars and burgers — and filled instead with fruit and veg-etables and the sorts of things that Uncle Vernon called "rabbit food." To make Dudley feel better about it all, Aunt Petunia had insisted that the whole family follow the diet too. She now passed a grapefruit quarter to Harry. He noticed that it was a lot smaller than Dudley's. Aunt Petunia seemed to feel that the best way to keep up Dudley's morale was to make sure that he did, at least, get more to eat than Harry.

But Aunt Petunia didn't know what was hidden under the loose floorboard upstairs. She had no idea that Harry was not following the diet at all. The moment he had got wind of the fact that he was expected to survive the summer on carrot sticks, Harry had sent Hedwig to his friends with pleas for help, and they had risen to the occasion magnificently. Hedwig had returned from Hermione's house with a large box stuffed full of sugar-free snacks. (Hermione's parents were dentists.) Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, had obliged with a sack full of his own homemade rock cakes. (Harry hadn't touched these; he had had too much experience of Hagrid's cooking.) Mrs. Weasley, however, had sent the family owl, Errol, with an enormous fruitcake and assorted meat pies. Poor Errol, who was elderly and feeble, had needed a full five days to recover from the journey. And then on Harry's birthday (which the Dursleys had completely ignored) he had received four superb birthday cakes, one each from Ron, Hermione, Hagrid, and Sirius. Harry still had two of them left, and so, looking forward to a real breakfast when he got back upstairs, he ate his grapefruit without complaint.

Uncle Vernon laid aside his paper with a deep sniff of disap-proval and looked down at his own grapefruit quarter.

“Is this it?” he said grumpily to Aunt Petunia.

Aunt Petunia gave him a severe look, and then nodded pointedly at Dudley, who had already finished his own grapefruit quarter and was eyeing Harry’s with a very sour look in his piggy little eyes.

Uncle Vernon gave a great sigh, which ruffled his large, bushy mustache, and picked up his spoon.

The doorbell rang. Uncle Vernon heaved himself out of his chair and set off down the hall. Quick as a flash, while his mother was occupied with the kettle, Dudley stole the rest of Uncle Vernon’s grapefruit.

Harry heard talking at the door, and someone laughing, and Uncle Vernon answering curtly. Then the front door closed, and the sound of ripping paper came from the hall.

Aunt Petunia set the teapot down on the table and looked curi-ously around to see where Uncle Vernon had got to. She didn’t have to wait long to find out; after about a minute, he was back. He looked livid.

“You,” he barked at Harry. “In the living room. Now.”

Bewildered, wondering what on earth he was supposed to have done this time, Harry got up and followed Uncle Vernon out of the kitchen and into the next room. Uncle Vernon closed the door sharply behind both of them.

“So,” he said, marching over to the fireplace and turning to face Harry as though he were about to pronounce him under arrest. “So.”

Harry would have dearly loved to have said, “So what?” but he didn’t feel that Uncle Vernon’s temper should be tested this early in the

morning, especially when it was already under severe strain from lack of food. He therefore settled for looking politely puzzled.

“This just arrived,” said Uncle Vernon. He brandished a piece of purple writing paper at Harry. “A letter. About you.”

Harry’s confusion increased. Who would be writing to Uncle Vernon about him? Who did he know who sent letters by the postman?

Uncle Vernon glared at Harry, then looked down at the letter and began to read aloud:Dear Mr. and Mrs. Dursley,

We have never been introduced, but I am sure you have heard a great deal from Harry about my son Ron.

As Harry might have told you, the final of the Quidditch World Cup takes place this Monday night, and my husband, Arthur, has just managed to get prime tickets through his con-nections at the Department of Magical Games and Sports.

I do hope you will allow us to take Harry to the match, as this really is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity; Britain hasn’t hosted the cup for thirty years, and tickets are extremely hard to come by. We would of course be glad to have Harry stay for the remainder of the summer holidays, and to see him safely onto the train back to school.

It would be best for Harry to send us your answer as quickly as possible in the normal way, because the Muggle postman has never delivered to our house, and I am not sure he even knows where it is.

Hoping to see Harry soon,

Yours sincerely,

Molly Weasley

P.S. I do hope we’ve put enough stamps on.

Uncle Vernon finished reading, put his hand back into his breast pocket, and drew out something else.

“Look at this,” he growled.

He held up the envelope in which Mrs. Weasley’s letter had come, and Harry had to fight down a laugh. Every bit of it was covered in stamps except for a square inch on the front, into which Mrs. Weasley had squeezed the Dursleys’ address in minute writing.

“She did put enough stamps on, then,” said Harry, trying to sound as though Mrs. Weasley’s was a mistake anyone could make. His uncle’s eyes flashed.

“The postman noticed,” he said through gritted teeth. “Very interested to know where this letter came from, he was. That’s why he rang the doorbell. Seemed to think it was funny.”

Harry didn’t say anything. Other people might not understand why Uncle Vernon was making a fuss about too many stamps, but Harry had lived with the Dursleys too long not to know how touchy they were about anything even slightly out of the ordinary. Their worst fear was that someone would find out that they were connected (however distantly) with people like Mrs. Weasley.

Uncle Vernon was still glaring at Harry, who tried to keep his expression neutral. If he didn’t do or say anything stupid, he might just be in for the treat of a lifetime. He waited for Uncle Vernon to say something, but he merely continued to glare. Harry decided to break the silence.

“So — can I go then?” he asked.

A slight spasm crossed Uncle Vernon’s large purple face. The mustache bristled. Harry thought he knew what was going on be-hind the mustache: a furious battle as two of Uncle Vernon’s most fundamental instincts came into conflict. Allowing Harry to go would

make Harry happy, something Uncle Vernon had struggled against for thirteen years. On the other hand, allowing Harry to disappear to the Weasleys' for the rest of the summer would get rid of him two weeks earlier than anyone could have hoped, and Uncle Vernon hated having Harry in the house. To give himself thinking time, it seemed, he looked down at Mrs. Weasley's letter again.

"Who is this woman?" he said, staring at the signature with distaste.

"You've seen her," said Harry. "She's my friend Ron's mother, she was meeting him off the Hog — off the school train at the end of last term."

He had almost said "Hogwarts Express," and that was a sure way to get his uncle's temper up. Nobody ever mentioned the name of Harry's school aloud in the Dursley household.

Uncle Vernon screwed up his enormous face as though trying to remember something very unpleasant.

"Dumpy sort of woman?" he growled finally. "Load of children with red hair?"

Harry frowned. He thought it was a bit rich of Uncle Vernon to call anyone "dumpy," when his own son, Dudley, had finally achieved what he'd been threatening to do since the age of three, and become wider than he was tall.

Uncle Vernon was perusing the letter again.

"Quidditch," he muttered under his breath. "Quidditch — what is this rubbish?"

Harry felt a second stab of annoyance.

"It's a sport," he said shortly. "Played on broom —"

"All right, all right!" said Uncle Vernon loudly. Harry saw, with some satisfaction, that his uncle looked vaguely panicky. Appar-ently his nerves couldn't stand the sound of the word "broom-sticks" in his living room. He took refuge in perusing the letter again. Harry saw his lips form the words "send us your answer … in the normal way." He scowled.

"What does she mean, 'the normal way'?" he spat.

"Normal for us," said Harry, and before his uncle could stop him, he added, "you know, owl post. That's what's normal for wizards."

Uncle Vernon looked as outraged as if Harry had just uttered a disgusting swear word. Shaking with anger, he shot a nervous look through the window, as though expecting to see some of the neighbors with their ears pressed against the glass.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to mention that unnaturalness under my roof?" he hissed, his face now a rich plum color. "You stand there, in the clothes Petunia and I have put on your ungrateful back —"

"Only after Dudley finished with them," said Harry coldly, and indeed, he was dressed in a sweatshirt so large for him that he had had to roll back the sleeves five times so as to be able to use his hands, and which fell past the knees of his extremely baggy jeans.

"I will not be spoken to like that!" said Uncle Vernon, trembling with rage.

But Harry wasn't going to stand for this. Gone were the days when he had been forced to take every single one of the Dursleys' stupid rules. He wasn't following Dudley's diet, and he wasn't going to let Uncle Vernon stop him from going to the Quidditch World Cup, not if he could help it. Harry took a deep, steadying breath and then said, "Okay, I can't see the World Cup. Can I go now, then? Only I've got a letter to Sirius I want to finish. You know — my godfather."

He had done it. He had said the magic words. Now he watched the purple recede blotchily from Uncle Vernon's face, making it look like badly mixed black currant ice cream.

"You're — you're writing to him, are you?" said Uncle Vernon, in a would-be calm voice — but Harry had seen the pupils of his tiny eyes contract with sudden fear.

"Well — yeah," said Harry, casually. "It's been a while since he heard from me, and, you know, if he doesn't, he might start think-ing something's wrong."

He stopped there to enjoy the effect of these words. He could al-most see the cogs working under Uncle Vernon's thick, dark, neatly parted hair. If he tried to stop Harry writing to Sirius, Sirius would think Harry was being mistreated. If he told Harry he couldn't go to the Quidditch World Cup, Harry would write and tell Sirius, who would know Harry was being mistreated. There was only one thing for Uncle Vernon to do. Harry could see the conclusion forming in his uncle's mind as though the great mustached face were transparent. Harry tried not to smile, to keep his own face as blank as possible. And then —"Well, all right then. You can go to this ruddy … this stupid … this World Cup thing. You write and tell these — these Weasleys they're to pick you up, mind. I haven't got time to go dropping you off all over the country. And you can spend the rest of the summer there. And you can tell your — your godfather … tell him … tell him you're going."

"Okay then," said Harry brightly.

He turned and walked toward the living room door, fighting the urge to jump into the air and whoop. He was going … he was going to the Weasleys', he was going to watch the Quidditch World Cup!

Outside in the hall he nearly ran into Dudley, who had been lurking behind the door, clearly hoping to overhear Harry being told off. He looked shocked to see the broad grin on Harry's face.

“That was an excellent breakfast, wasn’t it?” said Harry. “I feel really full, don’t you?”

Laughing at the astonished look on Dudley’s face, Harry took the stairs three at a time, and hurled himself back into his bedroom.

The first thing he saw was that Hedwig was back. She was sitting in her cage, staring at Harry with her enormous amber eyes, and clicking her beak in the way that meant she was annoyed about something. Exactly what was annoying her became apparent al-most at once.

“OUCH!” said Harry as what appeared to be a small, gray, feathery tennis ball collided with the side of his head. Harry mas-saged the spot furiously, looking up to see what had hit him, and saw a minute owl, small enough to fit into the palm of his hand, whizzing excitedly around the room like a loose firework. Harry then realized that the owl had dropped a letter at his feet. Harry bent down, recognized Ron’s handwriting, then tore open the en-velope. Inside was a hastily scribbled note.

Harry — DAD GOT THE TICKETS — Ireland versus Bulgaria, Monday night. Mum’s writing to the Muggles to ask you to stay. They might already have the letter, I don’t know how fast Muggle post is. Thought I’d send this with Pig anyway.

Harry stared at the word “Pig,” then looked up at the tiny owl now zooming around the light fixture on the ceiling. He had never seen anything that looked less like a pig. Maybe he couldn’t read Ron’s writing. He went back to the letter:We’re coming for you whether the Muggles like it or not, you can’t miss the World Cup, only Mum and Dad reckon it’s better if we pretend to ask their permission first. If they say yes, send Pig back with your answer pronto, and we’ll come and get you at five o’clock on Sunday. If they say no, send Pig back pronto and we’ll come and get you at five o’clock on Sunday anyway.

Hermione's arriving this afternoon. Percy's started work — the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Don't mention anything about Abroad while you're here unless you want the pants bored off you.

See you soon —

Ron

"Calm down!" Harry said as the small owl flew low over his head, twittering madly with what Harry could only assume was pride at having delivered the letter to the right person. "Come here, I need you to take my answer back!"

The owl fluttered down on top of Hedwig's cage. Hedwig looked coldly up at it, as though daring it to try and come any closer.

Harry seized his eagle-feather quill once more, grabbed a fresh piece of parchment, and wrote:Ron, it's all okay, the Muggles say I can come. See you five o'clock tomorrow. Can't wait.

Harry

He folded this note up very small, and with immense difficulty, tied it to the tiny owl's leg as it hopped on the spot with excite-ment. The moment the note was secure, the owl was off again; it zoomed out of the window and out of sight.

Harry turned to Hedwig.

"Feeling up to a long journey?" he asked her.

Hedwig hooted in a dignified sort of a way.

"Can you take this to Sirius for me?" he said, picking up his let-ter. "Hang on … I just want to finish it."

He unfolded the parchment and hastily added a postscript.

If you want to contact me, I'll be at my friend Ron Weasley's for the rest of the summer. His dad's got us tickets for the Quidditch World Cup!

The letter finished, he tied it to Hedwig's leg; she kept unusually still, as though determined to show him how a real post owl should behave.

"I'll be at Ron's when you get back, all right?" Harry told her.

She nipped his finger affectionately, then, with a soft swooshing noise, spread her enormous wings and soared out of the open window.

Harry watched her out of sight, then crawled under his bed, wrenched up the loose floorboard, and pulled out a large chunk of birthday cake. He sat there on the floor eating it, savoring the hap-piness that was flooding through him. He had cake, and Dudley had nothing but grapefruit; it was a bright summer's day, he would be leaving Privet Drive tomorrow, his scar felt perfectly normal again, and he was going to watch the Quidditch World Cup. It was hard, just now, to feel worried about anything — even Lord Voldemort.

Chapter 4 Back to the Burrow

By twelve o'clock the next day, Harry's school trunk was packed with his school things and all his most prized possessions — the Invisibility Cloak he had inherited from his father, the broom-stick he had gotten from Sirius, the enchanted map of Hogwarts he had been given by Fred and George Weasley last year. He had emp-tied his hiding place under the loose floorboard of all food, double-checked every nook and cranny of his bedroom for forgotten spellbooks or quills, and taken down the chart on the wall count-ing down the days to September the first, on which he liked to cross off the days remaining until his return to Hogwarts.

The atmosphere inside number four, Privet Drive was extremely tense. The imminent arrival at their house of an assortment of wiz-ards was making the Dursleys uptight and irritable. Uncle Vernon had looked downright alarmed when Harry informed him that the Weasleys would be arriving at five o'clock the very next day.

"I hope you told them to dress properly, these people," he snarled at once. "I've seen the sort of stuff your lot wear. They'd better have the decency to put on normal clothes, that's all."

Harry felt a slight sense of foreboding. He had rarely seen Mr. or Mrs. Weasley wearing anything that the Dursleys would call "nor-mal." Their children might don Muggle clothing during the holi-days, but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley usually wore long robes in varying states of shabbiness. Harry wasn't bothered about what the neigh-bors would think, but he was anxious about how rude the Dursleys might be to the Weasleys if they turned up looking like their worst idea of wizards.

Uncle Vernon had put on his best suit. To some people, this might have looked like a gesture of welcome, but Harry knew it was because Uncle Vernon wanted to look impressive and intimi-dating. Dudley, on the other hand, looked somehow diminished. This was not

because the diet was at last taking effect, but due to fright. Dudley had emerged from his last encounter with a fully-grown wizard with a curly pig's tail poking out of the seat of his trousers, and Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had had to pay for its removal at a private hospital in London. It wasn't altogether sur-prising, therefore, that Dudley kept running his hand nervously over his backside, and walking sideways from room to room, so as not to present the same target to the enemy.

Lunch was an almost silent meal. Dudley didn't even protest at the food (cottage cheese and grated celery). Aunt Petunia wasn't eating anything at all. Her arms were folded, her lips were pursed, and she seemed to be chewing her tongue, as though biting back the furious diatribe she longed to throw at Harry.

"They'll be driving, of course?" Uncle Vernon barked across the table.

"Er," said Harry.

He hadn't thought of that. How were the Weasleys going to pick him up? They didn't have a car anymore; the old Ford Anglia they had once owned was currently running wild in the Forbidden For-est at Hogwarts. But Mr. Weasley had borrowed a Ministry of Magic car last year; possibly he would do the same today?

"I think so," said Harry.

Uncle Vernon snorted into his mustache. Normally, Uncle Ver-non would have asked what car Mr. Weasley drove; he tended to judge other men by how big and expensive their cars were. But Harry doubted whether Uncle Vernon would have taken to Mr. Weasley even if he drove a Ferrari.

Harry spent most of the afternoon in his bedroom; he couldn't stand watching Aunt Petunia peer out through the net curtains every few seconds, as though there had been a warning about an es-caped

rhinoceros. Finally, at a quarter to five, Harry went back downstairs and into the living room.

Aunt Petunia was compulsively straightening cushions. Uncle Vernon was pretending to read the paper, but his tiny eyes were not moving, and Harry was sure he was really listening with all his might for the sound of an approaching car. Dudley was crammed into an armchair, his porky hands beneath him, clamped firmly around his bottom. Harry couldn't take the tension; he left the room and went and sat on the stairs in the hall, his eyes on his watch and his heart pumping fast from excitement and nerves.

But five o'clock came and then went. Uncle Vernon, perspiring slightly in his suit, opened the front door, peered up and down the street, then withdrew his head quickly.

"They're late!" he snarled at Harry.

"I know," said Harry. "Maybe — er — the traffic's bad, or something."

Ten past five … then a quarter past five … Harry was starting to feel anxious himself now. At half past, he heard Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia conversing in terse mutters in the living room.

"No consideration at all."

"We might've had an engagement."

"Maybe they think they'll get invited to dinner if they're late."

"Well, they most certainly won't be," said Uncle Vernon, and Harry heard him stand up and start pacing the living room. "They'll take the boy and go, there'll be no hanging around. That's if they're coming at all. Probably mistaken the day. I daresay their kind don't set much store by punctuality. Either that or they drive some tin-pot car that's broken d — AAAAAAAARRRRRGH!"

Harry jumped up. From the other side of the living room door came the sounds of the three Dursleys scrambling, panic-stricken, across the room. Next moment Dudley came flying into the hall, looking terrified.

“What happened?” said Harry. “What’s the matter?”

But Dudley didn’t seem able to speak. Hands still clamped over his buttocks, he waddled as fast as he could into the kitchen. Harry hurried into the living room.

Loud hangings and scrapings were coming from behind the Dursleys’ boarded-up fireplace, which had a fake coal fire plugged in front of it.

“What is it?” gasped Aunt Petunia, who had backed into the wall and was staring, terrified, toward the fire. “What is it, Vernon?”

But they were left in doubt barely a second longer. Voices could be heard from inside the blocked fireplace.

“Ouch! Fred, no — go back, go back, there’s been some kind of mistake — tell George not to — OUCH! George, no, there’s no room, go back quickly and tell Ron —”

“Maybe Harry can hear us, Dad — maybe he’ll be able to let us out —”

There was a loud hammering of fists on the boards behind the electric fire.

“Harry? Harry, can you hear us?”

The Dursleys rounded on Harry like a pair of angry wolverines.

“What is this?” growled Uncle Vernon. “What’s going on?”

“They — they’ve tried to get here by Floo powder,” said Harry, fighting a mad desire to laugh. “They can travel by fire — only you’ve blocked

the fireplace — hang on —”

He approached the fireplace and called through the boards.

“Mr. Weasley? Can you hear me?”

The hammering stopped. Somebody inside the chimney piece said, “Shh!”

“Mr. Weasley, it’s Harry … the fireplace has been blocked up. You won’t be able to get through there.”

“Damn!” said Mr. Weasley’s voice. “What on earth did they want to block up the fireplace for?”

“They’ve got an electric fire,” Harry explained.

“Really?” said Mr. Weasley’s voice excitedly. “Eclectic, you say? With a plug? Gracious, I must see that. … Let’s think … ouch, Ron!”

Ron’s voice now joined the others’.

“What are we doing here? Has something gone wrong?”

“Oh no, Ron,” came Fred’s voice, very sarcastically. “No, this is exactly where we wanted to end up.”

“Yeah, we’re having the time of our lives here,” said George, whose voice sounded muffled, as though he was squashed against the wall.

“Boys, boys …” said Mr. Weasley vaguely. “I’m trying to think what to do. … Yes … only way … Stand back, Harry.”

Harry retreated to the sofa. Uncle Vernon, however, moved forward.

“Wait a moment!” he bellowed at the fire. “What exactly are you going to —”

BANG.

The electric fire shot across the room as the boarded-up fireplace burst outward, expelling Mr. Weasley, Fred, George, and Ron in a cloud of rubble and loose chippings. Aunt Petunia shrieked and fell backward over the coffee table; Uncle Vernon caught her before she hit the floor, and gaped, speechless, at the Weasleys, all of whom had bright red hair, including Fred and George, who were identical to the last freckle.

“That’s better,” panted Mr. Weasley, brushing dust from his long green robes and straightening his glasses. “Ah — you must be Harry’s aunt and uncle!”

Tall, thin, and balding, he moved toward Uncle Vernon, his hand outstretched, but Uncle Vernon backed away several paces, dragging Aunt Petunia. Words utterly failed Uncle Vernon. His best suit was covered in white dust, which had settled in his hair and mustache and made him look as though he had just aged thirty years.

“Er — yes — sorry about that,” said Mr. Weasley, lowering his hand and looking over his shoulder at the blasted fireplace. “It’s all my fault. It just didn’t occur to me that we wouldn’t be able to get out at the other end. I had your fireplace connected to the Floo Network, you see — just for an afternoon, you know, so we could get Harry. Muggle fireplaces aren’t supposed to be connected, strictly speaking — but I’ve got a useful contact at the Floo Regu-lation Panel and he fixed it for me. I can put it right in a jiffy, though, don’t worry. I’ll light a fire to send the boys back, and then I can repair your fireplace before I Disapparate.”

Harry was ready to bet that the Dursleys hadn’t understood a single word of this. They were still gaping at Mr. Weasley, thun-derstruck. Aunt Petunia staggered upright again and hid behind Uncle Vernon.

“Hello, Harry!” said Mr. Weasley brightly. “Got your trunk ready?”

“It’s upstairs,” said Harry, grinning back.

“We’ll get it,” said Fred at once. Winking at Harry, he and George left the room. They knew where Harry’s bedroom was, hav-ing once rescued him from it in the dead of night. Harry suspected that Fred and George were hoping for a glimpse of Dudley; they had heard a lot about him from Harry.

“Well,” said Mr. Weasley, swinging his arms slightly, while he tried to find words to break the very nasty silence. “Very — erm — very nice place you’ve got here.”

As the usually spotless living room was now covered in dust and bits of brick, this remark didn’t go down too well with the Durs-leys. Uncle Vernon’s face purpled once more, and Aunt Petunia started chewing her tongue again. However, they seemed too scared to actually say anything.

Mr. Weasley was looking around. He loved everything to do with Muggles. Harry could see him itching to go and examine the television and the video recorder.

“They run off eckeltricity, do they?” he said knowledgeably. “Ah yes, I can see the plugs. I collect plugs,” he added to Uncle Vernon. “And batteries. Got a very large collection of batteries. My wife thinks I’m mad, but there you are.”

Uncle Vernon clearly thought Mr. Weasley was mad too. He moved ever so slightly to the right, screening Aunt Petunia from view, as though he thought Mr. Weasley might suddenly run at them and attack.

Dudley suddenly reappeared in the room. Harry could hear the clunk of his trunk on the stairs, and knew that the sounds had scared Dudley out of the kitchen. Dudley edged along the wall, gazing at Mr. Weasley with terrified eyes, and attempted to conceal himself behind his mother and father. Unfortunately, Uncle Ver-non’s bulk, while

sufficient to hide bony Aunt Petunia, was nowhere near enough to conceal Dudley.

“Ah, this is your cousin, is it, Harry?” said Mr. Weasley, taking another brave stab at making conversation.

“Yep,” said Harry, “that’s Dudley.”

He and Ron exchanged glances and then quickly looked away from each other; the temptation to burst out laughing was almost overwhelming. Dudley was still clutching his bottom as though afraid it might fall off. Mr. Weasley, however, seemed genuinely concerned at Dudley’s peculiar behavior. Indeed, from the tone of his voice when he next spoke, Harry was quite sure that Mr. Weasley thought Dudley was quite as mad as the Dursleys thought he was, except that Mr. Weasley felt sympathy rather than fear.

“Having a good holiday, Dudley?” he said kindly.

Dudley whimpered. Harry saw his hands tighten still harder over his massive backside.

Fred and George came back into the room carrying Harry’s school trunk. They glanced around as they entered and spotted Dudley. Their faces cracked into identical evil grins.

“Ah, right,” said Mr. Weasley. “Better get cracking then.”

He pushed up the sleeves of his robes and took out his wand. Harry saw the Dursleys draw back against the wall as one.

“Incendio!” said Mr. Weasley, pointing his wand at the hole in the wall behind him.

Flames rose at once in the fireplace, crackling merrily as though they had been burning for hours. Mr. Weasley took a small draw-string bag from his pocket, untied it, took a pinch of the powder inside, and threw

it onto the flames, which turned emerald green and roared higher than ever.

“Off you go then, Fred,” said Mr. Weasley.

“Coming,” said Fred. “Oh no — hang on —”

A bag of sweets had spilled out of Fred’s pocket and the contents were now rolling in every direction — big, fat toffees in brightly colored wrappers.

Fred scrambled around, cramming them back into his pocket, then gave the Dursleys a cheery wave, stepped forward, and walked right into the fire, saying “the Burrow!” Aunt Petunia gave a little shuddering gasp. There was a whooshing sound, and Fred vanished.

“Right then, George,” said Mr. Weasley, “you and the trunk.”

Harry helped George carry the trunk forward into the flames and turn it onto its end so that he could hold it better. Then, with a second whoosh, George had cried “the Burrow!” and vanished too.

“Ron, you next,” said Mr. Weasley.

“See you,” said Ron brightly to the Dursleys. He grinned broadly at Harry, then stepped into the fire, shouted “the Burrow!” and disappeared.

Now Harry and Mr. Weasley alone remained.

“Well … ’bye then,” Harry said to the Dursleys.

They didn’t say anything at all. Harry moved toward the fire, but just as he reached the edge of the hearth, Mr. Weasley put out a hand and held him back. He was looking at the Dursleys in amazement.

“Harry said good-bye to you,” he said. “Didn’t you hear him?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harry muttered to Mr. Weasley. “Honestly, I don’t care.”

Mr. Weasley did not remove his hand from Harry’s shoulder.

“You aren’t going to see your nephew till next summer,” he said to Uncle Vernon in mild indignation. “Surely you’re going to say good-bye?”

Uncle Vernon’s face worked furiously. The idea of being taught consideration by a man who had just blasted away half his living room wall seemed to be causing him intense suffering. But Mr. Weasley’s wand was still in his hand, and Uncle Vernon’s tiny eyes darted to it once, before he said, very resentfully, “Good-bye, then.”

“See you,” said Harry, putting one foot forward into the green flames, which felt pleasantly like warm breath. At that moment, however, a horrible gagging sound erupted behind him, and Aunt Petunia started to scream.

Harry wheeled around. Dudley was no longer standing behind his parents. He was kneeling beside the coffee table, and he was gagging and sputtering on a foot-long, purple, slimy thing that was protruding from his mouth. One bewildered second later, Harry realized that the foot-long thing was Dudley’s tongue — and that a brightly colored toffee wrapper lay on the floor before him.

Aunt Petunia hurled herself onto the ground beside Dudley, seized the end of his swollen tongue, and attempted to wrench it out of his mouth; unsurprisingly, Dudley yelled and sputtered worse than ever, trying to fight her off. Uncle Vernon was bellow-ing and waving his arms around, and Mr. Weasley had to shout to make himself heard.

“Not to worry, I can sort him out!” he yelled, advancing on Dudley with his wand outstretched, but Aunt Petunia screamed worse than ever and threw herself on top of Dudley, shielding him from Mr. Weasley.

“No, really!” said Mr. Weasley desperately. “It’s a simple process — it was the toffee — my son Fred — real practical joker — but it’s only an Engorgement Charm — at least, I think it is — please, I can correct it —”

But far from being reassured, the Dursleys became more panic-stricken; Aunt Petunia was sobbing hysterically, tugging Dudley’s tongue as though determined to rip it out; Dudley appeared to be suffocating under the combined pressure of his mother and his tongue; and Uncle Vernon, who had lost control completely, seized a china figure from on top of the sideboard and threw it very hard at Mr. Weasley, who ducked, causing the ornament to shatter in the blasted fireplace.

“Now really!” said Mr. Weasley angrily, brandishing his wand. “I’m trying to help!”

Bellowing like a wounded hippo, Uncle Vernon snatched up an-other ornament.

“Harry, go! Just go!” Mr. Weasley shouted, his wand on Uncle Vernon. “I’ll sort this out!”

Harry didn’t want to miss the fun, but Uncle Vernon’s second ornament narrowly missed his left ear, and on balance he thought it best to leave the situation to Mr. Weasley. He stepped into the fire, looking over his shoulder as he said “the Burrow!” His last fleeting glimpse of the living room was of Mr. Weasley blasting a third ornament out of Uncle Vernon’s hand with his wand, Aunt Petunia screaming and lying on top of Dudley, and Dudley’s tongue lolling around like a great slimy python. But next moment Harry had be-gun to spin very fast, and the Dursleys’ living room was whipped out of sight in a rush of emerald-green flames.

Chapter 5 Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes

Harry spun faster and faster, elbows tucked tightly to his sides, blurred fireplaces flashing past him, until he started to feel sick and closed his eyes. Then, when at last he felt himself slowing down, he threw out his hands and came to a halt in time to prevent himself from falling face forward out of the Weasleys' kitchen fire.

"Did he eat it?" said Fred excitedly, holding out a hand to pull Harry to his feet.

"Yeah," said Harry, straightening up. "What was it?"

"Ton-Tongue Toffee," said Fred brightly. "George and I in-vented them, and we've been looking for someone to test them on all summer. …"

The tiny kitchen exploded with laughter; Harry looked around and saw that Ron and George were sitting at the scrubbed wooden table with two red-haired people Harry had never seen before, though he knew immediately who they must be: Bill and Charlie, the two eldest Weasley brothers.

"How're you doing, Harry?" said the nearer of the two, grinning at him and holding out a large hand, which Harry shook, feeling calluses and blisters under his fingers. This had to be Charlie, who worked with dragons in Romania. Charlie was built like the twins, shorter and stockier than Percy and Ron, who were both long and lanky. He had a broad, good-natured face, which was weather-beaten and so freckly that he looked almost tanned; his arms were muscular, and one of them had a large, shiny burn on it.

Bill got to his feet, smiling, and also shook Harry's hand. Bill came as something of a surprise. Harry knew that he worked for the wizarding bank, Gringotts, and that Bill had been Head Boy at Hogwarts; Harry had always imagined Bill to be an older version of Percy: fussy about

rule-breaking and fond of bossing everyone around. However, Bill was — there was no other word for it — cool. He was tall, with long hair that he had tied back in a ponytail. He was wearing an earring with what looked like a fang dangling from it. Bill's clothes would not have looked out of place at a rock concert, except that Harry recognized his boots to be made, not of leather, but of dragon hide.

Before any of them could say anything else, there was a faint popping noise, and Mr. Weasley appeared out of thin air at George's shoulder. He was looking angrier than Harry had ever seen him.

"That wasn't funny, Fred!" he shouted. "What on earth did you give that Muggle boy?"

"I didn't give him anything," said Fred, with another evil grin. "I just dropped it. … It was his fault he went and ate it, I never told him to."

"You dropped it on purpose!" roared Mr. Weasley. "You knew he'd eat it, you knew he was on a diet —"

"How big did his tongue get?" George asked eagerly.

"It was four feet long before his parents would let me shrink it!"

Harry and the Weasleys roared with laughter again.

"It isn't funny!" Mr. Weasley shouted. "That sort of behavior se-riously undermines wizard–Muggle relations! I spend half my life campaigning against the mistreatment of Muggles, and my own sons —"

"We didn't give it to him because he's a Muggle!" said Fred indignantly.

"No, we gave it to him because he's a great bullying git," said George. "Isn't he, Harry?"

"Yeah, he is, Mr. Weasley," said Harry earnestly.

"That's not the point!" raged Mr. Weasley. "You wait until I tell your mother —"

"Tell me what?" said a voice behind them.

Mrs. Weasley had just entered the kitchen. She was a short, plump woman with a very kind face, though her eyes were presently narrowed with suspicion.

"Oh hello, Harry, dear," she said, spotting him and smiling. Then her eyes snapped back to her husband. "Tell me what, Arthur?"

Mr. Weasley hesitated. Harry could tell that, however angry he was with Fred and George, he hadn't really intended to tell Mrs. Weasley what had happened. There was a silence, while Mr. Weasley eyed his wife nervously. Then two girls appeared in the kitchen doorway behind Mrs. Weasley. One, with very bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth, was Harry's and Ron's friend, Hermione Granger. The other, who was small and red-haired, was Ron's younger sister, Ginny. Both of them smiled at Harry, who grinned back, which made Ginny go scarlet — she had been very taken with Harry ever since his first visit to the Burrow.

"Tell me what, Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley repeated, in a dangerous sort of voice.

"It's nothing, Molly," mumbled Mr. Weasley, "Fred and George just — but I've had words with them —"

"What have they done this time?" said Mrs. Weasley. "If it's got anything to do with Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes —"

"Why don't you show Harry where he's sleeping, Ron?" said Hermione from the doorway.

“He knows where he’s sleeping,” said Ron, “in my room, he slept there last —”

“We can all go,” said Hermione pointedly.

“Oh,” said Ron, cottoning on. “Right.”

“Yeah, we’ll come too,” said George.

“You stay where you are!” snarled Mrs. Weasley.

Harry and Ron edged out of the kitchen, and they, Hermione, and Ginny set off along the narrow hallway and up the rickety staircase that zigzagged through the house to the upper stories.

“What are Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes?” Harry asked as they climbed.

Ron and Ginny both laughed, although Hermione didn’t.

“Mum found this stack of order forms when she was cleaning Fred and George’s room,” said Ron quietly. “Great long price lists for stuff they’ve invented. Joke stuff, you know. Fake wands and trick sweets, loads of stuff. It was brilliant, I never knew they’d been inventing all that …”

“We’ve been hearing explosions out of their room for ages, but we never thought they were actually making things,” said Ginny. “We thought they just liked the noise.”

“Only, most of the stuff — well, all of it, really — was a bit dangerous,” said Ron, “and, you know, they were planning to sell it at Hogwarts to make some money, and Mum went mad at them. Told them they weren’t allowed to make any more of it, and burned all the order forms. … She’s furious at them anyway. They didn’t get as many O.W.L.s as she expected.”

O.W.L.s were Ordinary Wizarding Levels, the examinations Hogwarts students took at the age of fifteen.

“And then there was this big row,” Ginny said, “because Mum wants them to go into the Ministry of Magic like Dad, and they told her all they want to do is open a joke shop.”

Just then a door on the second landing opened, and a face poked out wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a very annoyed expression.

“Hi, Percy,” said Harry.

“Oh hello, Harry,” said Percy. “I was wondering who was mak-ing all the noise. I’m trying to work in here, you know — I’ve got a report to finish for the office — and it’s rather difficult to con-centrate when people keep thundering up and down the stairs.”

“We’re not thundering,” said Ron irritably. “We’re walking. Sorry if we’ve disturbed the top-secret workings of the Ministry of Magic.”

“What are you working on?” said Harry.

“A report for the Department of International Magical Cooper-ation,” said Percy smugly. “We’re trying to standardize cauldron thickness. Some of these foreign imports are just a shade too thin — leakages have been increasing at a rate of almost three per-cent a year —”

“That’ll change the world, that report will,” said Ron. “Front page of the Daily Prophet, I expect, cauldron leaks.”

Percy went slightly pink.

“You might sneer, Ron,” he said heatedly, “but unless some sort of international law is imposed we might well find the market flooded with flimsy, shallow-bottomed products that seriously endanger —”

“Yeah, yeah, all right,” said Ron, and he started off upstairs again. Percy slammed his bedroom door shut. As Harry, Hermi-one, and Ginny followed Ron up three more flights of stairs, shouts from the kitchen below echoed up to them. It sounded as though Mr. Weasley had told Mrs. Weasley about the toffees.

The room at the top of the house where Ron slept looked much as it had the last time that Harry had come to stay: the same posters of Ron’s favorite Quidditch team, the Chudley Cannons, were whirling and waving on the walls and sloping ceiling, and the fish tank on the windowsill, which had previously held frog spawn, now contained one extremely large frog. Ron’s old rat, Scabbers, was here no more, but instead there was the tiny gray owl that had delivered Ron’s letter to Harry in Privet Drive. It was hopping up and down in a small cage and twittering madly.

“Shut up, Pig,” said Ron, edging his way between two of the four beds that had been squeezed into the room. “Fred and George are in here with us, because Bill and Charlie are in their room,” he told Harry. “Percy gets to keep his room all to himself because he’s got to work.”

“Er — why are you calling that owl Pig?” Harry asked Ron.

“Because he’s being stupid,” said Ginny. “Its proper name is Pigwidgeon.”

“Yeah, and that’s not a stupid name at all,” said Ron sarcastically. “Ginny named him,” he explained to Harry. “She reckons it’s sweet. And I tried to change it, but it was too late, he won’t answer to anything else. So now he’s Pig. I’ve got to keep him up here be-cause he annoys Errol and Hermes. He annoys me too, come to that.”

Pigwidgeon zoomed happily around his cage, hooting shrilly. Harry knew Ron too well to take him seriously. He had moaned continually about his old rat, Scabbers, but had been most upset when Hermione’s cat, Crookshanks, appeared to have eaten him.

“Where’s Crookshanks?” Harry asked Hermione now.

“Out in the garden, I expect,” she said. “He likes chasing gnomes. He’s never seen any before.”

“Percy’s enjoying work, then?” said Harry, sitting down on one of the beds and watching the Chudley Cannons zooming in and out of the posters on the ceiling.

“Enjoying it?” said Ron darkly. “I don’t reckon he’d come home if Dad didn’t make him. He’s obsessed. Just don’t get him onto the subject of his boss. According to Mr. Crouch … as I was saying to Mr. Crouch … Mr. Crouch is of the opinion … Mr. Crouch was telling me … They’ll be announcing their engagement any day now.”

“Have you had a good summer, Harry?” said Hermione. “Did you get our food parcels and everything?”

“Yeah, thanks a lot,” said Harry. “They saved my life, those cakes.”

“And have you heard from — ?” Ron began, but at a look from Hermione he fell silent. Harry knew Ron had been about to ask about Sirius. Ron and Hermione had been so deeply involved in helping Sirius escape from the Ministry of Magic that they were almost as concerned about Harry’s godfather as he was. However, discussing him in front of Ginny was a bad idea. Nobody but themselves and Professor Dumbledore knew about how Sirius had escaped, or believed in his innocence.

“I think they’ve stopped arguing,” said Hermione, to cover the awkward moment, because Ginny was looking curiously from Ron to Harry. “Shall we go down and help your mum with dinner?”

“Yeah, all right,” said Ron. The four of them left Ron’s room and went back downstairs to find Mrs. Weasley alone in the kitchen, looking extremely bad-tempered.

“We’re eating out in the garden,” she said when they came in. “There’s just not room for eleven people in here. Could you take the plates outside, girls? Bill and Charlie are setting up the tables. Knives and forks, please, you two,” she said to Ron and Harry, pointing her wand a little more vigorously than she had intended at a pile of potatoes in the sink, which shot out of their skins so fast that they ricocheted off the walls and ceiling.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” she snapped, now directing her wand at a dustpan, which hopped off the sideboard and started skating across the floor, scooping up the potatoes. “Those two!” she burst out savagely, now pulling pots and pans out of a cupboard, and Harry knew she meant Fred and George. “I don’t know what’s go-ing to happen to them, I really don’t. No ambition, unless you count making as much trouble as they possibly can. …”

Mrs. Weasley slammed a large copper saucepan down on the kitchen table and began to wave her wand around inside it. A creamy sauce poured from the wand tip as she stirred.

“It’s not as though they haven’t got brains,” she continued irrita-bly, taking the saucepan over to the stove and lighting it with a fur-ther poke of her wand, “but they’re wasting them, and unless they pull themselves together soon, they’ll be in real trouble. I’ve had more owls from Hogwarts about them than the rest put together. If they carry on the way they’re going, they’ll end up in front of the Improper Use of Magic Office.”

Mrs. Weasley jabbed her wand at the cutlery drawer, which shot open. Harry and Ron both jumped out of the way as several knives soared out of it, flew across the kitchen, and began chopping the potatoes, which had just been tipped back into the sink by the dustpan.

“I don’t know where we went wrong with them,” said Mrs. Weasley, putting down her wand and starting to pull out still more saucepans.

“It’s been the same for years, one thing after another, and they won’t listen to — OH NOT AGAIN!”

She had picked up her wand from the table, and it had emitted a loud squeak and turned into a giant rubber mouse.

“One of their fake wands again!” she shouted. “How many times have I told them not to leave them lying around?”

She grabbed her real wand and turned around to find that the sauce on the stove was smoking.

“C’mon,” Ron said hurriedly to Harry, seizing a handful of cut-lery from the open drawer, “let’s go and help Bill and Charlie.”

They left Mrs. Weasley and headed out the back door into the yard.

They had only gone a few paces when Hermione’s bandy-legged ginger cat, Crookshanks, came pelting out of the garden, bottle-brush tail held high in the air, chasing what looked like a muddy potato on legs. Harry recognized it instantly as a gnome. Barely ten inches high, its horny little feet pattered very fast as it sprinted across the yard and dived headlong into one of the Wellington boots that lay scattered around the door. Harry could hear the gnome giggling madly as Crookshanks inserted a paw into the boot, trying to reach it. Meanwhile, a very loud crashing noise was coming from the other side of the house. The source of the com-motion was revealed as they entered the garden, and saw that Bill and Charlie both had their wands out, and were making two bat-tered old tables fly high above the lawn, smashing into each other, each attempting to knock the other’s out of the air. Fred and George were cheering, Ginny was laughing, and Hermione was hovering near the hedge, apparently torn between amusement and anxiety.

Bill’s table caught Charlie’s with a huge bang and knocked one of its legs off. There was a clatter from overhead, and they all looked up to see Percy’s head poking out of a window on the sec-ond floor.

“Will you keep it down?!” he bellowed.

“Sorry, Perce,” said Bill, grinning. “How’re the cauldron bot-toms coming on?”

“Very badly,” said Percy peevishly, and he slammed the window shut. Chuckling, Bill and Charlie directed the tables safely onto the grass, end to end, and then, with a flick of his wand, Bill reattached the table leg and conjured tablecloths from nowhere.

By seven o’clock, the two tables were groaning under dishes and dishes of Mrs. Weasley’s excellent cooking, and the nine Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione were settling themselves down to eat beneath a clear, deep-blue sky. To somebody who had been living on meals of increasingly stale cake all summer, this was paradise, and at first, Harry listened rather than talked as he helped himself to chicken and ham pie, boiled potatoes, and salad.

At the far end of the table, Percy was telling his father all about his report on cauldron bottoms.

“I’ve told Mr. Crouch that I’ll have it ready by Tuesday,” Percy was saying pompously. “That’s a bit sooner than he expected it, but I like to keep on top of things. I think he’ll be grateful I’ve done it in good time, I mean, it’s extremely busy in our department just now, what with all the arrangements for the World Cup. We’re just not getting the support we need from the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Ludo Bagman —”

“I like Ludo,” said Mr. Weasley mildly. “He was the one who got us such good tickets for the Cup. I did him a bit of a favor: His brother, Otto, got into a spot of trouble — a lawnmower with un-natural powers — I smoothed the whole thing over.”

“Oh Bagman’s likable enough, of course,” said Percy dismis-sively, “but how he ever got to be Head of Department … when I compare him to Mr. Crouch! I can’t see Mr. Crouch losing a mem-ber of our

department and not trying to find out what's happened to them. You realize Bertha Jorkins has been missing for over a month now? Went on holiday to Albania and never came back?"

"Yes, I was asking Ludo about that," said Mr. Weasley, frowning. "He says Bertha's gotten lost plenty of times before now — though I must say, if it was someone in my department, I'd be worried. …"

"Oh Bertha's hopeless, all right," said Percy. "I hear she's been shunted from department to department for years, much more trouble than she's worth … but all the same, Bagman ought to be trying to find her. Mr. Crouch has been taking a personal interest, she worked in our department at one time, you know, and I think Mr. Crouch was quite fond of her — but Bagman just keeps laugh-ing and saying she probably misread the map and ended up in Aus-tralia instead of Albania. However" — Percy heaved an impressive sigh and took a deep swig of elderflower wine — "we've got quite enough on our plates at the Department of International Magical Cooperation without trying to find members of other departments too. As you know, we've got another big event to organize right af-ter the World Cup."

Percy cleared his throat significantly and looked down toward the end of the table where Harry, Ron, and Hermione were sitting. "You know the one I'm talking about, Father." He raised his voice slightly. "The top-secret one."

Ron rolled his eyes and muttered to Harry and Hermione, "He's been trying to get us to ask what that event is ever since he started work. Probably an exhibition of thick-bottomed cauldrons."

In the middle of the table, Mrs. Weasley was arguing with Bill about his earring, which seemed to be a recent acquisition.

"… with a horrible great fang on it. Really, Bill, what do they say at the bank?"

“Mum, no one at the bank gives a damn how I dress as long as I bring home plenty of treasure,” said Bill patiently.

“And your hair’s getting silly, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley, fingering her wand lovingly. “I wish you’d let me give it a trim. …”

“I like it,” said Ginny, who was sitting beside Bill. “You’re so old-fashioned, Mum. Anyway, it’s nowhere near as long as Professor Dumbledore’s. …”

Next to Mrs. Weasley, Fred, George, and Charlie were all talking spiritedly about the World Cup.

“It’s got to be Ireland,” said Charlie thickly, through a mouthful of potato. “They flattened Peru in the semifinals.”

“Bulgaria has got Viktor Krum, though,” said Fred.

“Krum’s one decent player, Ireland has got seven,” said Charlie shortly. “I wish England had got through. That was embarrassing, that was.”

“What happened?” said Harry eagerly, regretting more than ever his isolation from the wizarding world when he was stuck on Privet Drive.

“Went down to Transylvania, three hundred and ninety to ten,” said Charlie gloomily. “Shocking performance. And Wales lost to Uganda, and Scotland was slaughtered by Luxembourg.”

Harry had been on the Gryffindor House Quidditch team ever since his first year at Hogwarts and owned one of the best racing brooms in the world, a Firebolt. Flying came more naturally to Harry than anything else in the magical world, and he played in the position of Seeker on the Gryffindor House team.

Mr. Weasley conjured up candles to light the darkening garden before they had their homemade strawberry ice cream, and by the time they

had finished, moths were fluttering low over the table, and the warm air was perfumed with the smells of grass and hon-eysuckle. Harry was feeling extremely well fed and at peace with the world as he watched several gnomes sprinting through the rose-bushes, laughing madly and closely pursued by Crookshanks.

Ron looked carefully up the table to check that the rest of the family were all busy talking, then he said very quietly to Harry, "So — have you heard from Sirius lately?"

Hermione looked around, listening closely.

"Yeah," said Harry softly, "twice. He sounds okay. I wrote to him yesterday. He might write back while I'm here."

He suddenly remembered the reason he had written to Sirius, and for a moment was on the verge of telling Ron and Hermione about his scar hurting again, and about the dream that had awoken him … but he really didn't want to worry them just now, not when he himself was feeling so happy and peaceful.

"Look at the time," Mrs. Weasley said suddenly, checking her wristwatch. "You really should be in bed, the whole lot of you — you'll be up at the crack of dawn to get to the Cup. Harry, if you leave your school list out, I'll get your things for you tomorrow in Diagon Alley. I'm getting everyone else's. There might not be time after the World Cup, the match went on for five days last time."

"Wow — hope it does this time!" said Harry enthusiastically.

"Well, I certainly don't," said Percy sanctimoniously. "I shudder to think what the state of my in-tray would be if I was away from work for five days."

"Yeah, someone might slip dragon dung in it again, eh, Perce?" said Fred.

“That was a sample of fertilizer from Norway!” said Percy, going very red in the face. “It was nothing personal!”

“It was,” Fred whispered to Harry as they got up from the table. “We sent it.”

Chapter 6 The Portkey

Harry felt as though he had barely lain down to sleep in Ron’s room when he was being shaken awake by Mrs. Weasley.

“Time to go, Harry, dear,” she whispered, moving away to wake Ron.

Harry felt around for his glasses, put them on, and sat up. It was still dark outside. Ron muttered indistinctly as his mother roused him. At the foot of Harry’s mattress he saw two large, disheveled shapes emerging from tangles of blankets.

“ ’S’ time already?” said Fred groggily.

They dressed in silence, too sleepy to talk, then, yawning and stretching, the four of them headed downstairs into the kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley was stirring the contents of a large pot on the stove, while Mr. Weasley was sitting at the table, checking a sheaf of large parchment tickets. He looked up as the boys entered and spread his arms so that they could see his clothes more clearly. He was wearing what appeared to be a golfing sweater and a very old pair of jeans, slightly too big for him and held up with a thick leather belt.

“What d’you think?” he asked anxiously. “We’re supposed to go incognito — do I look like a Muggle, Harry?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, smiling, “very good.”

“Where’re Bill and Charlie and Per-Per-Percy?” said George, fail-ing to stifle a huge yawn.

“Well, they’re Apparating, aren’t they?” said Mrs. Weasley, heav-ing the large pot over to the table and starting to ladle porridge into bowls. “So they can have a bit of a lie-in.”

Harry knew that Apparating meant disappearing from one place and reappearing almost instantly in another, but had never known any Hogwarts student to do it, and understood that it was very difficult.

"So they're still in bed?" said Fred grumpily, pulling his bowl of porridge toward him. "Why can't we Apparate too?"

"Because you're not of age and you haven't passed your test," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "And where have those girls got to?"

She bustled out of the kitchen and they heard her climbing the stairs.

"You have to pass a test to Apparate?" Harry asked.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Weasley, tucking the tickets safely into the back pocket of his jeans. "The Department of Magical Transporta-tion had to fine a couple of people the other day for Apparating without a license. It's not easy, Apparition, and when it's not done properly it can lead to nasty complications. This pair I'm talking about went and splinched themselves."

Everyone around the table except Harry winced.

"Er — splinched?" said Harry.

"They left half of themselves behind," said Mr. Weasley, now spooning large amounts of treacle onto his porridge. "So, of course, they were stuck. Couldn't move either way. Had to wait for the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad to sort them out. Meant a fair old bit of paperwork, I can tell you, what with the Muggles who spot-ted the body parts they'd left behind. …"

Harry had a sudden vision of a pair of legs and an eyeball lying abandoned on the pavement of Privet Drive.

"Were they okay?" he asked, startled.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Weasley matter-of-factly. "But they got a heavy fine, and I don't think they'll be trying it again in a hurry. You don't mess around with Apparition. There are plenty of adult wizards who don't bother with it. Prefer brooms — slower, but safer."

"But Bill and Charlie and Percy can all do it?"

"Charlie had to take the test twice," said Fred, grinning. "He failed the first time, Apparated five miles south of where he meant to, right on top of some poor old dear doing her shopping, remember?"

"Yes, well, he passed the second time," said Mrs. Weasley, marching back into the kitchen amid hearty sniggers.

"Percy only passed two weeks ago," said George. "He's been Apparating downstairs every morning since, just to prove he can."

There were footsteps down the passageway and Hermione and Ginny came into the kitchen, both looking pale and drowsy.

"Why do we have to be up so early?" Ginny said, rubbing her eyes and sitting down at the table.

"We've got a bit of a walk," said Mr. Weasley.

"Walk?" said Harry. "What, are we walking to the World Cup?"

"No, no, that's miles away," said Mr. Weasley, smiling. "We only need to walk a short way. It's just that it's very difficult for a large number of wizards to congregate without attracting Muggle atten-tion. We have to be very careful about how we travel at the best of times, and on a huge occasion like the Quidditch World Cup —"

"George!" said Mrs. Weasley sharply, and they all jumped.

"What?" said George, in an innocent tone that deceived nobody.

"What is that in your pocket?"

"Nothing!"

"Don't you lie to me!"

Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at George's pocket and said, "Accio!"

Several small, brightly colored objects zoomed out of George's pocket; he made a grab for them but missed, and they sped right into Mrs. Weasley's outstretched hand.

"We told you to destroy them!" said Mrs. Weasley furiously, holding up what were unmistakably more Ton-Tongue Toffees. "We told you to get rid of the lot! Empty your pockets, go on, both of you!"

It was an unpleasant scene; the twins had evidently been trying to smuggle as many toffees out of the house as possible, and it was only by using her Summoning Charm that Mrs. Weasley managed to find them all.

"Accio! Accio! Accio!" she shouted, and toffees zoomed from all sorts of unlikely places, including the lining of George's jacket and the turn-ups of Fred's jeans.

"We spent six months developing those!" Fred shouted at his mother as she threw the toffees away.

"Oh a fine way to spend six months!" she shrieked. "No wonder you didn't get more O.W.L.s!"

All in all, the atmosphere was not very friendly as they took their departure. Mrs. Weasley was still glowering as she kissed Mr. Weasley on the cheek, though not nearly as much as the twins, who had each hoisted their rucksacks onto their backs and walked out without a word to her.

"Well, have a lovely time," said Mrs. Weasley, "and behave yourselves," she called after the twins' retreating backs, but they did not

look back or answer. “I’ll send Bill, Charlie, and Percy along around midday,” Mrs. Weasley said to Mr. Weasley, as he, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny set off across the dark yard after Fred and George.

It was chilly and the moon was still out. Only a dull, greenish tinge along the horizon to their right showed that daybreak was drawing closer. Harry, having been thinking about thousands of wizards speeding toward the Quidditch World Cup, sped up to walk with Mr. Weasley.

“So how does everyone get there without all the Muggles notic-ing?” he asked.

“It’s been a massive organizational problem,” sighed Mr. Weasley. “The trouble is, about a hundred thousand wizards turn up at the World Cup, and of course, we just haven’t got a magical site big enough to accommodate them all. There are places Mug-gles can’t penetrate, but imagine trying to pack a hundred thousand wizards into Diagon Alley or platform nine and three-quarters. So we had to find a nice deserted moor, and set up as many anti-Muggle precautions as possible. The whole Ministry’s been work-ing on it for months. First, of course, we have to stagger the arrivals. People with cheaper tickets have to arrive two weeks beforehand. A limited number use Muggle transport, but we can’t have too many clogging up their buses and trains — remember, wizards are coming from all over the world. Some Apparate, of course, but we have to set up safe points for them to appear, well away from Muggles. I believe there’s a handy wood they’re using as the Apparition point. For those who don’t want to Apparate, or can’t, we use Portkeys. They’re objects that are used to transport wizards from one spot to another at a prearranged time. You can do large groups at a time if you need to. There have been two hundred Portkeys placed at strategic points around Britain, and the nearest one to us is up at the top of Stoatshead Hill, so that’s where we’re headed.”

Mr. Weasley pointed ahead of them, where a large black mass rose beyond the village of Ottery St. Catchpole.

“What sort of objects are Portkeys?” said Harry curiously.

“Well, they can be anything,” said Mr. Weasley. “Unobtrusive things, obviously, so Muggles don’t go picking them up and play-ing with them … stuff they’ll just think is litter. …”

They trudged down the dark, dank lane toward the village, the silence broken only by their footsteps. The sky lightened very slowly as they made their way through the village, its inky black-ness diluting to deepest blue. Harry’s hands and feet were freezing. Mr. Weasley kept checking his watch.

They didn’t have breath to spare for talking as they began to climb Stoatshead Hill, stumbling occasionally in hidden rabbit holes, slipping on thick black tuffets of grass. Each breath Harry took was sharp in his chest and his legs were starting to seize up when, at last, his feet found level ground.

“Whew,” panted Mr. Weasley, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his sweater. “Well, we’ve made good time — we’ve got ten minutes. …”

Hermione came over the crest of the hill last, clutching a stitch in her side.

“Now we just need the Portkey,” said Mr. Weasley, replacing his glasses and squinting around at the ground. “It won’t be big. … Come on …”

They spread out, searching. They had only been at it for a cou-ple of minutes, however, when a shout rent the still air.

“Over here, Arthur! Over here, son, we’ve got it!”

Two tall figures were silhouetted against the starry sky on the other side of the hilltop.

“Amos!” said Mr. Weasley, smiling as he strode over to the man who had shouted. The rest of them followed.

Mr. Weasley was shaking hands with a ruddy-faced wizard with a scrubby brown beard, who was holding a moldy-looking old boot in his other hand.

“This is Amos Diggory, everyone,” said Mr. Weasley. “He works for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. And I think you know his son, Cedric?”

Cedric Diggory was an extremely handsome boy of around seventeen. He was Captain and Seeker of the Hufflepuff House Quidditch team at Hogwarts.

“Hi,” said Cedric, looking around at them all.

Everybody said hi back except Fred and George, who merely nodded. They had never quite forgiven Cedric for beating their team, Gryffindor, in the first Quidditch match of the previous year.

“Long walk, Arthur?” Cedric’s father asked.

“Not too bad,” said Mr. Weasley. “We live just on the other side of the village there. You?”

“Had to get up at two, didn’t we, Ced? I tell you, I’ll be glad when he’s got his Apparition test. Still … not complaining … Quidditch World Cup, wouldn’t miss it for a sackful of Gal-leons — and the tickets cost about that. Mind you, looks like I got off easy. …” Amos Diggory peered good-naturedly around at the three Weasley boys, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny. “All these yours, Arthur?”

"Oh no, only the redheads," said Mr. Weasley, pointing out his children. "This is Hermione, friend of Ron's — and Harry, an-other friend —"

"Merlin's beard," said Amos Diggory, his eyes widening. "Harry? Harry Potter?"

"Er — yeah," said Harry.

Harry was used to people looking curiously at him when they met him, used to the way their eyes moved at once to the lightning scar on his forehead, but it always made him feel uncomfortable.

"Ced's talked about you, of course," said Amos Diggory. "Told us all about playing against you last year. … I said to him, I said — Ced, that'll be something to tell your grandchildren, that will. … You beat Harry Potter!"

Harry couldn't think of any reply to this, so he remained silent. Fred and George were both scowling again. Cedric looked slightly embarrassed.

"Harry fell off his broom, Dad," he muttered. "I told you … it was an accident. …"

"Yes, but you didn't fall off, did you?" roared Amos genially, slap-ping his son on his back. "Always modest, our Ced, always the gen-tleman … but the best man won, I'm sure Harry'd say the same, wouldn't you, eh? One falls off his broom, one stays on, you don't need to be a genius to tell which one's the better flier!"

"Must be nearly time," said Mr. Weasley quickly, pulling out his watch again. "Do you know whether we're waiting for any more, Amos?"

"No, the Lovegoods have been there for a week already and the Fawcetts couldn't get tickets," said Mr. Diggory. "There aren't any more of us in this area, are there?"

“Not that I know of,” said Mr. Weasley. “Yes, it’s a minute off. … We’d better get ready. …”

He looked around at Harry and Hermione.

“You just need to touch the Portkey, that’s all, a finger will do —”

With difficulty, owing to their bulky backpacks, the nine of them crowded around the old boot held out by Amos Diggory.

They all stood there, in a tight circle, as a chill breeze swept over the hilltop. Nobody spoke. It suddenly occurred to Harry how odd this would look if a Muggle were to walk up here now … nine people, two of them grown men, clutching this manky old boot in the semidarkness, waiting. …“Three …” muttered Mr. Weasley, one eye still on his watch, “two … one …”

It happened immediately: Harry felt as though a hook just be-hind his navel had been suddenly jerked irresistibly forward. His feet left the ground; he could feel Ron and Hermione on either side of him, their shoulders banging into his; they were all speeding for-ward in a howl of wind and swirling color; his forefinger was stuck to the boot as though it was pulling him magnetically onward and then —His feet slammed into the ground; Ron staggered into him and he fell over; the Portkey hit the ground near his head with a heavy thud.

Harry looked up. Mr. Weasley, Mr. Diggory, and Cedric were still standing, though looking very windswept; everybody else was on the ground.

“Seven past five from Stoatshead Hill,” said a voice.

Chapter 7 Bagman and Crouch

Harry disentangled himself from Ron and got to his feet. They had arrived on what appeared to be a deserted stretch of misty moor. In front of them was a pair of tired and grumpy-looking wizards, one of whom was holding a large gold watch, the other a thick roll of parchment and a quill. Both were dressed as Muggles, though very inexpertly: The man with the watch wore a tweed suit with thigh-length galoshes; his colleague, a kilt and a poncho.

“Morning, Basil,” said Mr. Weasley, picking up the boot and handing it to the kilted wizard, who threw it into a large box of used Portkeys beside him; Harry could see an old newspaper, an empty drinks can, and a punctured football.

“Hello there, Arthur,” said Basil wearily. “Not on duty, eh? It’s all right for some. … We’ve been here all night. … You’d better get out of the way, we’ve got a big party coming in from the Black For-est at five-fifteen. Hang on, I’ll find your campsite. … Weasley … Weasley …” He consulted his parchment list. “About a quarter of a mile’s walk over there, first field you come to. Site manager’s called Mr. Roberts. Diggory … second field … ask for Mr. Payne.”

“Thanks, Basil,” said Mr. Weasley, and he beckoned everyone to follow him.

They set off across the deserted moor, unable to make out much through the mist. After about twenty minutes, a small stone cot-tage next to a gate swam into view. Beyond it, Harry could just make out the ghostly shapes of hundreds and hundreds of tents, rising up the gentle slope of a large field toward a dark wood on the horizon. They said good-bye to the Diggorys and approached the cottage door.

A man was standing in the doorway, looking out at the tents. Harry knew at a glance that this was the only real Muggle for sev-eral acres.

When he heard their footsteps, he turned his head to look at them.

“Morning!” said Mr. Weasley brightly.

“Morning,” said the Muggle.

“Would you be Mr. Roberts?”

“Aye, I would,” said Mr. Roberts. “And who’re you?”

“Weasley — two tents, booked a couple of days ago?”

“Aye,” said Mr. Roberts, consulting a list tacked to the door. “You’ve got a space up by the wood there. Just the one night?”

“That’s it,” said Mr. Weasley.

“You’ll be paying now, then?” said Mr. Roberts.

“Ah — right — certainly —” said Mr. Weasley. He retreated a short distance from the cottage and beckoned Harry toward him. “Help me, Harry,” he muttered, pulling a roll of Muggle money from his pocket and starting to peel the notes apart. “This one’s a — a — a ten? Ah yes, I see the little number on it now. … So this is a five?”

“A twenty,” Harry corrected him in an undertone, uncomfort-ably aware of Mr. Roberts trying to catch every word.

“Ah yes, so it is. … I don’t know, these little bits of paper …”

“You foreign?” said Mr. Roberts as Mr. Weasley returned with the correct notes.

“Foreign?” repeated Mr. Weasley, puzzled.

“You’re not the first one who’s had trouble with money,” said Mr. Roberts, scrutinizing Mr. Weasley closely. “I had two try and pay me with great gold coins the size of hubcaps ten minutes ago.”

“Did you really?” said Mr. Weasley nervously.

Mr. Roberts rummaged around in a tin for some change.

“Never been this crowded,” he said suddenly, looking out over the misty field again. “Hundreds of pre-bookings. People usually just turn up. …”

“Is that right?” said Mr. Weasley, his hand held out for his change, but Mr. Roberts didn’t give it to him.

“Aye,” he said thoughtfully. “People from all over. Loads of for-eigners. And not just foreigners. Weirdos, you know? There’s a bloke walking ’round in a kilt and a poncho.”

“Shouldn’t he?” said Mr. Weasley anxiously.

“It’s like some sort of … I dunno … like some sort of rally,” said Mr. Roberts. “They all seem to know each other. Like a big party.”

At that moment, a wizard in plus-fours appeared out of thin air next to Mr. Roberts’s front door.

“Obliviate!” he said sharply, pointing his wand at Mr. Roberts.

Instantly, Mr. Roberts’s eyes slid out of focus, his brows unknitted, and a look of dreamy unconcern fell over his face. Harry recognized the symptoms of one who had just had his mem-ory modified.

“A map of the campsite for you,” Mr. Roberts said placidly to Mr. Weasley. “And your change.”

“Thanks very much,” said Mr. Weasley.

The wizard in plus-fours accompanied them toward the gate to the campsite. He looked exhausted: His chin was blue with stubble and there were deep purple shadows under his eyes. Once out of earshot of Mr. Roberts, he muttered to Mr. Weasley, “Been having a lot of

trouble with him. Needs a Memory Charm ten times a day to keep him happy. And Ludo Bagman's not helping. Trotting around talking about Bludgers and Quaffles at the top of his voice, not a worry about anti-Muggle security. Blimey, I'll be glad when this is over. See you later, Arthur."

He Disapparated.

"I thought Mr. Bagman was Head of Magical Games and Sports," said Ginny, looking surprised. "He should know better than to talk about Bludgers near Muggles, shouldn't he?"

"He should," said Mr. Weasley, smiling, and leading them through the gates into the campsite, "but Ludo's always been a bit … well … lax about security. You couldn't wish for a more enthusiastic head of the sports department though. He played Quidditch for England himself, you know. And he was the best Beater the Wimbourne Wasps ever had."

They trudged up the misty field between long rows of tents. Most looked almost ordinary; their owners had clearly tried to make them as Muggle-like as possible, but had slipped up by adding chimneys, or bellpulls, or weather vanes. However, here and there was a tent so obviously magical that Harry could hardly be surprised that Mr. Roberts was getting suspicious. Halfway up the field stood an extravagant confection of striped silk like a miniature palace, with several live peacocks tethered at the entrance. A little farther on they passed a tent that had three floors and several tur-rets; and a short way beyond that was a tent that had a front garden attached, complete with birdbath, sundial, and fountain.

"Always the same," said Mr. Weasley, smiling. "We can't resist showing off when we get together. Ah, here we are, look, this is us."

They had reached the very edge of the wood at the top of the field, and here was an empty space, with a small sign hammered into the ground that read WEEZLY.

“Couldn’t have a better spot!” said Mr. Weasley happily. “The field is just on the other side of the wood there, we’re as close as we could be.” He hoisted his backpack from his shoulders. “Right,” he said excitedly, “no magic allowed, strictly speaking, not when we’re out in these numbers on Muggle land. We’ll be putting these tents up by hand! Shouldn’t be too difficult. … Muggles do it all the time. … Here, Harry, where do you reckon we should start?”

Harry had never been camping in his life; the Dursleys had never taken him on any kind of holiday, preferring to leave him with Mrs. Figg, an old neighbor. However, he and Hermione worked out where most of the poles and pegs should go, and though Mr. Weasley was more of a hindrance than a help, because he got thoroughly overexcited when it came to using the mallet, they finally managed to erect a pair of shabby two-man tents.

All of them stood back to admire their handiwork. Nobody looking at these tents would guess they belonged to wizards, Harry thought, but the trouble was that once Bill, Charlie, and Percy arrived, they would be a party of ten. Hermione seemed to have spotted this problem too; she gave Harry a quizzical look as Mr. Weasley dropped to his hands and knees and entered the first tent.

“We’ll be a bit cramped,” he called, “but I think we’ll all squeeze in. Come and have a look.”

Harry bent down, ducked under the tent flap, and felt his jaw drop. He had walked into what looked like an old-fashioned, three-room flat, complete with bathroom and kitchen. Oddly enough, it was furnished in exactly the same sort of style as Mrs. Figg’s house: There were crocheted covers on the mismatched chairs and a strong smell of cats.

“Well, it’s not for long,” said Mr. Weasley, mopping his bald patch with a handkerchief and peering in at the four bunk beds that stood in the

bedroom. “I borrowed this from Perkins at the of-fice. Doesn’t camp much anymore, poor fellow, he’s got lumbago.”

He picked up the dusty kettle and peered inside it. “We’ll need water. …”

“There’s a tap marked on this map the Muggle gave us,” said Ron, who had followed Harry inside the tent and seemed com-pletely unimpressed by its extraordinary inner proportions. “It’s on the other side of the field.”

“Well, why don’t you, Harry, and Hermione go and get us some water then” — Mr. Weasley handed over the kettle and a couple of saucepans — “and the rest of us will get some wood for a fire?”

“But we’ve got an oven,” said Ron. “Why can’t we just —”

“Ron, anti-Muggle security!” said Mr. Weasley, his face shining with anticipation. “When real Muggles camp, they cook on fires outdoors. I’ve seen them at it!”

After a quick tour of the girls’ tent, which was slightly smaller than the boys’, though without the smell of cats, Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off across the campsite with the kettle and saucepans.

Now, with the sun newly risen and the mist lifting, they could see the city of tents that stretched in every direction. They made their way slowly through the rows, staring eagerly around. It was only just dawning on Harry how many witches and wizards there must be in the world; he had never really thought much about those in other countries.

Their fellow campers were starting to wake up. First to stir were the families with small children; Harry had never seen witches and wizards this young before. A tiny boy no older than two was crouched outside a large pyramid-shaped tent, holding a wand and poking happily at a slug in the grass, which was swelling slowly to the size of

a salami. As they drew level with him, his mother came hurrying out of the tent.

“How many times, Kevin? You don’t — touch — Daddy’s — wand — yecchh!”

She had trodden on the giant slug, which burst. Her scolding carried after them on the still air, mingling with the little boy’s yells — “You bust slug! You bust slug!”

A short way farther on, they saw two little witches, barely older than Kevin, who were riding toy broomsticks that rose only high enough for the girls’ toes to skim the dewy grass. A Ministry wiz-ard had already spotted them; as he hurried past Harry, Ron, and Hermione he muttered distractedly, “In broad daylight! Parents having a lie-in, I suppose —”

Here and there adult wizards and witches were emerging from their tents and starting to cook breakfast. Some, with furtive looks around them, conjured fires with their wands; others were striking matches with dubious looks on their faces, as though sure this couldn’t work. Three African wizards sat in serious conversation, all of them wearing long white robes and roasting what looked like a rabbit on a bright purple fire, while a group of middle-aged American witches sat gossiping happily beneath a spangled banner stretched between their tents that read: THE SALEM WITCHES’ INSTITUTE. Harry caught snatches of conversation in strange lan-guages from the inside of tents they passed, and though he couldn’t understand a word, the tone of every single voice was excited.

“Er — is it my eyes, or has everything gone green?” said Ron.

It wasn’t just Ron’s eyes. They had walked into a patch of tents that were all covered with a thick growth of shamrocks, so that it looked as though small, oddly shaped hillocks had sprouted out of the earth. Grinning faces could be seen under those that had their flaps open. Then, from behind them, they heard their names.

“Harry! Ron! Hermione!”

It was Seamus Finnigan, their fellow Gryffindor fourth year. He was sitting in front of his own shamrock-covered tent, with a sandy-haired woman who had to be his mother, and his best friend, Dean Thomas, also of Gryffindor.

“Like the decorations?” said Seamus, grinning. “The Ministry’s not too happy.”

“Ah, why shouldn’t we show our colors?” said Mrs. Finnigan. “You should see what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over their tents. You’ll be supporting Ireland, of course?” she added, eye-ing Harry, Ron, and Hermione beadily. When they had assured her that they were indeed supporting Ireland, they set off again, though, as Ron said, “Like we’d say anything else surrounded by that lot.”

“I wonder what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over their tents?” said Hermione.

“Let’s go and have a look,” said Harry, pointing to a large patch of tents upheld, where the Bulgarian flag — white, green, and red — was fluttering in the breeze.

The tents here had not been bedecked with plant life, but each and every one of them had the same poster attached to it, a poster of a very surly face with heavy black eyebrows. The picture was, of course, moving, but all it did was blink and scowl.

“Krum,” said Ron quietly.

“What?” said Hermione.

“Krum!” said Ron. “Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker!”

“He looks really grumpy,” said Hermione, looking around at the many Krums blinking and scowling at them.

“ ‘Really grumpy’?” Ron raised his eyes to the heavens. “Who cares what he looks like? He’s unbelievable. He’s really young too. Only just eighteen or something. He’s a genius, you wait until tonight, you’ll see.”

There was already a small queue for the tap in the corner of the field. Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined it, right behind a pair of men who were having a heated argument. One of them was a very old wizard who was wearing a long flowery nightgown. The other was clearly a Ministry wizard; he was holding out a pair of pin-striped trousers and almost crying with exasperation.

“Just put them on, Archie, there’s a good chap. You can’t walk around like that, the Muggle at the gate’s already getting suspi-cious —”

“I bought this in a Muggle shop,” said the old wizard stubbornly. “Muggles wear them.”

“Muggle women wear them, Archie, not the men, they wear these,” said the Ministry wizard, and he brandished the pinstriped trousers.

“I’m not putting them on,” said old Archie in indignation. “I like a healthy breeze ’round my privates, thanks.”

Hermione was overcome with such a strong fit of the giggles at this point that she had to duck out of the queue and only returned when Archie had collected his water and moved away.

Walking more slowly now, because of the weight of the water, they made their way back through the campsite. Here and there, they saw more familiar faces: other Hogwarts students with their families. Oliver Wood, the old captain of Harry’s House Quidditch team, who had just left Hogwarts, dragged Harry over to his par-ents’ tent to introduce him, and told him excitedly that he had just been signed to the Puddlemere United reserve team. Next they were hailed by Ernie Macmillan, a Hufflepuff fourth year, and a lit-tle farther on they saw Cho Chang, a very pretty girl who played Seeker on the Ravenclaw

team. She waved and smiled at Harry, who slopped quite a lot of water down his front as he waved back. More to stop Ron from smirking than anything, Harry hurriedly pointed out a large group of teenagers whom he had never seen before.

“Who d’you reckon they are?” he said. “They don’t go to Hog-warts, do they?”

“ ’Spect they go to some foreign school,” said Ron. “I know there are others. Never met anyone who went to one, though. Bill had a penfriend at a school in Brazil … this was years and years ago … and he wanted to go on an exchange trip but Mum and Dad couldn’t afford it. His penfriend got all offended when he said he wasn’t going and sent him a cursed hat. It made his ears shrivel up.”

Harry laughed but didn’t voice the amazement he felt at hearing about other wizarding schools. He supposed, now that he saw representatives of so many nationalities in the campsite, that he had been stupid never to realize that Hogwarts couldn’t be the only one. He glanced at Hermione, who looked utterly unsurprised by the information. No doubt she had run across the news about other wizarding schools in some book or other.

“You’ve been ages,” said George when they finally got back to the Weasleys’ tents.

“Met a few people,” said Ron, setting the water down. “You not got that fire started yet?”

“Dad’s having fun with the matches,” said Fred.

Mr. Weasley was having no success at all in lighting the fire, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. Splintered matches littered the ground around him, but he looked as though he was having the time of his life.

“Oops!” he said as he managed to light a match and promptly dropped it in surprise.

“Come here, Mr. Weasley,” said Hermione kindly, taking the box from him, and showing him how to do it properly.

At last they got the fire lit, though it was at least another hour before it was hot enough to cook anything. There was plenty to watch while they waited, however. Their tent seemed to be pitched right alongside a kind of thoroughfare to the field, and Ministry members kept hurrying up and down it, greeting Mr. Weasley cor-dially as they passed. Mr. Weasley kept up a running commentary, mainly for Harry’s and Hermione’s benefit; his own children knew too much about the Ministry to be greatly interested.

“That was Cuthbert Mockridge, Head of the Goblin Liaison Office. … Here comes Gilbert Wimple; he’s with the Committee on Experimental Charms; he’s had those horns for a while now. … Hello, Arnie … Arnold Peasegood, he’s an Obliviator — member of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, you know. … and that’s Bode and Croaker … they’re Unspeakables. …”

“They’re what?”

“From the Department of Mysteries, top secret, no idea what they get up to. …”

At last, the fire was ready, and they had just started cooking eggs and sausages when Bill, Charlie, and Percy came strolling out of the woods toward them.

“Just Apparated, Dad,” said Percy loudly. “Ah, excellent, lunch!”

They were halfway through their plates of eggs and sausages when Mr. Weasley jumped to his feet, waving and grinning at a man who was striding toward them. “Aha!” he said. “The man of the moment! Ludo!”

Ludo Bagman was easily the most noticeable person Harry had seen so far, even including old Archie in his flowered nightdress. He was wearing long Quidditch robes in thick horizontal stripes of bright yellow and black. An enormous picture of a wasp was splashed across his chest. He had the look of a powerfully built man gone slightly to seed; the robes were stretched tightly across a large belly he surely had not had in the days when he had played Quidditch for England. His nose was squashed (probably broken by a stray Bludger, Harry thought), but his round blue eyes, short blond hair, and rosy complexion made him look like a very over-grown schoolboy.

"Ahoy there!" Bagman called happily. He was walking as though he had springs attached to the balls of his feet and was plainly in a state of wild excitement.

"Arthur, old man," he puffed as he reached the campfire, "what a day, eh? What a day! Could we have asked for more perfect weather? A cloudless night coming … and hardly a hiccough in the arrangements. … Not much for me to do!"

Behind him, a group of haggard-looking Ministry wizards rushed past, pointing at the distant evidence of some sort of a mag-ical fire that was sending violet sparks twenty feet into the air.

Percy hurried forward with his hand outstretched. Apparently his disapproval of the way Ludo Bagman ran his department did not prevent him from wanting to make a good impression.

"Ah — yes," said Mr. Weasley, grinning, "this is my son Percy. He's just started at the Ministry — and this is Fred — no, George, sorry — that's Fred — Bill, Charlie, Ron — my daughter, Ginny — and Ron's friends, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter."

Bagman did the smallest of double takes when he heard Harry's name, and his eyes performed the familiar flick upward to the scar on Harry's forehead.

“Everyone,” Mr. Weasley continued, “this is Ludo Bagman, you know who he is, it’s thanks to him we’ve got such good tickets —”

Bagman beamed and waved his hand as if to say it had been nothing.

“Fancy a flutter on the match, Arthur?” he said eagerly, jingling what seemed to be a large amount of gold in the pockets of his yellow-and-black robes. “I’ve already got Roddy Pontner betting me Bulgaria will score first — I offered him nice odds, considering Ireland’s front three are the strongest I’ve seen in years — and little Agatha Timms has put up half shares in her eel farm on a week-long match.”

“Oh … go on then,” said Mr. Weasley. “Let’s see … a Galleon on Ireland to win?”

“A Galleon?” Ludo Bagman looked slightly disappointed, but recovered himself. “Very well, very well … any other takers?”

“They’re a bit young to be gambling,” said Mr. Weasley. “Molly wouldn’t like —”

“We’ll bet thirty-seven Galleons, fifteen Sickles, three Knuts,” said Fred as he and George quickly pooled all their money, “that Ireland wins — but Viktor Krum gets the Snitch. Oh and we’ll throw in a fake wand.”

“You don’t want to go showing Mr. Bagman rubbish like that —” Percy hissed, but Bagman didn’t seem to think the wand was rubbish at all; on the contrary, his boyish face shone with excitement as he took it from Fred, and when the wand gave a loud squawk and turned into a rubber chicken, Bagman roared with laughter.

“Excellent! I haven’t seen one that convincing in years! I’d pay five Galleons for that!”

Percy froze in an attitude of stunned disapproval.

“Boys,” said Mr. Weasley under his breath, “I don’t want you betting. … That’s all your savings. … Your mother —”

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Arthur!” boomed Ludo Bagman, rattling his pockets excitedly. “They’re old enough to know what they want! You reckon Ireland will win but Krum’ll get the Snitch? Not a chance, boys, not a chance. … I’ll give you excellent odds on that one. … We’ll add five Galleons for the funny wand, then, shall we. …”

Mr. Weasley looked on helplessly as Ludo Bagman whipped out a notebook and quill and began jotting down the twins’ names.

“Cheers,” said George, taking the slip of parchment Bagman handed him and tucking it away carefully. Bagman turned most cheerfully back to Mr. Weasley.

“Couldn’t do me a brew, I suppose? I’m keeping an eye out for Barty Crouch. My Bulgarian opposite number’s making difficul-ties, and I can’t understand a word he’s saying. Barty’ll be able to sort it out. He speaks about a hundred and fifty languages.”

“Mr. Crouch?” said Percy, suddenly abandoning his look of poker-stiff disapproval and positively writhing with excitement. “He speaks over two hundred! Mermish and Gobbledegook and Troll …”

“Anyone can speak Troll,” said Fred dismissively. “All you have to do is point and grunt.”

Percy threw Fred an extremely nasty look and stoked the fire vigorously to bring the kettle back to the boil.

“Any news of Bertha Jorkins yet, Ludo?” Mr. Weasley asked as Bagman settled himself down on the grass beside them all.

“Not a dicky bird,” said Bagman comfortably. “But she’ll turn up. Poor old Bertha … memory like a leaky cauldron and no sense of direction.

Lost, you take my word for it. She'll wander back into the office sometime in October, thinking it's still July."

"You don't think it might be time to send someone to look for her?" Mr. Weasley suggested tentatively as Percy handed Bagman his tea.

"Barty Crouch keeps saying that," said Bagman, his round eyes widening innocently, "but we really can't spare anyone at the moment. Oh — talk of the devil! Barty!"

A wizard had just Apparated at their fireside, and he could not have made more of a contrast with Ludo Bagman, sprawled on the grass in his old Wasp robes. Barty Crouch was a stiff, upright, el-derly man, dressed in an impeccably crisp suit and tie. The parting in his short gray hair was almost unnaturally straight, and his nar-row toothbrush mustache looked as though he trimmed it using a slide rule. His shoes were very highly polished. Harry could see at once why Percy idolized him. Percy was a great believer in rigidly following rules, and Mr. Crouch had complied with the rule about Muggle dressing so thoroughly that he could have passed for a bank manager; Harry doubted even Uncle Vernon would have spotted him for what he really was.

"Pull up a bit of grass, Barty," said Ludo brightly, patting the ground beside him.

"No thank you, Ludo," said Crouch, and there was a bite of impatience in his voice. "I've been looking for you everywhere. The Bulgarians are insisting we add another twelve seats to the Top Box."

"Oh is that what they're after?" said Bagman. "I thought the chap was asking to borrow a pair of tweezers. Bit of a strong accent."

"Mr. Crouch!" said Percy breathlessly, sunk into a kind of half-bow that made him look like a hunchback. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

“Oh,” said Mr. Crouch, looking over at Percy in mild surprise. “Yes — thank you, Weatherby”

Fred and George choked into their own cups. Percy, very pink around the ears, busied himself with the kettle.

“Oh and I’ve been wanting a word with you too, Arthur,” said Mr. Crouch, his sharp eyes falling upon Mr. Weasley. “Ali Bashir’s on the warpath. He wants a word with you about your embargo on flying carpets.”

Mr. Weasley heaved a deep sigh.

“I sent him an owl about that just last week. If I’ve told him once I’ve told him a hundred times: Carpets are defined as a Muggle Ar-tifact by the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects, but will he listen?”

“I doubt it,” said Mr. Crouch, accepting a cup from Percy. “He’s desperate to export here.”

“Well, they’ll never replace brooms in Britain, will they?” said Bagman.

“Ali thinks there’s a niche in the market for a family vehicle,” said Mr. Crouch. “I remember my grandfather had an Axminster that could seat twelve — but that was before carpets were banned, of course.”

He spoke as though he wanted to leave nobody in any doubt that all his ancestors had abided strictly by the law.

“So, been keeping busy, Barty?” said Bagman breezily.

“Fairly,” said Mr. Crouch dryly. “Organizing Portkeys across five continents is no mean feat, Ludo.”

“I expect you’ll both be glad when this is over?” said Mr. Weasley.

Ludo Bagman looked shocked.

“Glad! Don’t know when I’ve had more fun. … Still, it’s not as though we haven’t got anything to look forward to, eh, Barty? Eh? Plenty left to organize, eh?”

Mr. Crouch raised his eyebrows at Bagman.

“We agreed not to make the announcement until all the details —”

“Oh details!” said Bagman, waving the word away like a cloud of midges. “They’ve signed, haven’t they? They’ve agreed, haven’t they? I bet you anything these kids’ll know soon enough anyway. I mean, it’s happening at Hogwarts —”

“Ludo, we need to meet the Bulgarians, you know,” said Mr. Crouch sharply, cutting Bagman’s remarks short. “Thank you for the tea, Weatherby.”

He pushed his undrunk tea back at Percy and waited for Ludo to rise; Bagman struggled to his feet, swigging down the last of his tea, the gold in his pockets chinking merrily.

“See you all later!” he said. “You’ll be up in the Top Box with me — I’m commentating!” He waved, Barty Crouch nodded curtly, and both of them Disapparated.

“What’s happening at Hogwarts, Dad?” said Fred at once. “What were they talking about?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” said Mr.Weasley, smiling.

“It’s classified information, until such time as the Ministry de-cides to release it,” said Percy stiffly. “Mr. Crouch was quite right not to disclose it.”

“Oh shut up, Weatherby,” said Fred.

A sense of excitement rose like a palpable cloud over the camp-site as the afternoon wore on. By dusk, the still summer air itself seemed to be quivering with anticipation, and as darkness spread like a curtain over the thousands of waiting wizards, the last vestiges of pretence disappeared: the Ministry seemed to have bowed to the inevitable and stopped fighting the signs of blatant magic now breaking out everywhere.

Salesmen were Apparating every few feet, carrying trays and pushing carts full of extraordinary merchandise. There were lumi-nous rosettes — green for Ireland, red for Bulgaria — which were squealing the names of the players, pointed green hats bedecked with dancing shamrocks, Bulgarian scarves adorned with lions that really roared, flags from both countries that played their national anthems as they were waved; there were tiny models of Firebolts that really flew, and collectible figures of famous players, which strolled across the palm of your hand, preening themselves.

“Been saving my pocket money all summer for this,” Ron told Harry as they and Hermione strolled through the salesmen, buying souvenirs. Though Ron purchased a dancing shamrock hat and a large green rosette, he also bought a small figure of Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker. The miniature Krum walked backward and forward over Ron’s hand, scowling up at the green rosette above him.

“Wow, look at these!” said Harry, hurrying over to a cart piled high with what looked like brass binoculars, except that they were covered with all sorts of weird knobs and dials.

“Omnioculars,” said the saleswizard eagerly. “You can replay ac-tion … slow everything down … and they flash up a play-by-play breakdown if you need it. Bargain — ten Galleons each.”

“Wish I hadn’t bought this now,” said Ron, gesturing at his dancing shamrock hat and gazing longingly at the Omnioculars.

“Three pairs,” said Harry firmly to the wizard.

“No — don’t bother,” said Ron, going red. He was always touchy about the fact that Harry, who had inherited a small for-tune from his parents, had much more money than he did.

“You won’t be getting anything for Christmas,” Harry told him, thrusting Omnioculars into his and Hermione’s hands. “For about ten years, mind.”

“Fair enough,” said Ron, grinning.

“Oooh, thanks, Harry,” said Hermione. “And I’ll get us some programs, look —”

Their money bags considerably lighter, they went back to the tents. Bill, Charlie, and Ginny were all sporting green rosettes too, and Mr. Weasley was carrying an Irish flag. Fred and George had no souvenirs as they had given Bagman all their gold.

And then a deep, booming gong sounded somewhere beyond the woods, and at once, green and red lanterns blazed into life in the trees, lighting a path to the field.

“It’s time!” said Mr. Weasley, looking as excited as any of them. “Come on, let’s go!”

Chapter 8 The Quidditch World Cup

Clutching their purchases, Mr. Weasley in the lead, they all hurried into the wood, following the lantern-lit trail. They could hear the sounds of thousands of people moving around them, shouts and laughter, snatches of singing. The atmosphere of feverish excitement was highly infectious; Harry couldn't stop grin-ning. They walked through the wood for twenty minutes, talking and joking loudly, until at last they emerged on the other side and found themselves in the shadow of a gigantic stadium. Though Harry could see only a fraction of the immense gold walls sur-rounding the field, he could tell that ten cathedrals would fit com-fortably inside it.

"Seats a hundred thousand," said Mr. Weasley, spotting the awestruck look on Harry's face. "Ministry task force of five hun-dred have been working on it all year. Muggle Repelling Charms on every inch of it. Every time Muggles have got anywhere near here all year, they've suddenly remembered urgent appointments and had to dash away again … bless them," he added fondly, lead-ing the way toward the nearest entrance, which was already sur-rounded by a swarm of shouting witches and wizards.

"Prime seats!" said the Ministry witch at the entrance when she checked their tickets. "Top Box! Straight upstairs, Arthur, and as high as you can go."

The stairs into the stadium were carpeted in rich purple. They clambered upward with the rest of the crowd, which slowly filtered away through doors into the stands to their left and right. Mr. Weasley's party kept climbing, and at last they reached the top of the staircase and found themselves in a small box, set at the high-est point of the stadium and situated exactly halfway between the golden goal posts. About twenty purple-and-gilt chairs stood in two rows here, and Harry, filing into the front seats with the Weasleys, looked down upon a scene the likes of which he could never have imagined.

A hundred thousand witches and wizards were taking their places in the seats, which rose in levels around the long oval field. Everything was suffused with a mysterious golden light, which seemed to come from the stadium itself. The field looked smooth as velvet from their lofty position. At either end of the field stood three goal hoops, fifty feet high; right opposite them, almost at Harry's eye level, was a gigantic blackboard. Gold writing kept dashing across it as though an invisible giant's hand were scrawling upon the blackboard and then wiping it off again; watching it, Harry saw that it was flashing advertisements across the field.

The Bluebottle: A Broom for All the Family — safe, reliable, and with Built-in Anti-Burglar Buzzer … Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover: No Pain, No Stain! … Gladrags Wizardwear — London, Paris, Hogsmeade …Harry tore his eyes away from the sign and looked over his shoulder to see who else was sharing the box with them. So far it was empty, except for a tiny creature sitting in the second from last seat at the end of the row behind them. The creature, whose legs were so short they stuck out in front of it on the chair, was wearing a tea towel draped like a toga, and it had its face hidden in its hands. Yet those long, batlike ears were oddly familiar. …"Dobby?" said Harry incredulously.

The tiny creature looked up and stretched its fingers, revealing enormous brown eyes and a nose the exact size and shape of a large tomato. It wasn't Dobby — it was, however, unmistakably a house-elf, as Harry's friend Dobby had been. Harry had set Dobby free from his old owners, the Malfoy family.

"Did sir just call me Dobby?" squeaked the elf curiously from between its fingers. Its voice was higher even than Dobby's had been, a teeny, quivering squeak of a voice, and Harry suspected — though it was very hard to tell with a house-elf — that this one might just be female. Ron and Hermione spun around in their seats to look. Though they had heard a lot about Dobby from Harry, they had never actually met him. Even Mr. Weasley looked around in interest.

“Sorry,” Harry told the elf, “I just thought you were someone I knew.”

“But I knows Dobby too, sir!” squeaked the elf. She was shield-ing her face, as though blinded by light, though the Top Box was not brightly lit. “My name is Winky, sir — and you, sir —” Her dark brown eyes widened to the size of side plates as they rested upon Harry’s scar. “You is surely Harry Potter!”

“Yeah, I am,” said Harry.

“But Dobby talks of you all the time, sir!” she said, lowering her hands very slightly and looking awestruck.

“How is he?” said Harry. “How’s freedom suiting him?”

“Ah, sir,” said Winky, shaking her head, “ah sir, meaning no dis-respect, sir, but I is not sure you did Dobby a favor, sir, when you is setting him free.”

“Why?” said Harry, taken aback. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Freedom is going to Dobby’s head, sir,” said Winky sadly. “Ideas above his station, sir. Can’t get another position, sir.”

“Why not?” said Harry.

Winky lowered her voice by a half-octave and whispered, “He is wanting paying for his work, sir.”

“Paying?” said Harry blankly. “Well — why shouldn’t he be paid?”

Winky looked quite horrified at the idea and closed her fingers slightly so that her face was half-hidden again.

“House-elves is not paid, sir!” she said in a muffled squeak. “No, no, no. I says to Dobby, I says, go find yourself a nice family and settle down, Dobby. He is getting up to all sorts of high jinks, sir, what is unbecoming to a house-elf. You goes racketing around like this,

Dobby, I says, and next thing I hear you's up in front of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, like some common goblin."

"Well, it's about time he had a bit of fun," said Harry.

"House-elves is not supposed to have fun, Harry Potter," said Winky firmly, from behind her hands. "House-elves does what they is told. I is not liking heights at all, Harry Potter" — she glanced toward the edge of the box and gulped — "but my master sends me to the Top Box and I comes, sir."

"Why's he sent you up here, if he knows you don't like heights?" said Harry, frowning.

"Master — master wants me to save him a seat, Harry Potter. He is very busy," said Winky, tilting her head toward the empty space beside her. "Winky is wishing she is back in master's tent, Harry Potter, but Winky does what she is told. Winky is a good house-elf."

She gave the edge of the box another frightened look and hid her eyes completely again. Harry turned back to the others.

"So that's a house-elf?" Ron muttered. "Weird things, aren't they?"

"Dobby was weirder," said Harry fervently.

Ron pulled out his Omniocculars and started testing them, star-ing down into the crowd on the other side of the stadium.

"Wild!" he said, twiddling the replay knob on the side. "I can make that old bloke down there pick his nose again … and again … and again …"

Hermione, meanwhile, was skimming eagerly through her velvet-covered, tasseled program.

“ ‘A display from the team mascots will precede the match,’ ” she read aloud.

“Oh that’s always worth watching,” said Mr. Weasley. “National teams bring creatures from their native land, you know, to put on a bit of a show.”

The box filled gradually around them over the next half hour. Mr. Weasley kept shaking hands with people who were obviously very important wizards. Percy jumped to his feet so often that he looked as though he were trying to sit on a hedgehog. When Cor-nelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself, arrived, Percy bowed so low that his glasses fell off and shattered. Highly embarrassed, he repaired them with his wand and thereafter remained in his seat, throwing jealous looks at Harry, whom Cornelius Fudge had greeted like an old friend. They had met before, and Fudge shook Harry’s hand in a fatherly fashion, asked how he was, and intro-duced him to the wizards on either side of him.

“Harry Potter, you know,” he told the Bulgarian minister loudly, who was wearing splendid robes of black velvet trimmed with gold and didn’t seem to understand a word of English. “Harry Potter … oh come on now, you know who he is … the boy who survived You-Know-Who … you do know who he is —”

The Bulgarian wizard suddenly spotted Harry’s scar and started gabbling loudly and excitedly, pointing at it.

“Knew we’d get there in the end,” said Fudge wearily to Harry. “I’m no great shakes at languages; I need Barty Crouch for this sort of thing. Ah, I see his house-elf’s saving him a seat. … Good job too, these Bulgarian blighters have been trying to cadge all the best places … ah, and here’s Lucius!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned quickly. Edging along the second row to three still-empty seats right behind Mr. Weasley were none

other than Dobby the house-elf's former owners: Lucius Malfoy; his son, Draco; and a woman Harry supposed must be Draco's mother.

Harry and Draco Malfoy had been enemies ever since their very first journey to Hogwarts. A pale boy with a pointed face and white-blond hair, Draco greatly resembled his father. His mother was blonde too; tall and slim, she would have been nice-looking if she hadn't been wearing a look that suggested there was a nasty smell under her nose.

"Ah, Fudge," said Mr. Malfoy, holding out his hand as he reached the Minister of Magic. "How are you? I don't think you've met my wife, Narcissa? Or our son, Draco?"

"How do you do, how do you do?" said Fudge, smiling and bowing to Mrs. Malfoy. "And allow me to introduce you to Mr. Oblansk — Obalonsk — Mr. — well, he's the Bulgarian Minister of Magic, and he can't understand a word I'm saying anyway, so never mind. And let's see who else — you know Arthur Weasley, I daresay?"

It was a tense moment. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy looked at each other and Harry vividly recalled the last time they had come face-to-face: It had been in Flourish and Blotts' bookshop, and they had had a fight. Mr. Malfoy's cold gray eyes swept over Mr. Weasley, and then up and down the row.

"Good lord, Arthur," he said softly. "What did you have to sell to get seats in the Top Box? Surely your house wouldn't have fetched this much?"

Fudge, who wasn't listening, said, "Lucius has just given a very generous contribution to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Mal-adies and Injuries, Arthur. He's here as my guest."

"How — how nice," said Mr. Weasley, with a very strained smile.

Mr. Malfoy’s eyes had returned to Hermione, who went slightly pink, but stared determinedly back at him. Harry knew exactly what was making Mr. Malfoy’s lip curl like that. The Malfoys prided themselves on being purebloods; in other words, they con-sidered anyone of Muggle descent, like Hermione, second-class. However, under the gaze of the Minister of Magic, Mr. Malfoy did-n’t dare say anything. He nodded sneeringly to Mr. Weasley and continued down the line to his seats. Draco shot Harry, Ron, and Hermione one contemptuous look, then settled himself between his mother and father.

“Slimy gits,” Ron muttered as he, Harry, and Hermione turned to face the field again. Next moment, Ludo Bagman charged into the box.

“Everyone ready?” he said, his round face gleaming like a great, excited Edam. “Minister — ready to go?”

“Ready when you are, Ludo,” said Fudge comfortably.

Ludo whipped out his wand, directed it at his own throat, and said “Sonorus!” and then spoke over the roar of sound that was now filling the packed stadium; his voice echoed over them, booming into every corner of the stands.

“Ladies and gentlemen … welcome! Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!”

The spectators screamed and clapped. Thousands of flags waved, adding their discordant national anthems to the racket. The huge blackboard opposite them was wiped clear of its last message (Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans — A Risk With Every Mouthful!) and now showed BULGARIA: 0, IRELAND: 0.

“And now, without further ado, allow me to introduce … the Bulgarian National Team Mascots!”

The right-hand side of the stands, which was a solid block of scarlet, roared its approval.

“I wonder what they’ve brought,” said Mr. Weasley, leaning for-ward in his seat. “Aaah!” He suddenly whipped off his glasses and polished them hurriedly on his robes. “Veela!”

“What are veel — ?”

But a hundred veela were now gliding out onto the field, and Harry’s question was answered for him. Veela were women … the most beautiful women Harry had ever seen … except that they weren’t — they couldn’t be — human. This puzzled Harry for a moment while he tried to guess what exactly they could be; what could make their skin shine moon-bright like that, or their white-gold hair fan out behind them without wind … but then the mu-sic started, and Harry stopped worrying about them not being human — in fact, he stopped worrying about anything at all.

The veela had started to dance, and Harry’s mind had gone com-pletely and blissfully blank. All that mattered in the world was that he kept watching the veela, because if they stopped dancing, terri-ble things would happen. …And as the veela danced faster and faster, wild, half-formed thoughts started chasing through Harry’s dazed mind. He wanted to do something very impressive, right now. Jumping from the box into the stadium seemed a good idea … but would it be good enough?

“Harry, what are you doing?” said Hermione’s voice from a long way off.

The music stopped. Harry blinked. He was standing up, and one of his legs was resting on the wall of the box. Next to him, Ron was frozen in an attitude that looked as though he were about to dive from a springboard.

Angry yells were filling the stadium. The crowd didn’t want the veela to go. Harry was with them; he would, of course, be sup-porting Bulgaria, and he wondered vaguely why he had a large green shamrock pinned to his chest. Ron, meanwhile, was absent-mindedly

shredding the shamrocks on his hat. Mr. Weasley, smil-ing slightly, leaned over to Ron and tugged the hat out of his hands.

"You'll be wanting that," he said, "once Ireland have had their say."

"Huh?" said Ron, staring openmouthed at the veela, who had now lined up along one side of the field.

Hermione made a loud tutting noise. She reached up and pulled Harry back into his seat. "Honestly!" she said.

"And now," roared Ludo Bagman's voice, "kindly put your wands in the air … for the Irish National Team Mascots!"

Next moment, what seemed to be a great green-and-gold comet came zooming into the stadium. It did one circuit of the stadium, then split into two smaller comets, each hurtling toward the goal posts. A rainbow arced suddenly across the field, connecting the two balls of light. The crowd oooohed and aaaaahed, as though at a fireworks display. Now the rainbow faded and the balls of light re-united and merged; they had formed a great shimmering sham-rock, which rose up into the sky and began to soar over the stands. Something like golden rain seemed to be falling from it —"Excellent!" yelled Ron as the shamrock soared over them, and heavy gold coins rained from it, bouncing off their heads and seats. Squinting up at the shamrock, Harry realized that it was actually comprised of thousands of tiny little bearded men with red vests, each carrying a minute lamp of gold or green.

"Leprechauns!" said Mr. Weasley over the tumultuous applause of the crowd, many of whom were still fighting and rummaging around under their chairs to retrieve the gold.

"There you go," Ron yelled happily, stuffing a fistful of gold coins into Harry's hand, "for the Omniocculars! Now you've got to buy me a Christmas present, ha!"

The great shamrock dissolved, the leprechauns drifted down onto the field on the opposite side from the veela, and settled themselves cross-legged to watch the match.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, kindly welcome — the Bulgar-ian National Quidditch Team! I give you — Dimitrov!”

A scarlet-clad figure on a broomstick, moving so fast it was blurred, shot out onto the field from an entrance far below, to wild applause from the Bulgarian supporters.

“Ivanova!”

A second scarlet-robed player zoomed out.

“Zograf! Levski! Vulchanov! Volkov! Aaaaaaand — Krum!”

“That’s him, that’s him!” yelled Ron, following Krum with his Omnioculars. Harry quickly focused his own.

Viktor Krum was thin, dark, and sallow-skinned, with a large curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He looked like an over-grown bird of prey. It was hard to believe he was only eighteen.

“And now, please greet — the Irish National Quidditch Team!” yelled Bagman. “Presenting — Connolly! Ryan! Troy! Mullet! Moran! Quigley! Aaaaaand — Lynch!”

Seven green blurs swept onto the field; Harry spun a small dial on the side of his Omnioculars and slowed the players down enough to read the word “Firebolt” on each of their brooms and see their names, embroidered in silver, upon their backs.

“And here, all the way from Egypt, our referee, acclaimed Chairwizard of the International Association of Quidditch, Hassan Mostafa!”

A small and skinny wizard, completely bald but with a mustache to rival Uncle Vernon's, wearing robes of pure gold to match the stadium, strode out onto the field. A silver whistle was protruding from under the mustache, and he was carrying a large wooden crate under one arm, his broomstick under the other. Harry spun the speed dial on his Omnioculars back to normal, watching closely as Mostafa mounted his broomstick and kicked the crate open — four balls burst into the air: the scarlet Quaffle, the two black Bludgers, and (Harry saw it for the briefest moment, before it sped out of sight) the minuscule, winged Golden Snitch. With a sharp blast on his whistle, Mostafa shot into the air after the balls.

"Theeeeeeeey're OFF!" screamed Bagman. "And it's Mullet! Troy! Moran! Dimitrov! Back to Mullet! Troy! Levski! Moran!"

It was Quidditch as Harry had never seen it played before. He was pressing his Omnioculars so hard to his glasses that they were cutting into the bridge of his nose. The speed of the players was incredible — the Chasers were throwing the Quaffle to one another so fast that Bagman only had time to say their names. Harry spun the slow dial on the right of his Omnioculars again, pressed the play-by-play button on the top, and he was immediately watching in slow motion, while glittering purple lettering flashed across the lenses and the noise of the crowd pounded against his eardrums.

Hawkshead Attacking Formation, he read as he watched the three Irish Chasers zoom closely together, Troy in the center, slightly ahead of Mullet and Moran, bearing down upon the Bul-garians. Porskoff Ploy flashed up next, as Troy made as though to dart upward with the Quaffle, drawing away the Bulgarian Chaser Ivanova and dropping the Quaffle to Moran. One of the Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov, swung hard at a passing Bludger with his small club, knocking it into Moran's path; Moran ducked to avoid the Bludger and dropped the Quaffle; and Levski, soaring beneath, caught it —"TROY SCORES!" roared Bagman, and the stadium shuddered with a roar of applause and cheers. "Ten zero to Ireland!"

“What?” Harry yelled, looking wildly around through his Om-nioculars. “But Levski’s got the Quaffle!”

“Harry, if you’re not going to watch at normal speed, you’re go-ing to miss things!” shouted Hermione, who was dancing up and down, waving her arms in the air while Troy did a lap of honor around the field. Harry looked quickly over the top of his Omni-oculars and saw that the leprechauns watching from the sidelines had all risen into the air again and formed the great, glittering shamrock. Across the field, the veela were watching them sulkily.

Furious with himself, Harry spun his speed dial back to normal as play resumed.

Harry knew enough about Quidditch to see that the Irish Chasers were superb. They worked as a seamless team, their move-ments so well coordinated that they appeared to be reading one another’s minds as they positioned themselves, and the rosette on Harry’s chest kept squeaking their names: “Troy — Mullet — Moran!” And within ten minutes, Ireland had scored twice more, bringing their lead to thirty-zero and causing a thunderous tide of roars and applause from the green-clad supporters.

The match became still faster, but more brutal. Volkov and Vulchanov, the Bulgarian Beaters, were whacking the Bludgers as fiercely as possible at the Irish Chasers, and were starting to prevent them from using some of their best moves; twice they were forced to scatter, and then, finally, Ivanova managed to break through their ranks; dodge the Keeper, Ryan; and score Bulgaria’s first goal.

“Fingers in your ears!” bellowed Mr. Weasley as the veela started to dance in celebration. Harry screwed up his eyes too; he wanted to keep his mind on the game. After a few seconds, he chanced a glance at the field. The veela had stopped dancing, and Bulgaria was again in possession of the Quaffle.

“Dimitrov! Levski! Dimitrov! Ivanova — oh I say!” roared Bagman.

One hundred thousand wizards gasped as the two Seekers, Krum and Lynch, plummeted through the center of the Chasers, so fast that it looked as though they had just jumped from airplanes without parachutes. Harry followed their descent through his Om-nioculars, squinting to see where the Snitch was —"They're going to crash!" screamed Hermione next to Harry.

She was half right — at the very last second, Viktor Krum pulled out of the dive and spiraled off. Lynch, however, hit the ground with a dull thud that could be heard throughout the sta-dium. A huge groan rose from the Irish seats.

"Fool!" moaned Mr. Weasley. "Krum was feinting!"

"It's time-out!" yelled Bagman's voice, "as trained mediwizards hurry onto the field to examine Aidan Lynch!"

"He'll be okay, he only got ploughed!" Charlie said reassuringly to Ginny, who was hanging over the side of the box, looking horror-struck. "Which is what Krum was after, of course. …"

Harry hastily pressed the replay and play-by-play buttons on his Omnioculars, twiddled the speed dial, and put them back up to his eyes.

He watched as Krum and Lynch dived again in slow motion. Wronski Defensive Feint — dangerous Seeker diversion read the shining purple lettering across his lenses. He saw Krum's face contorted with concentration as he pulled out of the dive just in time, while Lynch was flattened, and he understood — Krum hadn't seen the Snitch at all, he was just making Lynch copy him. Harry had never seen anyone fly like that; Krum hardly looked as though he was using a broomstick at all; he moved so easily through the air that he looked unsupported and weightless. Harry turned his Omnioculars back to normal and focused them on Krum. He was now circling high above Lynch, who was being re-vived by mediwizards with cups of potion. Harry, focusing still more closely upon Krum's face, saw his dark eyes

darting all over the ground a hundred feet below. He was using the time while Lynch was revived to look for the Snitch without interference.

Lynch got to his feet at last, to loud cheers from the green-clad supporters, mounted his Firebolt, and kicked back off into the air. His revival seemed to give Ireland new heart. When Mostafa blew his whistle again, the Chasers moved into action with a skill unri-valed by anything Harry had seen so far.

After fifteen more fast and furious minutes, Ireland had pulled ahead by ten more goals. They were now leading by one hundred and thirty points to ten, and the game was starting to get dirtier.

As Mullet shot toward the goal posts yet again, clutching the Quaffle tightly under her arm, the Bulgarian Keeper, Zograf, flew out to meet her. Whatever happened was over so quickly Harry didn't catch it, but a scream of rage from the Irish crowd, and Mostafa's long, shrill whistle blast, told him it had been a foul.

"And Mostafa takes the Bulgarian Keeper to task for cobbing — excessive use of elbows!" Bagman informed the roaring spectators. "And — yes, it's a penalty to Ireland!"

The leprechauns, who had risen angrily into the air like a swarm of glittering hornets when Mullet had been fouled, now darted to-gether to form the words "HA, HA, HA!" The veela on the other side of the field leapt to their feet, tossed their hair angrily, and started to dance again.

As one, the Weasley boys and Harry stuffed their fingers into their ears, but Hermione, who hadn't bothered, was soon tugging on Harry's arm. He turned to look at her, and she pulled his fingers impatiently out of his ears.

"Look at the referee!" she said, giggling.

Harry looked down at the field. Hassan Mostafa had landed right in front of the dancing veela, and was acting very oddly indeed. He was flexing his muscles and smoothing his mustache excitedly.

“Now, we can’t have that!” said Ludo Bagman, though he sounded highly amused. “Somebody slap the referee!”

A mediwizard came tearing across the field, his fingers stuffed into his own ears, and kicked Mostafa hard in the shins. Mostafa seemed to come to himself; Harry, watching through the Om-nioculars again, saw that he looked exceptionally embarrassed and had started shouting at the veela, who had stopped dancing and were looking mutinous.

“And unless I’m much mistaken, Mostafa is actually attempting to send off the Bulgarian team mascots!” said Bagman’s voice. “Now there’s something we haven’t seen before. … Oh this could turn nasty. …”

It did: The Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov and Vulchanov, landed on either side of Mostafa and began arguing furiously with him, gesticulating toward the leprechauns, who had now gleefully formed the words “HEE, HEE, HEE.” Mostafa was not impressed by the Bulgarians’ arguments, however; he was jabbing his finger into the air, clearly telling them to get flying again, and when they refused, he gave two short blasts on his whistle.

“Two penalties for Ireland!” shouted Bagman, and the Bulgarian crowd howled with anger. “And Volkov and Vulchanov had better get back on those brooms … yes … there they go … and Troy takes the Quaffle …”

Play now reached a level of ferocity beyond anything they had yet seen. The Beaters on both sides were acting without mercy: Volkov and Vulchanov in particular seemed not to care whether their clubs made contact with Bludger or human as they swung them violently

through the air. Dimitrov shot straight at Moran, who had the Quaffle, nearly knocking her off her broom.

“Foul!” roared the Irish supporters as one, all standing up in a great wave of green.

“Foul!” echoed Ludo Bagman’s magically magnified voice. “Dimitrov skins Moran — deliberately flying to collide there — and it’s got to be another penalty — yes, there’s the whistle!”

The leprechauns had risen into the air again, and this time, they formed a giant hand, which was making a very rude sign indeed at the veela across the field. At this, the veela lost control. Instead of dancing, they launched themselves across the field and began throwing what seemed to be handfuls of fire at the leprechauns. Watching through his Omnioculars, Harry saw that they didn’t look remotely beautiful now. On the contrary, their faces were elongating into sharp, cruel-beaked bird heads, and long, scaly wings were bursting from their shoulders —“And that, boys,” yelled Mr. Weasley over the tumult of the crowd below, “is why you should never go for looks alone!”

Ministry wizards were flooding onto the field to separate the veela and the leprechauns, but with little success; meanwhile, the pitched battle below was nothing to the one taking place above. Harry turned this way and that, staring through his Omnioculars, as the Quaffle changed hands with the speed of a bullet.

“Levski — Dimitrov — Moran — Troy — Mullet — Ivanova — Moran again — Moran — MORAN SCORES!”

But the cheers of the Irish supporters were barely heard over the shrieks of the veela, the blasts now issuing from the Ministry members’ wands, and the furious roars of the Bulgarians. The game recommenced immediately; now Levski had the Quaffle, now Dimitrov —The Irish Beater Quigley swung heavily at a passing

Bludger, and hit it as hard as possible toward Krum, who did not duck quickly enough. It hit him full in the face.

There was a deafening groan from the crowd; Krum's nose looked broken, there was blood everywhere, but Hassan Mostafa didn't blow his whistle. He had become distracted, and Harry couldn't blame him; one of the veela had thrown a handful of fire and set his broom tail alight.

Harry wanted someone to realize that Krum was injured; even though he was supporting Ireland, Krum was the most exciting player on the field. Ron obviously felt the same.

"Time-out! Ah, come on, he can't play like that, look at him —"

"Look at Lynch!" Harry yelled.

For the Irish Seeker had suddenly gone into a dive, and Harry was quite sure that this was no Wronski Feint; this was the real thing. …"He's seen the Snitch!" Harry shouted. "He's seen it! Look at him go!"

Half the crowd seemed to have realized what was happening; the Irish supporters rose in another great wave of green, screaming their Seeker on … but Krum was on his tail. How he could see where he was going, Harry had no idea; there were flecks of blood flying through the air behind him, but he was drawing level with Lynch now as the pair of them hurtled toward the ground again —"They're going to crash!" shrieked Hermione.

"They're not!" roared Ron.

"Lynch is!" yelled Harry.

And he was right — for the second time, Lynch hit the ground with tremendous force and was immediately stampeded by a horde of angry veela.

“The Snitch, where’s the Snitch?” bellowed Charlie, along the row.

“He’s got it — Krum’s got it — it’s all over!” shouted Harry.

Krum, his red robes shining with blood from his nose, was ris-ing gently into the air, his fist held high, a glint of gold in his hand.

The scoreboard was flashing BULGARIA: 160, IRELAND: 170 across the crowd, who didn’t seem to have realized what had hap-pened. Then, slowly, as though a great jumbo jet were revving up, the rumbling from the Ireland supporters grew louder and louder and erupted into screams of delight.

“IRELAND WINS!” Bagman shouted, who like the Irish, seemed to be taken aback by the sudden end of the match. “KRUM GETS THE SNITCH — BUT IRELAND WINS — good lord, I don’t think any of us were expecting that!”

“What did he catch the Snitch for?” Ron bellowed, even as he jumped up and down, applauding with his hands over his head. “He ended it when Ireland were a hundred and sixty points ahead, the idiot!”

“He knew they were never going to catch up!” Harry shouted back over all the noise, also applauding loudly. “The Irish Chasers were too good. … He wanted to end it on his terms, that’s all. …”

“He was very brave, wasn’t he?” Hermione said, leaning forward to watch Krum land as a swarm of mediwizards blasted a path through the battling leprechauns and veela to get to him. “He looks a terrible mess. …”

Harry put his Omnioculars to his eyes again. It was hard to see what was happening below, because leprechauns were zooming de-lightedly all over the field, but he could just make out Krum, sur-rounded by mediwizards. He looked surlier than ever and refused to let them mop him up. His team members were around him, shaking their heads and looking dejected; a short way away, the Irish players

were dancing gleefully in a shower of gold descending from their mascots. Flags were waving all over the stadium, the Irish national anthem blared from all sides; the veela were shrink-ing back into their usual, beautiful selves now, though looking dispirited and forlorn.

“Vell, ve fought bravely,” said a gloomy voice behind Harry. He looked around; it was the Bulgarian Minister of Magic.

“You can speak English!” said Fudge, sounding outraged. “And you’ve been letting me mime everything all day!”

“Vell, it vos very funny,” said the Bulgarian minister, shrugging.

“And as the Irish team performs a lap of honor, flanked by their mascots, the Quidditch World Cup itself is brought into the Top Box!” roared Bagman.

Harry’s eyes were suddenly dazzled by a blinding white light, as the Top Box was magically illuminated so that everyone in the stands could see the inside. Squinting toward the entrance, he saw two panting wizards carrying a vast golden cup into the box, which they handed to Cornelius Fudge, who was still looking very dis-gruntled that he’d been using sign language all day for nothing.

“Let’s have a really loud hand for the gallant losers — Bulgaria!” Bagman shouted.

And up the stairs into the box came the seven defeated Bulgar-ian players. The crowd below was applauding appreciatively; Harry could see thousands and thousands of Omniocular lenses flashing and winking in their direction.

One by one, the Bulgarians filed between the rows of seats in the box, and Bagman called out the name of each as they shook hands with their own minister and then with Fudge. Krum, who was last in line, looked a real mess. Two black eyes were blooming spectac-ularly on his bloody face. He was still holding the Snitch. Harry

noticed that he seemed much less coordinated on the ground. He was slightly duck-footed and distinctly round-shouldered. But when Krum's name was announced, the whole stadium gave him a resounding, earsplitting roar.

And then came the Irish team. Aidan Lynch was being sup-ported by Moran and Connolly; the second crash seemed to have dazed him and his eyes looked strangely unfocused. But he grinned happily as Troy and Quigley lifted the Cup into the air and the crowd below thundered its approval. Harry's hands were numb with clapping.

At last, when the Irish team had left the box to perform another lap of honor on their brooms (Aidan Lynch on the back of Con-nolly's, clutching hard around his waist and still grinning in a be-mused sort of way), Bagman pointed his wand at his throat and muttered, "Quietus."

"They'll be talking about this one for years," he said hoarsely, "a really unexpected twist, that. … shame it couldn't have lasted longer. … Ah yes. … yes, I owe you … how much?"

For Fred and George had just scrambled over the backs of their seats and were standing in front of Ludo Bagman with broad grins on their faces, their hands outstretched.

Chapter 9 The Dark Mark

"Don't tell your mother you've been gambling," Mr. Weasley implored Fred and George as they all made their way slowly down the purple-carpeted stairs.

"Don't worry, Dad," said Fred gleefully, "we've got big plans for this money. We don't want it confiscated."

Mr. Weasley looked for a moment as though he was going to ask what these big plans were, but seemed to decide, upon reflection, that he didn't want to know.

They were soon caught up in the crowds now flooding out of the stadium and back to their campsites. Raucous singing was borne toward them on the night air as they retraced their steps along the lantern-lit path, and leprechauns kept shooting over their heads, cackling and waving their lanterns. When they finally reached the tents, nobody felt like sleeping at all, and given the level of noise around them, Mr. Weasley agreed that they could all have one last cup of cocoa together before turning in. They were soon arguing enjoyably about the match; Mr. Weasley got drawn into a disagreement about cobbing with Charlie, and it was only when Ginny fell asleep right at the tiny table and spilled hot chocolate all over the floor that Mr. Weasley called a halt to the verbal replays and in-sisted that everyone go to bed. Hermione and Ginny went into the next tent, and Harry and the rest of the Weasleys changed into pa-jamas and clambered into their bunks. From the other side of the campsite they could still hear much singing and the odd echoing bang.

"Oh I am glad I'm not on duty," muttered Mr. Weasley sleepily. "I wouldn't fancy having to go and tell the Irish they've got to stop celebrating."

Harry, who was on a top bunk above Ron, lay staring up at the canvas ceiling of the tent, watching the glow of an occasional leprechaun lantern flying overhead, and picturing again some of Krum's more spectacular moves. He was itching to get back on his own Firebolt and try out the Wronski Feint. … Somehow Oliver Wood had never managed to convey with all his wriggling dia-grams what that move was supposed to look like. … Harry saw himself in robes that had his name on the back, and imagined the sensation of hearing a hundred-thousand-strong crowd roar, as Ludo Bagman's voice echoed throughout the stadium, "I give you … Potter!"

Harry never knew whether or not he had actually dropped off to sleep — his fantasies of flying like Krum might well have slipped into actual dreams — all he knew was that, quite suddenly, Mr. Weasley was shouting.

"Get up! Ron — Harry — come on now, get up, this is urgent!"

Harry sat up quickly and the top of his head hit canvas.

" 'S' matter?" he said.

Dimly, he could tell that something was wrong. The noises in the campsite had changed. The singing had stopped. He could hear screams, and the sound of people running. He slipped down from the bunk and reached for his clothes, but Mr. Weasley, who had pulled on his jeans over his own pajamas, said, "No time, Harry — just grab a jacket and get outside — quickly!"

Harry did as he was told and hurried out of the tent, Ron at his heels.

By the light of the few fires that were still burning, he could see people running away into the woods, fleeing something that was moving across the field toward them, something that was emitting odd flashes of light and noises like gunfire. Loud jeering, roars of laughter, and drunken yells were drifting toward them; then came a burst of strong green light, which illuminated the scene.

A crowd of wizards, tightly packed and moving together with wands pointing straight upward, was marching slowly across the field. Harry squinted at them. … They didn't seem to have faces. … Then he realized that their heads were hooded and their faces masked. High above them, floating along in midair, four struggling figures were being contorted into grotesque shapes. It was as though the masked wizards on the ground were puppeteers, and the people above them were marionettes operated by invisible strings that rose from the wands into the air. Two of the figures were very small.

More wizards were joining the marching group, laughing and pointing up at the floating bodies. Tents crumpled and fell as the marching crowd swelled. Once or twice Harry saw one of the marchers blast a tent out of his way with his wand. Several caught fire. The screaming grew louder.

The floating people were suddenly illuminated as they passed over a burning tent and Harry recognized one of them: Mr. Roberts, the campsite manager. The other three looked as though they might be his wife and children. One of the marchers below flipped Mrs. Roberts upside down with his wand; her nightdress fell down to reveal voluminous drawers and she struggled to cover herself up as the crowd below her screeched and hooted with glee.

"That's sick," Ron muttered, watching the smallest Muggle child, who had begun to spin like a top, sixty feet above the ground, his head flopping limply from side to side. "That is really sick. …"

Hermione and Ginny came hurrying toward them, pulling coats over their nightdresses, with Mr. Weasley right behind them. At the same moment, Bill, Charlie, and Percy emerged from the boys' tent, fully dressed, with their sleeves rolled up and their wands out.

"We're going to help the Ministry!" Mr. Weasley shouted over all the noise, rolling up his own sleeves. "You lot — get into the woods, and stick together. I'll come and fetch you when we've sorted this out!"

Bill, Charlie, and Percy were already sprinting away toward the oncoming marchers; Mr. Weasley tore after them. Ministry wizards were dashing from every direction toward the source of the trouble. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was coming ever closer.

“C’mon,” said Fred, grabbing Ginny’s hand and starting to pull her toward the wood. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and George fol-lowed. They all looked back as they reached the trees. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was larger than ever; they could see the Ministry wizards trying to get through it to the hooded wizards in the center, but they were having great difficulty. It looked as though they were scared to perform any spell that might make the Roberts family fall.

The colored lanterns that had lit the path to the stadium had been extinguished. Dark figures were blundering through the trees; children were crying; anxious shouts and panicked voices were re-verberating around them in the cold night air. Harry felt himself being pushed hither and thither by people whose faces he could not see. Then he heard Ron yell with pain.

“What happened?” said Hermione anxiously, stopping so abruptly that Harry walked into her. “Ron, where are you? Oh this is stupid — lumos!”

She illuminated her wand and directed its narrow beam across the path. Ron was lying sprawled on the ground.

“Tripped over a tree root,” he said angrily, getting to his feet again.

“Well, with feet that size, hard not to,” said a drawling voice from behind them.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned sharply. Draco Malfoy was standing alone nearby, leaning against a tree, looking utterly re-laxed. His arms folded, he seemed to have been watching the scene at the campsite through a gap in the trees.

Ron told Malfoy to do something that Harry knew he would never have dared say in front of Mrs. Weasley“Language, Weasley,” said Malfoy, his pale eyes glittering. “Had-n’t you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn’t like her spot-ted, would you?”

He nodded at Hermione, and at the same moment, a blast like a bomb sounded from the campsite, and a flash of green light momentarily lit the trees around them.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Hermione defiantly.

“Granger, they’re after Muggles,” said Malfoy. “D’you want to be showing off your knickers in midair? Because if you do, hang around … they’re moving this way, and it would give us all a laugh.”

“Hermione’s a witch,” Harry snarled.

“Have it your own way, Potter,” said Malfoy, grinning mali-ciously. “If you think they can’t spot a Mudblood, stay where you are.”

“You watch your mouth!” shouted Ron. Everybody present knew that “Mudblood” was a very offensive term for a witch or wizard of Muggle parentage.

“Never mind, Ron,” said Hermione quickly, seizing Ron’s arm to restrain him as he took a step toward Malfoy.

There came a bang from the other side of the trees that was louder than anything they had heard. Several people nearby screamed. Malfoy chuckled softly.

“Scare easily, don’t they?” he said lazily. “I suppose your daddy told you all to hide? What’s he up to — trying to rescue the Muggles?”

“Where’re your parents?” said Harry, his temper rising. “Out there wearing masks, are they?”

Malfoy turned his face to Harry, still smiling.

“Well … if they were, I wouldn’t be likely to tell you, would I, Potter?”

“Oh come on,” said Hermione, with a disgusted look at Malfoy, “let’s go and find the others.”

“Keep that big bushy head down, Granger,” sneered Malfoy.

“Come on,” Hermione repeated, and she pulled Harry and Ron up the path again.

“I’ll bet you anything his dad is one of that masked lot!” said Ron hotly.

“Well, with any luck, the Ministry will catch him!” said Her-mione fervently. “Oh I can’t believe this. Where have the others got to?”

Fred, George, and Ginny were nowhere to be seen, though the path was packed with plenty of other people, all looking nervously over their shoulders toward the commotion back at the campsite. A huddle of teenagers in pajamas was arguing vociferously a little way along the path. When they saw Harry, Ron, and Hermione, a girl with thick curly hair turned and said quickly, “Où est Madame Maxime? Nous l’avons perdue —”

“Er — what?” said Ron.

“Oh …” The girl who had spoken turned her back on him, and as they walked on they distinctly heard her say, “ ’Ogwarts.”

“Beauxbatons,” muttered Hermione.

“Sorry?” said Harry.

“They must go to Beauxbatons,” said Hermione. “You know … Beauxbatons Academy of Magic … I read about it in An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe.”

"Oh … yeah … right," said Harry.

"Fred and George can't have gone that far," said Ron, pulling out his wand, lighting it like Hermione's, and squinting up the path. Harry dug in the pockets of his jacket for his own wand — but it wasn't there. The only thing he could find was his Omnioculars.

"Ah, no, I don't believe it … I've lost my wand!"

"You're kidding!"

Ron and Hermione raised their wands high enough to spread the narrow beams of light farther on the ground; Harry looked all around him, but his wand was nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe it's back in the tent," said Ron.

"Maybe it fell out of your pocket when we were running?" Hermione suggested anxiously.

"Yeah," said Harry, "maybe …"

He usually kept his wand with him at all times in the wizarding world, and finding himself without it in the midst of a scene like this made him feel very vulnerable.

A rustling noise nearby made all three of them jump. Winky the house-elf was fighting her way out of a clump of bushes nearby. She was moving in a most peculiar fashion, apparently with great difficulty; it was as though someone invisible were trying to hold her back.

"There is bad wizards about!" she squeaked distractedly as she leaned forward and labored to keep running. "People high — high in the air! Winky is getting out of the way!"

And she disappeared into the trees on the other side of the path, panting and squeaking as she fought the force that was restraining her.

“What’s up with her?” said Ron, looking curiously after Winky. “Why can’t she run properly?”

“Bet she didn’t ask permission to hide,” said Harry. He was thinking of Dobby: Every time he had tried to do something the Malfoys wouldn’t like, the house-elf had been forced to start beat-ing himself up.

“You know, house-elves get a very raw deal!” said Hermione in-dignantly. “It’s slavery, that’s what it is! That Mr. Crouch made her go up to the top of the stadium, and she was terrified, and he’s got her bewitched so she can’t even run when they start trampling tents! Why doesn’t anyone do something about it?”

“Well, the elves are happy, aren’t they?” Ron said. “You heard old Winky back at the match … ‘House-elves is not supposed to have fun’ … that’s what she likes, being bossed around. …”

“It’s people like you, Ron,” Hermione began hotly, “who prop up rotten and unjust systems, just because they’re too lazy to —”

Another loud bang echoed from the edge of the wood.

“Let’s just keep moving, shall we?” said Ron, and Harry saw him glance edgily at Hermione. Perhaps there was truth in what Malfoy had said; perhaps Hermione was in more danger than they were. They set off again, Harry still searching his pockets, even though he knew his wand wasn’t there.

They followed the dark path deeper into the wood, still keeping an eye out for Fred, George, and Ginny. They passed a group of goblins who were cackling over a sack of gold that they had un-doubtedly won betting on the match, and who seemed quite unperturbed by the trouble at the campsite. Farther still along the path, they walked into a

patch of silvery light, and when they looked through the trees, they saw three tall and beautiful veela standing in a clearing, surrounded by a gaggle of young wizards, all of whom were talking very loudly.

“I pull down about a hundred sacks of Galleons a year!” one of them shouted. “I’m a dragon killer for the Committee for the Dis-posal of Dangerous Creatures.”

“No, you’re not!” yelled his friend. “You’re a dishwasher at the Leaky Cauldron. … but I’m a vampire hunter, I’ve killed about ninety so far —”

A third young wizard, whose pimples were visible even by the dim, silvery light of the veela, now cut in, “I’m about to become the youngest ever Minister of Magic, I am.”

Harry snorted with laughter. He recognized the pimply wizard: His name was Stan Shunpike, and he was in fact a conductor on the triple-decker Knight Bus. He turned to tell Ron this, but Ron’s face had gone oddly slack, and next second Ron was yelling, “Did I tell you I’ve invented a broomstick that’ll reach Jupiter?”

“Honestly!” said Hermione, and she and Harry grabbed Ron firmly by the arms, wheeled him around, and marched him away. By the time the sounds of the veela and their admirers had faded completely, they were in the very heart of the wood. They seemed to be alone now; everything was much quieter.

Harry looked around. “I reckon we can just wait here, you know. We’ll hear anyone coming a mile off.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth, when Ludo Bagman emerged from behind a tree right ahead of them.

Even by the feeble light of the two wands, Harry could see that a great change had come over Bagman. He no longer looked buoy-ant

and rosy-faced; there was no more spring in his step. He looked very white and strained.

“Who’s that?” he said, blinking down at them, trying to make out their faces. “What are you doing in here, all alone?”

They looked at one another, surprised.

“Well — there’s a sort of riot going on,” said Ron.

Bagman stared at him.

“What?”

“At the campsite … some people have got hold of a family of Muggles. …”

Bagman swore loudly.

“Damn them!” he said, looking quite distracted, and without another word, he Disapparated with a small pop!

“Not exactly on top of things, Mr. Bagman, is he?” said Hermione, frowning.

“He was a great Beater, though,” said Ron, leading the way off the path into a small clearing, and sitting down on a patch of dry grass at the foot of a tree. “The Wimbourne Wasps won the league three times in a row while he was with them.”

He took his small figure of Krum out of his pocket, set it down on the ground, and watched it walk around. Like the real Krum, the model was slightly duck-footed and round-shouldered, much less impressive on his splayed feet than on his broomstick. Harry was listening for noise from the campsite. Everything seemed much quieter; perhaps the riot was over.

“I hope the others are okay,” said Hermione after a while.

“They’ll be fine,” said Ron.

“Imagine if your dad catches Lucius Malfoy,” said Harry, sitting down next to Ron and watching the small figure of Krum slouch-ing over the fallen leaves. “He’s always said he’d like to get some-thing on him.”

“That’d wipe the smirk off old Draco’s face, all right,” said Ron.

“Those poor Muggles, though,” said Hermione nervously. “What if they can’t get them down?”

“They will,” said Ron reassuringly. “They’ll find a way.”

“Mad, though, to do something like that when the whole Min-istry of Magic’s out here tonight!” said Hermione. “I mean, how do they expect to get away with it? Do you think they’ve been drink-ing, or are they just —”

But she broke off abruptly and looked over her shoulder. Harry and Ron looked quickly around too. It sounded as though some-one was staggering toward their clearing. They waited, listening to the sounds of the uneven steps behind the dark trees. But the foot-steps came to a sudden halt.

“Hello?” called Harry.

There was silence. Harry got to his feet and peered around the tree. It was too dark to see very far, but he could sense somebody standing just beyond the range of his vision.

“Who’s there?” he said.

And then, without warning, the silence was rent by a voice un-like any they had heard in the wood; and it uttered, not a panicked shout, but what sounded like a spell.

“MORSMORDRE!”

And something vast, green, and glittering erupted from the patch of darkness Harry's eyes had been struggling to penetrate; it flew up over the treetops and into the sky.

"What the — ?" gasped Ron as he sprang to his feet again, star-ing up at the thing that had appeared.

For a split second, Harry thought it was another leprechaun for-mation. Then he realized that it was a colossal skull, comprised of what looked like emerald stars, with a serpent protruding from its mouth like a tongue. As they watched, it rose higher and higher, blazing in a haze of greenish smoke, etched against the black sky like a new constellation.

Suddenly, the wood all around them erupted with screams. Harry didn't understand why, but the only possible cause was the sudden appearance of the skull, which had now risen high enough to illuminate the entire wood like some grisly neon sign. He scanned the darkness for the person who had conjured the skull, but he couldn't see anyone.

"Who's there?" he called again.

"Harry, come on, move!" Hermione had seized the collar of his jacket and was tugging him backward.

"What's the matter?" Harry said, startled to see her face so white and terrified.

"It's the Dark Mark, Harry!" Hermione moaned, pulling him as hard as she could. "You-Know-Who's sign!"

"Voldemort's — ?"

"Harry, come on!"

Harry turned — Ron was hurriedly scooping up his miniature Krum — the three of them started across the clearing — but be-fore they had taken a few hurried steps, a series of popping noises announced the arrival of twenty wizards, appearing from thin air, surrounding them.

Harry whirled around, and in an instant, he registered one fact: Each of these wizards had his wand out, and every wand was point-ing right at himself, Ron, and Hermione.

Without pausing to think, he yelled, “DUCK!”

He seized the other two and pulled them down onto the ground.

“STUPEFY!” roared twenty voices — there was a blinding series of flashes and Harry felt the hair on his head ripple as though a powerful wind had swept the clearing. Raising his head a fraction of an inch he saw jets of fiery red light flying over them from the wizards’ wands, crossing one another, bouncing off tree trunks, re-bounding into the darkness —“Stop!” yelled a voice he recognized. “STOP! That’s my son!”

Harry’s hair stopped blowing about. He raised his head a little higher. The wizard in front of him had lowered his wand. He rolled over and saw Mr. Weasley striding toward them, looking terrified.

“Ron — Harry” — his voice sounded shaky — “Hermione — are you all right?”

“Out of the way, Arthur,” said a cold, curt voice.

It was Mr. Crouch. He and the other Ministry wizards were clos-ing in on them. Harry got to his feet to face them. Mr. Crouch’s face was taut with rage.

“Which of you did it?” he snapped, his sharp eyes darting be-tween them. “Which of you conjured the Dark Mark?”

“We didn’t do that!” said Harry, gesturing up at the skull.

“We didn’t do anything!” said Ron, who was rubbing his elbow and looking indignantly at his father. “What did you want to at-tack us for?”

“Do not lie, sir!” shouted Mr. Crouch. His wand was still point-ing directly at Ron, and his eyes were popping — he looked slightly mad. “You have been discovered at the scene of the crime!”

“Barty,” whispered a witch in a long woolen dressing gown, “they’re kids, Barty, they’d never have been able to —”

“Where did the Mark come from, you three?” said Mr. Weasley quickly.

“Over there,” said Hermione shakily, pointing at the place where they had heard the voice. “There was someone behind the trees … they shouted words — an incantation —”

“Oh, stood over there, did they?” said Mr. Crouch, turning his popping eyes on Hermione now, disbelief etched all over his face. “Said an incantation, did they? You seem very well informed about how that Mark is summoned, missy —”

But none of the Ministry wizards apart from Mr. Crouch seemed to think it remotely likely that Harry, Ron, or Hermione had conjured the skull; on the contrary, at Hermione’s words, they had all raised their wands again and were pointing in the direction she had indicated, squinting through the dark trees.

“We’re too late,” said the witch in the woolen dressing gown, shaking her head. “They’ll have Disapparated.”

“I don’t think so,” said a wizard with a scrubby brown beard. It was Amos Diggory, Cedric’s father. “Our Stunners went right through those trees. … There’s a good chance we got them. …”

“Amos, be careful!” said a few of the wizards warningly as Mr. Diggory squared his shoulders, raised his wand, marched across the clearing, and disappeared into the darkness. Hermione watched him vanish with her hands over her mouth.

A few seconds later, they heard Mr. Diggory shout.

“Yes! We got them! There’s someone here! Unconscious! It’s — but — blimey …”

“You’ve got someone?” shouted Mr. Crouch, sounding highly disbelieving. “Who? Who is it?”

They heard snapping twigs, the rustling of leaves, and then crunching footsteps as Mr. Diggory reemerged from behind the trees. He was carrying a tiny, limp figure in his arms. Harry recog-nized the tea towel at once. It was Winky.

Mr. Crouch did not move or speak as Mr. Diggory deposited his elf on the ground at his feet. The other Ministry wizards were all staring at Mr. Crouch. For a few seconds Crouch remained trans-fixed, his eyes blazing in his white face as he stared down at Winky. Then he appeared to come to life again.

“This — cannot — be,” he said jerkily. “No —”

He moved quickly around Mr. Diggory and strode off toward the place where he had found Winky.

“No point, Mr. Crouch,” Mr. Diggory called after him. “There’s no one else there.”

But Mr. Crouch did not seem prepared to take his word for it. They could hear him moving around and the rustling of leaves as he pushed the bushes aside, searching.

“Bit embarrassing,” Mr. Diggory said grimly, looking down at Winky’s unconscious form. “Barty Crouch’s house-elf … I mean to say …”

“Come off it, Amos,” said Mr. Weasley quietly, “you don’t seriously think it was the elf? The Dark Mark’s a wizard’s sign. It requires a wand.”

“Yeah,” said Mr. Diggory, “and she had a wand.”

“What?” said Mr. Weasley.

“Here, look.” Mr. Diggory held up a wand and showed it to Mr. Weasley. “Had it in her hand. So that’s clause three of the Code of Wand Use broken, for a start. No non-human creature is permitted to carry or use a wand.”

Just then there was another pop, and Ludo Bagman Apparated right next to Mr. Weasley. Looking breathless and disorientated, he spun on the spot, goggling upward at the emerald-green skull.

“The Dark Mark!” he panted, almost trampling Winky as he turned inquiringly to his colleagues. “Who did it? Did you get them? Barty! What’s going on?”

Mr. Crouch had returned empty-handed. His face was still ghostly white, and his hands and his toothbrush mustache were both twitching.

“Where have you been, Barty?” said Bagman. “Why weren’t you at the match? Your elf was saving you a seat too — gulping gar-goyles!” Bagman had just noticed Winky lying at his feet. “What happened to her?”

“I have been busy, Ludo,” said Mr. Crouch, still talking in the same jerky fashion, barely moving his lips. “And my elf has been stunned.”

“Stunned? By you lot, you mean? But why — ?”

Comprehension dawned suddenly on Bagman's round, shiny face; he looked up at the skull, down at Winky, and then at Mr. Crouch.

"No!" he said. "Winky? Conjure the Dark Mark? She wouldn't know how! She'd need a wand, for a start!"

"And she had one," said Mr. Diggory. "I found her holding one, Ludo. If it's all right with you, Mr. Crouch, I think we should hear what she's got to say for herself."

Crouch gave no sign that he had heard Mr. Diggory, but Mr. Diggory seemed to take his silence for assent. He raised his own wand, pointed it at Winky, and said, "Rennervate!"

Winky stirred feebly. Her great brown eyes opened and she blinked several times in a bemused sort of way. Watched by the silent wizards, she raised herself shakily into a sitting position. She caught sight of Mr. Diggory's feet, and slowly, tremulously, raised her eyes to stare up into his face; then, more slowly still, she looked up into the sky. Harry could see the floating skull reflected twice in her enormous, glassy eyes. She gave a gasp, looked wildly around the crowded clearing, and burst into terrified sobs.

"Elf!" said Mr. Diggory sternly. "Do you know who I am? I'm a member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures!"

Winky began to rock backward and forward on the ground, her breath coming in sharp bursts. Harry was reminded forcibly of Dobby in his moments of terrified disobedience.

"As you see, elf, the Dark Mark was conjured here a short while ago," said Mr. Diggory. "And you were discovered moments later, right beneath it! An explanation, if you please!"

"I — I — I is not doing it, sir!" Winky gasped. "I is not know-ing how, sir!"

“You were found with a wand in your hand!” barked Mr. Dig-gory, brandishing it in front of her. And as the wand caught the green light that was filling the clearing from the skull above, Harry recognized it.

“Hey — that’s mine!” he said.

Everyone in the clearing looked at him.

“Excuse me?” said Mr. Diggory, incredulously.

“That’s my wand!” said Harry. “I dropped it!”

“You dropped it?” repeated Mr. Diggory in disbelief. “Is this a confession? You threw it aside after you conjured the Mark?”

“Amos, think who you’re talking to!” said Mr. Weasley, very an-grily. “Is Harry Potter likely to conjure the Dark Mark?”

“Er — of course not,” mumbled Mr. Diggory. “Sorry … car-ried away …”

“I didn’t drop it there, anyway,” said Harry, jerking his thumb toward the trees beneath the skull. “I missed it right after we got into the wood.”

“So,” said Mr. Diggory, his eyes hardening as he turned to look at Winky again, cowering at his feet. “You found this wand, eh, elf? And you picked it up and thought you’d have some fun with it, did you?”

“I is not doing magic with it, sir!” squealed Winky, tears stream-ing down the sides of her squashed and bulbous nose. “I is … I is … I is just picking it up, sir! I is not making the Dark Mark, sir, I is not knowing how!”

“It wasn’t her!” said Hermione. She looked very nervous, speak-ing up in front of all these Ministry wizards, yet determined all the same. “Winky’s got a squeaky little voice, and the voice we heard doing the

incantation was much deeper!" She looked around at Harry and Ron, appealing for their support. "It didn't sound any-thing like Winky, did it?"

"No," said Harry, shaking his head. "It definitely didn't sound like an elf."

"Yeah, it was a human voice," said Ron.

"Well, we'll soon see," growled Mr. Diggory, looking unim-pressed. "There's a simple way of discovering the last spell a wand performed, elf, did you know that?"

Winky trembled and shook her head frantically, her ears flap-ping, as Mr. Diggory raised his own wand again and placed it tip to tip with Harry's.

"Prior Incantato!" roared Mr. Diggory.

Harry heard Hermione gasp, horrified, as a gigantic serpent-tongued skull erupted from the point where the two wands met, but it was a mere shadow of the green skull high above them; it looked as though it were made of thick gray smoke: the ghost of a spell.

"Deletrius!" Mr. Diggory shouted, and the smoky skull vanished in a wisp of smoke.

"So," said Mr. Diggory with a kind of savage triumph, looking down upon Winky, who was still shaking convulsively.

"I is not doing it!" she squealed, her eyes rolling in terror. "I is not, I is not, I is not knowing how! I is a good elf, I isn't using wands, I isn't knowing how!"

"You've been caught red-handed, elf!" Mr. Diggory roared. "Caught with the guilty wand in your hand!"

“Amos,” said Mr. Weasley loudly, “think about it … precious few wizards know how to do that spell. … Where would she have learned it?”

“Perhaps Amos is suggesting,” said Mr. Crouch, cold anger in every syllable, “that I routinely teach my servants to conjure the Dark Mark?”

There was a deeply unpleasant silence. Amos Diggory looked horrified. “Mr. Crouch … not … not at all …”

“You have now come very close to accusing the two people in this clearing who are least likely to conjure that Mark!” barked Mr. Crouch. “Harry Potter — and myself! I suppose you are familiar with the boy’s story, Amos?”

“Of course — everyone knows —” muttered Mr. Diggory, look-ing highly discomforted.

“And I trust you remember the many proofs I have given, over a long career, that I despise and detest the Dark Arts and those who practice them?” Mr. Crouch shouted, his eyes bulging again.

“Mr. Crouch, I — I never suggested you had anything to do with it!” Amos Diggory muttered again, now reddening behind his scrubby brown beard.

“If you accuse my elf, you accuse me, Diggory!” shouted Mr. Crouch. “Where else would she have learned to conjure it?”

“She — she might’ve picked it up anywhere —”

“Precisely, Amos,” said Mr. Weasley. “She might have picked it up anywhere. … Winky?” he said kindly, turning to the elf, but she flinched as though he too was shouting at her. “Where exactly did you find Harry’s wand?”

Winky was twisting the hem of her tea towel so violently that it was fraying beneath her fingers.

"I — I is finding it … finding it there, sir. …" she whispered, "there … in the trees, sir. …"

"You see, Amos?" said Mr. Weasley. "Whoever conjured the Mark could have Disapparated right after they'd done it, leaving Harry's wand behind. A clever thing to do, not using their own wand, which could have betrayed them. And Winky here had the misfortune to come across the wand moments later and pick it up.

"But then, she'd have been only a few feet away from the real culprit!" said Mr. Diggory impatiently. "Elf? Did you see anyone?"

Winky began to tremble worse than ever. Her giant eyes flick-ered from Mr. Diggory, to Ludo Bagman, and onto Mr. Crouch. Then she gulped and said, "I is seeing no one, sir … no one …"

"Amos," said Mr. Crouch curtly, "I am fully aware that, in the ordinary course of events, you would want to take Winky into your department for questioning. I ask you, however, to allow me to deal with her."

Mr. Diggory looked as though he didn't think much of this sug-gestion at all, but it was clear to Harry that Mr. Crouch was such an important member of the Ministry that he did not dare refuse him.

"You may rest assured that she will be punished," Mr. Crouch added coldly.

"M-m-master …" Winky stammered, looking up at Mr. Crouch, her eyes brimming with tears. "M-m-master, p-p-please …"

Mr. Crouch stared back, his face somehow sharpened, each line upon it more deeply etched. There was no pity in his gaze.

“Winky has behaved tonight in a manner I would not have be-lieved possible,” he said slowly. “I told her to remain in the tent. I told her to stay there while I went to sort out the trouble. And I find that she disobeyed me. This means clothes.”

“No!” shrieked Winky, prostrating herself at Mr. Crouch’s feet. “No, master! Not clothes, not clothes!”

Harry knew that the only way to turn a house-elf free was to pre-sent it with proper garments. It was pitiful to see the way Winky clutched at her tea towel as she sobbed over Mr. Crouch’s feet.

“But she was frightened!” Hermione burst out angrily, glaring at Mr. Crouch. “Your elf’s scared of heights, and those wizards in masks were levitating people! You can’t blame her for wanting to get out of their way!”

Mr. Crouch took a step backward, freeing himself from contact with the elf, whom he was surveying as though she were something filthy and rotten that was contaminating his over-shined shoes.

“I have no use for a house-elf who disobeys me,” he said coldly, looking over at Hermione. “I have no use for a servant who forgets what is due to her master, and to her master’s reputation.”

Winky was crying so hard that her sobs echoed around the clear-ing. There was a very nasty silence, which was ended by Mr. Weasley, who said quietly, “Well, I think I’ll take my lot back to the tent, if nobody’s got any objections. Amos, that wand’s told us all it can — if Harry could have it back, please —”

Mr. Diggory handed Harry his wand and Harry pocketed it.

“Come on, you three,” Mr. Weasley said quietly. But Hermione didn’t seem to want to move; her eyes were still upon the sobbing elf. “Hermione!” Mr. Weasley said, more urgently. She turned and followed Harry and Ron out of the clearing and off through the trees.

“What’s going to happen to Winky?” said Hermione, the mo-ment they had left the clearing.

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Weasley.

“The way they were treating her!” said Hermione furiously. “Mr. Diggory, calling her ‘elf’ all the time … and Mr. Crouch! He knows she didn’t do it and he’s still going to sack her! He didn’t care how frightened she’d been, or how upset she was — it was like she wasn’t even human!”

“Well, she’s not,” said Ron.

Hermione rounded on him.

“That doesn’t mean she hasn’t got feelings, Ron. It’s disgusting the way —”

“Hermione, I agree with you,” said Mr. Weasley quickly, beck-oning her on, “but now is not the time to discuss elf rights. I want to get back to the tent as fast as we can. What happened to the others?”

“We lost them in the dark,” said Ron. “Dad, why was everyone so uptight about that skull thing?”

“I’ll explain everything back at the tent,” said Mr. Weasley tensely.

But when they reached the edge of the wood, their progress was impeded. A large crowd of frightened-looking witches and wizards was congregated there, and when they saw Mr. Weasley coming to-ward them, many of them surged forward.

“What’s going on in there?”

“Who conjured it?”

“Arthur — it’s not — Him?”

"Of course it's not Him," said Mr. Weasley impatiently. "We don't know who it was; it looks like they Disapparated. Now excuse me, please, I want to get to bed."

He led Harry, Ron, and Hermione through the crowd and back into the campsite. All was quiet now; there was no sign of the masked wizards, though several ruined tents were still smoking.

Charlie's head was poking out of the boys' tent.

"Dad, what's going on?" he called through the dark. "Fred, George, and Ginny got back okay, but the others —"

"I've got them here," said Mr. Weasley, bending down and en-tering the tent. Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered after him.

Bill was sitting at the small kitchen table, holding a bedsheet to his arm, which was bleeding profusely. Charlie had a large rip in his shirt, and Percy was sporting a bloody nose. Fred, George, and Ginny looked unhurt, though shaken.

"Did you get them, Dad?" said Bill sharply. "The person who conjured the Mark?"

"No," said Mr. Weasley. "We found Barty Crouch's elf holding Harry's wand, but we're none the wiser about who actually con-jured the Mark."

"What?" said Bill, Charlie, and Percy together.

"Harry's wand?" said Fred.

"Mr. Crouch's elf?" said Percy, sounding thunderstruck.

With some assistance from Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Mr. Weasley explained what had happened in the woods. When they had finished their story, Percy swelled indignantly.

"Well, Mr. Crouch is quite right to get rid of an elf like that!" he said. "Running away when he'd expressly told her not to … em-barrassing him in front of the whole Ministry … how would that have looked, if she'd been brought up in front of the Department for the Regulation and Control —"

"She didn't do anything — she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time!" Hermione snapped at Percy, who looked very taken aback. Hermione had always got on fairly well with Percy — better, indeed, than any of the others.

"Hermione, a wizard in Mr. Crouch's position can't afford a house-elf who's going to run amok with a wand!" said Percy pompously, recovering himself.

"She didn't run amok!" shouted Hermione. "She just picked it up off the ground!"

"Look, can someone just explain what that skull thing was?" said Ron impatiently. "It wasn't hurting anyone. … Why's it such a big deal?"

"I told you, it's You-Know-Who's symbol, Ron," said Hermione, before anyone else could answer. "I read about it in The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts."

"And it hasn't been seen for thirteen years," said Mr. Weasley quietly. "Of course people panicked … it was almost like seeing You-Know-Who back again."

"I don't get it," said Ron, frowning. "I mean … it's still only a shape in the sky. …"

"Ron, You-Know-Who and his followers sent the Dark Mark into the air whenever they killed," said Mr. Weasley. "The terror it inspired … you have no idea, you're too young. Just picture com-ing home and finding the Dark Mark hovering over your house, and knowing what

you're about to find inside. …" Mr. Weasley winced. "Everyone's worst fear … the very worst …"

There was silence for a moment. Then Bill, removing the sheet from his arm to check on his cut, said, "Well, it didn't help us tonight, whoever conjured it. It scared the Death Eaters away the moment they saw it. They all Disapparated before we'd got near enough to unmask any of them. We caught the Robertses before they hit the ground, though. They're having their memories modi-fied right now."

"Death Eaters?" said Harry. "What are Death Eaters?"

"It's what You-Know-Who's supporters called themselves," said Bill. "I think we saw what's left of them tonight — the ones who managed to keep themselves out of Azkaban, anyway."

"We can't prove it was them, Bill," said Mr. Weasley. "Though it probably was," he added hopelessly.

"Yeah, I bet it was!" said Ron suddenly. "Dad, we met Draco Malfoy in the woods, and he as good as told us his dad was one of those nutters in masks! And we all know the Malfoys were right in with You-Know-Who!"

"But what were Voldemort's supporters —" Harry began. Everybody flinched — like most of the wizarding world, the Weasleys always avoided saying Voldemort's name. "Sorry," said Harry quickly. "What were You-Know-Who's supporters up to, levitating Muggles? I mean, what was the point?"

"The point?" said Mr. Weasley with a hollow laugh. "Harry, that's their idea of fun. Half the Muggle killings back when You-Know-Who was in power were done for fun. I suppose they had a few drinks tonight and couldn't resist reminding us all that lots of them are still at large. A nice little reunion for them," he finished disgustedly.

“But if they were the Death Eaters, why did they Disapparate when they saw the Dark Mark?” said Ron. “They’d have been pleased to see it, wouldn’t they?”

“Use your brains, Ron,” said Bill. “If they really were Death Eaters, they worked very hard to keep out of Azkaban when You-Know-Who lost power, and told all sorts of lies about him forcing them to kill and torture people. I bet they’d be even more fright-ened than the rest of us to see him come back. They denied they’d ever been involved with him when he lost his powers, and went back to their daily lives. … I don’t reckon he’d be over-pleased with them, do you?”

“So … whoever conjured the Dark Mark …” said Hermione slowly, “were they doing it to show support for the Death Eaters, or to scare them away?”

“Your guess is as good as ours, Hermione,” said Mr. Weasley. “But I’ll tell you this … it was only the Death Eaters who ever knew how to conjure it. I’d be very surprised if the person who did it hadn’t been a Death Eater once, even if they’re not now. … Listen, it’s very late, and if your mother hears what’s happened she’ll be worried sick. We’ll get a few more hours sleep and then try and get an early Portkey out of here.”

Harry got back into his bunk with his head buzzing. He knew he ought to feel exhausted: It was nearly three in the morning, but he felt wide-awake — wide-awake, and worried.

Three days ago — it felt like much longer, but it had only been three days — he had awoken with his scar burning. And tonight, for the first time in thirteen years, Lord Voldemort’s mark had ap-peared in the sky. What did these things mean?

He thought of the letter he had written to Sirius before leaving Privet Drive. Would Sirius have gotten it yet? When would he reply? Harry lay looking up at the canvas, but no flying fantasies came to him now

to ease him to sleep, and it was a long time after Charlie's snores filled the tent that Harry finally dozed off.

Chapter 10 Mayhem at the Ministry

Mr. Weasley woke them after only a few hours sleep. He used magic to pack up the tents, and they left the campsite as quickly as possible, passing Mr. Roberts at the door of his cottage. Mr. Roberts had a strange, dazed look about him, and he waved them off with a vague "Merry Christmas."

"He'll be all right," said Mr. Weasley quietly as they marched off onto the moor. "Sometimes, when a person's memory's modified, it makes him a bit disorientated for a while … and that was a big thing they had to make him forget."

They heard urgent voices as they approached the spot where the Portkeys lay, and when they reached it, they found a great number of witches and wizards gathered around Basil, the keeper of the Portkeys, all clamoring to get away from the campsite as quickly as possible. Mr. Weasley had a hurried discussion with Basil; they joined the queue, and were able to take an old rubber tire back to Stoatshead Hill before the sun had really risen. They walked back through Ottery St. Catchpole and up the damp lane toward the Burrow in the dawn light, talking very little because they were so exhausted, and thinking longingly of their breakfast. As they rounded the corner and the Burrow came into view, a cry echoed along the lane.

"Oh thank goodness, thank goodness!"

Mrs. Weasley, who had evidently been waiting for them in the front yard, came running toward them, still wearing her bedroom slippers, her face pale and strained, a rolled-up copy of the Daily Prophet clutched in her hand.

"Arthur — I've been so worried — so worried —"

She flung her arms around Mr. Weasley's neck, and the Daily Prophet fell out of her limp hand onto the ground. Looking down, Harry saw the headline: SCENES OF TERROR AT THE QUID-DITCH WORLD CUP, complete with a twinkling black-and-white photograph of the Dark Mark over the treetops.

"You're all right," Mrs. Weasley muttered distractedly, releasing Mr. Weasley and staring around at them all with red eyes, "you're alive. … Oh boys …"

And to everybody's surprise, she seized Fred and George and pulled them both into such a tight hug that their heads banged together.

"Ouch! Mum — you're strangling us —"

"I shouted at you before you left!" Mrs. Weasley said, starting to sob. "It's all I've been thinking about! What if You-Know-Who had got you, and the last thing I ever said to you was that you didn't get enough O.W.L.s? Oh Fred … George …"

"Come on, now, Molly, we're all perfectly okay," said Mr. Weasley soothingly, prising her off the twins and leading her back toward the house. "Bill," he added in an undertone, "pick up that paper, I want to see what it says. …"

When they were all crammed into the tiny kitchen, and Hermione had made Mrs. Weasley a cup of very strong tea, into which Mr. Weasley insisted on pouring a shot of Ogdens Old Firewhiskey, Bill handed his father the newspaper. Mr. Weasley scanned the front page while Percy looked over his shoulder.

"I knew it," said Mr. Weasley heavily. "Ministry blunders … cul-prits not apprehended … lax security … Dark wizards running unchecked … national disgrace … Who wrote this? Ah … of course … Rita Skeeter."

“That woman’s got it in for the Ministry of Magic!” said Percy furiously. “Last week she was saying we’re wasting our time quib-bling about cauldron thickness, when we should be stamping out vampires! As if it wasn’t specifically stated in paragraph twelve of the Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans —”

“Do us a favor, Perce,” said Bill, yawning, “and shut up.”

“I’m mentioned,” said Mr. Weasley, his eyes widening behind his glasses as he reached the bottom of the Daily Prophet article.

“Where?” spluttered Mrs. Weasley, choking on her tea and whiskey. “If I’d seen that, I’d have known you were alive!”

“Not by name,” said Mr. Weasley. “Listen to this: ‘If the terrified wizards and witches who waited breathlessly for news at the edge of the wood expected reassurance from the Ministry of Magic, they were sadly disappointed. A Ministry official emerged some time after the appear-ance of the Dark Mark alleging that nobody had been hurt, but refus-ing to give any more information. Whether this statement will be enough to quash the rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods an hour later, remains to be seen.’ Oh really,” said Mr. Weasley in exasperation, handing the paper to Percy. “Nobody was hurt. What was I supposed to say? Rumors that several bodies were re-moved from the woods … well, there certainly will be rumors now she’s printed that.”

He heaved a deep sigh. “Molly, I’m going to have to go into the office; this is going to take some smoothing over.”

“I’ll come with you, Father,” said Percy importantly. “Mr. Crouch will need all hands on deck. And I can give him my caul-dron report in person.”

He bustled out of the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley looked most upset.

“Arthur, you’re supposed to be on holiday! This hasn’t got any-thing to do with your office; surely they can handle this without you?”

“I’ve got to go, Molly,” said Mr. Weasley. “I’ve made things worse. I’ll just change into my robes and I’ll be off. …”

“Mrs. Weasley,” said Harry suddenly, unable to contain himself, “Hedwig hasn’t arrived with a letter for me, has she?”

“Hedwig, dear?” said Mrs. Weasley distractedly. “No … no, there hasn’t been any post at all.”

Ron and Hermione looked curiously at Harry. With a meaning-ful look at both of them he said, “All right if I go and dump my stuff in your room, Ron?”

“Yeah … think I will too,” said Ron at once. “Hermione?”

“Yes,” she said quickly, and the three of them marched out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

“What’s up, Harry?” said Ron, the moment they had closed the door of the attic room behind them.

“There’s something I haven’t told you,” Harry said. “On Satur-day morning, I woke up with my scar hurting again.”

Ron’s and Hermione’s reactions were almost exactly as Harry had imagined them back in his bedroom on Privet Drive. Hermione gasped and started making suggestions at once, mentioning a number of reference books, and everybody from Albus Dumble-dore to Madam Pomfrey, the Hogwarts nurse. Ron simply looked dumbstruck.

“But — he wasn’t there, was he? You-Know-Who? I mean — last time your scar kept hurting, he was at Hogwarts, wasn’t he?”

“I’m sure he wasn’t on Privet Drive,” said Harry. “But I was dreaming about him … him and Peter — you know, Wormtail. I can’t remember all of it now, but they were plotting to kill … someone.”

He had teetered for a moment on the verge of saying “me,” but couldn’t bring himself to make Hermione look any more horrified than she already did.

“It was only a dream,” said Ron bracingly. “Just a nightmare.”

“Yeah, but was it, though?” said Harry, turning to look out of the window at the brightening sky. “It’s weird, isn’t it? … My scar hurts, and three days later the Death Eaters are on the march, and Voldemort’s sign’s up in the sky again.”

“Don’t — say — his — name!” Ron hissed through gritted teeth.

“And remember what Professor Trelawney said?” Harry went on, ignoring Ron. “At the end of last year?”

Professor Trelawney was their Divination teacher at Hogwarts. Hermione’s terrified look vanished as she let out a derisive snort.

“Oh Harry, you aren’t going to pay attention to anything that old fraud says?”

“You weren’t there,” said Harry. “You didn’t hear her. This time was different. I told you, she went into a trance — a real one. And she said the Dark Lord would rise again … greater and more terri-ble than ever before … and he’d manage it because his servant was going to go back to him … and that night Wormtail escaped.”

There was a silence in which Ron fidgeted absentmindedly with a hole in his Chudley Cannons bedspread.

“Why were you asking if Hedwig had come, Harry?” Hermione asked. “Are you expecting a letter?”

"I told Sirius about my scar," said Harry, shrugging. "I'm wait-ing for his answer."

"Good thinking!" said Ron, his expression clearing. "I bet Sir-ius'll know what to do!"

"I hoped he'd get back to me quickly," said Harry.

"But we don't know where Sirius is … he could be in Africa or somewhere, couldn't he?" said Hermione reasonably. "Hedwig's not going to manage that journey in a few days."

"Yeah, I know," said Harry, but there was a leaden feeling in his stomach as he looked out of the window at the Hedwig-free sky.

"Come and have a game of Quidditch in the orchard, Harry," said Ron. "Come on — three on three, Bill and Charlie and Fred and George will play. … You can try out the Wronski Feint. …"

"Ron," said Hermione, in an I-don't-think-you're-being-very-sensitive sort of voice, "Harry doesn't want to play Quidditch right now. … He's worried, and he's tired. … We all need to go to bed. …"

"Yeah, I want to play Quidditch," said Harry suddenly. "Hang on, I'll get my Firebolt."

Hermione left the room, muttering something that sounded very much like "Boys."

* * *

Neither Mr. Weasley nor Percy was at home much over the follow-ing week. Both left the house each morning before the rest of the family got up, and returned well after dinner every night.

"It's been an absolute uproar," Percy told them importantly the Sunday evening before they were due to return to Hogwarts. "I've

been putting out fires all week. People keep sending Howlers, and of course, if you don't open a Howler straight away, it explodes. Scorch marks all over my desk and my best quill reduced to cinders."

"Why are they all sending Howlers?" asked Ginny, who was mending her copy of One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi with Spellotape on the rug in front of the living room fire.

"Complaining about security at the World Cup," said Percy. "They want compensation for their ruined property. Mundungus Fletcher's put in a claim for a twelve-bedroomed tent with en-suite Jacuzzi, but I've got his number. I know for a fact he was sleeping under a cloak propped on sticks."

Mrs. Weasley glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. Harry liked this clock. It was completely useless if you wanted to know the time, but otherwise very informative. It had nine golden hands, and each of them was engraved with one of the Weasley family's names. There were no numerals around the face, but de-scriptions of where each family member might be. "Home," "school," and "work" were there, but there was also "traveling," "lost," "hospital," "prison," and, in the position where the number twelve would be on a normal clock, "mortal peril."

Eight of the hands were currently pointing to the "home" position, but Mr. Weasley's, which was the longest, was still point-ing to "work." Mrs. Weasley sighed.

"Your father hasn't had to go into the office on weekends since the days of You-Know-Who," she said. "They're working him far too hard. His dinner's going to be ruined if he doesn't come home soon."

"Well, Father feels he's got to make up for his mistake at the match, doesn't he?" said Percy. "If truth be told, he was a tad un-wise to make a public statement without clearing it with his Head of Department first —"

"Don't you dare blame your father for what that wretched Skeeter woman wrote!" said Mrs. Weasley, flaring up at once.

"If Dad hadn't said anything, old Rita would just have said it was disgraceful that nobody from the Ministry had commented," said Bill, who was playing chess with Ron. "Rita Skeeter never makes anyone look good. Remember, she interviewed all the Gringotts' Charm Breakers once, and called me 'a long-haired pillock'?"

"Well, it is a bit long, dear," said Mrs. Weasley gently. "If you'd just let me —"

"No, Mum."

Rain lashed against the living room window. Hermione was immersed in The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, copies of which Mrs. Weasley had bought for her, Harry, and Ron in Diagon Alley. Charlie was darning a fireproof balaclava. Harry was polishing his Firebolt, the broomstick servicing kit Hermione had given him for his thirteenth birthday open at his feet. Fred and George were sit-ting in a far corner, quills out, talking in whispers, their heads bent over a piece of parchment.

"What are you two up to?" said Mrs. Weasley sharply, her eyes on the twins.

"Homework," said Fred vaguely.

"Don't be ridiculous, you're still on holiday," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Yeah, we've left it a bit late," said George.

"You're not by any chance writing out a new order form, are you?" said Mrs. Weasley shrewdly. "You wouldn't be thinking of re-starting Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, by any chance?"

"Now, Mum," said Fred, looking up at her, a pained look on his face. "If the Hogwarts Express crashed tomorrow, and George and I died, how would you feel to know that the last thing we ever heard from you was an unfounded accusation?"

Everyone laughed, even Mrs. Weasley.

"Oh your father's coming!" she said suddenly, looking up at the clock again.

Mr. Weasley's hand had suddenly spun from "work" to "travel-ing"; a second later it had shuddered to a halt on "home" with the others, and they heard him calling from the kitchen.

"Coming, Arthur!" called Mrs. Weasley, hurrying out of the room.

A few moments later, Mr. Weasley came into the warm liv-ing room carrying his dinner on a tray. He looked completely exhausted.

"Well, the fat's really in the fire now," he told Mrs. Weasley as he sat down in an armchair near the hearth and toyed unenthusiasti-cally with his somewhat shriveled cauliflower. "Rita Skeeter's been ferreting around all week, looking for more Ministry mess-ups to report. And now she's found out about poor old Bertha going missing, so that'll be the headline in the Prophet tomorrow. I told Bagman he should have sent someone to look for her ages ago."

"Mr. Crouch has been saying it for weeks and weeks," said Percy swiftly.

"Crouch is very lucky Rita hasn't found out about Winky," said Mr. Weasley irritably. "There'd be a week's worth of headlines in his house-elf being caught holding the wand that conjured the Dark Mark."

"I thought we were all agreed that that elf, while irresponsible, did not conjure the Mark?" said Percy hotly.

“If you ask me, Mr. Crouch is very lucky no one at the Daily Prophet knows how mean he is to elves!” said Hermione angrily.

“Now look here, Hermione!” said Percy. “A high-ranking Min-istry official like Mr. Crouch deserves unswerving obedience from his servants —”

“His slave, you mean!” said Hermione, her voice rising passion-ately, “because he didn’t pay Winky, did he?”

“I think you’d all better go upstairs and check that you’ve packed properly!” said Mrs. Weasley, breaking up the argument. “Come on now, all of you. …”

Harry repacked his broomstick servicing kit, put his Firebolt over his shoulder, and went back upstairs with Ron. The rain sounded even louder at the top of the house, accompanied by loud whistlings and moans from the wind, not to mention sporadic howls from the ghoul who lived in the attic. Pigwidgeon began twittering and zooming around his cage when they entered. The sight of the half-packed trunks seemed to have sent him into a frenzy of excitement.

“Bung him some Owl Treats,” said Ron, throwing a packet across to Harry. “It might shut him up.”

Harry poked a few Owl Treats through the bars of Pigwidgeon’s cage, then turned to his trunk. Hedwig’s cage stood next to it, still empty.

“It’s been over a week,” Harry said, looking at Hedwig’s deserted perch. “Ron, you don’t reckon Sirius has been caught, do you?”

“Nah, it would’ve been in the Daily Prophet,” said Ron. “The Ministry would want to show they’d caught someone, wouldn’t they?”

“Yeah, I suppose. …”

“Look, here’s the stuff Mum got for you in Diagon Alley. And she’s got some gold out of your vault for you … and she’s washed all your socks.”

He heaved a pile of parcels onto Harry’s camp bed and dropped the money bag and a load of socks next to it. Harry started un-wrapping the shopping. Apart from The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, by Miranda Goshawk, he had a handful of new quills, a dozen rolls of parchment, and refills for his potion-making kit — he had been running low on spine of lionfish and essence of bel-ladonna. He was just piling underwear into his cauldron when Ron made a loud noise of disgust behind him.

“What is that supposed to be?”

He was holding up something that looked to Harry like a long, maroon velvet dress. It had a moldy-looking lace frill at the collar and matching lace cuffs.

There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Weasley entered, car-rying an armful of freshly laundered Hogwarts robes.

“Here you are,” she said, sorting them into two piles. “Now, mind you pack them properly so they don’t crease.”

“Mum, you’ve given me Ginny’s new dress,” said Ron, handing it out to her.

“Of course I haven’t,” said Mrs. Weasley. “That’s for you. Dress robes.”

“What?” said Ron, looking horror-struck.

“Dress robes!” repeated Mrs. Weasley. “It says on your school list that you’re supposed to have dress robes this year … robes for for-mal occasions.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” said Ron in disbelief. “I’m not wear-ing that, no way.”

“Everyone wears them, Ron!” said Mrs. Weasley crossly. “They’re all like that! Your father’s got some for smart parties!”

“I’ll go starkers before I put that on,” said Ron stubbornly.

“Don’t be so silly,” said Mrs. Weasley. “You’ve got to have dress robes, they’re on your list! I got some for Harry too … show him, Harry. …”

In some trepidation, Harry opened the last parcel on his camp bed. It wasn’t as bad as he had expected, however; his dress robes didn’t have any lace on them at all — in fact, they were more or less the same as his school ones, except that they were bottle green in-stead of black.

“I thought they’d bring out the color of your eyes, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley fondly.

“Well, they’re okay!” said Ron angrily, looking at Harry’s robes. “Why couldn’t I have some like that?”

“Because … well, I had to get yours secondhand, and there wasn’t a lot of choice!” said Mrs. Weasley, flushing.

Harry looked away. He would willingly have split all the money in his Gringotts vault with the Weasleys, but he knew they would never take it.

“I’m never wearing them,” Ron was saying stubbornly. “Never.”

“Fine,” snapped Mrs. Weasley. “Go naked. And, Harry, make sure you get a picture of him. Goodness knows I could do with a laugh.”

She left the room, slamming the door behind her. There was a funny spluttering noise from behind them. Pigwidgeon was chok-ing on an overlarge Owl Treat.

“Why is everything I own rubbish?” said Ron furiously, striding across the room to unstick Pigwidgeon’s beak.

Chapter 11 Aboard the Hogwarts Express

There was a definite end-of-the-holidays gloom in the air when Harry awoke next morning. Heavy rain was still splat-tering against the window as he got dressed in jeans and a sweat-shirt; they would change into their school robes on the Hogwarts Express.

He, Ron, Fred, and George had just reached the first-floor land-ing on their way down to breakfast, when Mrs. Weasley appeared at the foot of the stairs, looking harassed.

“Arthur!” she called up the staircase. “Arthur! Urgent message from the Ministry!”

Harry flattened himself against the wall as Mr. Weasley came clattering past with his robes on back-to-front and hurtled out of sight. When Harry and the others entered the kitchen, they saw Mrs. Weasley rummaging anxiously in the drawers — “I’ve got a quill here somewhere!” — and Mr. Weasley bending over the fire, talking to — Harry shut his eyes hard and opened them again to make sure that they were working properly.

Amos Diggory’s head was sitting in the middle of the flames like a large, bearded egg. It was talking very fast, completely unper-turbed by the sparks flying around it and the flames licking its ears.

“… Muggle neighbors heard bangs and shouting, so they went and called those what-d’you-call-’ems — please-men. Arthur, you’ve got to get over there —”

“Here!” said Mrs. Weasley breathlessly, pushing a piece of parch-ment, a bottle of ink, and a crumpled quill into Mr. Weasley’s hands.

“— it’s a real stroke of luck I heard about it,” said Mr. Diggory’s head. “I had to come into the office early to send a couple of owls, and I

found the Improper Use of Magic lot all setting off — if Rita Skeeter gets hold of this one, Arthur —"

"What does Mad-Eye say happened?" asked Mr. Weasley, unscrewing the ink bottle, loading up his quill, and preparing to take notes.

Mr. Diggory's head rolled its eyes. "Says he heard an intruder in his yard. Says he was creeping toward the house, but was ambushed by his dustbins."

"What did the dustbins do?" asked Mr. Weasley, scribbling frantically.

"Made one hell of a noise and fired rubbish everywhere, as far as I can tell," said Mr. Diggory. "Apparently one of them was still rocketing around when the please-men turned up —"

Mr. Weasley groaned.

"And what about the intruder?"

"Arthur, you know Mad-Eye," said Mr. Diggory's head, rolling its eyes again. "Someone creeping into his yard in the dead of night? More likely there's a very shell-shocked cat wandering around somewhere, covered in potato peelings. But if the Improper Use of Magic lot get their hands on Mad-Eye, he's had it — think of his record — we've got to get him off on a minor charge, some-thing in your department — what are exploding dustbins worth?"

"Might be a caution," said Mr. Weasley, still writing very fast, his brow furrowed. "Mad-Eye didn't use his wand? He didn't actually attack anyone?"

"I'll bet he leapt out of bed and started jinxing everything he could reach through the window," said Mr. Diggory, "but they'll have a job proving it, there aren't any casualties."

“All right, I’m off,” Mr. Weasley said, and he stuffed the parch-ment with his notes on it into his pocket and dashed out of the kitchen again.

Mr. Diggory’s head looked around at Mrs. Weasley.

“Sorry about this, Molly,” it said, more calmly, “bothering you so early and everything … but Arthur’s the only one who can get Mad-Eye off, and Mad-Eye’s supposed to be starting his new job today. Why he had to choose last night …”

“Never mind, Amos,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Sure you won’t have a bit of toast or anything before you go?”

“Oh go on, then,” said Mr. Diggory.

Mrs. Weasley took a piece of buttered toast from a stack on the kitchen table, put it into the fire tongs, and transferred it into Mr. Diggory’s mouth.

“Fanks,” he said in a muffled voice, and then, with a small pop, vanished.

Harry could hear Mr. Weasley calling hurried good-byes to Bill, Charlie, Percy, and the girls. Within five minutes, he was back in the kitchen, his robes on the right way now, dragging a comb through his hair.

“I’d better hurry — you have a good term, boys,” said Mr. Weasley to Harry, Ron, and the twins, fastening a cloak over his shoulders and preparing to Disapparate. “Molly, are you going to be all right taking the kids to King’s Cross?”

“Of course I will,” she said. “You just look after Mad-Eye, we’ll be fine.”

As Mr. Weasley vanished, Bill and Charlie entered the kitchen.

“Did someone say Mad-Eye?” Bill asked. “What’s he been up to now?

“He says someone tried to break into his house last night,” said Mrs. Weasley.

“Mad-Eye Moody?” said George thoughtfully, spreading mar-malade on his toast. “Isn’t he that nutter —”

“Your father thinks very highly of Mad-Eye Moody,” said Mrs. Weasley sternly.

“Yeah, well, Dad collects plugs, doesn’t he?” said Fred quietly as Mrs. Weasley left the room. “Birds of a feather …”

“Moody was a great wizard in his time,” said Bill.

“He’s an old friend of Dumbledore’s, isn’t he?” said Charlie.

“Dumbledore’s not what you’d call normal, though, is he?” said Fred. “I mean, I know he’s a genius and everything …”

“Who is Mad-Eye?” asked Harry.

“He’s retired, used to work at the Ministry,” said Charlie. “I met him once when Dad took me into work with him. He was an Auror — one of the best … a Dark wizard catcher,” he added, see-ing Harry’s blank look. “Half the cells in Azkaban are full because of him. He made himself loads of enemies, though … the families of people he caught, mainly … and I heard he’s been getting really paranoid in his old age. Doesn’t trust anyone anymore. Sees Dark wizards everywhere.”

Bill and Charlie decided to come and see everyone off at King’s Cross station, but Percy, apologizing most profusely, said that he really needed to get to work.

“I just can’t justify taking more time off at the moment,” he told them. “Mr. Crouch is really starting to rely on me.”

“Yeah, you know what, Percy?” said George seriously. “I reckon he’ll know your name soon.”

Mrs. Weasley had braved the telephone in the village post office to order three ordinary Muggle taxis to take them into London.

“Arthur tried to borrow Ministry cars for us,” Mrs. Weasley whispered to Harry as they stood in the rain-washed yard, watch-ing the taxi drivers heaving six heavy Hogwarts trunks into their cars. “But there weren’t any to spare. … Oh dear, they don’t look happy, do they?”

Harry didn’t like to tell Mrs. Weasley that Muggle taxi drivers rarely transported overexcited owls, and Pigwidgeon was making an earsplitting racket. Nor did it help that a number of Filibuster’s Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks went off unexpectedly when Fred’s trunk sprang open, causing the driver carrying it to yell with fright and pain as Crookshanks clawed his way up the man’s leg.

The journey was uncomfortable, owing to the fact that they were jammed in the back of the taxis with their trunks. Crook-shanks took quite a while to recover from the fireworks, and by the time they entered London, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were all severely scratched. They were very relieved to get out at King’s Cross, even though the rain was coming down harder than ever, and they got soaked carrying their trunks across the busy road and into the station.

Harry was used to getting onto platform nine and three-quarters by now. It was a simple matter of walking straight through the apparently solid barrier dividing platforms nine and ten. The only tricky part was doing this in an unobtrusive way, so as to avoid at-tracting Muggle attention. They did it in groups today; Harry, Ron, and Hermione (the most conspicuous, since they were accompa-nied by Pigwidgeon and Crookshanks) went first; they leaned casu-ally against the barrier, chatting unconcernedly, and slid sideways through it … and as they did so, platform nine and three-quarters materialized in front of them.

The Hogwarts Express, a gleaming scarlet steam engine, was already there, clouds of steam billowing from it, through which the many Hogwarts students and parents on the platform appeared like dark ghosts. Pigwidgeon became noisier than ever in response to the hooting of many owls through the mist. Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off to find seats, and were soon stowing their luggage in a compartment halfway along the train. They then hopped back down onto the platform to say good-bye to Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie.

"I might be seeing you all sooner than you think," said Charlie, grinning, as he hugged Ginny good-bye.

"Why?" said Fred keenly.

"You'll see," said Charlie. "Just don't tell Percy I mentioned it … it's 'classified information, until such time as the Ministry sees fit to release it,' after all."

"Yeah, I sort of wish I were back at Hogwarts this year," said Bill, hands in his pockets, looking almost wistfully at the train.

"Why?" said George impatiently.

"You're going to have an interesting year," said Bill, his eyes twinkling. "I might even get time off to come and watch a bit of it. …"

"A bit of what?" said Ron.

But at that moment, the whistle blew, and Mrs. Weasley chivvied them toward the train doors.

"Thanks for having us to stay, Mrs. Weasley," said Hermione as they climbed on board, closed the door, and leaned out of the win-dow to talk to her.

"Yeah, thanks for everything, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry.

“Oh it was my pleasure, dears,” said Mrs. Weasley. “I’d invite you for Christmas, but … well, I expect you’re all going to want to stay at Hogwarts, what with … one thing and another.”

“Mum!” said Ron irritably. “What d’you three know that we don’t?”

“You’ll find out this evening, I expect,” said Mrs. Weasley, smil-ing. “It’s going to be very exciting — mind you, I’m very glad they’ve changed the rules —”

“What rules?” said Harry, Ron, Fred, and George together.

“I’m sure Professor Dumbledore will tell you. … Now, behave, won’t you? Won’t you, Fred? And you, George?”

The pistons hissed loudly and the train began to move.

“Tell us what’s happening at Hogwarts!” Fred bellowed out of the window as Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie sped away from them. “What rules are they changing?”

But Mrs. Weasley only smiled and waved. Before the train had rounded the corner, she, Bill, and Charlie had Disapparated.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went back to their compartment. The thick rain splattering the windows made it very difficult to see out of them. Ron undid his trunk, pulled out his maroon dress robes, and flung them over Pigwidgeon’s cage to muffle his hooting.

“Bagman wanted to tell us what’s happening at Hogwarts,” he said grumpily, sitting down next to Harry. “At the World Cup, remember? But my own mother won’t say. Wonder what —”

“Shh!” Hermione whispered suddenly, pressing her finger to her lips and pointing toward the compartment next to theirs. Harry and Ron listened, and heard a familiar drawling voice drifting in through the open door.

"… Father actually considered sending me to Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts, you know. He knows the headmaster, you see. Well, you know his opinion of Dumbledore — the man's such a Mudblood-lover — and Durmstrang doesn't admit that sort of riffraff. But Mother didn't like the idea of me going to school so far away. Father says Durmstrang takes a far more sensible line than Hogwarts about the Dark Arts. Durmstrang students actually learn them, not just the defense rubbish we do. …"

Hermione got up, tiptoed to the compartment door, and slid it shut, blocking out Malfoy's voice.

"So he thinks Durmstrang would have suited him, does he?" she said angrily. "I wish he had gone, then we wouldn't have to put up with him."

"Durmstrang's another wizarding school?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Hermione sniffily, "and it's got a horrible reputation. According to An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe, it puts a lot of emphasis on the Dark Arts."

"I think I've heard of it," said Ron vaguely. "Where is it? What country?"

"Well, nobody knows, do they?" said Hermione, raising her eyebrows.

"Er — why not?" said Harry.

"There's traditionally been a lot of rivalry between all the magic schools. Durmstrang and Beauxbatons like to conceal their whereabouts so nobody can steal their secrets," said Hermione matter-of-factly.

"Come off it," said Ron, starting to laugh. "Durmstrang's got to be about the same size as Hogwarts — how are you going to hide a great big castle?"

“But Hogwarts is hidden,” said Hermione, in surprise. “Every-one knows that … well, everyone who’s read Hogwarts, A History, anyway.”

“Just you, then,” said Ron. “So go on — how d’you hide a place like Hogwarts?”

“It’s bewitched,” said Hermione. “If a Muggle looks at it, all they see is a moldering old ruin with a sign over the entrance saying DANGER, DO NOT ENTER, UNSAFE.”

“So Durmstrang’ll just look like a ruin to an outsider too?”

“Maybe,” said Hermione, shrugging, “or it might have Muggle-repelling charms on it, like the World Cup stadium. And to keep foreign wizards from finding it, they’ll have made it Unplottable —”

“Come again?”

“Well, you can enchant a building so it’s impossible to plot on a map, can’t you?”

“Er … if you say so,” said Harry.

“But I think Durmstrang must be somewhere in the far north,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “Somewhere very cold, because they’ve got fur capes as part of their uniforms.”

“Ah, think of the possibilities,” said Ron dreamily. “It would’ve been so easy to push Malfoy off a glacier and make it look like an accident. … Shame his mother likes him. …”

The rain became heavier and heavier as the train moved farther north. The sky was so dark and the windows so steamy that the lanterns were lit by midday. The lunch trolley came rattling along the corridor, and Harry bought a large stack of Cauldron Cakes for them to share.

Several of their friends looked in on them as the afternoon progressed, including Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom, a round-faced, extremely forgetful boy who had been brought up by his formidable witch of a grandmother. Seamus was still wearing his Ireland rosette. Some of its magic seemed to be wearing off now; it was still squeaking "Troy — Mullet — Moran!" but in a very feeble and exhausted sort of way. After half an hour or so, Hermione, growing tired of the endless Quidditch talk, buried herself once more in The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, and started trying to learn a Summoning Charm.

Neville listened jealously to the others' conversation as they re-lived the Cup match.

"Gran didn't want to go," he said miserably. "Wouldn't buy tick-ets. It sounded amazing though."

"It was," said Ron. "Look at this, Neville. …"

He rummaged in his trunk up in the luggage rack and pulled out the miniature figure of Viktor Krum.

"Oh wow," said Neville enviously as Ron tipped Krum onto his pudgy hand.

"We saw him right up close, as well," said Ron. "We were in the Top Box —"

"For the first and last time in your life, Weasley."

Draco Malfoy had appeared in the doorway. Behind him stood Crabbe and Goyle, his enormous, thuggish cronies, both of whom appeared to have grown at least a foot during the summer. Evi-dently they had overheard the conversation through the compart-ment door, which Dean and Seamus had left ajar.

"Don't remember asking you to join us, Malfoy," said Harry coolly.

“Weasley … what is that?” said Malfoy, pointing at Pigwid-geon’s cage. A sleeve of Ron’s dress robes was dangling from it, sway-ing with the motion of the train, the moldy lace cuff very obvious.

Ron made to stuff the robes out of sight, but Malfoy was too quick for him; he seized the sleeve and pulled.

“Look at this!” said Malfoy in ecstasy, holding up Ron’s robes and showing Crabbe and Goyle, “Weasley, you weren’t thinking of wearing these, were you? I mean — they were very fashionable in about eighteen ninety. …”

“Eat dung, Malfoy!” said Ron, the same color as the dress robes as he snatched them back out of Malfoy’s grip. Malfoy howled with derisive laughter; Crabbe and Goyle guffawed stupidly.

“So … going to enter, Weasley? Going to try and bring a bit of glory to the family name? There’s money involved as well, you know … you’d be able to afford some decent robes if you won. …”

“What are you talking about?” snapped Ron.

“Are you going to enter?” Malfoy repeated. “I suppose you will, Potter? You never miss a chance to show off, do you?”

“Either explain what you’re on about or go away, Malfoy,” said Hermione testily, over the top of The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4.

A gleeful smile spread across Malfoy’s pale face.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know?” he said delightedly. “You’ve got a father and brother at the Ministry and you don’t even know? My God, my father told me about it ages ago … heard it from Cor-nelius Fudge. But then, Father’s always associated with the top peo-ple at the Ministry. … Maybe your father’s too junior to know about it,

Weasley … yes … they probably don't talk about impor-tant stuff in front of him. …"

Laughing once more, Malfoy beckoned to Crabbe and Goyle, and the three of them disappeared.

Ron got to his feet and slammed the sliding compartment door so hard behind them that the glass shattered.

"Ron!" said Hermione reproachfully, and she pulled out her wand, muttered "Reparo!" and the glass shards flew back into a sin-gle pane and back into the door.

"Well … making it look like he knows everything and we don't. …" Ron snarled. " 'Father's always associated with the top peo-ple at the Ministry.'… Dad could've got a promotion any time … he just likes it where he is. …"

"Of course he does," said Hermione quietly. "Don't let Malfoy get to you, Ron —"

"Him! Get to me!? As if!" said Ron, picking up one of the re-maining Cauldron Cakes and squashing it into a pulp.

Ron's bad mood continued for the rest of the journey. He didn't talk much as they changed into their school robes, and was still glowering when the Hogwarts Express slowed down at last and fi-nally stopped in the pitch-darkness of Hogsmeade station.

As the train doors opened, there was a rumble of thunder over-head. Hermione bundled up Crookshanks in her cloak and Ron left his dress robes over Pigwidgeon as they left the train, heads bent and eyes narrowed against the downpour. The rain was now coming down so thick and fast that it was as though buckets of ice-cold water were being emptied repeatedly over their heads.

“Hi, Hagrid!” Harry yelled, seeing a gigantic silhouette at the far end of the platform.

“All righ’, Harry?” Hagrid bellowed back, waving. “See yeh at the feast if we don’ drown!”

First years traditionally reached Hogwarts Castle by sailing across the lake with Hagrid.

“Oooh, I wouldn’t fancy crossing the lake in this weather,” said Hermione fervently, shivering as they inched slowly along the dark platform with the rest of the crowd. A hundred horseless carriages stood waiting for them outside the station. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville climbed gratefully into one of them, the door shut with a snap, and a few moments later, with a great lurch, the long procession of carriages was rumbling and splashing its way up the track toward Hogwarts Castle.

Chapter 12 The Triwizard Tournament

Through the gates, flanked with statues of winged boars, and up the sweeping drive the carriages trundled, swaying dan-gerously in what was fast becoming a gale. Leaning against the win-dow, Harry could see Hogwarts coming nearer, its many lighted windows blurred and shimmering behind the thick curtain of rain. Lightning flashed across the sky as their carriage came to a halt before the great oak front doors, which stood at the top of a flight of stone steps. People who had occupied the carriages in front were already hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville jumped down from their carriage and dashed up the steps too, looking up only when they were safely inside the cavernous, torch-lit entrance hall, with its magnificent marble staircase.

“Blimey,” said Ron, shaking his head and sending water every-where, “if that keeps up the lake’s going to overflow. I’m soak — ARRGH!”

A large, red, water-filled balloon had dropped from out of the ceiling onto Ron’s head and exploded. Drenched and sputtering, Ron staggered sideways into Harry, just as a second water bomb dropped — narrowly missing Hermione, it burst at Harry’s feet, sending a wave of cold water over his sneakers into his socks. Peo-ple all around them shrieked and started pushing one another in their efforts to get out of the line of fire. Harry looked up and saw, floating twenty feet above them, Peeves the Poltergeist, a little man in a bell-covered hat and orange bow tie, his wide, malicious face contorted with concentration as he took aim again.

“PEEVES!” yelled an angry voice. “Peeves, come down here at ONCE!”

Professor McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and head of Gryf-findor House, had come dashing out of the Great Hall; she skidded on the

wet floor and grabbed Hermione around the neck to stop herself from falling.

“Ouch — sorry, Miss Granger —”

“That’s all right, Professor!” Hermione gasped, massaging her throat.

“Peeves, get down here NOW!” barked Professor McGonagall, straightening her pointed hat and glaring upward through her square-rimmed spectacles.

“Not doing nothing!” cackled Peeves, lobbing a water bomb at several fifth-year girls, who screamed and dived into the Great Hall. “Already wet, aren’t they? Little squirts! Wheeeeeeeeee!” And he aimed another bomb at a group of second years who had just arrived.

“I shall call the headmaster!” shouted Professor McGonagall. “I’m warning you, Peeves —”

Peeves stuck out his tongue, threw the last of his water bombs into the air, and zoomed off up the marble staircase, cackling insanely.

“Well, move along, then!” said Professor McGonagall sharply to the bedraggled crowd. “Into the Great Hall, come on!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione slipped and slid across the entrance hall and through the double doors on the right, Ron muttering furiously under his breath as he pushed his sopping hair off his face.

The Great Hall looked its usual splendid self, decorated for the start-of-term feast. Golden plates and goblets gleamed by the light of hundreds and hundreds of candles, floating over the tables in midair. The four long House tables were packed with chattering students; at the top of the Hall, the staff sat along one side of a fifth table, facing their pupils. It was much warmer in here. Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked past the Slytherins, the Ravenclaws, and the Hufflepuffs, and sat down with the rest of the Gryffindors at the far side of the Hall,

next to Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost. Pearly white and semitransparent, Nick was dressed tonight in his usual doublet, but with a particularly large ruff, which served the dual purpose of looking extra-festive, and insuring that his head didn't wobble too much on his partially severed neck.

"Good evening," he said, beaming at them.

"Says who?" said Harry, taking off his sneakers and emptying them of water. "Hope they hurry up with the Sorting. I'm starving."

The Sorting of the new students into Houses took place at the start of every school year, but by an unlucky combination of cir-cumstances, Harry hadn't been present at one since his own. He was quite looking forward to it. Just then, a highly excited, breath-less voice called down the table.

"Hiya, Harry!"

It was Colin Creevey, a third year to whom Harry was some-thing of a hero.

"Hi, Colin," said Harry warily.

"Harry, guess what? Guess what, Harry? My brother's starting! My brother Dennis!"

"Er — good," said Harry.

"He's really excited!" said Colin, practically bouncing up and down in his seat. "I just hope he's in Gryffindor! Keep your fingers crossed, eh, Harry?"

"Er — yeah, all right," said Harry. He turned back to Hermi-one, Ron, and Nearly Headless Nick. "Brothers and sisters usually go in the same Houses, don't they?" he said. He was judging by the Weasleys, all seven of whom had been put into Gryffindor.

“Oh no, not necessarily,” said Hermione. “Parvati Patil’s twin’s in Ravenclaw, and they’re identical. You’d think they’d be together, wouldn’t you?”

Harry looked up at the staff table. There seemed to be rather more empty seats there than usual. Hagrid, of course, was still fight-ing his way across the lake with the first years; Professor McGonagall was presumably supervising the drying of the entrance hall floor, but there was another empty chair too, and Harry couldn’t think who else was missing.

“Where’s the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?” said Hermione, who was also looking up at the teachers.

They had never yet had a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who had lasted more than three terms. Harry’s favorite by far had been Professor Lupin, who had resigned last year. He looked up and down the staff table. There was definitely no new face there.

“Maybe they couldn’t get anyone!” said Hermione, looking anxious.

Harry scanned the table more carefully. Tiny little Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was sitting on a large pile of cushions beside Professor Sprout, the Herbology teacher, whose hat was askew over her flyaway gray hair. She was talking to Professor Sin-istra of the Astronomy department. On Professor Sinistra’s other side was the sallow-faced, hook-nosed, greasy-haired Potions mas-ter, Snape — Harry’s least favorite person at Hogwarts. Harry’s loathing of Snape was matched only by Snape’s hatred of him, a ha-tred which had, if possible, intensified last year, when Harry had helped Sirius escape right under Snape’s overlarge nose — Snape and Sirius had been enemies since their own school days.

On Snape’s other side was an empty seat, which Harry guessed was Professor McGonagall’s. Next to it, and in the very center of the table, sat Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster, his sweeping silver hair and beard shining in the candlelight, his magnificent deep green

robes embroidered with many stars and moons. The tips of Dumbledore's long, thin fingers were together and he was resting his chin upon them, staring up at the ceiling through his half-moon spectacles as though lost in thought. Harry glanced up at the ceiling too. It was enchanted to look like the sky outside, and he had never seen it look this stormy. Black and purple clouds were swirling across it, and as another thunderclap sounded outside, a fork of lightning flashed across it.

“Oh hurry up,” Ron moaned, beside Harry, “I could eat a hippogriff.”

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the doors of the Great Hall opened and silence fell. Professor McGonagall was leading a long line of first years up to the top of the Hall. If Harry, Ron, and Hermione were wet, it was nothing to how these first years looked. They appeared to have swum across the lake rather than sailed. All of them were shivering with a combination of cold and nerves as they filed along the staff table and came to a halt in a line facing the rest of the school — all of them except the smallest of the lot, a boy with mousy hair, who was wrapped in what Harry recognized as Hagrid's moleskin overcoat. The coat was so big for him that it looked as though he were draped in a furry black circus tent. His small face protruded from over the collar, looking almost painfully excited. When he had lined up with his terrified-looking peers, he caught Colin Creevey's eye, gave a double thumbs-up, and mouthed, I fell in the lake! He looked positively delighted about it.

Professor McGonagall now placed a three-legged stool on the ground before the first years and, on top of it, an extremely old, dirty, patched wizard's hat. The first years stared at it. So did every-one else. For a moment, there was silence. Then a long tear near the brim opened wide like a mouth, and the hat broke into song:A thousand years or more ago,

When I was newly sewn,

There lived four wizards of renown,Whose names are still well known:Bold Gryffindor, from wild moor,Fair Ravenclaw, from glen,

Sweet Hufflepuff, from valley broad,Shrewd Slytherin, from fen.

They shared a wish, a hope, a dream,They hatched a daring plan

To educate young sorcerers

Thus Hogwarts School began.

Now each of these four foundersFormed their own house, for eachDid value different virtues

In the ones they had to teach.

By Gryffindor, the bravest werePrized far beyond the rest;

For Ravenclaw, the cleverest

Would always be the best;

For Hufflepuff, hard workers wereMost worthy of admission;

And power-hungry Slytherin

Loved those of great ambition.

While still alive they did divideTheir favorites from the throng,Yet how to pick the worthy onesWhen they were dead and gone?

‘Twas Gryffindor who found the way,He whipped me off his head

The founders put some brains in meSo I could choose instead!

Now slip me snug about your ears,I’ve never yet been wrong,

I’ll have a look inside your mindAnd tell where you belong!

The Great Hall rang with applause as the Sorting Hat finished.

"That's not the song it sang when it Sorted us," said Harry, clap-ping along with everyone else.

"Sings a different one every year," said Ron. "It's got to be a pretty boring life, hasn't it, being a hat? I suppose it spends all year making up the next one."

Professor McGonagall was now unrolling a large scroll of parchment.

"When I call out your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool," she told the first years. "When the hat announces your House, you will go and sit at the appropriate table.

"Ackerley, Stewart!"

A boy walked forward, visibly trembling from head to foot, picked up the Sorting Hat, put it on, and sat down on the stool.

"RAVENCLAW!" shouted the hat.

Stewart Ackerley took off the hat and hurried into a seat at the Ravenclaw table, where everyone was applauding him. Harry caught a glimpse of Cho, the Ravenclaw Seeker, cheering Stewart Ackerley as he sat down. For a fleeting second, Harry had a strange desire to join the Ravenclaw table too.

"Baddock, Malcolm!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

The table on the other side of the hall erupted with cheers; Harry could see Malfoy clapping as Baddock joined the Slytherins. Harry wondered whether Baddock knew that Slytherin House had turned out more Dark witches and wizards than any other. Fred and George hissed Malcolm Baddock as he sat down.

“Branstone, Eleanor!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Cauldwell, Owen!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Creevey, Dennis!”

Tiny Dennis Creevey staggered forward, tripping over Hagrid’s moleskin, just as Hagrid himself sidled into the Hall through a door behind the teachers’ table. About twice as tall as a normal man, and at least three times as broad, Hagrid, with his long, wild, tangled black hair and beard, looked slightly alarming — a mis-leading impression, for Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew Hagrid to possess a very kind nature. He winked at them as he sat down at the end of the staff table and watched Dennis Creevey putting on the Sorting Hat. The rip at the brim opened wide —“GRYFFINDOR!” the hat shouted.

Hagrid clapped along with the Gryffindors as Dennis Creevey, beaming widely, took off the hat, placed it back on the stool, and hurried over to join his brother.

“Colin, I fell in!” he said shrilly, throwing himself into an empty seat. “It was brilliant! And something in the water grabbed me and pushed me back in the boat!”

“Cool!” said Colin, just as excitedly. “It was probably the giant squid, Dennis!”

“Wow!” said Dennis, as though nobody in their wildest dreams could hope for more than being thrown into a storm-tossed, fath-oms-deep lake, and pushed out of it again by a giant sea monster.

“Dennis! Dennis! See that boy down there? The one with the black hair and glasses? See him? Know who he is, Dennis?”

Harry looked away, staring very hard at the Sorting Hat, now Sorting Emma Dobbs.

The Sorting continued; boys and girls with varying degrees of fright on their faces moving one by one to the three-legged stool, the line dwindling slowly as Professor McGonagall passed the L's.

"Oh hurry up," Ron moaned, massaging his stomach.

"Now, Ron, the Sorting's much more important than food," said Nearly Headless Nick as "Madley, Laura!" became a Hufflepuff.

" 'Course it is, if you're dead," snapped Ron.

"I do hope this year's batch of Gryffindors are up to scratch," said Nearly Headless Nick, applauding as "McDonald, Natalie!" joined the Gryffindor table. "We don't want to break our winning streak, do we?"

Gryffindor had won the Inter-House Championship for the last three years in a row.

"Pritchard, Graham!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

"Quirke, Orla!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

And finally, with "Whitby, Kevin!" ("HUFFLEPUFF!"), the Sorting ended. Professor McGonagall picked up the hat and the stool and carried them away.

"About time," said Ron, seizing his knife and fork and looking expectantly at his golden plate.

Professor Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was smiling around at the students, his arms opened wide in welcome.

“I have only two words to say to you,” he told them, his deep voice echoing around the Hall. “Tuck in.”

“Hear, hear!” said Harry and Ron loudly as the empty dishes filled magically before their eyes.

Nearly Headless Nick watched mournfully as Harry, Ron, and Hermione loaded their own plates.

“Aaah, ’at’s be’er,” said Ron, with his mouth full of mashed potato.

“You’re lucky there’s a feast at all tonight, you know,” said Nearly Headless Nick. “There was trouble in the kitchens earlier.”

“Why? Wha’ ’appened?” said Harry, through a sizable chunk of steak.

“Peeves, of course,” said Nearly Headless Nick, shaking his head, which wobbled dangerously. He pulled his ruff a little higher up on his neck. “The usual argument, you know. He wanted to attend the feast — well, it’s quite out of the question, you know what he’s like, utterly uncivilized, can’t see a plate of food without throwing it. We held a ghost’s council — the Fat Friar was all for giving him the chance — but most wisely, in my opinion, the Bloody Baron put his foot down.”

The Bloody Baron was the Slytherin ghost, a gaunt and silent specter covered in silver bloodstains. He was the only person at Hogwarts who could really control Peeves.

“Yeah, we thought Peeves seemed hacked off about something,” said Ron darkly. “So what did he do in the kitchens?”

“Oh the usual,” said Nearly Headless Nick, shrugging. “Wreaked havoc and mayhem. Pots and pans everywhere. Place swimming in soup. Terrified the house-elves out of their wits —”

Clang.

Hermione had knocked over her golden goblet. Pumpkin juice spread steadily over the tablecloth, staining several feet of white linen orange, but Hermione paid no attention.

"There are house-elves here?" she said, staring, horror-struck, at Nearly Headless Nick. "Here at Hogwarts?"

"Certainly," said Nearly Headless Nick, looking surprised at her reaction. "The largest number in any dwelling in Britain, I believe. Over a hundred."

"I've never seen one!" said Hermione.

"Well, they hardly ever leave the kitchen by day, do they?" said Nearly Headless Nick. "They come out at night to do a bit of cleaning … see to the fires and so on. … I mean, you're not sup-posed to see them, are you? That's the mark of a good house-elf, isn't it, that you don't know it's there?"

Hermione stared at him.

"But they get paid?" she said. "They get holidays, don't they? And — and sick leave, and pensions, and everything?"

Nearly Headless Nick chortled so much that his ruff slipped and his head flopped off, dangling on the inch or so of ghostly skin and muscle that still attached it to his neck.

"Sick leave and pensions?" he said, pushing his head back onto his shoulders and securing it once more with his ruff. "House-elves don't want sick leave and pensions!"

Hermione looked down at her hardly touched plate of food, then put her knife and fork down upon it and pushed it away from her.

"Oh c'mon, 'Er-my-knee," said Ron, accidentally spraying Harry with bits of Yorkshire pudding. "Oops — sorry, 'Arry —" He swallowed.

“You won’t get them sick leave by starving yourself!”

“Slave labor,” said Hermione, breathing hard through her nose. “That’s what made this dinner. Slave labor.”

And she refused to eat another bite.

The rain was still drumming heavily against the high, dark glass. Another clap of thunder shook the windows, and the stormy ceiling flashed, illuminating the golden plates as the remains of the first course vanished and were replaced, instantly, with puddings.

“Treacle tart, Hermione!” said Ron, deliberately wafting its smell toward her. “Spotted dick, look! Chocolate gateau!”

But Hermione gave him a look so reminiscent of Professor McGonagall that he gave up.

When the puddings too had been demolished, and the last crumbs had faded off the plates, leaving them sparkling clean, Albus Dumbledore got to his feet again. The buzz of chatter filling the Hall ceased almost at once, so that only the howling wind and pounding rain could be heard.

“So!” said Dumbledore, smiling around at them all. “Now that we are all fed and watered,” (“Hmph!” said Hermione) “I must once more ask for your attention, while I give out a few notices.

“Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me to tell you that the list of objects forbidden inside the castle has this year been extended to include Screaming Yo-yos, Fanged Frisbees, and Ever-Bashing Boomerangs. The full list comprises some four hundred and thirty-seven items, I believe, and can be viewed in Mr. Filch’s office, if anybody would like to check it.”

The corners of Dumbledore’s mouth twitched. He continued, “As ever, I would like to remind you all that the forest on the grounds is

out-of-bounds to students, as is the village of Hogs- meade to all below third year.

"It is also my painful duty to inform you that the Inter-House Quidditch Cup will not take place this year."

"What?" Harry gasped. He looked around at Fred and George, his fellow members of the Quidditch team. They were mouthing soundlessly at Dumbledore, apparently too appalled to speak. Dumbledore went on, "This is due to an event that will be starting in October, and continuing throughout the school year, taking up much of the teachers' time and energy — but I am sure you will all enjoy it immensely. I have great pleasure in announcing that this year at Hogwarts —"

But at that moment, there was a deafening rumble of thunder and the doors of the Great Hall banged open.

A man stood in the doorway, leaning upon a long staff, shrouded in a black traveling cloak. Every head in the Great Hall swiveled toward the stranger, suddenly brightly illuminated by a fork of lightning that flashed across the ceiling. He lowered his hood, shook out a long mane of grizzled, dark gray hair, then be-gan to walk up toward the teachers' table.

A dull clunk echoed through the Hall on his every other step. He reached the end of the top table, turned right, and limped heavily toward Dumbledore. Another flash of lightning crossed the ceiling. Hermione gasped.

The lightning had thrown the man's face into sharp relief, and it was a face unlike any Harry had ever seen. It looked as though it had been carved out of weathered wood by someone who had only the vaguest idea of what human faces are supposed to look like, and was none too skilled with a chisel. Every inch of skin seemed to be scarred. The mouth looked like a diagonal gash, and a large chunk of the nose was missing. But it was the man's eyes that made him frightening.

One of them was small, dark, and beady. The other was large, round as a coin, and a vivid, electric blue. The blue eye was moving ceaselessly, without blinking, and was rolling up, down, and from side to side, quite independently of the normal eye — and then it rolled right over, pointing into the back of the man's head, so that all they could see was whiteness.

The stranger reached Dumbledore. He stretched out a hand that was as badly scarred as his face, and Dumbledore shook it, mutter-ing words Harry couldn't hear. He seemed to be making some in-quiry of the stranger, who shook his head unsmilingly and replied in an undertone. Dumbledore nodded and gestured the man to the empty seat on his right-hand side.

The stranger sat down, shook his mane of dark gray hair out of his face, pulled a plate of sausages toward him, raised it to what was left of his nose, and sniffed it. He then took a small knife out of his pocket, speared a sausage on the end of it, and began to eat. His normal eye was fixed upon the sausages, but the blue eye was still darting restlessly around in its socket, taking in the Hall and the students.

"May I introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?" said Dumbledore brightly into the silence. "Professor Moody."

It was usual for new staff members to be greeted with applause, but none of the staff or students clapped except Dumbledore and Hagrid, who both put their hands together and applauded, but the sound echoed dismally into the silence, and they stopped fairly quickly. Everyone else seemed too transfixed by Moody's bizarre appearance to do more than stare at him.

"Moody?" Harry muttered to Ron. "Mad-Eye Moody? The one your dad went to help this morning?"

"Must be," said Ron in a low, awed voice.

“What happened to him?” Hermione whispered. “What hap-pened to his face?”

“Dunno,” Ron whispered back, watching Moody with fasci-nation.

Moody seemed totally indifferent to his less-than-warm wel-come. Ignoring the jug of pumpkin juice in front of him, he reached again into his traveling cloak, pulled out a hip flask, and took a long draught from it. As he lifted his arm to drink, his cloak was pulled a few inches from the ground, and Harry saw, below the table, several inches of carved wooden leg, ending in a clawed foot.

Dumbledore cleared his throat.

“As I was saying,” he said, smiling at the sea of students before him, all of whom were still gazing transfixed at Mad-Eye Moody, “we are to have the honor of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months, an event that has not been held for over a century. It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Triwizard Tour-nament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year.”

“You’re JOKING!” said Fred Weasley loudly.

The tension that had filled the Hall ever since Moody’s arrival suddenly broke. Nearly everyone laughed, and Dumbledore chuck-led appreciatively.

“I am not joking, Mr. Weasley,” he said, “though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun who all go into a bar …”

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

“Er — but maybe this is not the time … no …” said Dumble-dore, “where was I? Ah yes, the Triwizard Tournament … well, some of you will not know what this tournament involves, so I hope those who do

know will forgive me for giving a short expla-nation, and allow their attention to wander freely.

“The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The schools took it in turns to host the tournament once every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of es-tablishing ties between young witches and wizards of different na-tionalities — until, that is, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued.”

“Death toll?” Hermione whispered, looking alarmed. But her anxiety did not seem to be shared by the majority of students in the Hall; many of them were whispering excitedly to one another, and Harry himself was far more interested in hearing about the tourna-ment than in worrying about deaths that had happened hundreds of years ago.

“There have been several attempts over the centuries to reinstate the tournament,” Dumbledore continued, “none of which has been very successful. However, our own departments of Interna-tional Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another attempt. We have worked hard over the summer to ensure that this time, no champion will find himself or herself in mortal danger.

“The heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving with their short-listed contenders in October, and the selection of the three champions will take place at Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a thousand Galleons personal prize money.”

“I’m going for it!” Fred Weasley hissed down the table, his face lit with enthusiasm at the prospect of such glory and riches. He was not the only person who seemed to be visualizing himself as the Hogwarts champion. At every House table, Harry could see people either gazing raptly at Dumbledore, or else whispering fervently to their neighbors. But then Dumbledore spoke again, and the Hall quieted once more.

“Eager though I know all of you will be to bring the Triwizard Cup to Hogwarts,” he said, “the heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age — that is to say, seventeen years or older — will be allowed to put for-ward their names for consideration. This” — Dumbledore raised his voice slightly, for several people had made noises of outrage at these words, and the Weasley twins were suddenly looking furious — “is a measure we feel is necessary, given that the tournament tasks will still be difficult and dangerous, whatever precautions we take, and it is highly unlikely that students below sixth and seventh year will be able to cope with them. I will personally be ensuring that no under-age student hoodwinks our impartial judge into making them Hog-warts champion.” His light blue eyes twinkled as they flickered over Fred’s and George’s mutinous faces. “I therefore beg you not to waste your time submitting yourself if you are under seventeen.

“The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be ar-riving in October and remaining with us for the greater part of this year. I know that you will all extend every courtesy to our foreign guests while they are with us, and will give your whole-hearted sup-port to the Hogwarts champion when he or she is selected. And now, it is late, and I know how important it is to you all to be alert and rested as you enter your lessons tomorrow morning. Bedtime! Chop chop!”

Dumbledore sat down again and turned to talk to Mad-Eye Moody. There was a great scraping and banging as all the students got to

their feet and swarmed toward the double doors into the en-trance hall.

“They can’t do that!” said George Weasley, who had not joined the crowd moving toward the door, but was standing up and glar-ing at Dumbledore. “We’re seventeen in April, why can’t we have a shot?”

“They’re not stopping me entering,” said Fred stubbornly, also scowling at the top table. “The champions’ll get to do all sorts of stuff you’d never be allowed to do normally. And a thousand Galleons prize money!”

“Yeah,” said Ron, a faraway look on his face. “Yeah, a thousand Galleons …”

“Come on,” said Hermione, “we’ll be the only ones left here if you don’t move.”

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George set off for the en-trance hall, Fred and George debating the ways in which Dumble-dore might stop those who were under seventeen from entering the tournament.

“Who’s this impartial judge who’s going to decide who the champions are?” said Harry.

“Dunno,” said Fred, “but it’s them we’ll have to fool. I reckon a couple of drops of Aging Potion might do it, George. …”

“Dumbledore knows you’re not of age, though,” said Ron.

“Yeah, but he’s not the one who decides who the champion is, is he?” said Fred shrewdly. “Sounds to me like once this judge knows who wants to enter, he’ll choose the best from each school and never mind how old they are. Dumbledore’s trying to stop us giv-ing our names.”

“People have died, though!” said Hermione in a worried voice as they walked through a door concealed behind a tapestry and started up another, narrower staircase.

“Yeah,” said Fred airily, “but that was years ago, wasn’t it? Any-way, where’s the fun without a bit of risk? Hey, Ron, what if we find out how to get ’round Dumbledore? Fancy entering?”

“What d’you reckon?” Ron asked Harry. “Be cool to enter, wouldn’t it? But I s’pose they might want someone older. … Dunno if we’ve learned enough. …”

“I definitely haven’t,” came Neville’s gloomy voice from behind Fred and George.

“I expect my gran’d want me to try, though. She’s always going on about how I should be upholding the family honor. I’ll just have to — oops. …”

Neville’s foot had sunk right through a step halfway up the staircase. There were many of these trick stairs at Hogwarts; it was second nature to most of the older students to jump this particu-lar step, but Neville’s memory was notoriously poor. Harry and Ron seized him under the armpits and pulled him out, while a suit of armor at the top of the stairs creaked and clanked, laughing wheezily.

“Shut it, you,” said Ron, banging down its visor as they passed.

They made their way up to the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, which was concealed behind a large portrait of a fat lady in a pink silk dress.

“Password?” she said as they approached.

“Balderdash,” said George, “a prefect downstairs told me.”

The portrait swung forward to reveal a hole in the wall through which they all climbed. A crackling fire warmed the circular com-mon room,

which was full of squashy armchairs and tables. Her-mione cast the merrily dancing flames a dark look, and Harry distinctly heard her mutter "Slave labor," before bidding them good night and disappearing through the doorway to the girls' dormitory.

Harry, Ron, and Neville climbed up the last, spiral staircase un-til they reached their own dormitory, which was situated at the top of the tower. Five four-poster beds with deep crimson hangings stood against the walls, each with its owner's trunk at the foot. Dean and Seamus were already getting into bed; Seamus had pinned his Ireland rosette to his headboard, and Dean had tacked up a poster of Viktor Krum over his bedside table. His old poster of the West Ham football team was pinned right next to it.

"Mental," Ron sighed, shaking his head at the completely sta-tionary soccer players.

Harry, Ron, and Neville got into their pajamas and into bed. Someone — a house-elf, no doubt — had placed warming pans between the sheets. It was extremely comfortable, lying there in bed and listening to the storm raging outside.

"I might go in for it, you know," Ron said sleepily through the darkness, "if Fred and George find out how to … the tourna-ment … you never know, do you?"

"S'pose not. …"

Harry rolled over in bed, a series of dazzling new pictures form-ing in his mind's eye. … He had hoodwinked the impartial judge into believing he was seventeen … he had become Hogwarts champion … he was standing on the grounds, his arms raised in triumph in front of the whole school, all of whom were applauding and screaming … he had just won the Triwizard Tournament. … Cho's face stood out particularly clearly in the blurred crowd, her face glowing with admiration. …Harry grinned into his pillow, exceptionally glad that Ron couldn't see what he could.

Chapter 13 Mad-Eye Moody

The storm had blown itself out by the following morning, though the ceiling in the Great Hall was still gloomy; heavy clouds of pewter gray swirled overhead as Harry, Ron, and Hermi-one examined their new course schedules at breakfast. A few seats along, Fred, George, and Lee Jordan were discussing magical meth-ods of aging themselves and bluffing their way into the Triwizard Tournament.

“Today’s not bad … outside all morning,” said Ron, who was running his finger down the Monday column of his schedule. “Her-bology with the Hufflepuffs and Care of Magical Creatures … damn it, we’re still with the Slytherins. …”

“Double Divination this afternoon,” Harry groaned, looking down. Divination was his least favorite subject, apart from Potions. Professor Trelawney kept predicting Harry’s death, which he found extremely annoying.

“You should have given it up like me, shouldn’t you?” said Hermione briskly, buttering herself some toast. “Then you’d be do-ing something sensible like Arithmancy.”

“You’re eating again, I notice,” said Ron, watching Hermione adding liberal amounts of jam to her toast too.

“I’ve decided there are better ways of making a stand about elf rights,” said Hermione haughtily.

“Yeah … and you were hungry,” said Ron, grinning.

There was a sudden rustling noise above them, and a hundred owls came soaring through the open windows carrying the morning mail. Instinctively, Harry looked up, but there was no sign of white among the mass of brown and gray. The owls circled the tables, look-ing for the people to whom their letters and packages were ad-dressed. A

large tawny owl soared down to Neville Longbottom and deposited a parcel into his lap — Neville almost always forgot to pack something. On the other side of the Hall Draco Malfoy's eagle owl had landed on his shoulder, carrying what looked like his usual supply of sweets and cakes from home. Trying to ignore the sinking feeling of disappointment in his stomach, Harry returned to his por-ridge. Was it possible that something had happened to Hedwig, and that Sirius hadn't even got his letter?

His preoccupation lasted all the way across the sodden vegetable patch until they arrived in greenhouse three, but here he was dis-tracted by Professor Sprout showing the class the ugliest plants Harry had ever seen. Indeed, they looked less like plants than thick, black, giant slugs, protruding vertically out of the soil. Each was squirming slightly and had a number of large, shiny swellings upon it, which appeared to be full of liquid.

"Bubotubers," Professor Sprout told them briskly. "They need squeezing. You will collect the pus —"

"The what?" said Seamus Finnigan, sounding revolted.

"Pus, Finnigan, pus," said Professor Sprout, "and it's extremely valuable, so don't waste it. You will collect the pus, I say, in these bottles. Wear your dragon-hide gloves; it can do funny things to the skin when undiluted, bubotuber pus."

Squeezing the bubotubers was disgusting, but oddly satisfying. As each swelling was popped, a large amount of thick yellowish-green liquid burst forth, which smelled strongly of petrol. They caught it in the bottles as Professor Sprout had indicated, and by the end of the lesson had collected several pints.

"This'll keep Madam Pomfrey happy," said Professor Sprout, stoppering the last bottle with a cork. "An excellent remedy for the more stubborn forms of acne, bubotuber pus. Should stop students resorting to desperate measures to rid themselves of pimples."

“Like poor Eloise Midgen,” said Hannah Abbott, a Hufflepuff, in a hushed voice. “She tried to curse hers off.”

“Silly girl,” said Professor Sprout, shaking her head. “But Madam Pomfrey fixed her nose back on in the end.”

A booming bell echoed from the castle across the wet grounds, signaling the end of the lesson, and the class separated; the Hufflepuffs climbing the stone steps for Transfiguration, and the Gryffindors heading in the other direction, down the sloping lawn toward Hagrid’s small wooden cabin, which stood on the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Hagrid was standing outside his hut, one hand on the collar of his enormous black boarhound, Fang. There were several open wooden crates on the ground at his feet, and Fang was whimpering and straining at his collar, apparently keen to investigate the con-tents more closely. As they drew nearer, an odd rattling noise reached their ears, punctuated by what sounded like minor explosions.

“Mornin’!” Hagrid said, grinning at Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “Be’er wait fer the Slytherins, they won’ want ter miss this — Blast-Ended Skrewts!”

“Come again?” said Ron.

Hagrid pointed down into the crates.

“Eurgh!” squealed Lavender Brown, jumping backward.

“Eurgh” just about summed up the Blast-Ended Skrewts in Harry’s opinion. They looked like deformed, shell-less lobsters, horribly pale and slimy-looking, with legs sticking out in very odd places and no visible heads. There were about a hundred of them in each crate, each about six inches long, crawling over one another, bumping blindly into the sides of the boxes. They were giving off a very powerful smell of rotting fish. Every now and then, sparks would fly

out of the end of a skrewt, and with a small phut, it would be propelled forward several inches.

“On’y jus’ hatched,” said Hagrid proudly, “so yeh’ll be able ter raise ’em yerselves! Thought we’d make a bit of a project of it!”

“And why would we want to raise them?” said a cold voice.

The Slytherins had arrived. The speaker was Draco Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle were chuckling appreciatively at his words.

Hagrid looked stumped at the question.

“I mean, what do they do?” asked Malfoy. “What is the point of them?”

Hagrid opened his mouth, apparently thinking hard; there was a few seconds’ pause, then he said roughly, “Tha’s next lesson, Mal-foy. Yer jus’ feedin’ ’em today. Now, yeh’ll wan’ ter try ’em on a few diff’rent things — I’ve never had ’em before, not sure what they’ll go fer — I got ant eggs an’ frog livers an’ a bit o’ grass snake — just try ’em out with a bit of each.”

“First pus and now this,” muttered Seamus.

Nothing but deep affection for Hagrid could have made Harry, Ron, and Hermione pick up squelchy handfuls of frog liver and lower them into the crates to tempt the Blast-Ended Skrewts. Harry couldn’t suppress the suspicion that the whole thing was entirely pointless, because the skrewts didn’t seem to have mouths.

“Ouch!” yelled Dean Thomas after about ten minutes. “It got me!

Hagrid hurried over to him, looking anxious.

“Its end exploded!” said Dean angrily, showing Hagrid a burn on his hand.

“Ah, yeah, that can happen when they blast off,” said Hagrid, nodding.

“Eurgh!” said Lavender Brown again. “Eurgh, Hagrid, what’s that pointy thing on it?”

“Ah, some of ’em have got stings,” said Hagrid enthusiastically (Lavender quickly withdrew her hand from the box). “I reckon they’re the males. … The females’ve got sorta sucker things on their bellies. … I think they might be ter suck blood.”

“Well, I can certainly see why we’re trying to keep them alive,” said Malfoy sarcastically. “Who wouldn’t want pets that can burn, sting, and bite all at once?”

“Just because they’re not very pretty, it doesn’t mean they’re not useful,” Hermione snapped. “Dragon blood’s amazingly magical, but you wouldn’t want a dragon for a pet, would you?”

Harry and Ron grinned at Hagrid, who gave them a furtive smile from behind his bushy beard. Hagrid would have liked nothing better than a pet dragon, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew only too well — he had owned one for a brief period during their first year, a vicious Norwegian Ridgeback by the name of Norbert. Hagrid simply loved monstrous creatures, the more lethal, the better.

“Well, at least the skrewts are small,” said Ron as they made their way back up to the castle for lunch an hour later.

“They are now,” said Hermione in an exasperated voice, “but once Hagrid’s found out what they eat, I expect they’ll be six feet long.”

“Well, that won’t matter if they turn out to cure seasickness or something, will it?” said Ron, grinning slyly at her.

“You know perfectly well I only said that to shut Malfoy up,” said Hermione. “As a matter of fact I think he’s right. The best thing to do would be to stamp on the lot of them before they start attacking us all.”

They sat down at the Gryffindor table and helped themselves to lamb chops and potatoes. Hermione began to eat so fast that Harry and Ron stared at her.

"Er — is this the new stand on elf rights?" said Ron. "You're go-ing to make yourself puke instead?"

"No," said Hermione, with as much dignity as she could muster with her mouth bulging with sprouts. "I just want to get to the library."

"What?" said Ron in disbelief. "Hermione — it's the first day back! We haven't even got homework yet!"

Hermione shrugged and continued to shovel down her food as though she had not eaten for days. Then she leapt to her feet, said, "See you at dinner!" and departed at high speed.

When the bell rang to signal the start of afternoon lessons, Harry and Ron set off for North Tower where, at the top of a tightly spiraling staircase, a silver stepladder led to a circular trap-door in the ceiling, and the room where Professor Trelawney lived.

The familiar sweet perfume spreading from the fire met their nostrils as they emerged at the top of the stepladder. As ever, the curtains were all closed; the circular room was bathed in a dim red-dish light cast by the many lamps, which were all draped with scarves and shawls. Harry and Ron walked through the mass of occupied chintz chairs and poufs that cluttered the room, and sat down at the same small circular table.

"Good day," said the misty voice of Professor Trelawney right behind Harry, making him jump.

A very thin woman with enormous glasses that made her eyes appear far too large for her face, Professor Trelawney was peering down at Harry with the tragic expression she always wore whenever

she saw him. The usual large amount of beads, chains, and bangles glittered upon her person in the firelight.

"You are preoccupied, my dear," she said mournfully to Harry. "My inner eye sees past your brave face to the troubled soul within. And I regret to say that your worries are not baseless. I see difficult times ahead for you, alas … most difficult … I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass … and perhaps sooner than you think. …"

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. Ron rolled his eyes at Harry, who looked stonily back. Professor Trelawney swept past them and seated herself in a large winged armchair before the fire, facing the class. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil, who deeply ad-mired Professor Trelawney, were sitting on poufs very close to her.

"My dears, it is time for us to consider the stars," she said. "The movements of the planets and the mysterious portents they reveal only to those who understand the steps of the celestial dance. Human destiny may be deciphered by the planetary rays, which intermingle …"

But Harry's thoughts had drifted. The perfumed fire always made him feel sleepy and dull-witted, and Professor Trelawney's rambling talks on fortune-telling never held him exactly spell-bound — though he couldn't help thinking about what she had just said to him. " 'I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass …' "

But Hermione was right, Harry thought irritably, Professor Trelawney really was an old fraud. He wasn't dreading anything at the moment at all … well, unless you counted his fears that Sirius had been caught … but what did Professor Trelawney know? He had long since come to the conclusion that her brand of fortune-telling was really no more than lucky guesswork and a spooky manner.

Except, of course, for that time at the end of last term, when she had made the prediction about Voldemort rising again … and Dumbledore

himself had said that he thought that trance had been genuine, when Harry had described it to him. …"Harry!" Ron muttered.

"What?"

Harry looked around; the whole class was staring at him. He sat up straight; he had been almost dozing off, lost in the heat and his thoughts.

"I was saying, my dear, that you were clearly born under the baleful influence of Saturn," said Professor Trelawney, a faint note of resentment in her voice at the fact that he had obviously not been hanging on her words.

"Born under — what, sorry?" said Harry.

"Saturn, dear, the planet Saturn!" said Professor Trelawney, sounding definitely irritated that he wasn't riveted by this news. "I was saying that Saturn was surely in a position of power in the heavens at the moment of your birth. … Your dark hair … your mean stature … tragic losses so young in life … I think I am right in saying, my dear, that you were born in midwinter?"

"No," said Harry, "I was born in July."

Ron hastily turned his laugh into a hacking cough.

Half an hour later, each of them had been given a complicated circular chart, and was attempting to fill in the position of the planets at their moment of birth. It was dull work, requiring much consultation of timetables and calculation of angles.

"I've got two Neptunes here," said Harry after a while, frowning down at his piece of parchment, "that can't be right, can it?"

"Aaaaah," said Ron, imitating Professor Trelawney's mystical whisper, "when two Neptunes appear in the sky, it is a sure sign that

a midget in glasses is being born, Harry …”

Seamus and Dean, who were working nearby, sniggered loudly, though not loudly enough to mask the excited squeals from Lavender Brown — “Oh Professor, look! I think I’ve got an unaspected planet! Oooh, which one’s that, Professor?”

“It is Uranus, my dear,” said Professor Trelawney, peering down at the chart.

“Can I have a look at Uranus too, Lavender?” said Ron.

Most unfortunately, Professor Trelawney heard him, and it was this, perhaps, that made her give them so much homework at the end of the class.

“A detailed analysis of the way the planetary movements in the coming month will affect you, with reference to your personal chart,” she snapped, sounding much more like Professor McGona-gall than her usual airy-fairy self. “I want it ready to hand in next Monday, and no excuses!”

“Miserable old bat,” said Ron bitterly as they joined the crowds descending the staircases back to the Great Hall and dinner. “That’ll take all weekend, that will. …”

“Lots of homework?” said Hermione brightly, catching up with them. “Professor Vector didn’t give us any at all!”

“Well, bully for Professor Vector,” said Ron moodily.

They reached the entrance hall, which was packed with people queuing for dinner. They had just joined the end of the line, when a loud voice rang out behind them.

“Weasley! Hey, Weasley!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing there, each looking thoroughly pleased about something.

“What?” said Ron shortly.

“Your dad’s in the paper, Weasley!” said Malfoy, brandishing a copy of the Daily Prophet and speaking very loudly, so that every-one in the packed entrance hall could hear. “Listen to this!

FURTHER MISTAKES AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGICIt seems as though the Ministry of Magic’s troubles are not yet at an end, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Recently under fire for its poor crowd control at the Quidditch World Cup, and still unable to account for the disappearance of one of its witches, the Ministry was plunged into fresh embarrassment yesterday by the antics of Arnold Weasley, of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office.”

Malfoy looked up.

“Imagine them not even getting his name right, Weasley. It’s almost as though he’s a complete nonentity, isn’t it?” he crowed.

Everyone in the entrance hall was listening now. Malfoy straightened the paper with a flourish and read on:Arnold Weasley, who was charged with possession of a flying car two years ago, was yesterday involved in a tussle with several Muggle law-keepers (“policemen”) over a number of highly aggressive dustbins. Mr. Weasley appears to have rushed to the aid of “Mad-Eye” Moody, the aged ex-Auror who retired from the Ministry when no longer able to tell the difference between a handshake and at-tempted murder. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Weasley found, upon arrival at Mr. Moody’s heavily guarded house, that Mr. Moody had once again raised a false alarm. Mr. Weasley was forced to modify several memories before he could escape from the policemen, but refused to answer Daily Prophet questions about why he had involved the Ministry in such an undignified and potentially embarrassing scene.

“And there’s a picture, Weasley!” said Malfoy, flipping the paper over and holding it up. “A picture of your parents outside their house — if you can call it a house! Your mother could do with los-ing a bit of weight, couldn’t she?”

Ron was shaking with fury. Everyone was staring at him.

“Get stuffed, Malfoy,” said Harry. “C’mon, Ron. …”

“Oh yeah, you were staying with them this summer, weren’t you, Potter?” sneered Malfoy. “So tell me, is his mother really that porky, or is it just the picture?”

“You know your mother, Malfoy?” said Harry — both he and Hermione had grabbed the back of Ron’s robes to stop him from launching himself at Malfoy — “that expression she’s got, like she’s got dung under her nose? Has she always looked like that, or was it just because you were with her?”

Malfoy’s pale face went slightly pink.

“Don’t you dare insult my mother, Potter.”

“Keep your fat mouth shut, then,” said Harry, turning away.

BANG!

Several people screamed — Harry felt something white-hot graze the side of his face — he plunged his hand into his robes for his wand, but before he’d even touched it, he heard a second loud BANG, and a roar that echoed through the entrance hall.

“OH NO YOU DON’T, LADDIE!”

Harry spun around. Professor Moody was limping down the marble staircase. His wand was out and it was pointing right at a pure white

ferret, which was shivering on the stone-flagged floor, exactly where Malfoy had been standing.

There was a terrified silence in the entrance hall. Nobody but Moody was moving a muscle. Moody turned to look at Harry — at least, his normal eye was looking at Harry; the other one was pointing into the back of his head.

“Did he get you?” Moody growled. His voice was low and gravelly.

“No,” said Harry, “missed.”

“LEAVE IT!” Moody shouted.

“Leave — what?” Harry said, bewildered.

“Not you — him!” Moody growled, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at Crabbe, who had just frozen, about to pick up the white ferret. It seemed that Moody’s rolling eye was magical and could see out of the back of his head.

Moody started to limp toward Crabbe, Goyle, and the ferret, which gave a terrified squeak and took off, streaking toward the dungeons.

“I don’t think so!” roared Moody, pointing his wand at the ferret again — it flew ten feet into the air, fell with a smack to the floor, and then bounced upward once more.

“I don’t like people who attack when their opponent’s back’s turned,” growled Moody as the ferret bounced higher and higher, squealing in pain. “Stinking, cowardly, scummy thing to do. …”

The ferret flew through the air, its legs and tail flailing helplessly.

“Never — do — that — again —” said Moody, speaking each word as the ferret hit the stone floor and bounced upward again.

“Professor Moody!” said a shocked voice.

Professor McGonagall was coming down the marble staircase with her arms full of books.

“Hello, Professor McGonagall,” said Moody calmly, bouncing the ferret still higher.

“What — what are you doing?” said Professor McGonagall, her eyes following the bouncing ferret’s progress through the air.

“Teaching,” said Moody.

“Teach — Moody, is that a student?” shrieked Professor McGo-nagall, the books spilling out of her arms.

“Yep,” said Moody.

“No!” cried Professor McGonagall, running down the stairs and pulling out her wand; a moment later, with a loud snapping noise, Draco Malfoy had reappeared, lying in a heap on the floor with his sleek blond hair all over his now brilliantly pink face. He got to his feet, wincing.

“Moody, we never use Transfiguration as a punishment!” said Professor McGonagall weakly. “Surely Professor Dumbledore told you that?”

“He might’ve mentioned it, yeah,” said Moody, scratching his chin unconcernedly, “but I thought a good sharp shock —”

“We give detentions, Moody! Or speak to the offender’s Head of House!”

“I’ll do that, then,” said Moody, staring at Malfoy with great dislike.

Malfoy, whose pale eyes were still watering with pain and hu-miliation, looked malevolently up at Moody and muttered some-thing in which the words “my father” were distinguishable.

"Oh yeah?" said Moody quietly, limping forward a few steps, the dull clunk of his wooden leg echoing around the hall. "Well, I know your father of old, boy. … You tell him Moody's keeping a close eye on his son … you tell him that from me. … Now, your Head of House'll be Snape, will it?"

"Yes," said Malfoy resentfully.

"Another old friend," growled Moody. "I've been looking for-ward to a chat with old Snape. … Come on, you. …"

And he seized Malfoy's upper arm and marched him off toward the dungeons.

Professor McGonagall stared anxiously after them for a few mo-ments, then waved her wand at her fallen books, causing them to soar up into the air and back into her arms.

"Don't talk to me," Ron said quietly to Harry and Hermione as they sat down at the Gryffindor table a few minutes later, sur-rounded by excited talk on all sides about what had just happened.

"Why not?" said Hermione in surprise.

"Because I want to fix that in my memory forever," said Ron, his eyes closed and an uplifted expression on his face. "Draco Malfoy, the amazing bouncing ferret …"

Harry and Hermione both laughed, and Hermione began dol-ing beef casserole onto each of their plates.

"He could have really hurt Malfoy, though," she said. "It was good, really, that Professor McGonagall stopped it —"

"Hermione!" said Ron furiously, his eyes snapping open again, "you're ruining the best moment of my life!"

Hermione made an impatient noise and began to eat at top speed again.

"Don't tell me you're going back to the library this evening?" said Harry, watching her.

"Got to," said Hermione thickly. "Loads to do."

"But you told us Professor Vector —"

"It's not schoolwork," she said. Within five minutes, she had cleared her plate and departed. No sooner had she gone than her seat was taken by Fred Weasley.

"Moody!" he said. "How cool is he?"

"Beyond cool," said George, sitting down opposite Fred.

"Supercool," said the twins' best friend, Lee Jordan, sliding into the seat beside George. "We had him this afternoon," he told Harry and Ron.

"What was it like?" said Harry eagerly.

Fred, George, and Lee exchanged looks full of meaning.

"Never had a lesson like it," said Fred.

"He knows, man," said Lee.

"Knows what?" said Ron, leaning forward.

"Knows what it's like to be out there doing it," said George impressively.

"Doing what?" said Harry.

"Fighting the Dark Arts," said Fred.

“He’s seen it all,” said George.

“ ’Mazing,” said Lee.

Ron dived into his bag for his schedule.

“We haven’t got him till Thursday!” he said in a disappointed voice.

Chapter 14 The Unforgivable Curses

The next two days passed without great incident, unless you counted Neville melting his sixth cauldron in Potions. Pro-fessor Snape, who seemed to have attained new levels of vindictive-ness over the summer, gave Neville detention, and Neville returned from it in a state of nervous collapse, having been made to disem-bowel a barrel full of horned toads.

“You know why Snape’s in such a foul mood, don’t you?” said Ron to Harry as they watched Hermione teaching Neville a Scour-ing Charm to remove the frog guts from under his fingernails.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Moody.”

It was common knowledge that Snape really wanted the Dark Arts job, and he had now failed to get it for the fourth year run-ning. Snape had disliked all of their previous Dark Arts teachers, and shown it — but he seemed strangely wary of displaying overt animosity to Mad-Eye Moody. Indeed, whenever Harry saw the two of them together — at mealtimes, or when they passed in the corridors — he had the distinct impression that Snape was avoid-ing Moody’s eye, whether magical or normal.

“I reckon Snape’s a bit scared of him, you know,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“Imagine if Moody turned Snape into a horned toad,” said Ron, his eyes misting over, “and bounced him all around his dungeon. …”

The Gryffindor fourth years were looking forward to Moody’s first lesson so much that they arrived early on Thursday lunchtime and queued up outside his classroom before the bell had even rung. The only person missing was Hermione, who turned up just in time for the lesson.

"Been in the —"

"Library." Harry finished her sentence for her. "C'mon, quick, or we won't get decent seats."

They hurried into three chairs right in front of the teacher's desk, took out their copies of The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection, and waited, unusually quiet. Soon they heard Moody's distinctive clunking footsteps coming down the corridor, and he entered the room, looking as strange and frightening as ever. They could just see his clawed, wooden foot protruding from under-neath his robes.

"You can put those away," he growled, stumping over to his desk and sitting down, "those books. You won't need them."

They returned the books to their bags, Ron looking excited.

Moody took out a register, shook his long mane of grizzled gray hair out of his twisted and scarred face, and began to call out names, his normal eye moving steadily down the list while his mag-ical eye swiveled around, fixing upon each student as he or she answered.

"Right then," he said, when the last person had declared them-selves present, "I've had a letter from Professor Lupin about this class. Seems you've had a pretty thorough grounding in tackling Dark creatures — you've covered boggarts, Red Caps, hinkypunks, grindylows, Kappas, and werewolves, is that right?"

There was a general murmur of assent.

"But you're behind — very behind — on dealing with curses," said Moody. "So I'm here to bring you up to scratch on what wiz-ards can do to each other. I've got one year to teach you how to deal with Dark —"

"What, aren't you staying?" Ron blurted out.

Moody's magical eye spun around to stare at Ron; Ron looked extremely apprehensive, but after a moment Moody smiled — the first time Harry had seen him do so. The effect was to make his heavily scarred face look more twisted and contorted than ever, but it was nevertheless good to know that he ever did anything as friendly as smile. Ron looked deeply relieved.

"You'll be Arthur Weasley's son, eh?" Moody said. "Your father got me out of a very tight corner a few days ago. … Yeah, I'm stay-ing just the one year. Special favor to Dumbledore. … One year, and then back to my quiet retirement."

He gave a harsh laugh, and then clapped his gnarled hands together.

"So — straight into it. Curses. They come in many strengths and forms. Now, according to the Ministry of Magic, I'm supposed to teach you countercurses and leave it at that. I'm not supposed to show you what illegal Dark curses look like until you're in the sixth year. You're not supposed to be old enough to deal with it till then. But Professor Dumbledore's got a higher opinion of your nerves, he reckons you can cope, and I say, the sooner you know what you're up against, the better. How are you supposed to defend yourself against something you've never seen? A wizard who's about to put an illegal curse on you isn't going to tell you what he's about to do. He's not going to do it nice and polite to your face. You need to be prepared. You need to be alert and watchful. You need to put that away, Miss Brown, when I'm talking."

Lavender jumped and blushed. She had been showing Parvati her completed horoscope under the desk. Apparently Moody's magical eye could see through solid wood, as well as out of the back of his head.

"So … do any of you know which curses are most heavily pun-ished by wizarding law?"

Several hands rose tentatively into the air, including Ron's and Hermione's. Moody pointed at Ron, though his magical eye was still fixed on Lavender.

"Er," said Ron tentatively, "my dad told me about one. … Is it called the Imperius Curse, or something?"

"Ah, yes," said Moody appreciatively. "Your father would know that one. Gave the Ministry a lot of trouble at one time, the Im-perius Curse."

Moody got heavily to his mismatched feet, opened his desk drawer, and took out a glass jar. Three large black spiders were scut-tling around inside it. Harry felt Ron recoil slightly next to him — Ron hated spiders.

Moody reached into the jar, caught one of the spiders, and held it in the palm of his hand so that they could all see it. He then pointed his wand at it and muttered, "Imperio!"

The spider leapt from Moody's hand on a fine thread of silk and began to swing backward and forward as though on a trapeze. It stretched out its legs rigidly, then did a back flip, breaking the thread and landing on the desk, where it began to cartwheel in cir-cles. Moody jerked his wand, and the spider rose onto two of its hind legs and went into what was unmistakably a tap dance.

Everyone was laughing — everyone except Moody.

"Think it's funny, do you?" he growled. "You'd like it, would you, if I did it to you?"

The laughter died away almost instantly.

"Total control," said Moody quietly as the spider balled itself up and began to roll over and over. "I could make it jump out of the window, drown itself, throw itself down one of your throats …"

Ron gave an involuntary shudder.

"Years back, there were a lot of witches and wizards being con-trolled by the Imperius Curse," said Moody, and Harry knew he was talking about the days in which Voldemort had been all-pow-erful. "Some job for the Ministry, trying to sort out who was being forced to act, and who was acting of their own free will.

"The Imperius Curse can be fought, and I'll be teaching you how, but it takes real strength of character, and not everyone's got it. Better avoid being hit with it if you can. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he barked, and everyone jumped.

Moody picked up the somersaulting spider and threw it back into the jar.

"Anyone else know one? Another illegal curse?"

Hermione's hand flew into the air again and so, to Harry's slight surprise, did Neville's. The only class in which Neville usually vol-unteered information was Herbology, which was easily his best subject. Neville looked surprised at his own daring.

"Yes?" said Moody, his magical eye rolling right over to fix on Neville.

"There's one — the Cruciatus Curse," said Neville in a small but distinct voice.

Moody was looking very intently at Neville, this time with both eyes.

"Your name's Longbottom?" he said, his magical eye swooping down to check the register again.

Neville nodded nervously, but Moody made no further in-quiries. Turning back to the class at large, he reached into the jar for the next spider and placed it upon the desktop, where it re-mained motionless, apparently too scared to move.

“The Cruciatus Curse,” said Moody. “Needs to be a bit bigger for you to get the idea,” he said, pointing his wand at the spider. “Engorgio!”

The spider swelled. It was now larger than a tarantula. Aban-doning all pretense, Ron pushed his chair backward, as far away from Moody’s desk as possible.

Moody raised his wand again, pointed it at the spider, and mut-tered, “Crucio!”

At once, the spider’s legs bent in upon its body; it rolled over and began to twitch horribly, rocking from side to side. No sound came from it, but Harry was sure that if it could have given voice, it would have been screaming. Moody did not remove his wand, and the spider started to shudder and jerk more violently —“Stop it!” Hermione said shrilly.

Harry looked around at her. She was looking, not at the spider, but at Neville, and Harry, following her gaze, saw that Neville’s hands were clenched upon the desk in front of him, his knuckles white, his eyes wide and horrified.

Moody raised his wand. The spider’s legs relaxed, but it contin-ued to twitch.

“Reducio,” Moody muttered, and the spider shrank back to its proper size. He put it back into the jar.

“Pain,” said Moody softly. “You don’t need thumbscrews or knives to torture someone if you can perform the Cruciatus Curse. … That one was very popular once too.

“Right … anyone know any others?”

Harry looked around. From the looks on everyone’s faces, he guessed they were all wondering what was going to happen to the

last spider. Hermione's hand shook slightly as, for the third time, she raised it into the air.

"Yes?" said Moody, looking at her.

"Avada Kedavra," Hermione whispered.

Several people looked uneasily around at her, including Ron.

"Ah," said Moody, another slight smile twisting his lopsided mouth. "Yes, the last and worst. Avada Kedavra … the Killing Curse."

He put his hand into the glass jar, and almost as though it knew what was coming, the third spider scuttled frantically around the bottom of the jar, trying to evade Moody's fingers, but he trapped it, and placed it upon the desktop. It started to scuttle frantically across the wooden surface.

Moody raised his wand, and Harry felt a sudden thrill of foreboding.

"Avada Kedavra!" Moody roared.

There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound, as though a vast, invisible something was soaring through the air — instantaneously the spider rolled over onto its back, unmarked, but unmistakably dead. Several of the students stifled cries; Ron had thrown himself backward and almost toppled off his seat as the spider skidded toward him.

Moody swept the dead spider off the desk onto the floor.

"Not nice," he said calmly. "Not pleasant. And there's no countercurse. There's no blocking it. Only one known person has ever survived it, and he's sitting right in front of me."

Harry felt his face redden as Moody's eyes (both of them) looked into his own. He could feel everyone else looking around at him too. Harry

stared at the blank blackboard as though fascinated by it, but not really seeing it at all. …So that was how his parents had died … exactly like that spider. Had they been unblemished and unmarked too? Had they simply seen the flash of green light and heard the rush of speeding death, before life was wiped from their bodies?

Harry had been picturing his parents' deaths over and over again for three years now, ever since he'd found out they had been murdered, ever since he'd found out what had happened that night: Wormtail had betrayed his parents' whereabouts to Voldemort, who had come to find them at their cottage. How Voldemort had killed Harry's father first. How James Potter had tried to hold him off, while he shouted at his wife to take Harry and run … Voldemort had advanced on Lily Potter, told her to move aside so that he could kill Harry … how she had begged him to kill her instead, refused to stop shielding her son … and so Voldemort had murdered her too, before turning his wand on Harry. …Harry knew these details because he had heard his parents' voices when he had fought the dementors last year — for that was the terrible power of the dementors: to force their victims to relive the worst memories of their lives, and drown, powerless, in their own despair. …Moody was speaking again, from a great distance, it seemed to Harry. With a massive effort, he pulled himself back to the present and listened to what Moody was saying.

"Avada Kedavra's a curse that needs a powerful bit of magic be-hind it — you could all get your wands out now and point them at me and say the words, and I doubt I'd get so much as a nosebleed. But that doesn't matter. I'm not here to teach you how to do it.

"Now, if there's no countercurse, why am I showing you? Because you've got to know. You've got to appreciate what the worst is. You don't want to find yourself in a situation where you're facing it. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he roared, and the whole class jumped again.

"Now … those three curses — Avada Kedavra, Imperius, and Cruciatus — are known as the Unforgivable Curses. The use of any one of them on a fellow human being is enough to earn a life sentence in Azkaban. That's what you're up against. That's what I've got to teach you to fight. You need preparing. You need arm-ing. But most of all, you need to practice constant, never-ceasing vigilance. Get out your quills … copy this down. …"

They spent the rest of the lesson taking notes on each of the Un-forgivable Curses. No one spoke until the bell rang — but when Moody had dismissed them and they had left the classroom, a tor-rent of talk burst forth. Most people were discussing the curses in awed voices — "Did you see it twitch?" "— and when he killed it — just like that!"

They were talking about the lesson, Harry thought, as though it had been some sort of spectacular show, but he hadn't found it very entertaining — and nor, it seemed, had Hermione.

"Hurry up," she said tensely to Harry and Ron.

"Not the ruddy library again?" said Ron.

"No," said Hermione curtly, pointing up a side passage. "Neville."

Neville was standing alone, halfway up the passage, staring at the stone wall opposite him with the same horrified, wide-eyed look he had worn when Moody had demonstrated the Cruciatus Curse.

"Neville?" Hermione said gently.

Neville looked around.

"Oh hello," he said, his voice much higher than usual. "Interest-ing lesson, wasn't it? I wonder what's for dinner, I'm — I'm starv-ing, aren't you?"

"Neville, are you all right?" said Hermione.

"Oh yes, I'm fine," Neville gabbled in the same unnaturally high voice. "Very interesting dinner — I mean lesson — what's for eating?"

Ron gave Harry a startled look.

"Neville, what — ?"

But an odd clunking noise sounded behind them, and they turned to see Professor Moody limping toward them. All four of them fell silent, watching him apprehensively, but when he spoke, it was in a much lower and gentler growl than they had yet heard.

"It's all right, sonny," he said to Neville. "Why don't you come up to my office? Come on … we can have a cup of tea. …"

Neville looked even more frightened at the prospect of tea with Moody. He neither moved nor spoke. Moody turned his magical eye upon Harry.

"You all right, are you, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, almost defiantly.

Moody's blue eye quivered slightly in its socket as it surveyed Harry. Then he said, "You've got to know. It seems harsh, maybe, but you've got to know. No point pretending … well … come on, Longbottom, I've got some books that might interest you."

Neville looked pleadingly at Harry, Ron, and Hermione, but they didn't say anything, so Neville had no choice but to allow himself to be steered away, one of Moody's gnarled hands on his shoulder.

"What was that about?" said Ron, watching Neville and Moody turn the corner.

"I don't know," said Hermione, looking pensive.

“Some lesson, though, eh?” said Ron to Harry as they set off for the Great Hall. “Fred and George were right, weren’t they? He really knows his stuff, Moody, doesn’t he? When he did Avada Kedavra, the way that spider just died, just snuffed it right —”

But Ron fell suddenly silent at the look on Harry’s face and didn’t speak again until they reached the Great Hall, when he said he supposed they had better make a start on Professor Trelawney’s predictions tonight, since they would take hours.

Hermione did not join in with Harry and Ron’s conversation during dinner, but ate furiously fast, and then left for the library again. Harry and Ron walked back to Gryffindor Tower, and Harry, who had been thinking of nothing else all through dinner, now raised the subject of the Unforgivable Curses himself.

“Wouldn’t Moody and Dumbledore be in trouble with the Min-istry if they knew we’d seen the curses?” Harry asked as they ap-proached the Fat Lady.

“Yeah, probably,” said Ron. “But Dumbledore’s always done things his way, hasn’t he, and Moody’s been getting in trouble for years, I reckon. Attacks first and asks questions later — look at his dustbins. Balderdash.”

The Fat Lady swung forward to reveal the entrance hole, and they climbed into the Gryffindor common room, which was crowded and noisy.

“Shall we get our Divination stuff, then?” said Harry.

“I s’pose,” Ron groaned.

They went up to the dormitory to fetch their books and charts, to find Neville there alone, sitting on his bed, reading. He looked a good deal calmer than at the end of Moody’s lesson, though still not entirely normal. His eyes were rather red.

“You all right, Neville?” Harry asked him.

“Oh yes,” said Neville, “I’m fine, thanks. Just reading this book Professor Moody lent me. …”

He held up the book: Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean.

“Apparently, Professor Sprout told Professor Moody I’m really good at Herbology,” Neville said. There was a faint note of pride in his voice that Harry had rarely heard there before. “He thought I’d like this.”

Telling Neville what Professor Sprout had said, Harry thought, had been a very tactful way of cheering Neville up, for Neville very rarely heard that he was good at anything. It was the sort of thing Professor Lupin would have done.

Harry and Ron took their copies of Unfogging the Future back down to the common room, found a table, and set to work on their predictions for the coming month. An hour later, they had made very little progress, though their table was littered with bits of parchment bearing sums and symbols, and Harry’s brain was as fogged as though it had been filled with the fumes from Professor Trelawney’s fire.

“I haven’t got a clue what this lot’s supposed to mean,” he said, staring down at a long list of calculations.

“You know,” said Ron, whose hair was on end because of all the times he had run his fingers through it in frustration, “I think it’s back to the old Divination standby.”

“What — make it up?”

“Yeah,” said Ron, sweeping the jumble of scrawled notes off the table, dipping his pen into some ink, and starting to write.

“Next Monday,” he said as he scribbled, “I am likely to develop a cough, owing to the unlucky conjunction of Mars and Jupiter.” He looked up at Harry. “You know her — just put in loads of mis-ery, she’ll lap it up.”

“Right,” said Harry, crumpling up his first attempt and lobbing it over the heads of a group of chattering first years into the fire. “Okay … on Monday, I will be in danger of — er — burns.”

“Yeah, you will be,” said Ron darkly, “we’re seeing the skrewts again on Monday. Okay, Tuesday, I’ll … erm …”

“Lose a treasured possession,” said Harry, who was flicking through Unfogging the Future for ideas.

“Good one,” said Ron, copying it down. “Because of … erm … Mercury. Why don’t you get stabbed in the back by some-one you thought was a friend?”

“Yeah … cool …” said Harry, scribbling it down, “because … Venus is in the twelfth house.”

“And on Wednesday, I think I’ll come off worst in a fight.”

“Aaah, I was going to have a fight. Okay, I’ll lose a bet.”

“Yeah, you’ll be betting I’ll win my fight. …”

They continued to make up predictions (which grew steadily more tragic) for another hour, while the common room around them slowly emptied as people went up to bed. Crookshanks wan-dered over to them, leapt lightly into an empty chair, and stared in-scrutably at Harry, rather as Hermione might look if she knew they weren’t doing their homework properly.

Staring around the room, trying to think of a kind of misfortune he hadn’t yet used, Harry saw Fred and George sitting together against

the opposite wall, heads together, quills out, poring over a single piece of parchment. It was most unusual to see Fred and George hidden away in a corner and working silently; they usually liked to be in the thick of things and the noisy center of attention. There was something secretive about the way they were working on the piece of parchment, and Harry was reminded of how they had sat together writing something back at the Burrow. He had thought then that it was another order form for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, but it didn't look like that this time; if it had been, they would surely have let Lee Jordan in on the joke. He wondered whether it had anything to do with entering the Triwizard Tournament.

As Harry watched, George shook his head at Fred, scratched out something with his quill, and said, in a very quiet voice that nevertheless carried across the almost deserted room, "No — that sounds like we're accusing him. Got to be careful …"

Then George looked over and saw Harry watching him. Harry grinned and quickly returned to his predictions — he didn't want George to think he was eavesdropping. Shortly after that, the twins rolled up their parchment, said good night, and went off to bed.

Fred and George had been gone ten minutes or so when the por-trait hole opened and Hermione climbed into the common room carrying a sheaf of parchment in one hand and a box whose con-tents rattled as she walked in the other. Crookshanks arched his back, purring.

"Hello," she said, "I've just finished!"

"So have I!" said Ron triumphantly, throwing down his quill.

Hermione sat down, laid the things she was carrying in an empty armchair, and pulled Ron's predictions toward her.

"Not going to have a very good month, are you?" she said sardonically as Crookshanks curled up in her lap.

"Ah well, at least I'm forewarned," Ron yawned.

"You seem to be drowning twice," said Hermione.

"Oh am I?" said Ron, peering down at his predictions. "I'd better change one of them to getting trampled by a rampaging hippogriff."

"Don't you think it's a bit obvious you've made these up?" said Hermione.

"How dare you!" said Ron, in mock outrage. "We've been work-ing like house-elves here!"

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"It's just an expression," said Ron hastily.

Harry laid down his quill too, having just finished predicting his own death by decapitation.

"What's in the box?" he asked, pointing at it.

"Funny you should ask," said Hermione, with a nasty look at Ron. She took off the lid and showed them the contents.

Inside were about fifty badges, all of different colors, but all bearing the same letters: S.P.E.W.

" 'Spew'?" said Harry, picking up a badge and looking at it. "What's this about?"

"Not spew," said Hermione impatiently. "It's S-P-E-W. Stands for the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare."

"Never heard of it," said Ron.

"Well, of course you haven't," said Hermione briskly, "I've only just started it."

"Yeah?" said Ron in mild surprise. "How many members have you got?"

"Well — if you two join — three," said Hermione.

"And you think we want to walk around wearing badges saying 'spew,' do you?" said Ron.

"S-P-E-W!" said Hermione hotly. "I was going to put Stop the Outrageous Abuse of Our Fellow Magical Creatures and Cam-paign for a Change in Their Legal Status — but it wouldn't fit. So that's the heading of our manifesto."

She brandished the sheaf of parchment at them.

"I've been researching it thoroughly in the library. Elf enslave-ment goes back centuries. I can't believe no one's done anything about it before now."

"Hermione — open your ears," said Ron loudly. "They. Like. It. They like being enslaved!"

"Our short-term aims," said Hermione, speaking even more loudly than Ron, and acting as though she hadn't heard a word, "are to secure house-elves fair wages and working conditions. Our long-term aims include changing the law about non-wand use, and trying to get an elf into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, because they're shockingly underrepresented."

"And how do we do all this?" Harry asked.

"We start by recruiting members," said Hermione happily. "I thought two Sickles to join — that buys a badge — and the pro-ceeds can fund our leaflet campaign. You're treasurer, Ron — I've got you a collecting tin upstairs — and Harry, you're secretary, so you might want to write down everything I'm saying now, as a record of our first meeting."

There was a pause in which Hermione beamed at the pair of them, and Harry sat, torn between exasperation at Hermione and amusement at the look on Ron's face. The silence was broken, not by Ron, who in any case looked as though he was temporarily dumbstruck, but by a soft tap, tap on the window. Harry looked across the now empty common room and saw, illuminated by the moonlight, a snowy owl perched on the windowsill.

"Hedwig!" he shouted, and he launched himself out of his chair and across the room to pull open the window.

Hedwig flew inside, soared across the room, and landed on the table on top of Harry's predictions.

"About time!" said Harry, hurrying after her.

"She's got an answer!" said Ron excitedly, pointing at the grubby piece of parchment tied to Hedwig's leg.

Harry hastily untied it and sat down to read, whereupon Hed-wig fluttered onto his knee, hooting softly.

"What does it say?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

The letter was very short, and looked as though it had been scrawled in a great hurry. Harry read it aloud:Harry —

I'm flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumors that have reached me here. If it hurts again, go straight to Dumbledore — they're saying he's got Mad-Eye out of retirement, which means he's reading the signs, even if no one else is.

I'll be in touch soon. My best to Ron and Hermione. Keep your eyes open, Harry.

Sirius

Harry looked up at Ron and Hermione, who stared back at him.

"He's flying north?" Hermione whispered. "He's coming back?"

"Dumbledore's reading what signs?" said Ron, looking per-plexed. "Harry — what's up?"

For Harry had just hit himself in the forehead with his fist, jolt-ing Hedwig out of his lap.

"I shouldn't've told him!" Harry said furiously.

"What are you on about?" said Ron in surprise.

"It's made him think he's got to come back!" said Harry, now slamming his fist on the table so that Hedwig landed on the back of Ron's chair, hooting indignantly. "Coming back, because he thinks I'm in trouble! And there's nothing wrong with me! And I haven't got anything for you," Harry snapped at Hedwig, who was clicking her beak expectantly, "you'll have to go up to the Owlery if you want food."

Hedwig gave him an extremely offended look and took off for the open window, cuffing him around the head with her out-stretched wing as she went.

"Harry," Hermione began, in a pacifying sort of voice.

"I'm going to bed," said Harry shortly. "See you in the morning."

Upstairs in the dormitory he pulled on his pajamas and got into his four-poster, but he didn't feel remotely tired.

If Sirius came back and got caught, it would be his, Harry's, fault. Why hadn't he kept his mouth shut? A few seconds' pain and he'd had to blab. … If he'd just had the sense to keep it to himself. …He heard Ron come up into the dormitory a short while later, but did not speak

to him. For a long time, Harry lay staring up at the dark canopy of his bed. The dormitory was completely silent, and, had he been less preoccupied, Harry would have realized that the absence of Neville's usual snores meant that he was not the only one lying awake.

Chapter 15 Beauxbatons and Durmstrang

Early next morning, Harry woke with a plan fully formed in his mind, as though his sleeping brain had been working on it all night. He got up, dressed in the pale dawn light, left the dormitory without waking Ron, and went back down to the deserted common room. Here he took a piece of parchment from the table upon which his Divination homework still lay and wrote the following letter:Dear Sirius,

I reckon I just imagined my scar hurting, I was half asleep when I wrote to you last time. There's no point coming back, everything's fine here. Don't worry about me, my head feels completely normal.

Harry

He then climbed out of the portrait hole, up through the silent castle (held up only briefly by Peeves, who tried to overturn a large vase on him halfway along the fourth-floor corridor), finally arriv-ing at the Owlery, which was situated at the top of West Tower.

The Owlery was a circular stone room, rather cold and drafty, because none of the windows had glass in them. The floor was entirely covered in straw, owl droppings, and the regurgitated skeletons of mice and voles. Hundreds upon hundreds of owls of every breed imaginable were nestled here on perches that rose right up to the top of the tower, nearly all of them asleep, though here and there a round amber eye glared at Harry. He spotted Hedwig nestled between a barn owl and a tawny, and hurried over to her, sliding a little on the dropping-strewn floor.

It took him a while to persuade her to wake up and then to look at him, as she kept shuffling around on her perch, showing him her tail. She was evidently still furious about his lack of gratitude the previous night. In the end, it was Harry suggesting she might be too tired, and

that perhaps he would ask Ron to borrow Pigwidgeon, that made her stick out her leg and allow him to tie the letter to it.

"Just find him, all right?" Harry said, stroking her back as he car-ried her on his arm to one of the holes in the wall. "Before the de-mentors do."

She nipped his finger, perhaps rather harder than she would or-dinarily have done, but hooted softly in a reassuring sort of way all the same. Then she spread her wings and took off into the sunrise. Harry watched her fly out of sight with the familiar feeling of un-ease back in his stomach. He had been so sure that Sirius's reply would alleviate his worries rather than increasing them.

"That was a lie, Harry," said Hermione sharply over breakfast, when he told her and Ron what he had done. "You didn't imagine your scar hurting and you know it."

"So what?" said Harry. "He's not going back to Azkaban because of me."

"Drop it," said Ron sharply to Hermione as she opened her mouth to argue some more, and for once, Hermione heeded him, and fell silent.

Harry did his best not to worry about Sirius over the next cou-ple of weeks. True, he could not stop himself from looking anx-iously around every morning when the post owls arrived, nor, late at night before he went to sleep, prevent himself from seeing horri-ble visions of Sirius, cornered by dementors down some dark Lon-don street, but betweentimes he tried to keep his mind off his godfather. He wished he still had Quidditch to distract him; noth-ing worked so well on a troubled mind as a good, hard training ses-sion. On the other hand, their lessons were becoming more difficult and demanding than ever before, particularly Moody's Defense Against the Dark Arts.

To their surprise, Professor Moody had announced that he would be putting the Imperius Curse on each of them in turn, to demonstrate its power and to see whether they could resist its ef-fects.

“But — but you said it’s illegal, Professor,” said Hermione un-certainly as Moody cleared away the desks with a sweep of his wand, leaving a large clear space in the middle of the room. “You said — to use it against another human was —”

“Dumbledore wants you taught what it feels like,” said Moody, his magical eye swiveling onto Hermione and fixing her with an eerie, unblinking stare. “If you’d rather learn the hard way — when someone’s putting it on you so they can control you completely — fine by me. You’re excused. Off you go.”

He pointed one gnarled finger toward the door. Hermione went very pink and muttered something about not meaning that she wanted to leave. Harry and Ron grinned at each other. They knew Hermione would rather eat bubotuber pus than miss such an im-portant lesson.

Moody began to beckon students forward in turn and put the Imperius Curse upon them. Harry watched as, one by one, his classmates did the most extraordinary things under its influence. Dean Thomas hopped three times around the room, singing the national anthem. Lavender Brown imitated a squirrel. Neville per-formed a series of quite astonishing gymnastics he would certainly not have been capable of in his normal state. Not one of them seemed to be able to fight off the curse, and each of them recovered only when Moody had removed it.

“Potter,” Moody growled, “you next.”

Harry moved forward into the middle of the classroom, into the space that Moody had cleared of desks. Moody raised his wand, pointed it at Harry, and said, “Imperio!”

It was the most wonderful feeling. Harry felt a floating sensation as every thought and worry in his head was wiped gently away, leaving nothing but a vague, untraceable happiness. He stood there feeling immensely relaxed, only dimly aware of everyone watching him.

And then he heard Mad-Eye Moody's voice, echoing in some distant chamber of his empty brain: Jump onto the desk … jump onto the desk. …Harry bent his knees obediently, preparing to spring.

Jump onto the desk. …

Why, though? Another voice had awoken in the back of his brain.

Stupid thing to do, really, said the voice.

Jump onto the desk. …

No, I don't think I will, thanks, said the other voice, a little more firmly … no, I don't really want to. …Jump! NOW!

The next thing Harry felt was considerable pain. He had both jumped and tried to prevent himself from jumping — the result was that he'd smashed headlong into the desk, knocking it over, and, by the feeling in his legs, fractured both his kneecaps.

"Now, that's more like it!" growled Moody's voice, and suddenly, Harry felt the empty, echoing feeling in his head disappear. He remembered exactly what was happening, and the pain in his knees seemed to double.

"Look at that, you lot … Potter fought! He fought it, and he damn near beat it! We'll try that again, Potter, and the rest of you, pay attention — watch his eyes, that's where you see it — very good, Potter, very good indeed! They'll have trouble controlling you!"

"The way he talks," Harry muttered as he hobbled out of the De-fense Against the Dark Arts class an hour later (Moody had insisted on

putting Harry through his paces four times in a row, until Harry could throw off the curse entirely), “you’d think we were all going to be attacked any second.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Ron, who was skipping on every alternate step. He had had much more difficulty with the curse than Harry, though Moody assured him the effects would wear off by lunch-time. “Talk about paranoid …” Ron glanced nervously over his shoulder to check that Moody was definitely out of earshot and went on. “No wonder they were glad to get shot of him at the Min-istry. Did you hear him telling Seamus what he did to that witch who shouted ‘Boo’ behind him on April Fools’ Day? And when are we supposed to read up on resisting the Imperius Curse with every-thing else we’ve got to do?”

All the fourth years had noticed a definite increase in the amount of work they were required to do this term. Professor McGonagall explained why, when the class gave a particularly loud groan at the amount of Transfiguration homework she had assigned.

“You are now entering a most important phase of your magical education!” she told them, her eyes glinting dangerously behind her square spectacles. “Your Ordinary Wizarding Levels are draw-ing closer —”

“We don’t take O.W.L.s till fifth year!” said Dean Thomas indignantly.

“Maybe not, Thomas, but believe me, you need all the prepara-tion you can get! Miss Granger remains the only person in this class who has managed to turn a hedgehog into a satisfactory pincush-ion. I might remind you that your pincushion, Thomas, still curls up in fright if anyone approaches it with a pin!”

Hermione, who had turned rather pink again, seemed to be try-ing not to look too pleased with herself.

Harry and Ron were deeply amused when Professor Trelawney told them that they had received top marks for their homework in their

next Divination class. She read out large portions of their pre-dictions, commending them for their unflinching acceptance of the horrors in store for them — but they were less amused when she asked them to do the same thing for the month after next; both of them were running out of ideas for catastrophes.

Meanwhile Professor Binns, the ghost who taught History of Magic, had them writing weekly essays on the goblin rebellions of the eighteenth century. Professor Snape was forcing them to re-search antidotes. They took this one seriously, as he had hinted that he might be poisoning one of them before Christmas to see if their antidote worked. Professor Flitwick had asked them to read three extra books in preparation for their lesson on Summoning Charms.

Even Hagrid was adding to their workload. The Blast-Ended Skrewts were growing at a remarkable pace given that nobody had yet discovered what they ate. Hagrid was delighted, and as part of their "project," suggested that they come down to his hut on alter-nate evenings to observe the skrewts and make notes on their ex-traordinary behavior.

"I will not," said Draco Malfoy flatly when Hagrid had proposed this with the air of Father Christmas pulling an extra-large toy out of his sack. "I see enough of these foul things during lessons, thanks."

Hagrid's smile faded off his face.

"Yeh'll do wha' yer told," he growled, "or I'll be takin' a leaf outta Professor Moody's book. … I hear yeh made a good ferret, Malfoy."

The Gryffindors roared with laughter. Malfoy flushed with anger, but apparently the memory of Moody's punishment was still sufficiently painful to stop him from retorting. Harry, Ron, and Hermione returned to the castle at the end of the lesson in high spirits; seeing Hagrid put down Malfoy was particularly satisfying, especially because Malfoy had done his very best to get Hagrid sacked the previous year.

When they arrived in the entrance hall, they found themselves unable to proceed owing to the large crowd of students congre-gated there, all milling around a large sign that had been erected at the foot of the marble staircase. Ron, the tallest of the three, stood on tiptoe to see over the heads in front of them and read the sign aloud to the other two:TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT

The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving at 6 o'clock on Friday the 30th of October. Lessons will end half an hour early —"Brilliant!" said Harry. "It's Potions last thing on Friday! Snape won't have time to poison us all!"

Students will return their bags and books to their dormitories and assemble in front of the castle to greet our guests before the Welcoming Feast.

"Only a week away!" said Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff, emerg-ing from the crowd, his eyes gleaming. "I wonder if Cedric knows? Think I'll go and tell him. …"

"Cedric?" said Ron blankly as Ernie hurried off.

"Diggory," said Harry. "He must be entering the tournament."

"That idiot, Hogwarts champion?" said Ron as they pushed their way through the chattering crowd toward the staircase.

"He's not an idiot. You just don't like him because he beat Gryffindor at Quidditch," said Hermione. "I've heard he's a really good student — and he's a prefect."

She spoke as though this settled the matter.

"You only like him because he's handsome," said Ron scathingly.

"Excuse me, I don't like people just because they're handsome!" said Hermione indignantly.

Ron gave a loud false cough, which sounded oddly like “Lockhart!”

The appearance of the sign in the entrance hall had a marked ef-fect upon the inhabitants of the castle. During the following week, there seemed to be only one topic of conversation, no matter where Harry went: the Triwizard Tournament. Rumors were flying from student to student like highly contagious germs: who was going to try for Hogwarts champion, what the tournament would involve, how the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang differed from themselves.

Harry noticed too that the castle seemed to be undergoing an extra-thorough cleaning. Several grimy portraits had been scrubbed, much to the displeasure of their subjects, who sat hud-dled in their frames muttering darkly and wincing as they felt their raw pink faces. The suits of armor were suddenly gleaming and moving without squeaking, and Argus Filch, the caretaker, was be-having so ferociously to any students who forgot to wipe their shoes that he terrified a pair of first-year girls into hysterics.

Other members of the staff seemed oddly tense too.

“Longbottom, kindly do not reveal that you can’t even perform a simple Switching Spell in front of anyone from Durmstrang!” Pro-fessor McGonagall barked at the end of one particularly difficult lesson, during which Neville had accidentally transplanted his own ears onto a cactus.

When they went down to breakfast on the morning of the thir-tieth of October, they found that the Great Hall had been deco-rated overnight. Enormous silk banners hung from the walls, each of them representing a Hogwarts House: red with a gold lion for Gryffindor, blue with a bronze eagle for Ravenclaw, yellow with a black badger for Hufflepuff, and green with a silver serpent for Slytherin. Behind the teachers’ table, the largest banner of all bore the Hogwarts coat of arms: lion, eagle, badger, and snake united around a large letter H.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down beside Fred and George at the Gryffindor table. Once again, and most unusually, they were sitting apart from everyone else and conversing in low voices. Ron led the way over to them.

“It’s a bummer, all right,” George was saying gloomily to Fred. “But if he won’t talk to us in person, we’ll have to send him the letter after all. Or we’ll stuff it into his hand. He can’t avoid us forever.”

“Who’s avoiding you?” said Ron, sitting down next to them.

“Wish you would,” said Fred, looking irritated at the inter-ruption.

“What’s a bummer?” Ron asked George.

“Having a nosy git like you for a brother,” said George.

“You two got any ideas on the Triwizard Tournament yet?” Harry asked. “Thought any more about trying to enter?”

“I asked McGonagall how the champions are chosen but she wasn’t telling,” said George bitterly. “She just told me to shut up and get on with transfiguring my raccoon.”

“Wonder what the tasks are going to be?” said Ron thoughtfully. “You know, I bet we could do them, Harry. We’ve done dangerous stuff before. …”

“Not in front of a panel of judges, you haven’t,” said Fred. “McGonagall says the champions get awarded points according to how well they’ve done the tasks.”

“Who are the judges?” Harry asked.

“Well, the Heads of the participating schools are always on the panel,” said Hermione, and everyone looked around at her, rather surprised, “because all three of them were injured during the Tour-

nament of 1792, when a cockatrice the champions were supposed to be catching went on the rampage."

She noticed them all looking at her and said, with her usual air of impatience that nobody else had read all the books she had, "It's all in Hogwarts, A History. Though, of course, that book's not en-tirely reliable. A Revised History of Hogwarts would be a more accu-rate title. Or A Highly Biased and Selective History of Hogwarts, Which Glosses Over the Nastier Aspects of the School."

"What are you on about?" said Ron, though Harry thought he knew what was coming.

"House-elves!" said Hermione, her eyes flashing. "Not once, in over a thousand pages, does Hogwarts, A History mention that we are all colluding in the oppression of a hundred slaves!"

Harry shook his head and applied himself to his scrambled eggs. His and Ron's lack of enthusiasm had done nothing whatsoever to curb Hermione's determination to pursue justice for house-elves. True, both of them had paid two Sickles for a S.P.E.W. badge, but they had only done it to keep her quiet. Their Sickles had been wasted, however; if anything, they seemed to have made Hermione more vociferous. She had been badgering Harry and Ron ever since, first to wear the badges, then to persuade others to do the same, and she had also taken to rattling around the Gryffindor common room every evening, cornering people and shaking the collecting tin un-der their noses.

"You do realize that your sheets are changed, your fires lit, your classrooms cleaned, and your food cooked by a group of magical creatures who are unpaid and enslaved?" she kept saying fiercely.

Some people, like Neville, had paid up just to stop Hermione from glowering at them. A few seemed mildly interested in what she had to say, but were reluctant to take a more active role in cam-paigning. Many regarded the whole thing as a joke.

Ron now rolled his eyes at the ceiling, which was flooding them all in autumn sunlight, and Fred became extremely interested in his bacon (both twins had refused to buy a S.P.E.W. badge). George, however, leaned in toward Hermione.

“Listen, have you ever been down in the kitchens, Hermione?”

“No, of course not,” said Hermione curtly, “I hardly think stu-dents are supposed to —”

“Well, we have,” said George, indicating Fred, “loads of times, to nick food. And we’ve met them, and they’re happy. They think they’ve got the best job in the world —”

“That’s because they’re uneducated and brainwashed!” Hermi-one began hotly, but her next few words were drowned out by the sudden whooshing noise from overhead, which announced the arrival of the post owls. Harry looked up at once, and saw Hedwig soaring toward him. Hermione stopped talking abruptly; she and Ron watched Hedwig anxiously as she fluttered down onto Harry’s shoulder, folded her wings, and held out her leg wearily.

Harry pulled off Sirius’s reply and offered Hedwig his bacon rinds, which she ate gratefully. Then, checking that Fred and George were safely immersed in further discussions about the Tri-wizard Tournament, Harry read out Sirius’s letter in a whisper to Ron and Hermione.

Nice try, Harry.

I’m back in the country and well hidden. I want you to keep me posted on everything that’s going on at Hogwarts. Don’t use Hedwig, keep changing owls, and don’t worry about me, just watch out for yourself. Don’t forget what I said about your scar.

Sirius

“Why d’you have to keep changing owls?” Ron asked in a low voice.

“Hedwig’ll attract too much attention,” said Hermione at once. “She stands out. A snowy owl that keeps returning to wherever he’s hiding … I mean, they’re not native birds, are they?”

Harry rolled up the letter and slipped it inside his robes, won-dering whether he felt more or less worried than before. He sup-posed that Sirius managing to get back without being caught was something. He couldn’t deny either that the idea that Sirius was much nearer was reassuring; at least he wouldn’t have to wait so long for a response every time he wrote.

“Thanks, Hedwig,” he said, stroking her. She hooted sleepily, dipped her beak briefly into his goblet of orange juice, then took off again, clearly desperate for a good long sleep in the Owlery.

There was a pleasant feeling of anticipation in the air that day. Nobody was very attentive in lessons, being much more interested in the arrival that evening of the people from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang; even Potions was more bearable than usual, as it was half an hour shorter. When the bell rang early, Harry, Ron, and Hermione hurried up to Gryffindor Tower, deposited their bags and books as they had been instructed, pulled on their cloaks, and rushed back downstairs into the entrance hall.

The Heads of Houses were ordering their students into lines.

“Weasley, straighten your hat,” Professor McGonagall snapped at Ron. “Miss Patil, take that ridiculous thing out of your hair.”

Parvati scowled and removed a large ornamental butterfly from the end of her plait.

“Follow me, please,” said Professor McGonagall. “First years in front … no pushing. …”

They filed down the steps and lined up in front of the castle. It was a cold, clear evening; dusk was falling and a pale, transparent-looking moon was already shining over the Forbidden Forest. Harry, standing between Ron and Hermione in the fourth row from the front, saw Dennis Creevey positively shivering with an-ticipation among the other first years.

"Nearly six," said Ron, checking his watch and then staring down the drive that led to the front gates. "How d'you reckon they're coming? The train?"

"I doubt it," said Hermione.

"How, then? Broomsticks?" Harry suggested, looking up at the starry sky.

"I don't think so … not from that far away. …"

"A Portkey?" Ron suggested. "Or they could Apparate — maybe you're allowed to do it under seventeen wherever they come from?"

"You can't Apparate inside the Hogwarts grounds, how often do I have to tell you?" said Hermione impatiently.

They scanned the darkening grounds excitedly, but nothing was moving; everything was still, silent, and quite as usual. Harry was starting to feel cold. He wished they'd hurry up. … Maybe the for-eign students were preparing a dramatic entrance. … He remem-bered what Mr. Weasley had said back at the campsite before the Quidditch World Cup: "always the same — we can't resist showing off when we get together. …"

And then Dumbledore called out from the back row where he stood with the other teachers —"Aha! Unless I am very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!"

“Where?” said many students eagerly, all looking in different directions.

“There!” yelled a sixth year, pointing over the forest.

Something large, much larger than a broomstick — or, indeed, a hundred broomsticks — was hurtling across the deep blue sky toward the castle, growing larger all the time.

“It’s a dragon!” shrieked one of the first years, losing her head completely.

“Don’t be stupid … it’s a flying house!” said Dennis Creevey.

Dennis’s guess was closer. … As the gigantic black shape skimmed over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest and the lights shining from the castle windows hit it, they saw a gigantic, powder-blue, horse-drawn carriage, the size of a large house, soaring toward them, pulled through the air by a dozen winged horses, all palomi-nos, and each the size of an elephant.

The front three rows of students drew backward as the carriage hurtled ever lower, coming in to land at a tremendous speed — then, with an almighty crash that made Neville jump backward onto a Slytherin fifth year’s foot, the horses’ hooves, larger than dinner plates, hit the ground. A second later, the carriage landed too, bouncing upon its vast wheels, while the golden horses tossed their enormous heads and rolled large, fiery red eyes.

Harry just had time to see that the door of the carriage bore a coat of arms (two crossed, golden wands, each emitting three stars) before it opened.

A boy in pale blue robes jumped down from the carriage, bent forward, fumbled for a moment with something on the carriage floor, and unfolded a set of golden steps. He sprang back respect-fully. Then Harry saw a shining, high-heeled black shoe emerging from the

inside of the carriage — a shoe the size of a child's sled — followed, almost immediately, by the largest woman he had ever seen in his life. The size of the carriage, and of the horses, was im-mediately explained. A few people gasped.

Harry had only ever seen one person as large as this woman in his life, and that was Hagrid; he doubted whether there was an inch difference in their heights. Yet somehow — maybe simply because he was used to Hagrid — this woman (now at the foot of the steps, and looking around at the waiting, wide-eyed crowd) seemed even more unnaturally large. As she stepped into the light flooding from the entrance hall, she was revealed to have a hand-some, olive-skinned face; large, black, liquid-looking eyes; and a rather beaky nose. Her hair was drawn back in a shining knob at the base of her neck. She was dressed from head to foot in black satin, and many magnificent opals gleamed at her throat and on her thick fingers.

Dumbledore started to clap; the students, following his lead, broke into applause too, many of them standing on tiptoe, the bet-ter to look at this woman.

Her face relaxed into a gracious smile and she walked forward toward Dumbledore, extending a glittering hand. Dumbledore, though tall himself, had barely to bend to kiss it.

"My dear Madame Maxime," he said. "Welcome to Hogwarts."

"Dumbly-dorr," said Madame Maxime in a deep voice. "I 'ope I find you well?"

"In excellent form, I thank you," said Dumbledore.

"My pupils," said Madame Maxime, waving one of her enor-mous hands carelessly behind her.

Harry, whose attention had been focused completely upon Madame Maxime, now noticed that about a dozen boys and girls, all, by the

look of them, in their late teens, had emerged from the carriage and were now standing behind Madame Maxime. They were shivering, which was unsurprising, given that their robes seemed to be made of fine silk, and none of them were wearing cloaks. A few had wrapped scarves and shawls around their heads. From what Harry could see of them (they were standing in Madame Maxime's enormous shadow), they were staring up at Hogwarts with apprehensive looks on their faces.

" 'As Karkaroff arrived yet?" Madame Maxime asked.

"He should be here any moment," said Dumbledore. "Would you like to wait here and greet him or would you prefer to step in-side and warm up a trifle?"

"Warm up, I think," said Madame Maxime. "But ze 'orses —"

"Our Care of Magical Creatures teacher will be delighted to take care of them," said Dumbledore, "the moment he has returned from dealing with a slight situation that has arisen with some of his other — er — charges."

"Skrewts," Ron muttered to Harry, grinning.

"My steeds require — er — forceful 'andling," said Madame Maxime, looking as though she doubted whether any Care of Mag-ical Creatures teacher at Hogwarts could be up to the job. "Zey are very strong. …"

"I assure you that Hagrid will be well up to the job," said Dum-bledore, smiling.

"Very well," said Madame Maxime, bowing slightly. "Will you please inform zis 'Agrid zat ze 'orses drink only single-malt whiskey?"

"It will be attended to," said Dumbledore, also bowing.

“Come,” said Madame Maxime imperiously to her students, and the Hogwarts crowd parted to allow her and her students to pass up the stone steps.

“How big d’you reckon Durmstrang’s horses are going to be?” Seamus Finnigan said, leaning around Lavender and Parvati to address Harry and Ron.

“Well, if they’re any bigger than this lot, even Hagrid won’t be able to handle them,” said Harry. “That’s if he hasn’t been attacked by his skrewts. Wonder what’s up with them?”

“Maybe they’ve escaped,” said Ron hopefully.

“Oh don’t say that,” said Hermione with a shudder. “Imagine that lot loose on the grounds. …”

They stood, shivering slightly now, waiting for the Durmstrang party to arrive. Most people were gazing hopefully up at the sky. For a few minutes, the silence was broken only by Madame Maxime’s huge horses snorting and stamping. But then —“Can you hear something?” said Ron suddenly.

Harry listened; a loud and oddly eerie noise was drifting toward them from out of the darkness: a muffled rumbling and sucking sound, as though an immense vacuum cleaner were moving along a riverbed. …“The lake!” yelled Lee Jordan, pointing down at it. “Look at the lake!”

From their position at the top of the lawns overlooking the grounds, they had a clear view of the smooth black surface of the water — except that the surface was suddenly not smooth at all. Some disturbance was taking place deep in the center; great bub-bles were forming on the surface, waves were now washing over the muddy banks — and then, out in the very middle of the lake, a whirlpool appeared, as if a giant plug had just been pulled out of the lake’s floor. …What seemed to be a long, black pole began to rise slowly

out of the heart of the whirlpool … and then Harry saw the rigging. …"It's a mast!" he said to Ron and Hermione.

Slowly, magnificently, the ship rose out of the water, gleaming in the moonlight. It had a strangely skeletal look about it, as though it were a resurrected wreck, and the dim, misty lights shimmering at its portholes looked like ghostly eyes. Finally, with a great slosh-ing noise, the ship emerged entirely, bobbing on the turbulent water, and began to glide toward the bank. A few moments later, they heard the splash of an anchor being thrown down in the shal-lows, and the thud of a plank being lowered onto the bank.

People were disembarking; they could see their silhouettes passing the lights in the ship's portholes. All of them, Harry no-ticed, seemed to be built along the lines of Crabbe and Goyle … but then, as they drew nearer, walking up the lawns into the light streaming from the entrance hall, he saw that their bulk was really due to the fact that they were wearing cloaks of some kind of shaggy, matted fur. But the man who was leading them up to the castle was wearing furs of a different sort: sleek and silver, like his hair.

"Dumbledore!" he called heartily as he walked up the slope. "How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?"

"Blooming, thank you, Professor Karkaroff," Dumbledore replied.

Karkaroff had a fruity, unctuous voice; when he stepped into the light pouring from the front doors of the castle they saw that he was tall and thin like Dumbledore, but his white hair was short, and his goatee (finishing in a small curl) did not entirely hide his rather weak chin. When he reached Dumbledore, he shook hands with both of his own.

"Dear old Hogwarts," he said, looking up at the castle and smil-ing; his teeth were rather yellow, and Harry noticed that his smile did not extend to his eyes, which remained cold and shrewd. "How good it is to be here, how good. … Viktor, come along, into the warmth … you don't mind, Dumbledore? Viktor has a slight head cold. …"

Karkaroff beckoned forward one of his students. As the boy passed, Harry caught a glimpse of a prominent curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He didn't need the punch on the arm Ron gave him, or the hiss in his ear, to recognize that profile.

"Harry — it's Krum!"

Chapter 16 The Goblet of Fire

“I don’t believe it!” Ron said, in a stunned voice, as the Hogwarts students filed back up the steps behind the party from Durm-strang. “Krum, Harry! Viktor Krum!”

“For heaven’s sake, Ron, he’s only a Quidditch player,” said Hermione.

“Only a Quidditch player?” Ron said, looking at her as though he couldn’t believe his ears. “Hermione — he’s one of the best Seekers in the world! I had no idea he was still at school!”

As they recrossed the entrance hall with the rest of the Hogwarts students heading for the Great Hall, Harry saw Lee Jordan jump-ing up and down on the soles of his feet to get a better look at the back of Krum’s head. Several sixth-year girls were frantically search-ing their pockets as they walked —“Oh I don’t believe it, I haven’t got a single quill on me —”

“D’you think he’d sign my hat in lipstick?”

“Really,” Hermione said loftily as they passed the girls, now squabbling over the lipstick.

“I’m getting his autograph if I can,” said Ron. “You haven’t got a quill, have you, Harry?”

“Nope, they’re upstairs in my bag,” said Harry.

They walked over to the Gryffindor table and sat down. Ron took care to sit on the side facing the doorway, because Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students were still gathered around it, appar-ently unsure about where they should sit. The students from Beaux-batons had chosen seats at the Ravenclaw table. They were looking around the

Great Hall with glum expressions on their faces. Three of them were still clutching scarves and shawls around their heads.

“It’s not that cold,” said Hermione defensively. “Why didn’t they bring cloaks?”

“Over here! Come and sit over here!” Ron hissed. “Over here! Hermione, budge up, make a space —”

“What?”

“Too late,” said Ron bitterly.

Viktor Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students had settled themselves at the Slytherin table. Harry could see Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle looking very smug about this. As he watched, Malfoy bent forward to speak to Krum.

“Yeah, that’s right, smarm up to him, Malfoy,” said Ron scathingly. “I bet Krum can see right through him, though … bet he gets people fawning over him all the time. … Where d’you reckon they’re going to sleep? We could offer him a space in our dormitory, Harry … I wouldn’t mind giving him my bed, I could kip on a camp bed.”

Hermione snorted.

“They look a lot happier than the Beauxbatons lot,” said Harry.

The Durmstrang students were pulling off their heavy furs and looking up at the starry black ceiling with expressions of interest; a couple of them were picking up the golden plates and goblets and examining them, apparently impressed.

Up at the staff table, Filch, the caretaker, was adding chairs. He was wearing his moldy old tailcoat in honor of the occasion. Harry was surprised to see that he added four chairs, two on either side of Dumbledore’s.

“But there are only two extra people,” Harry said. “Why’s Filch putting out four chairs, who else is coming?”

“Eh?” said Ron vaguely. He was still staring avidly at Krum.

When all the students had entered the Hall and settled down at their House tables, the staff entered, filing up to the top table and taking their seats. Last in line were Professor Dumbledore, Profes-sor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime. When their headmistress ap-peared, the pupils from Beauxbatons leapt to their feet. A few of the Hogwarts students laughed. The Beauxbatons party appeared quite unembarrassed, however, and did not resume their seats un-til Madame Maxime had sat down on Dumbledore’s left-hand side. Dumbledore remained standing, and a silence fell over the Great Hall.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and — most partic-ularly — guests,” said Dumbledore, beaming around at the foreign students. “I have great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable.”

One of the Beauxbatons girls still clutching a muffler around her head gave what was unmistakably a derisive laugh.

“No one’s making you stay!” Hermione whispered, bristling at her.

“The tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast,” said Dumbledore. “I now invite you all to eat, drink, and make yourselves at home!”

He sat down, and Harry saw Karkaroff lean forward at once and engage him in conversation.

The plates in front of them filled with food as usual. The house-elves in the kitchen seemed to have pulled out all the stops; there was a

greater variety of dishes in front of them than Harry had ever seen, including several that were definitely foreign.

"What's that?" said Ron, pointing at a large dish of some sort of shellfish stew that stood beside a large steak-and-kidney pudding.

"Bouillabaisse," said Hermione.

"Bless you," said Ron.

"It's French," said Hermione, "I had it on holiday summer before last. It's very nice."

"I'll take your word for it," said Ron, helping himself to black pudding.

The Great Hall seemed somehow much more crowded than usual, even though there were barely twenty additional students there; perhaps it was because their differently colored uniforms stood out so clearly against the black of the Hogwarts' robes. Now that they had removed their furs, the Durmstrang students were re-vealed to be wearing robes of a deep bloodred.

Hagrid sidled into the Hall through a door behind the staff table twenty minutes after the start of the feast. He slid into his seat at the end and waved at Harry, Ron, and Hermione with a very heav-ily bandaged hand.

"Skrewts doing all right, Hagrid?" Harry called.

"Thrivin'," Hagrid called back happily.

"Yeah, I'll just bet they are," said Ron quietly. "Looks like they've finally found a food they like, doesn't it? Hagrid's fingers."

At that moment, a voice said, "Excuse me, are you wanting ze bouillabaisse?"

It was the girl from Beauxbatons who had laughed during Dumbledore’s speech. She had finally removed her muffler. A long sheet of silvery-blonde hair fell almost to her waist. She had large, deep blue eyes, and very white, even teeth.

Ron went purple. He stared up at her, opened his mouth to re-ply, but nothing came out except a faint gurgling noise.

“Yeah, have it,” said Harry, pushing the dish toward the girl.

“You ’ave finished wiz it?”

“Yeah,” Ron said breathlessly. “Yeah, it was excellent.”

The girl picked up the dish and carried it carefully off to the Ravenclaw table. Ron was still goggling at the girl as though he had never seen one before. Harry started to laugh. The sound seemed to jog Ron back to his senses.

“She’s a veela!” he said hoarsely to Harry.

“Of course she isn’t!” said Hermione tartly. “I don’t see anyone else gaping at her like an idiot!”

But she wasn’t entirely right about that. As the girl crossed the Hall, many boys’ heads turned, and some of them seemed to have become temporarily speechless, just like Ron.

“I’m telling you, that’s not a normal girl!” said Ron, leaning sideways so he could keep a clear view of her. “They don’t make them like that at Hogwarts!”

“They make them okay at Hogwarts,” said Harry without think-ing. Cho happened to be sitting only a few places away from the girl with the silvery hair.

“When you’ve both put your eyes back in,” said Hermione briskly, “you’ll be able to see who’s just arrived.”

She was pointing up at the staff table. The two remaining empty seats had just been filled. Ludo Bagman was now sitting on Profes-sor Karkaroff’s other side, while Mr. Crouch, Percy’s boss, was next to Madame Maxime.

“What are they doing here?” said Harry in surprise.

“They organized the Triwizard Tournament, didn’t they?” said Hermione. “I suppose they wanted to be here to see it start.”

When the second course arrived they noticed a number of unfa-miliar desserts too. Ron examined an odd sort of pale blancmange closely, then moved it carefully a few inches to his right, so that it would be clearly visible from the Ravenclaw table. The girl who looked like a veela appeared to have eaten enough, however, and did not come over to get it.

Once the golden plates had been wiped clean, Dumbledore stood up again. A pleasant sort of tension seemed to fill the Hall now. Harry felt a slight thrill of excitement, wondering what was coming. Several seats down from them, Fred and George were leaning forward, staring at Dumbledore with great concentration.

“The moment has come,” said Dumbledore, smiling around at the sea of upturned faces. “The Triwizard Tournament is about to start. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket —”

“The what?” Harry muttered.

Ron shrugged.

“— just to clarify the procedure that we will be following this year. But first, let me introduce, for those who do not know them, Mr. Bartemius

Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation" — there was a smattering of polite ap-plause — "and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

There was a much louder round of applause for Bagman than for Crouch, perhaps because of his fame as a Beater, or simply be-cause he looked so much more likable. He acknowledged it with a jovial wave of his hand. Bartemius Crouch did not smile or wave when his name was announced. Remembering him in his neat suit at the Quidditch World Cup, Harry thought he looked strange in wizard's robes. His toothbrush mustache and severe parting looked very odd next to Dumbledore's long white hair and beard.

"Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tourna-ment," Dumbledore continued, "and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions' efforts."

At the mention of the word "champions," the attentiveness of the listening students seemed to sharpen. Perhaps Dumbledore had noticed their sudden stillness, for he smiled as he said, "The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch."

Filch, who had been lurking unnoticed in a far corner of the Hall, now approached Dumbledore carrying a great wooden chest encrusted with jewels. It looked extremely old. A murmur of excited interest rose from the watching students; Dennis Creevey actually stood on his chair to see it properly, but, being so tiny, his head hardly rose above anyone else's.

"The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman," said Dumbledore as Filch placed the chest carefully on the table before him, "and they have made the necessary arrangements for each

challenge. There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways … their magical prowess — their daring — their powers of deduc-tion — and, of course, their ability to cope with danger."

At this last word, the Hall was filled with a silence so absolute that nobody seemed to be breathing.

"As you know, three champions compete in the tournament," Dumbledore went on calmly, "one from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be cho-sen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire."

Dumbledore now took out his wand and tapped three times upon the top of the casket. The lid creaked slowly open. Dumble-dore reached inside it and pulled out a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It would have been entirely unremarkable had it not been full to the brim with dancing blue-white flames.

Dumbledore closed the casket and placed the goblet carefully on top of it, where it would be clearly visible to everyone in the Hall.

"Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet," said Dumbledore. "Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely acces-sible to all those wishing to compete.

"To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation," said Dumbledore, "I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line.

"Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a cham-pion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have become a champion. Please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you drop your name into the goblet. Now, I think it is time for bed. Good night to you all."

"An Age Line!" Fred Weasley said, his eyes glinting, as they all made their way across the Hall to the doors into the entrance hall. "Well, that should be fooled by an Aging Potion, shouldn't it? And once your name's in that goblet, you're laughing — it can't tell whether you're seventeen or not!"

"But I don't think anyone under seventeen will stand a chance," said Hermione, "we just haven't learned enough …"

"Speak for yourself," said George shortly. "You'll try and get in, won't you, Harry?"

Harry thought briefly of Dumbledore's insistence that nobody under seventeen should submit their name, but then the wonder-ful picture of himself winning the Triwizard Tournament filled his mind again. … He wondered how angry Dumbledore would be if someone younger than seventeen did find a way to get over the Age Line. …"Where is he?" said Ron, who wasn't listening to a word of this conversation, but looking through the crowd to see what had be-come of Krum. "Dumbledore didn't say where the Durmstrang people are sleeping, did he?"

But this query was answered almost instantly; they were level with the Slytherin table now, and Karkaroff had just bustled up to his students.

“Back to the ship, then,” he was saying. “Viktor, how are you feeling? Did you eat enough? Should I send for some mulled wine from the kitchens?”

Harry saw Krum shake his head as he pulled his furs back on.

“Professor, I vood like some vine,” said one of the other Durm-strang boys hopefully.

“I wasn’t offering it to you, Poliakoff,” snapped Karkaroff, his warmly paternal air vanishing in an instant. “I notice you have dribbled food all down the front of your robes again, disgusting boy —”

Karkaroff turned and led his students toward the doors, reaching them at exactly the same moment as Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Harry stopped to let him walk through first.

“Thank you,” said Karkaroff carelessly, glancing at him.

And then Karkaroff froze. He turned his head back to Harry and stared at him as though he couldn’t believe his eyes. Behind their headmaster, the students from Durmstrang came to a halt too. Karkaroff’s eyes moved slowly up Harry’s face and fixed upon his scar. The Durmstrang students were staring curiously at Harry too. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw comprehension dawn on a few of their faces. The boy with food all down his front nudged the girl next to him and pointed openly at Harry’s forehead.

“Yeah, that’s Harry Potter,” said a growling voice from behind them.

Professor Karkaroff spun around. Mad-Eye Moody was standing there, leaning heavily on his staff, his magical eye glaring unblink-ingly at the Durmstrang headmaster.

The color drained from Karkaroff’s face as Harry watched. A terrible look of mingled fury and fear came over him.

“You!” he said, staring at Moody as though unsure he was really seeing him.

“Me,” said Moody grimly. “And unless you’ve got anything to say to Potter, Karkaroff, you might want to move. You’re blocking the doorway.”

It was true; half the students in the Hall were now waiting be-hind them, looking over one another’s shoulders to see what was causing the holdup.

Without another word, Professor Karkaroff swept his students away with him. Moody watched him until he was out of sight, his magical eye fixed upon his back, a look of intense dislike upon his mutilated face.

As the next day was Saturday, most students would normally have breakfasted late. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were not alone in rising much earlier than they usually did on weekends. When they went down into the entrance hall, they saw about twenty people milling around it, some of them eating toast, all ex-amining the Goblet of Fire. It had been placed in the center of the hall on the stool that normally bore the Sorting Hat. A thin golden line had been traced on the floor, forming a circle ten feet around it in every direction.

“Anyone put their name in yet?” Ron asked a third-year girl eagerly.

“All the Durmstrang lot,” she replied. “But I haven’t seen anyone from Hogwarts yet.”

“Bet some of them put it in last night after we’d all gone to bed,” said Harry. “I would’ve if it had been me … wouldn’t have wanted everyone watching. What if the goblet just gobbed you right back out again?”

Someone laughed behind Harry. Turning, he saw Fred, George, and Lee Jordan hurrying down the staircase, all three of them look-ing

extremely excited.

“Done it,” Fred said in a triumphant whisper to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “Just taken it.”

“What?” said Ron.

“The Aging Potion, dung brains,” said Fred.

“One drop each,” said George, rubbing his hands together with glee. “We only need to be a few months older.”

“We’re going to split the thousand Galleons between the three of us if one of us wins,” said Lee, grinning broadly.

“I’m not sure this is going to work, you know,” said Hermione warningly “I’m sure Dumbledore will have thought of this.”

Fred, George, and Lee ignored her.

“Ready?” Fred said to the other two, quivering with excitement. “C’mon, then — I’ll go first —”

Harry watched, fascinated, as Fred pulled a slip of parchment out of his pocket bearing the words Fred Weasley — Hogwarts. Fred walked right up to the edge of the line and stood there, rocking on his toes like a diver preparing for a fifty-foot drop. Then, with the eyes of every person in the entrance hall upon him, he took a great breath and stepped over the line.

For a split second Harry thought it had worked — George cer-tainly thought so, for he let out a yell of triumph and leapt after Fred — but next moment, there was a loud sizzling sound, and both twins were hurled out of the golden circle as though they had been thrown by an invisible shot-putter. They landed painfully, ten feet away on the cold stone floor, and to add insult to injury, there was a loud popping noise, and both of them sprouted identical long white beards.

The entrance hall rang with laughter. Even Fred and George joined in, once they had gotten to their feet and taken a good look at each other's beards.

"I did warn you," said a deep, amused voice, and everyone turned to see Professor Dumbledore coming out of the Great Hall. He surveyed Fred and George, his eyes twinkling. "I suggest you both go up to Madam Pomfrey. She is already tending to Miss Faw-cett, of Ravenclaw, and Mr. Summers, of Hufflepuff, both of whom decided to age themselves up a little too. Though I must say, neither of their beards is anything like as fine as yours."

Fred and George set off for the hospital wing, accompanied by Lee, who was howling with laughter, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione, also chortling, went in to breakfast.

The decorations in the Great Hall had changed this morning. As it was Halloween, a cloud of live bats was fluttering around the enchanted ceiling, while hundreds of carved pumpkins leered from every corner. Harry led the way over to Dean and Seamus, who were discussing those Hogwarts students of seventeen or over who might be entering.

"There's a rumor going around that Warrington got up early and put his name in," Dean told Harry. "That big bloke from Slytherin who looks like a sloth."

Harry, who had played Quidditch against Warrington, shook his head in disgust.

"We can't have a Slytherin champion!"

"And all the Hufflepuffs are talking about Diggory," said Seamus contemptuously. "But I wouldn't have thought he'd have wanted to risk his good looks."

"Listen!" said Hermione suddenly.

People were cheering out in the entrance hall. They all swiveled around in their seats and saw Angelina Johnson coming into the Hall, grinning in an embarrassed sort of way. A tall black girl who played Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Angelina came over to them, sat down, and said, “Well, I’ve done it! Just put my name in!”

“You’re kidding!” said Ron, looking impressed.

“Are you seventeen, then?” asked Harry.

“ ’Course she is, can’t see a beard, can you?” said Ron.

“I had my birthday last week,” said Angelina.

“Well, I’m glad someone from Gryffindor’s entering,” said Hermione. “I really hope you get it, Angelina!”

“Thanks, Hermione,” said Angelina, smiling at her.

“Yeah, better you than Pretty-Boy Diggory,” said Seamus, caus-ing several Hufflepuffs passing their table to scowl heavily at him.

“What’re we going to do today, then?” Ron asked Harry and Hermione when they had finished breakfast and were leaving the Great Hall.

“We haven’t been down to visit Hagrid yet,” said Harry.

“Okay,” said Ron, “just as long as he doesn’t ask us to donate a few fingers to the skrewts.”

A look of great excitement suddenly dawned on Hermione’s face.

“I’ve just realized — I haven’t asked Hagrid to join S.P.E.W. yet!” she said brightly. “Wait for me, will you, while I nip upstairs and get the badges?”

“What is it with her?” said Ron, exasperated, as Hermione ran away up the marble staircase.

“Hey, Ron,” said Harry suddenly. “It’s your friend …”

The students from Beauxbatons were coming through the front doors from the grounds, among them, the veela-girl. Those gath-ered around the Goblet of Fire stood back to let them pass, watch-ing eagerly.

Madame Maxime entered the hall behind her students and or-ganized them into a line. One by one, the Beauxbatons students stepped across the Age Line and dropped their slips of parchment into the blue-white flames. As each name entered the fire, it turned briefly red and emitted sparks.

“What d’you reckon’ll happen to the ones who aren’t chosen?” Ron muttered to Harry as the veela-girl dropped her parchment into the Goblet of Fire. “Reckon they’ll go back to school, or hang around to watch the tournament?”

“Dunno,” said Harry. “Hang around, I suppose. … Madame Maxime’s staying to judge, isn’t she?”

When all the Beauxbatons students had submitted their names, Madame Maxime led them back out of the hall and out onto the grounds again.

“Where are they sleeping, then?” said Ron, moving toward the front doors and staring after them.

A loud rattling noise behind them announced Hermione’s re-appearance with the box of S.P.E.W. badges.

“Oh good, hurry up,” said Ron, and he jumped down the stone steps, keeping his eyes on the back of the veela-girl, who was now halfway across the lawn with Madame Maxime.

As they neared Hagrid's cabin on the edge of the Forbidden For-est, the mystery of the Beauxbatons' sleeping quarters was solved. The gigantic powder-blue carriage in which they had arrived had been parked two hundred yards from Hagrid's front door, and the students were climbing back inside it. The elephantine flying horses that had pulled the carriage were now grazing in a makeshift paddock alongside it.

Harry knocked on Hagrid's door, and Fang's booming barks an-swered instantly" 'Bout time!" said Hagrid, when he'd flung open the door. "Thought you lot'd forgotten where I live!"

"We've been really busy, Hag —" Hermione started to say, but then she stopped dead, looking up at Hagrid, apparently lost for words.

Hagrid was wearing his best (and very horrible) hairy brown suit, plus a checked yellow-and-orange tie. This wasn't the worst of it, though; he had evidently tried to tame his hair, using large quantities of what appeared to be axle grease. It was now slicked down into two bunches — perhaps he had tried a ponytail like Bill's, but found he had too much hair. The look didn't really suit Hagrid at all. For a moment, Hermione goggled at him, then, ob-viously deciding not to comment, she said, "Erm — where are the skrewts?"

"Out by the pumpkin patch," said Hagrid happily. "They're get-tin' massive, mus' be nearly three foot long now. On'y trouble is, they've started killin' each other."

"Oh no, really?" said Hermione, shooting a repressive look at Ron, who, staring at Hagrid's odd hairstyle, had just opened his mouth to say something about it.

"Yeah," said Hagrid sadly. " 'S' okay, though, I've got 'em in sep-arate boxes now. Still got abou' twenty."

"Well, that's lucky," said Ron. Hagrid missed the sarcasm.

Hagrid’s cabin comprised a single room, in one corner of which was a gigantic bed covered in a patchwork quilt. A similarly enor-mous wooden table and chairs stood in front of the fire beneath the quantity of cured hams and dead birds hanging from the ceiling. They sat down at the table while Hagrid started to make tea, and were soon immersed in yet more discussion of the Triwizard Tour-nament. Hagrid seemed quite as excited about it as they were.

“You wait,” he said, grinning. “You jus’ wait. Yer going ter see some stuff yeh’ve never seen before. Firs’ task … ah, but I’m not supposed ter say.”

“Go on, Hagrid!” Harry, Ron, and Hermione urged him, but he just shook his head, grinning.

“I don’ want ter spoil it fer yeh,” said Hagrid. “But it’s gonna be spectacular, I’ll tell yeh that. Them champions’re going ter have their work cut out. Never thought I’d live ter see the Triwizard Tournament played again!”

They ended up having lunch with Hagrid, though they didn’t eat much — Hagrid had made what he said was a beef casserole, but after Hermione unearthed a large talon in hers, she, Harry, and Ron rather lost their appetites. However, they enjoyed themselves trying to make Hagrid tell them what the tasks in the tournament were going to be, speculating which of the entrants were likely to be selected as champions, and wondering whether Fred and George were beardless yet.

A light rain had started to fall by midafternoon; it was very cozy sitting by the fire, listening to the gentle patter of the drops on the window, watching Hagrid darning his socks and arguing with Her-mione about house-elves — for he flatly refused to join S.P.E.W. when she showed him her badges.

“It’d be doin’ ’em an unkindness, Hermione,” he said gravely, threading a massive bone needle with thick yellow yarn. “It’s in their

nature ter look after humans, that's what they like, see? Yeh'd be makin' 'em unhappy ter take away their work, an' insultin' 'em if yeh tried ter pay 'em."

"But Harry set Dobby free, and he was over the moon about it!" said Hermione. "And we heard he's asking for wages now!"

"Yeah, well, yeh get weirdos in every breed. I'm not sayin' there isn't the odd elf who'd take freedom, but yeh'll never persuade most of 'em ter do it — no, nothin' doin', Hermione."

Hermione looked very cross indeed and stuffed her box of badges back into her cloak pocket.

By half past five it was growing dark, and Ron, Harry, and Hermione decided it was time to get back up to the castle for the Halloween feast — and, more important, the announcement of the school champions.

"I'll come with yeh," said Hagrid, putting away his darning. "Jus' give us a sec."

Hagrid got up, went across to the chest of drawers beside his bed, and began searching for something inside it. They didn't pay too much attention until a truly horrible smell reached their nos-trils. Coughing, Ron said, "Hagrid, what's that?"

"Eh?" said Hagrid, turning around with a large bottle in his hand. "Don' yeh like it?"

"Is that aftershave?" said Hermione in a slightly choked voice.

"Er — eau de cologne," Hagrid muttered. He was blushing. "Maybe it's a bit much," he said gruffly. "I'll go take it off, hang on …He stumped out of the cabin, and they saw him washing himself vigorously in the water barrel outside the window.

"Eau de cologne?" said Hermione in amazement. "Hagrid?"

"And what's with the hair and the suit?" said Harry in an undertone.

"Look!" said Ron suddenly, pointing out of the window.

Hagrid had just straightened up and turned 'round. If he had been blushing before, it was nothing to what he was doing now. Getting to their feet very cautiously, so that Hagrid wouldn't spot them, Harry, Ron, and Hermione peered through the window and saw that Madame Maxime and the Beauxbatons students had just emerged from their carriage, clearly about to set off for the feast too. They couldn't hear what Hagrid was saying, but he was talking to Madame Maxime with a rapt, misty-eyed expression Harry had only ever seen him wear once before — when he had been looking at the baby dragon, Norbert.

"He's going up to the castle with her!" said Hermione indig-nantly. "I thought he was waiting for us!"

Without so much as a backward glance at his cabin, Hagrid was trudging off up the grounds with Madame Maxime, the Beaux-batons students following in their wake, jogging to keep up with their enormous strides.

"He fancies her!" said Ron incredulously. "Well, if they end up having children, they'll be setting a world record — bet any baby of theirs would weigh about a ton."

They let themselves out of the cabin and shut the door behind them. It was surprisingly dark outside. Drawing their cloaks more closely around themselves, they set off up the sloping lawns.

"Ooh it's them, look!" Hermione whispered.

The Durmstrang party was walking up toward the castle from the lake. Viktor Krum was walking side by side with Karkaroff, and the

other Durmstrang students were straggling along behind them. Ron watched Krum excitedly, but Krum did not look around as he reached the front doors a little ahead of Hermione, Ron, and Harry and proceeded through them.

When they entered the candlelit Great Hall it was almost full. The Goblet of Fire had been moved; it was now standing in front of Dumbledore's empty chair at the teachers' table. Fred and George — clean-shaven again — seemed to have taken their disap-pointment fairly well.

"Hope it's Angelina," said Fred as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down.

"So do I!" said Hermione breathlessly. "Well, we'll soon know!"

The Halloween feast seemed to take much longer than usual. Perhaps because it was their second feast in two days, Harry didn't seem to fancy the extravagantly prepared food as much as he would have normally. Like everyone else in the Hall, judging by the constantly craning necks, the impatient expressions on every face, the fidgeting, and the standing up to see whether Dumbledore had finished eating yet, Harry simply wanted the plates to clear, and to hear who had been selected as champions.

At long last, the golden plates returned to their original spotless state; there was a sharp upswing in the level of noise within the Hall, which died away almost instantly as Dumbledore got to his feet. On either side of him, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime looked as tense and expectant as anyone. Ludo Bagman was beaming and winking at various students. Mr. Crouch, how-ever, looked quite uninterested, almost bored.

"Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision," said Dumbledore. "I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions' names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the

next chamber" — he indicated the door behind the staff table — "where they will be receiving their first instructions."

He took out his wand and gave a great sweeping wave with it; at once, all the candles except those inside the carved pumpkins were extinguished, plunging them into a state of semidarkness. The Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole Hall, the sparkling bright, bluey-whiteness of the flames al-most painful on the eyes. Everyone watched, waiting. … A few people kept checking their watches. …"Any second," Lee Jordan whispered, two seats away from Harry.

The flames inside the goblet turned suddenly red again. Sparks began to fly from it. Next moment, a tongue of flame shot into the air, a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it — the whole room gasped.

Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and held it at arm's length, so that he could read it by the light of the flames, which had turned back to blue-white.

"The champion for Durmstrang," he read, in a strong, clear voice, "will be Viktor Krum."

"No surprises there!" yelled Ron as a storm of applause and cheering swept the Hall. Harry saw Viktor Krum rise from the Slytherin table and slouch up toward Dumbledore; he turned right, walked along the staff table, and disappeared through the door into the next chamber.

"Bravo, Viktor!" boomed Karkaroff, so loudly that everyone could hear him, even over all the applause. "Knew you had it in you!

The clapping and chatting died down. Now everyone's attention was focused again on the goblet, which, seconds later, turned red once more. A second piece of parchment shot out of it, propelled by the flames.

“The champion for Beauxbatons,” said Dumbledore, “is Fleur Delacour!”

“It’s her, Ron!” Harry shouted as the girl who so resembled a veela got gracefully to her feet, shook back her sheet of silvery blonde hair, and swept up between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables.

“Oh look, they’re all disappointed,” Hermione said over the noise, nodding toward the remainder of the Beauxbatons party. “Disappointed” was a bit of an understatement, Harry thought. Two of the girls who had not been selected had dissolved into tears and were sobbing with their heads on their arms.

When Fleur Delacour too had vanished into the side chamber, silence fell again, but this time it was a silence so stiff with excitement you could almost taste it. The Hogwarts champion next …And the Goblet of Fire turned red once more; sparks showered out of it; the tongue of flame shot high into the air, and from its tip Dumbledore pulled the third piece of parchment.

“The Hogwarts champion,” he called, “is Cedric Diggory!”

“No!” said Ron loudly, but nobody heard him except Harry; the uproar from the next table was too great. Every single Hufflepuff had jumped to his or her feet, screaming and stamping, as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers’ table. Indeed, the applause for Cedric went on so long that it was some time before Dumbledore could make himself heard again.

“Excellent!” Dumbledore called happily as at last the tumult died down. “Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real —”

But Dumbledore suddenly stopped speaking, and it was appar-ent to everybody what had distracted him.

The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were fly-ing out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Chapter 17 The Four Champions

Harry sat there, aware that every head in the Great Hall had turned to look at him. He was stunned. He felt numb. He was surely dreaming. He had not heard correctly.

There was no applause. A buzzing, as though of angry bees, was starting to fill the Hall; some students were standing up to get a better look at Harry as he sat, frozen, in his seat.

Up at the top table, Professor McGonagall had got to her feet and swept past Ludo Bagman and Professor Karkaroff to whisper urgently to Professor Dumbledore, who bent his ear toward her, frowning slightly.

Harry turned to Ron and Hermione; beyond them, he saw the long Gryffindor table all watching him, openmouthed.

“I didn’t put my name in,” Harry said blankly. “You know I didn’t.”

Both of them stared just as blankly back.

At the top table, Professor Dumbledore had straightened up, nodding to Professor McGonagall.

“Harry Potter!” he called again. “Harry! Up here, if you please!”

“Go on,” Hermione whispered, giving Harry a slight push.

Harry got to his feet, trod on the hem of his robes, and stumbled slightly. He set off up the gap between the Gryffindor and Huffle-puff tables. It felt like an immensely long walk; the top table didn’t seem to be getting any nearer at all, and he could feel hundreds and hundreds of eyes upon him, as though each were a searchlight. The buzzing grew louder and louder. After what seemed like an hour, he was right in front of Dumbledore, feeling the stares of all the teachers upon him.

"Well … through the door, Harry," said Dumbledore. He wasn't smiling.

Harry moved off along the teachers' table. Hagrid was seated right at the end. He did not wink at Harry, or wave, or give any of his usual signs of greeting. He looked completely astonished and stared at Harry as he passed like everyone else. Harry went through the door out of the Great Hall and found himself in a smaller room, lined with paintings of witches and wizards. A handsome fire was roaring in the fireplace opposite him.

The faces in the portraits turned to look at him as he entered. He saw a wizened witch flit out of the frame of her picture and into the one next to it, which contained a wizard with a walrus mus-tache. The wizened witch started whispering in his ear.

Viktor Krum, Cedric Diggory, and Fleur Delacour were grouped around the fire. They looked strangely impressive, silhouetted against the flames. Krum, hunched-up and brooding, was leaning against the mantelpiece, slightly apart from the other two. Cedric was standing with his hands behind his back, staring into the fire. Fleur Delacour looked around when Harry walked in and threw back her sheet of long, silvery hair.

"What is it?" she said. "Do zey want us back in ze Hall?"

She thought he had come to deliver a message. Harry didn't know how to explain what had just happened. He just stood there, looking at the three champions. It struck him how very tall all of them were.

There was a sound of scurrying feet behind him, and Ludo Bag-man entered the room. He took Harry by the arm and led him forward.

"Extraordinary!" he muttered, squeezing Harry's arm. "Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen … lady," he added, approaching the fire-side and addressing the other three. "May I introduce — incredible though it may seem — the fourth Triwizard champion?"

Viktor Krum straightened up. His surly face darkened as he sur-veyed Harry. Cedric looked nonplussed. He looked from Bagman to Harry and back again as though sure he must have misheard what Bagman had said. Fleur Delacour, however, tossed her hair, smiling, and said, "Oh, vairy funny joke, Meester Bagman."

"Joke?" Bagman repeated, bewildered. "No, no, not at all! Harry's name just came out of the Goblet of Fire!"

Krum's thick eyebrows contracted slightly. Cedric was still look-ing politely bewildered. Fleur frowned.

"But evidently zair 'as been a mistake," she said contemptuously to Bagman. " 'E cannot compete. 'E is too young."

"Well … it is amazing," said Bagman, rubbing his smooth chin and smiling down at Harry. "But, as you know, the age restriction was only imposed this year as an extra safety measure. And as his name's come out of the goblet … I mean, I don't think there can be any ducking out at this stage. … It's down in the rules, you're obliged … Harry will just have to do the best he —"

The door behind them opened again, and a large group of peo-ple came in: Professor Dumbledore, followed closely by Mr. Crouch, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor McGo-nagall, and Professor Snape. Harry heard the buzzing of the hun-dreds of students on the other side of the wall, before Professor McGonagall closed the door.

"Madame Maxime!" said Fleur at once, striding over to her headmistress. "Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete also!"

Somewhere under Harry's numb disbelief he felt a ripple of anger. Little boy?

Madame Maxime had drawn herself up to her full, and consid-erable, height. The top of her handsome head brushed the candle-filled

chandelier, and her gigantic black-satin bosom swelled.

“What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-dorr?” she said imperiously.

“I’d rather like to know that myself, Dumbledore,” said Profes-sor Karkaroff. He was wearing a steely smile, and his blue eyes were like chips of ice. “Two Hogwarts champions? I don’t remember any-one telling me the host school is allowed two champions — or have I not read the rules carefully enough?”

He gave a short and nasty laugh.

“C’est impossible,” said Madame Maxime, whose enormous hand with its many superb opals was resting upon Fleur’s shoulder. “ ’Ogwarts cannot ’ave two champions. It is most injust.”

“We were under the impression that your Age Line would keep out younger contestants, Dumbledore,” said Karkaroff, his steely smile still in place, though his eyes were colder than ever. “Other-wise, we would, of course, have brought along a wider selection of candidates from our own schools.”

“It’s no one’s fault but Potter’s, Karkaroff,” said Snape softly. His black eyes were alight with malice. “Don’t go blaming Dumbledore for Potter’s determination to break rules. He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here —”

“Thank you, Severus,” said Dumbledore firmly, and Snape went quiet, though his eyes still glinted malevolently through his curtain of greasy black hair.

Professor Dumbledore was now looking down at Harry, who looked right back at him, trying to discern the expression of the eyes behind the half-moon spectacles.

“Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry?” he asked calmly.

“No,” said Harry. He was very aware of everybody watching him closely. Snape made a soft noise of impatient disbelief in the shadows.

“Did you ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?” said Professor Dumbledore, ignoring Snape.

“No,” said Harry vehemently.

“Ah, but of course ’e is lying!” cried Madame Maxime. Snape was now shaking his head, his lip curling.

“He could not have crossed the Age Line,” said Professor McGo-nagall sharply. “I am sure we are all agreed on that —”

“Dumbly-dorr must ’ave made a mistake wiz ze line,” said Madame Maxime, shrugging.

“It is possible, of course,” said Dumbledore politely“Dumbledore, you know perfectly well you did not make a mistake!” said Professor McGonagall angrily. “Really, what non-sense! Harry could not have crossed the line himself, and as Profes-sor Dumbledore believes that he did not persuade an older student to do it for him, I’m sure that should be good enough for every-body else!”

She shot a very angry look at Professor Snape.

“Mr. Crouch … Mr. Bagman,” said Karkaroff, his voice unctu-ous once more, “you are our — er — objective judges. Surely you will agree that this is most irregular?”

Bagman wiped his round, boyish face with his handkerchief and looked at Mr. Crouch, who was standing outside the circle of the firelight, his face half hidden in shadow. He looked slightly eerie, the half darkness making him look much older, giving him an al-most skull-like appearance. When he spoke, however, it was in his usual curt voice.

“We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament.”

“Well, Barty knows the rule book back to front,” said Bagman, beaming and turning back to Karkaroff and Madame Maxime, as though the matter was now closed.

“I insist upon resubmitting the names of the rest of my stu-dents,” said Karkaroff. He had dropped his unctuous tone and his smile now. His face wore a very ugly look indeed. “You will set up the Goblet of Fire once more, and we will continue adding names until each school has two champions. It’s only fair, Dumbledore.”

“But Karkaroff, it doesn’t work like that,” said Bagman. “The Goblet of Fire’s just gone out — it won’t reignite until the start of the next tournament —”

“— in which Durmstrang will most certainly not be compet-ing!” exploded Karkaroff. “After all our meetings and negotiations and compromises, I little expected something of this nature to occur! I have half a mind to leave now!”

“Empty threat, Karkaroff,” growled a voice from near the door. “You can’t leave your champion now. He’s got to compete. They’ve all got to compete. Binding magical contract, like Dumbledore said. Convenient, eh?”

Moody had just entered the room. He limped toward the fire, and with every right step he took, there was a loud clunk.

“Convenient?” said Karkaroff. “I’m afraid I don’t understand you, Moody.”

Harry could tell he was trying to sound disdainful, as though what Moody was saying was barely worth his notice, but his hands gave him away; they had balled themselves into fists.

“Don’t you?” said Moody quietly. “It’s very simple, Karkaroff. Someone put Potter’s name in that goblet knowing he’d have to compete if it came out.”

“Evidently, someone ’oo wished to give ’Ogwarts two bites at ze apple!” said Madame Maxime.

“I quite agree, Madame Maxime,” said Karkaroff, bowing to her. “I shall be lodging complaints with the Ministry of Magic and the International Confederation of Wizards —”

“If anyone’s got reason to complain, it’s Potter,” growled Moody, “but … funny thing … I don’t hear him saying a word. …”

“Why should ’e complain?” burst out Fleur Delacour, stamping her foot. “ ’E ’as ze chance to compete, ’asn’t ’e? We ’ave all been ’oping to be chosen for weeks and weeks! Ze honor for our schools! A thousand Galleons in prize money — zis is a chance many would die for!”

“Maybe someone’s hoping Potter is going to die for it,” said Moody, with the merest trace of a growl.

An extremely tense silence followed these words. Ludo Bagman, who was looking very anxious indeed, bounced nervously up and down on his feet and said, “Moody, old man … what a thing to say!”

“We all know Professor Moody considers the morning wasted if he hasn’t discovered six plots to murder him before lunchtime,” said Karkaroff loudly. “Apparently he is now teaching his students to fear assassination too. An odd quality in a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Dumbledore, but no doubt you had your reasons.”

“Imagining things, am I?” growled Moody. “Seeing things, eh? It was a skilled witch or wizard who put the boy’s name in that goblet. …”

“Ah, what evidence is zere of zat?” said Madame Maxime, throw-ing up her huge hands.

“Because they hoodwinked a very powerful magical object!” said Moody. “It would have needed an exceptionally strong Confundus Charm to bamboozle that goblet into forgetting that only three schools compete in the tournament. … I’m guessing they submit-ted Potter’s name under a fourth school, to make sure he was the only one in his category. …”

“You seem to have given this a great deal of thought, Moody,” said Karkaroff coldly, “and a very ingenious theory it is — though of course, I heard you recently got it into your head that one of your birthday presents contained a cunningly disguised basilisk egg, and smashed it to pieces before realizing it was a carriage clock. So you’ll understand if we don’t take you entirely seriously. …”

“There are those who’ll turn innocent occasions to their advan-tage,” Moody retorted in a menacing voice. “It’s my job to think the way Dark wizards do, Karkaroff — as you ought to remember. …”

“Alastor!” said Dumbledore warningly. Harry wondered for a moment whom he was speaking to, but then realized “Mad-Eye” could hardly be Moody’s real first name. Moody fell silent, though still surveying Karkaroff with satisfaction — Karkaroff’s face was burning.

“How this situation arose, we do not know,” said Dumbledore, speaking to everyone gathered in the room. “It seems to me, however, that we have no choice but to accept it. Both Cedric and Harry have been chosen to compete in the Tournament. This, therefore, they will do. …”

“Ah, but Dumbly-dorr —”

“My dear Madame Maxime, if you have an alternative, I would be delighted to hear it.”

Dumbledore waited, but Madame Maxime did not speak, she merely glared. She wasn't the only one either. Snape looked furious; Karkaroff livid; Bagman, however, looked rather excited.

"Well, shall we crack on, then?" he said, rubbing his hands to-gether and smiling around the room. "Got to give our champions their instructions, haven't we? Barty, want to do the honors?"

Mr. Crouch seemed to come out of a deep reverie.

"Yes," he said, "instructions. Yes … the first task …"

He moved forward into the firelight. Close up, Harry thought he looked ill. There were dark shadows beneath his eyes and a thin, papery look about his wrinkled skin that had not been there at the Quidditch World Cup.

"The first task is designed to test your daring," he told Harry, Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor, "so we are not going to be telling you what it is. Courage in the face of the unknown is an important quality in a wizard … very important. …"The first task will take place on November the twenty-fourth, in front of the other students and the panel of judges.

"The champions are not permitted to ask for or accept help of any kind from their teachers to complete the tasks in the tourna-ment. The champions will face the first challenge armed only with their wands. They will receive information about the second task when the first is over. Owing to the demanding and time-consum-ing nature of the tournament, the champions are exempted from end-of-year tests."

Mr. Crouch turned to look at Dumbledore.

"I think that's all, is it, Albus?"

"I think so," said Dumbledore, who was looking at Mr. Crouch with mild concern. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay at Hog-warts tonight, Barty?"

“No, Dumbledore, I must get back to the Ministry,” said Mr. Crouch. “It is a very busy, very difficult time at the moment. … I’ve left young Weatherby in charge. … Very enthusiastic … a lit-tle overenthusiastic, if truth be told. …”

“You’ll come and have a drink before you go, at least?” said Dumbledore.

“Come on, Barty, I’m staying!” said Bagman brightly. “It’s all happening at Hogwarts now, you know, much more exciting here than at the office!”

“I think not, Ludo,” said Crouch with a touch of his old impa-tience.

“Professor Karkaroff — Madame Maxime — a nightcap?” said Dumbledore.

But Madame Maxime had already put her arm around Fleur’s shoulders and was leading her swiftly out of the room. Harry could hear them both talking very fast in French as they went off into the Great Hall. Karkaroff beckoned to Krum, and they, too, exited, though in silence.

“Harry, Cedric, I suggest you go up to bed,” said Dumbledore, smiling at both of them. “I am sure Gryffindor and Hufflepuff are waiting to celebrate with you, and it would be a shame to deprive them of this excellent excuse to make a great deal of mess and noise.”

Harry glanced at Cedric, who nodded, and they left together.

The Great Hall was deserted now; the candles had burned low, giving the jagged smiles of the pumpkins an eerie, flickering quality.

“So,” said Cedric, with a slight smile. “We’re playing against each other again!”

“I s’pose,” said Harry. He really couldn’t think of anything to say. The inside of his head seemed to be in complete disarray, as though his brain had been ransacked.

“So … tell me …” said Cedric as they reached the entrance hall, which was now lit only by torches in the absence of the Gob-let of Fire. “How did you get your name in?”

“I didn’t,” said Harry, staring up at him. “I didn’t put it in. I was telling the truth.”

“Ah … okay,” said Cedric. Harry could tell Cedric didn’t be-lieve him. “Well … see you, then.”

Instead of going up the marble staircase, Cedric headed for a door to its right. Harry stood listening to him going down the stone steps beyond it, then, slowly, he started to climb the marble ones.

Was anyone except Ron and Hermione going to believe him, or would they all think he’d put himself in for the tournament? Yet how could anyone think that, when he was facing competitors who’d had three years’ more magical education than he had — when he was now facing tasks that not only sounded very danger-ous, but which were to be performed in front of hundreds of peo-ple? Yes, he’d thought about it … he’d fantasized about it … but it had been a joke, really, an idle sort of dream … he’d never really, seriously considered entering. …But someone else had considered it … someone else had wanted him in the tournament, and had made sure he was entered. Why? To give him a treat? He didn’t think so, somehow. …To see him make a fool of himself? Well, they were likely to get their wish. …But to get him killed?

Was Moody just being his usual paranoid self? Couldn’t some-one have put Harry’s name in the goblet as a trick, a practical joke? Did anyone really want him dead?

Harry was able to answer that at once. Yes, someone wanted him dead, someone had wanted him dead ever since he had been a year old … Lord Voldemort. But how could Voldemort have ensured that Harry's name got into the Goblet of Fire? Voldemort was supposed to be far away, in some distant country, in hiding, alone … feeble and powerless. …Yet in that dream he had had, just before he had awoken with his scar hurting, Voldemort had not been alone … he had been talk-ing to Wormtail … plotting Harry's murder. …Harry got a shock to find himself facing the Fat Lady already. He had barely noticed where his feet were carrying him. It was also a surprise to see that she was not alone in her frame. The wizened witch who had flitted into her neighbor's painting when he had joined the champions downstairs was now sitting smugly beside the Fat Lady. She must have dashed through every picture lining seven staircases to reach here before him. Both she and the Fat Lady were looking down at him with the keenest interest.

"Well, well, well," said the Fat Lady, "Violet's just told me every-thing. Who's just been chosen as school champion, then?"

"Balderdash," said Harry dully.

"It most certainly isn't!" said the pale witch indignantly.

"No, no, Vi, it's the password," said the Fat Lady soothingly, and she swung forward on her hinges to let Harry into the common room.

The blast of noise that met Harry's ears when the portrait opened almost knocked him backward. Next thing he knew, he was being wrenched inside the common room by about a dozen pairs of hands, and was facing the whole of Gryffindor House, all of whom were screaming, applauding, and whistling.

"You should've told us you'd entered!" bellowed Fred; he looked half annoyed, half deeply impressed.

"How did you do it without getting a beard? Brilliant!" roared George.

“I didn’t,” Harry said. “I don’t know how —”

But Angelina had now swooped down upon him; “Oh if it couldn’t be me, at least it’s a Gryffindor —”

“You’ll be able to pay back Diggory for that last Quidditch match, Harry!” shrieked Katie Bell, another of the Gryffindor Chasers.

“We’ve got food, Harry, come and have some —”

“I’m not hungry, I had enough at the feast —”

But nobody wanted to hear that he wasn’t hungry; nobody wanted to hear that he hadn’t put his name in the goblet; not one single person seemed to have noticed that he wasn’t at all in the mood to celebrate. … Lee Jordan had unearthed a Gryffindor banner from somewhere, and he insisted on draping it around Harry like a cloak. Harry couldn’t get away; whenever he tried to sidle over to the staircase up to the dormitories, the crowd around him closed ranks, forcing another butterbeer on him, stuffing crisps and peanuts into his hands. … Everyone wanted to know how he had done it, how he had tricked Dumbledore’s Age Line and managed to get his name into the goblet. …“I didn’t,” he said, over and over again, “I don’t know how it happened.”

But for all the notice anyone took, he might just as well not have answered at all.

“I’m tired!” he bellowed finally, after nearly half an hour. “No, seriously, George — I’m going to bed —”

He wanted more than anything to find Ron and Hermione, to find a bit of sanity, but neither of them seemed to be in the com-mon room. Insisting that he needed to sleep, and almost flattening the little Creevey brothers as they attempted to waylay him at the foot of the stairs, Harry managed to shake everyone off and climb up to the dormitory as fast as he could.

To his great relief, he found Ron was lying on his bed in the otherwise empty dormitory, still fully dressed. He looked up when Harry slammed the door behind him.

“Where’ve you been?” Harry said.

“Oh hello,” said Ron.

He was grinning, but it was a very odd, strained sort of grin. Harry suddenly became aware that he was still wearing the scarlet Gryffindor banner that Lee had tied around him. He hastened to take it off, but it was knotted very tightly. Ron lay on the bed with-out moving, watching Harry struggle to remove it.

“So,” he said, when Harry had finally removed the banner and thrown it into a corner. “Congratulations.”

“What d’you mean, congratulations?” said Harry, staring at Ron. There was definitely something wrong with the way Ron was smiling: It was more like a grimace.

“Well … no one else got across the Age Line,” said Ron. “Not even Fred and George. What did you use — the Invisibility Cloak?”

“The Invisibility Cloak wouldn’t have got me over that line,” said Harry slowly.

“Oh right,” said Ron. “I thought you might’ve told me if it was the cloak … because it would’ve covered both of us, wouldn’t it? But you found another way, did you?”

“Listen,” said Harry, “I didn’t put my name in that goblet. Someone else must’ve done it.”

Ron raised his eyebrows.

“What would they do that for?”

“I dunno,” said Harry. He felt it would sound very melodra-matic to say, “To kill me.”

Ron’s eyebrows rose so high that they were in danger of disap-pearing into his hair.

“It’s okay, you know, you can tell me the truth,” he said. “If you don’t want everyone else to know, fine, but I don’t know why you’re bothering to lie, you didn’t get into trouble for it, did you? That friend of the Fat Lady’s, that Violet, she’s already told us all Dum-bledore’s letting you enter. A thousand Galleons prize money, eh? And you don’t have to do end-of-year tests either. …”

“I didn’t put my name in that goblet!” said Harry, starting to feel angry.

“Yeah, okay,” said Ron, in exactly the same sceptical tone as Cedric. “Only you said this morning you’d have done it last night, and no one would’ve seen you. … I’m not stupid, you know.”

“You’re doing a really good impression of it,” Harry snapped.

“Yeah?” said Ron, and there was no trace of a grin, forced or oth-erwise, on his face now. “You want to get to bed, Harry. I expect you’ll need to be up early tomorrow for a photo-call or something.”

He wrenched the hangings shut around his four-poster, leaving Harry standing there by the door, staring at the dark red velvet cur-tains, now hiding one of the few people he had been sure would be-lieve him.

Chapter 18 The Weighing of the Wands

When Harry woke up on Sunday morning, it took him a moment to remember why he felt so miserable and wor-ried. Then the memory of the previous night rolled over him. He sat up and ripped back the curtains of his own four-poster, intend-ing to talk to Ron, to force Ron to believe him — only to find that Ron's bed was empty; he had obviously gone down to breakfast.

Harry dressed and went down the spiral staircase into the com-mon room. The moment he appeared, the people who had already finished breakfast broke into applause again. The prospect of going down into the Great Hall and facing the rest of the Gryffindors, all treating him like some sort of hero, was not inviting; it was that, however, or stay here and allow himself to be cornered by the Creevey brothers, who were both beckoning frantically to him to join them. He walked resolutely over to the portrait hole, pushed it open, climbed out of it, and found himself face-to-face with Hermione.

"Hello," she said, holding up a stack of toast, which she was car-rying in a napkin. "I brought you this. … Want to go for a walk?"

"Good idea," said Harry gratefully.

They went downstairs, crossed the entrance hall quickly without looking in at the Great Hall, and were soon striding across the lawn toward the lake, where the Durmstrang ship was moored, reflected blackly in the water. It was a chilly morning, and they kept moving, munching their toast, as Harry told Hermione exactly what had happened after he had left the Gryffindor table the night before. To his immense relief, Hermione accepted his story without question.

"Well, of course I knew you hadn't entered yourself," she said when he'd finished telling her about the scene in the chamber off the Hall. "The look on your face when Dumbledore read out your name! But

the question is, who did put it in? Because Moody's right, Harry … I don't think any student could have done it … they'd never be able to fool the Goblet, or get over Dumbledore's —"

"Have you seen Ron?" Harry interrupted.

Hermione hesitated.

"Erm … yes … he was at breakfast," she said.

"Does he still think I entered myself?"

"Well … no, I don't think so … not really," said Hermione awkwardly.

"What's that supposed to mean, 'not really'?"

"Oh Harry, isn't it obvious?" Hermione said despairingly. "He's jealous!"

"Jealous?" Harry said incredulously. "Jealous of what? He wants to make a prat of himself in front of the whole school, does he?"

"Look," said Hermione patiently, "it's always you who gets all the attention, you know it is. I know it's not your fault," she added quickly, seeing Harry open his mouth furiously. "I know you don't ask for it … but — well — you know, Ron's got all those brothers to compete against at home, and you're his best friend, and you're really famous — he's always shunted to one side whenever people see you, and he puts up with it, and he never mentions it, but I suppose this is just one time too many. …"

"Great," said Harry bitterly. "Really great. Tell him from me I'll swap any time he wants. Tell him from me he's welcome to it. … People gawping at my forehead everywhere I go. …"

"I'm not telling him anything," Hermione said shortly. "Tell him yourself. It's the only way to sort this out."

"I'm not running around after him trying to make him grow up!" Harry said, so loudly that several owls in a nearby tree took flight in alarm. "Maybe he'll believe I'm not enjoying myself once I've got my neck broken or —"

"That's not funny," said Hermione quietly. "That's not funny at all." She looked extremely anxious. "Harry, I've been thinking — you know what we've got to do, don't you? Straight away, the mo-ment we get back to the castle?"

"Yeah, give Ron a good kick up the —"

"Write to Sirius. You've got to tell him what's happened. He asked you to keep him posted on everything that's going on at Hogwarts. … It's almost as if he expected something like this to happen. I brought some parchment and a quill out with me —"

"Come off it," said Harry, looking around to check that they couldn't be overheard, but the grounds were quite deserted. "He came back to the country just because my scar twinged. He'll prob-ably come bursting right into the castle if I tell him someone's en-tered me in the Triwizard Tournament —"

"He'd want you to tell him," said Hermione sternly. "He's going to find out anyway —"

"How?"

"Harry, this isn't going to be kept quiet," said Hermione, very seriously. "This tournament's famous, and you're famous. I'll be really surprised if there isn't anything in the Daily Prophet about you competing. … You're already in half the books about You-Know-Who, you know … and Sirius would rather hear it from you, I know he would."

"Okay, okay, I'll write to him," said Harry, throwing his last piece of toast into the lake. They both stood and watched it floating there for a

moment, before a large tentacle rose out of the water and scooped it beneath the surface. Then they returned to the castle.

“Whose owl am I going to use?” Harry said as they climbed the stairs. “He told me not to use Hedwig again.”

“Ask Ron if you can borrow —”

“I’m not asking Ron for anything,” Harry said flatly.

“Well, borrow one of the school owls, then, anyone can use them,” said Hermione.

They went up to the Owlery Hermione gave Harry a piece of parchment, a quill, and a bottle of ink, then strolled around the long lines of perches, looking at all the different owls, while Harry sat down against a wall and wrote his letter.

Dear Sirius,

You told me to keep you posted on what’s happening at Hog-warts, so here goes — I don’t know if you’ve heard, but the Tri-wizard Tournament’s happening this year and on Saturday night I got picked as a fourth champion. I don’t know who put my name in the Goblet of Fire, because I didn’t. The other Hog-warts champion is Cedric Diggory, from Hufflepuff.

He paused at this point, thinking. He had an urge to say some-thing about the large weight of anxiety that seemed to have settled inside his chest since last night, but he couldn’t think how to trans-late this into words, so he simply dipped his quill back into the ink bottle and wrote,Hope you’re okay, and Buckbeak — Harry“Finished,” he told Hermione, getting to his feet and brushing straw off his robes. At this, Hedwig came fluttering down onto his shoulder and held out her leg.

“I can’t use you,” Harry told her, looking around for the school owls. “I’ve got to use one of these. …”

Hedwig gave a very loud hoot and took off so suddenly that her talons cut into his shoulder. She kept her back to Harry all the time he was tying his letter to the leg of a large barn owl. When the barn owl had flown off, Harry reached out to stroke Hedwig, but she clicked her beak furiously and soared up into the rafters out of reach.

“First Ron, then you,” said Harry angrily. “This isn’t my fault.”

If Harry had thought that matters would improve once everyone got used to the idea of him being champion, the following day showed him how mistaken he was. He could no longer avoid the rest of the school once he was back at lessons — and it was clear that the rest of the school, just like the Gryffindors, thought Harry had entered himself for the tournament. Unlike the Gryffindors, however, they did not seem impressed.

The Hufflepuffs, who were usually on excellent terms with the Gryffindors, had turned remarkably cold toward the whole lot of them. One Herbology lesson was enough to demonstrate this. It was plain that the Hufflepuffs felt that Harry had stolen their champion’s glory; a feeling exacerbated, perhaps, by the fact that Hufflepuff House very rarely got any glory, and that Cedric was one of the few who had ever given them any, having beaten Gryffindor once at Quidditch. Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley, with whom Harry normally got on very well, did not talk to him even though they were repotting Bouncing Bulbs at the same tray — though they did laugh rather unpleasantly when one of the Bouncing Bulbs wriggled free from Harry’s grip and smacked him hard in the face. Ron wasn’t talking to Harry either. Hermione sat between them, making very forced conversation, but though both answered her normally, they avoided making eye con-tact with each other. Harry thought even Professor Sprout seemed distant with him — but then, she was Head of Hufflepuff House.

He would have been looking forward to seeing Hagrid under normal circumstances, but Care of Magical Creatures meant seeing the

Slytherins too — the first time he would come face-to-face with them since becoming champion.

Predictably, Malfoy arrived at Hagrid's cabin with his familiar sneer firmly in place.

"Ah, look, boys, it's the champion," he said to Crabbe and Goyle the moment he got within earshot of Harry. "Got your autograph books? Better get a signature now, because I doubt he's going to be around much longer. … Half the Triwizard champions have died … how long d'you reckon you're going to last, Potter? Ten minutes into the first task's my bet."

Crabbe and Goyle guffawed sycophantically, but Malfoy had to stop there, because Hagrid emerged from the back of his cabin balancing a teetering tower of crates, each containing a very large Blast-Ended Skrewt. To the class's horror, Hagrid proceeded to ex-plain that the reason the skrewts had been killing one another was an excess of pent-up energy, and that the solution would be for each student to fix a leash on a skrewt and take it for a short walk. The only good thing about this plan was that it distracted Malfoy completely.

"Take this thing for a walk?" he repeated in disgust, staring into one of the boxes. "And where exactly are we supposed to fix the leash? Around the sting, the blasting end, or the sucker?"

"Roun' the middle," said Hagrid, demonstrating. "Er — yeh might want ter put on yer dragon-hide gloves, jus' as an extra pre-caution, like. Harry — you come here an' help me with this big one. …"

Hagrid's real intention, however, was to talk to Harry away from the rest of the class. He waited until everyone else had set off with their skrewts, then turned to Harry and said, very seriously, "So — yer competin', Harry. In the tournament. School champion."

"One of the champions," Harry corrected him.

Hagrid's beetle-black eyes looked very anxious under his wild eyebrows.

"No idea who put yeh in fer it, Harry?"

"You believe I didn't do it, then?" said Harry, concealing with difficulty the rush of gratitude he felt at Hagrid's words.

" 'Course I do," Hagrid grunted. "Yeh say it wasn' you, an' I be-lieve yeh — an' Dumbledore believes yer, an' all."

"Wish I knew who did do it," said Harry bitterly.

The pair of them looked out over the lawn; the class was widely scattered now, and all in great difficulty. The skrewts were now over three feet long, and extremely powerful. No longer shell-less and colorless, they had developed a kind of thick, grayish, shiny armor. They looked like a cross between giant scorpions and elongated crabs — but still without recognizable heads or eyes. They had be-come immensely strong and very hard to control.

"Look like they're havin' fun, don' they?" Hagrid said happily. Harry assumed he was talking about the skrewts, because his class-mates certainly weren't; every now and then, with an alarming bang, one of the skrewts' ends would explode, causing it to shoot forward several yards, and more than one person was being dragged along on their stomach, trying desperately to get back on their feet.

"Ah, I don' know, Harry," Hagrid sighed suddenly, looking back down at him with a worried expression on his face. "School cham-pion … everythin' seems ter happen ter you, doesn' it?"

Harry didn't answer. Yes, everything did seem to happen to him … that was more or less what Hermione had said as they had walked around the lake, and that was the reason, according to her, that Ron was no longer talking to him.

The next few days were some of Harry's worst at Hogwarts. The closest he had ever come to feeling like this had been during those months, in his second year, when a large part of the school had suspected him of attacking his fellow students. But Ron had been on his side then. He thought he could have coped with the rest of the school's behavior if he could just have had Ron back as a friend, but he wasn't going to try and persuade Ron to talk to him if Ron didn't want to. Nevertheless, it was lonely with dislike pouring in on him from all sides.

He could understand the Hufflepuffs' attitude, even if he didn't like it; they had their own champion to support. He expected nothing less than vicious insults from the Slytherins — he was highly unpopular there and always had been, because he had helped Gryffindor beat them so often, both at Quidditch and in the Inter-House Championship. But he had hoped the Ravenclaws might have found it in their hearts to support him as much as Cedric. He was wrong, however. Most Ravenclaws seemed to think that he had been desperate to earn himself a bit more fame by trick-ing the goblet into accepting his name.

Then there was the fact that Cedric looked the part of a cham-pion so much more than he did. Exceptionally handsome, with his straight nose, dark hair, and gray eyes, it was hard to say who was receiving more admiration these days, Cedric or Viktor Krum. Harry actually saw the same sixth-year girls who had been so keen to get Krum's autograph begging Cedric to sign their school bags one lunchtime.

Meanwhile there was no reply from Sirius, Hedwig was refusing to come anywhere near him, Professor Trelawney was predicting his death with even more certainty than usual, and he did so badly at Summoning Charms in Professor Flitwick's class that he was given extra homework — the only person to get any, apart from Neville.

"It's really not that difficult, Harry," Hermione tried to reassure him as they left Flitwick's class — she had been making objects zoom across

the room to her all lesson, as though she were some sort of weird magnet for board dusters, wastepaper baskets, and lunascopes. “You just weren’t concentrating properly —”

“Wonder why that was,” said Harry darkly as Cedric Diggory walked past, surrounded by a large group of simpering girls, all of whom looked at Harry as though he were a particularly large Blast-Ended Skrewt. “Still — never mind, eh? Double Potions to look forward to this afternoon. …”

Double Potions was always a horrible experience, but these days it was nothing short of torture. Being shut in a dungeon for an hour and a half with Snape and the Slytherins, all of whom seemed determined to punish Harry as much as possible for daring to be-come school champion, was about the most unpleasant thing Harry could imagine. He had already struggled through one Fri-day’s worth, with Hermione sitting next to him intoning “ignore them, ignore them, ignore them” under her breath, and he could-n’t see why today should be any better.

When he and Hermione arrived at Snape’s dungeon after lunch, they found the Slytherins waiting outside, each and every one of them wearing a large badge on the front of his or her robes. For one wild moment Harry thought they were S.P.E.W. badges — then he saw that they all bore the same message, in luminous red letters that burnt brightly in the dimly lit underground passage:Support CEDRIC DIGGORY —

The REAL Hogwarts Champion

“Like them, Potter?” said Malfoy loudly as Harry approached. “And this isn’t all they do — look!”

He pressed his badge into his chest, and the message upon it vanished, to be replaced by another one, which glowed green:POTTER STINKS

The Slytherins howled with laughter. Each of them pressed their badges too, until the message POTTER STINKS was shin-ing brightly all around Harry. He felt the heat rise in his face and neck.

“Oh very funny,” Hermione said sarcastically to Pansy Parkinson and her gang of Slytherin girls, who were laughing harder than anyone, “really witty.”

Ron was standing against the wall with Dean and Seamus. He wasn’t laughing, but he wasn’t sticking up for Harry either.

“Want one, Granger?” said Malfoy, holding out a badge to Hermione. “I’ve got loads. But don’t touch my hand, now. I’ve just washed it, you see; don’t want a Mudblood sliming it up.”

Some of the anger Harry had been feeling for days and days seemed to burst through a dam in his chest. He had reached for his wand before he’d thought what he was doing. People all around them scrambled out of the way, backing down the corridor.

“Harry!” Hermione said warningly.

“Go on, then, Potter,” Malfoy said quietly, drawing out his own wand. “Moody’s not here to look after you now — do it, if you’ve got the guts —”

For a split second, they looked into each other’s eyes, then, at ex-actly the same time, both acted.

“Furnunculus!” Harry yelled.

“Densaugeo!” screamed Malfoy.

Jets of light shot from both wands, hit each other in midair, and ricocheted off at angles — Harry’s hit Goyle in the face, and Mal-foy’s hit Hermione. Goyle bellowed and put his hands to his nose, where

great ugly boils were springing up — Hermione, whimper-ing in panic, was clutching her mouth.

“Hermione!”

Ron had hurried forward to see what was wrong with her; Harry turned and saw Ron dragging Hermione’s hand away from her face. It wasn’t a pretty sight. Hermione’s front teeth — already larger than average — were now growing at an alarming rate; she was looking more and more like a beaver as her teeth elongated, past her bottom lip, toward her chin — panic-stricken, she felt them and let out a terrified cry.

“And what is all this noise about?” said a soft, deadly voice.

Snape had arrived. The Slytherins clamored to give their explanations; Snape pointed a long yellow finger at Malfoy and said, “Explain.”

“Potter attacked me, sir —”

“We attacked each other at the same time!” Harry shouted.

“— and he hit Goyle — look —”

Snape examined Goyle, whose face now resembled something that would have been at home in a book on poisonous fungi.

“Hospital wing, Goyle,” Snape said calmly.

“Malfoy got Hermione!” Ron said. “Look!”

He forced Hermione to show Snape her teeth — she was doing her best to hide them with her hands, though this was difficult as they had now grown down past her collar. Pansy Parkinson and the other Slytherin girls were doubled up with silent giggles, pointing at Hermione from behind Snape’s back.

Snape looked coldly at Hermione, then said, “I see no difference.”

Hermione let out a whimper; her eyes filled with tears, she turned on her heel and ran, ran all the way up the corridor and out of sight.

It was lucky, perhaps, that both Harry and Ron started shouting at Snape at the same time; lucky their voices echoed so much in the stone corridor, for in the confused din, it was impossible for him to hear exactly what they were calling him. He got the gist, however.

“Let’s see,” he said, in his silkiest voice. “Fifty points from Gryffindor and a detention each for Potter and Weasley. Now get inside, or it’ll be a week’s worth of detentions.”

Harry’s ears were ringing. The injustice of it made him want to curse Snape into a thousand slimy pieces. He passed Snape, walked with Ron to the back of the dungeon, and slammed his bag down onto the table. Ron was shaking with anger too — for a moment, it felt as though everything was back to normal between them, but then Ron turned and sat down with Dean and Seamus instead, leaving Harry alone at his table. On the other side of the dungeon, Malfoy turned his back on Snape and pressed his badge, smirking. POTTER STINKS flashed once more across the room.

Harry sat there staring at Snape as the lesson began, picturing horrific things happening to him. … If only he knew how to do the Cruciatus Curse … he’d have Snape flat on his back like that spider, jerking and twitching. …“Antidotes!” said Snape, looking around at them all, his cold black eyes glittering unpleasantly. “You should all have prepared your recipes now. I want you to brew them carefully, and then, we will be selecting someone on whom to test one. …”

Snape’s eyes met Harry’s, and Harry knew what was coming. Snape was going to poison him. Harry imagined picking up his cauldron, and sprinting to the front of the class, and bringing it down on Snape’s greasy head —And then a knock on the dungeon door burst in on Harry’s thoughts.

It was Colin Creevey; he edged into the room, beaming at Harry, and walked up to Snape's desk at the front of the room.

"Yes?" said Snape curtly.

"Please, sir, I'm supposed to take Harry Potter upstairs."

Snape stared down his hooked nose at Colin, whose smile faded from his eager face.

"Potter has another hour of Potions to complete," said Snape coldly. "He will come upstairs when this class is finished."

Colin went pink.

"Sir — sir, Mr. Bagman wants him," he said nervously. "All the champions have got to go, I think they want to take photo-graphs. …"

Harry would have given anything he owned to have stopped Colin saying those last few words. He chanced half a glance at Ron, but Ron was staring determinedly at the ceiling.

"Very well, very well," Snape snapped. "Potter, leave your things here, I want you back down here later to test your antidote."

"Please, sir — he's got to take his things with him," squeaked Colin. "All the champions —"

"Very well!" said Snape. "Potter — take your bag and get out of my sight!"

Harry swung his bag over his shoulder, got up, and headed for the door. As he walked through the Slytherin desks, POTTER STINKS flashed at him from every direction.

"It's amazing, isn't it, Harry?" said Colin, starting to speak the moment Harry had closed the dungeon door behind him. "Isn't it, though? You being champion?"

“Yeah, really amazing,” said Harry heavily as they set off toward the steps into the entrance hall. “What do they want photos for, Colin?”

“The Daily Prophet, I think!”

“Great,” said Harry dully. “Exactly what I need. More pub-licity.”

“Good luck!” said Colin when they had reached the right room. Harry knocked on the door and entered.

He was in a fairly small classroom; most of the desks had been pushed away to the back of the room, leaving a large space in the middle; three of them, however, had been placed end-to-end in front of the blackboard and covered with a long length of velvet. Five chairs had been set behind the velvet-covered desks, and Ludo Bagman was sitting in one of them, talking to a witch Harry had never seen before, who was wearing magenta robes.

Viktor Krum was standing moodily in a corner as usual and not talking to anybody. Cedric and Fleur were in conversation. Fleur looked a good deal happier than Harry had seen her so far; she kept throwing back her head so that her long silvery hair caught the light. A paunchy man, holding a large black camera that was smok-ing slightly, was watching Fleur out of the corner of his eye.

Bagman suddenly spotted Harry, got up quickly, and bounded forward.

“Ah, here he is! Champion number four! In you come, Harry, in you come … nothing to worry about, it’s just the wand weighing ceremony, the rest of the judges will be here in a moment —”

“Wand weighing?” Harry repeated nervously.

“We have to check that your wands are fully functional, no problems, you know, as they’re your most important tools in the tasks ahead,” said Bagman. “The expert’s upstairs now with Dum-bledore. And then

there's going to be a little photo shoot. This is Rita Skeeter," he added, gesturing toward the witch in magenta robes. "She's doing a small piece on the tournament for the Daily Prophet. …"

"Maybe not that small, Ludo," said Rita Skeeter, her eyes on Harry.

Her hair was set in elaborate and curiously rigid curls that con-trasted oddly with her heavy-jawed face. She wore jeweled specta-cles. The thick fingers clutching her crocodile-skin handbag ended in two-inch nails, painted crimson.

"I wonder if I could have a little word with Harry before we start?" she said to Bagman, but still gazing fixedly at Harry. "The youngest champion, you know … to add a bit of color?"

"Certainly!" cried Bagman. "That is — if Harry has no objection?"

"Er —" said Harry.

"Lovely," said Rita Skeeter, and in a second, her scarlet-taloned fingers had Harry's upper arm in a surprisingly strong grip, and she was steering him out of the room again and opening a nearby door.

"We don't want to be in there with all that noise," she said. "Let's see … ah, yes, this is nice and cozy."

It was a broom cupboard. Harry stared at her.

"Come along, dear — that's right — lovely," said Rita Skeeter again, perching herself precariously upon an upturned bucket, pushing Harry down onto a cardboard box, and closing the door, throwing them into darkness. "Let's see now …"

She unsnapped her crocodile-skin handbag and pulled out a handful of candles, which she lit with a wave of her wand and magicked into midair, so that they could see what they were doing.

“You won’t mind, Harry, if I use a Quick-Quotes Quill? It leaves me free to talk to you normally. …”

“A what?” said Harry.

Rita Skeeter’s smile widened. Harry counted three gold teeth. She reached again into her crocodile bag and drew out a long acid-green quill and a roll of parchment, which she stretched out between them on a crate of Mrs. Skower’s All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover. She put the tip of the green quill into her mouth, sucked it for a moment with apparent relish, then placed it upright on the parchment, where it stood balanced on its point, quivering slightly.

“Testing … my name is Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter.”

Harry looked down quickly at the quill. The moment Rita Skeeter had spoken, the green quill had started to scribble, skid-ding across the parchment:Attractive blonde Rita Skeeter, forty-three, whose savage quill has punctured many inflated reputations —“Lovely,” said Rita Skeeter, yet again, and she ripped the top piece of parchment off, crumpled it up, and stuffed it into her handbag. Now she leaned toward Harry and said, “So, Harry … what made you decide to enter the Triwizard Tournament?”

“Er —” said Harry again, but he was distracted by the quill. Even though he wasn’t speaking, it was dashing across the parch-ment, and in its wake he could make out a fresh sentence:An ugly scar, souvenir of a tragic past, disfigures the otherwise charming face of Harry Potter, whose eyes —“Ignore the quill, Harry,” said Rita Skeeter firmly. Reluctantly, Harry looked up at her instead. “Now — why did you decide to enter the tournament, Harry?”

“I didn’t,” said Harry. “I don’t know how my name got into the Goblet of Fire. I didn’t put it in there.”

Rita Skeeter raised one heavily penciled eyebrow.

“Come now, Harry, there’s no need to be scared of getting into trouble. We all know you shouldn’t really have entered at all. But don’t worry about that. Our readers love a rebel.”

“But I didn’t enter,” Harry repeated. “I don’t know who —”

“How do you feel about the tasks ahead?” said Rita Skeeter. “Excited? Nervous?”

“I haven’t really thought … yeah, nervous, I suppose,” said Harry. His insides squirmed uncomfortably as he spoke.

“Champions have died in the past, haven’t they?” said Rita Skeeter briskly. “Have you thought about that at all?”

“Well … they say it’s going to be a lot safer this year,” said Harry.

The quill whizzed across the parchment between them, back and forward as though it were skating.

“Of course, you’ve looked death in the face before, haven’t you?” said Rita Skeeter, watching him closely. “How would you say that’s affected you?”

“Er,” said Harry, yet again.

“Do you think that the trauma in your past might have made you keen to prove yourself? To live up to your name? Do you think that perhaps you were tempted to enter the Triwizard Tournament because —”

“I didn’t enter,” said Harry, starting to feel irritated.

“Can you remember your parents at all?” said Rita Skeeter, talk-ing over him.

“No,” said Harry.

“How do you think they’d feel if they knew you were competing in the Triwizard Tournament? Proud? Worried? Angry?”

Harry was feeling really annoyed now. How on earth was he to know how his parents would feel if they were alive? He could feel Rita Skeeter watching him very intently. Frowning, he avoided her gaze and looked down at words the quill had just written:Tears fill those startling green eyes as our conversation turns to the parents he can barely remember.

“I have NOT got tears in my eyes!” said Harry loudly.

Before Rita Skeeter could say a word, the door of the broom cupboard was pulled open. Harry looked around, blinking in the bright light. Albus Dumbledore stood there, looking down at both of them, squashed into the cupboard.

“Dumbledore!” cried Rita Skeeter, with every appearance of delight — but Harry noticed that her quill and the parchment had suddenly vanished from the box of Magical Mess Remover, and Rita’s clawed fingers were hastily snapping shut the clasp of her crocodile-skin bag. “How are you?” she said, standing up and hold-ing out one of her large, mannish hands to Dumbledore. “I hope you saw my piece over the summer about the International Con-federation of Wizards’ Conference?”

“Enchantingly nasty,” said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. “I particularly enjoyed your description of me as an obsolete dingbat.”

Rita Skeeter didn’t look remotely abashed.

“I was just making the point that some of your ideas are a little old-fashioned, Dumbledore, and that many wizards in the street —”

“I will be delighted to hear the reasoning behind the rudeness, Rita,” said Dumbledore, with a courteous bow and a smile, “but I’m afraid we will have to discuss the matter later. The Weighing of the Wands

is about to start, and it cannot take place if one of our champions is hidden in a broom cupboard."

Very glad to get away from Rita Skeeter, Harry hurried back into the room. The other champions were now sitting in chairs near the door, and he sat down quickly next to Cedric, looking up at the velvet-covered table, where four of the five judges were now sit-ting — Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Mr. Crouch, and Ludo Bagman. Rita Skeeter settled herself down in a corner; Harry saw her slip the parchment out of her bag again, spread it on her knee, suck the end of the Quick-Quotes Quill, and place it once more on the parchment.

"May I introduce Mr. Ollivander?" said Dumbledore, taking his place at the judges' table and talking to the champions. "He will be checking your wands to ensure that they are in good condition be-fore the tournament."

Harry looked around, and with a jolt of surprise saw an old wiz-ard with large, pale eyes standing quietly by the window. Harry had met Mr. Ollivander before — he was the wand-maker from whom Harry had bought his own wand over three years ago in Diagon Alley.

"Mademoiselle Delacour, could we have you first, please?" said Mr. Ollivander, stepping into the empty space in the middle of the room.

Fleur Delacour swept over to Mr. Ollivander and handed him her wand.

"Hmmm …" he said.

He twirled the wand between his long fingers like a baton and it emitted a number of pink and gold sparks. Then he held it close to his eyes and examined it carefully.

"Yes," he said quietly, "nine and a half inches … inflexible … rosewood … and containing … dear me …"

“An ’air from ze ’ead of a veela,” said Fleur. “One of my grandmuzzer’s.”

So Fleur was part veela, thought Harry, making a mental note to tell Ron … then he remembered that Ron wasn’t speaking to him.

“Yes,” said Mr. Ollivander, “yes, I’ve never used veela hair my-self, of course. I find it makes for rather temperamental wands … however, to each his own, and if this suits you …”

Mr. Ollivander ran his fingers along the wand, apparently check-ing for scratches or bumps; then he muttered, “Orchideous!” and a bunch of flowers burst from the wand tip.

“Very well, very well, it’s in fine working order,” said Mr. Olli-vander, scooping up the flowers and handing them to Fleur with her wand. “Mr. Diggory, you next.”

Fleur glided back to her seat, smiling at Cedric as he passed her.

“Ah, now, this is one of mine, isn’t it?” said Mr. Ollivander, with much more enthusiasm, as Cedric handed over his wand. “Yes, I re-member it well. Containing a single hair from the tail of a particu-larly fine male unicorn … must have been seventeen hands; nearly gored me with his horn after I plucked his tail. Twelve and a quar-ter inches … ash … pleasantly springy. It’s in fine condition. … You treat it regularly?”

“Polished it last night,” said Cedric, grinning.

Harry looked down at his own wand. He could see finger marks all over it. He gathered a fistful of robe from his knee and tried to rub it clean surreptitiously. Several gold sparks shot out of the end of it. Fleur Delacour gave him a very patronizing look, and he desisted.

Mr. Ollivander sent a stream of silver smoke rings across the room from the tip of Cedric’s wand, pronounced himself satisfied, and then

said, “Mr. Krum, if you please.”

Viktor Krum got up and slouched, round-shouldered and duck-footed, toward Mr. Ollivander. He thrust out his wand and stood scowling, with his hands in the pockets of his robes.

“Hmm,” said Mr. Ollivander, “this is a Gregorovitch creation, unless I’m much mistaken? A fine wand-maker, though the styling is never quite what I … however …”

He lifted the wand and examined it minutely, turning it over and over before his eyes.

“Yes … hornbeam and dragon heartstring?” he shot at Krum, who nodded. “Rather thicker than one usually sees … quite rigid … ten and a quarter inches … Avis!”

The hornbeam wand let off a blast like a gun, and a number of small, twittering birds flew out of the end and through the open window into the watery sunlight.

“Good,” said Mr. Ollivander, handing Krum back his wand. “Which leaves … Mr. Potter.”

Harry got to his feet and walked past Krum to Mr. Ollivander. He handed over his wand.

“Aaaah, yes,” said Mr. Ollivander, his pale eyes suddenly gleam-ing. “Yes, yes, yes. How well I remember.”

Harry could remember too. He could remember it as though it had happened yesterday. …Four summers ago, on his eleventh birthday, he had entered Mr. Ollivander’s shop with Hagrid to buy a wand. Mr. Ollivander had taken his measurements and then started handing him wands to try. Harry had waved what felt like every wand in the shop, until at last he had found the one that suited him — this one, which was made of holly, eleven inches long, and contained a single

feather from the tail of a phoenix. Mr. Ollivander had been very surprised that Harry had been so compatible with this wand. “Curious,” he had said, “curious,” and not until Harry asked what was curious had Mr. Ollivander explained that the phoenix feather in Harry’s wand had come from the same bird that had supplied the core of Lord Voldemort’s.

Harry had never shared this piece of information with anybody. He was very fond of his wand, and as far as he was concerned its relation to Voldemort’s wand was something it couldn’t help — rather as he couldn’t help being related to Aunt Petunia. However, he really hoped that Mr. Ollivander wasn’t about to tell the room about it. He had a funny feeling Rita Skeeter’s Quick-Quotes Quill might just explode with excitement if he did.

Mr. Ollivander spent much longer examining Harry’s wand than anyone else’s. Eventually, however, he made a fountain of wine shoot out of it, and handed it back to Harry, announcing that it was still in perfect condition.

“Thank you all,” said Dumbledore, standing up at the judges’ table. “You may go back to your lessons now — or perhaps it would be quicker just to go down to dinner, as they are about to end —”

Feeling that at last something had gone right today, Harry got up to leave, but the man with the black camera jumped up and cleared his throat.

“Photos, Dumbledore, photos!” cried Bagman excitedly. “All the judges and champions, what do you think, Rita?”

“Er — yes, let’s do those first,” said Rita Skeeter, whose eyes were upon Harry again. “And then perhaps some individual shots.”

The photographs took a long time. Madame Maxime cast every-one else into shadow wherever she stood, and the photographer couldn’t stand far enough back to get her into the frame; eventually she had to

sit while everyone else stood around her. Karkaroff kept twirling his goatee around his finger to give it an extra curl; Krum, whom Harry would have thought would have been used to this sort of thing, skulked, half-hidden, at the back of the group. The photographer seemed keenest to get Fleur at the front, but Rita Skeeter kept hurrying forward and dragging Harry into greater prominence. Then she insisted on separate shots of all the champi-ons. At last, they were free to go.

Harry went down to dinner. Hermione wasn't there — he sup-posed she was still in the hospital wing having her teeth fixed. He ate alone at the end of the table, then returned to Gryffindor Tower, thinking of all the extra work on Summoning Charms that he had to do. Up in the dormitory, he came across Ron.

"You've had an owl," said Ron brusquely the moment he walked in. He was pointing at Harry's pillow. The school barn owl was waiting for him there.

"Oh — right," said Harry.

"And we've got to do our detentions tomorrow night, Snape's dungeon," said Ron.

He then walked straight out of the room, not looking at Harry. For a moment, Harry considered going after him — he wasn't sure whether he wanted to talk to him or hit him, both seemed quite ap-pealing — but the lure of Sirius's answer was too strong. Harry strode over to the barn owl, took the letter off its leg, and unrolled it.

Harry —

I can't say everything I would like to in a letter, it's too risky in case the owl is intercepted — we need to talk face-to-face. Can you ensure that you are alone by the fire in Gryffindor Tower at one o'clock in the morning on the 22nd of November?

I know better than anyone that you can look after yourself and while you're around Dumbledore and Moody I don't think anyone will be able to hurt you. However, someone seems to be having a good try. Entering you in that tournament would have been very risky, especially right under Dumbledore's nose.

Be on the watch, Harry. I still want to hear about anything unusual. Let me know about the 22nd of November as quickly as you can.

Sirius

Chapter 19 The Hungarian Horntail

The prospect of talking face-to-face with Sirius was all that sustained Harry over the next fortnight, the only bright spot on a horizon that had never looked darker. The shock of finding himself school champion had worn off slightly now, and the fear of what was facing him had started to sink in. The first task was draw-ing steadily nearer; he felt as though it were crouching ahead of him like some horrific monster, barring his path. He had never suf-fered nerves like these; they were way beyond anything he had ex-perienced before a Quidditch match, not even his last one against Slytherin, which had decided who would win the Quidditch Cup. Harry was finding it hard to think about the future at all; he felt as though his whole life had been leading up to, and would finish with, the first task. …Admittedly, he didn't see how Sirius was going to make him feel any better about having to perform an unknown piece of difficult and dangerous magic in front of hundreds of people, but the mere sight of a friendly face would be something at the moment. Harry wrote back to Sirius saying that he would be beside the common room fire at the time Sirius had suggested, and he and Hermione spent a long time going over plans for forcing any stragglers out of the common room on the night in question. If the worst came to the worst, they were going to drop a bag of Dungbombs, but they hoped they wouldn't have to resort to that — Filch would skin them alive.

In the meantime, life became even worse for Harry within the confines of the castle, for Rita Skeeter had published her piece about the Triwizard Tournament, and it had turned out to be not so much a report on the tournament as a highly colored life story of Harry. Much of the front page had been given over to a picture of Harry; the article (continuing on pages two, six, and seven) had been all about Harry, the names of the Beauxbatons and Durm-strang champions (misspelled) had been squashed into the last line of the article, and Cedric hadn't been mentioned at all.

The article had appeared ten days ago, and Harry still got a sick, burning feeling of shame in his stomach every time he thought about it. Rita Skeeter had reported him saying an awful lot of things that he couldn't remember ever saying in his life, let alone in that broom cupboard.

I suppose I get my strength from my parents. I know they'd be very proud of me if they could see me now. … Yes, sometimes at night I still cry about them, I'm not ashamed to admit it. … I know nothing will hurt me during the tournament, because they're watching over me. … But Rita Skeeter had gone even further than transforming his "er's" into long, sickly sentences: She had interviewed other people about him too.

Harry has at last found love at Hogwarts. His close friend, Colin Creevey, says that Harry is rarely seen out of the company of one Hermione Granger, a stunningly pretty Muggle-born girl who, like Harry, is one of the top students in the school.

From the moment the article had appeared, Harry had had to endure people — Slytherins, mainly — quoting it at him as he passed and making sneering comments.

"Want a hanky, Potter, in case you start crying in Transfig-uration?"

"Since when have you been one of the top students in the school, Potter? Or is this a school you and Longbottom have set up together?"

"Hey — Harry!"

"Yeah, that's right!" Harry found himself shouting as he wheeled around in the corridor, having had just about enough. "I've just been crying my eyes out over my dead mum, and I'm just off to do a bit more. …"

"No — it was just — you dropped your quill."

It was Cho. Harry felt the color rising in his face.

“Oh — right — sorry,” he muttered, taking the quill back.

“Er … good luck on Tuesday,” she said. “I really hope you do well.”

Which left Harry feeling extremely stupidHermione had come in for her fair share of unpleasantness too, but she hadn’t yet started yelling at innocent bystanders; in fact, Harry was full of admiration for the way she was handling the situation.

“Stunningly pretty? Her?” Pansy Parkinson had shrieked the first time she had come face-to-face with Hermione after Rita’s article had appeared. “What was she judging against — a chipmunk?”

“Ignore it,” Hermione said in a dignified voice, holding her head in the air and stalking past the sniggering Slytherin girls as though she couldn’t hear them. “Just ignore it, Harry.”

But Harry couldn’t ignore it. Ron hadn’t spoken to him at all since he had told him about Snape’s detentions. Harry had half hoped they would make things up during the two hours they were forced to pickle rats’ brains in Snape’s dungeon, but that had been the day Rita’s article had appeared, which seemed to have con-firmed Ron’s belief that Harry was really enjoying all the attention.

Hermione was furious with the pair of them; she went from one to the other, trying to force them to talk to each other, but Harry was adamant: He would talk to Ron again only if Ron admitted that Harry hadn’t put his name in the Goblet of Fire and apolo-gized for calling him a liar.

“I didn’t start this,” Harry said stubbornly. “It’s his problem.”

“You miss him!” Hermione said impatiently. “And I know he misses you —”

“Miss him?” said Harry. “I don’t miss him. …”

But this was a downright lie. Harry liked Hermione very much, but she just wasn’t the same as Ron. There was much less laughter and a lot more hanging around in the library when Hermione was your best friend. Harry still hadn’t mastered Summoning Charms, he seemed to have developed something of a block about them, and Hermione insisted that learning the theory would help. They consequently spent a lot of time poring over books during their lunchtimes.

Viktor Krum was in the library an awful lot too, and Harry wondered what he was up to. Was he studying, or was he looking for things to help him through the first task? Hermione often com-plained about Krum being there — not that he ever bothered them — but because groups of giggling girls often turned up to spy on him from behind bookshelves, and Hermione found the noise distracting.

“He’s not even good-looking!” she muttered angrily, glaring at Krum’s sharp profile. “They only like him because he’s famous! They wouldn’t look twice at him if he couldn’t do that Wonky-Faint thing —”

“Wronski Feint,” said Harry, through gritted teeth. Quite apart from liking to get Quidditch terms correct, it caused him another pang to imagine Ron’s expression if he could have heard Hermione talking about Wonky-Faints.

It is a strange thing, but when you are dreading something, and would give anything to slow down time, it has a disobliging habit of speeding up. The days until the first task seemed to slip by as though someone had fixed the clocks to work at double speed. Harry’s feeling of barely controlled panic was with him wherever he went, as everpresent as the snide comments about the Daily Prophet article.

On the Saturday before the first task, all students in the third year and above were permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade. Hermione told Harry that it would do him good to get away from the castle for a bit, and Harry didn’t need much persuasion.

“What about Ron, though?” he said. “Don’t you want to go with him?”

“Oh … well …” Hermione went slightly pink. “I thought we might meet up with him in the Three Broomsticks. …”

“No,” said Harry flatly.

“Oh Harry, this is so stupid —”

“I’ll come, but I’m not meeting Ron, and I’m wearing my Invis-ibility Cloak.”

“Oh all right then …” Hermione snapped, “but I hate talking to you in that cloak, I never know if I’m looking at you or not.”

So Harry put on his Invisibility Cloak in the dormitory, went back downstairs, and together he and Hermione set off for Hogsmeade.

Harry felt wonderfully free under the cloak; he watched other students walking past them as they entered the village, most of them sporting Support Cedric Diggory! badges, but no horrible re-marks came his way for a change, and nobody was quoting that stupid article.

“People keep looking at me now,” said Hermione grumpily as they came out of Honeydukes Sweetshop later, eating large cream-filled chocolates. “They think I’m talking to myself.”

“Don’t move your lips so much then.”

“Come on, please just take off your cloak for a bit, no one’s go-ing to bother you here.”

“Oh yeah?” said Harry. “Look behind you.”

Rita Skeeter and her photographer friend had just emerged from the Three Broomsticks pub. Talking in low voices, they passed right by Hermione without looking at her. Harry backed into the wall of Honeydukes to stop Rita Skeeter from hitting him with her crocodile-

skin handbag. When they were gone, Harry said, “She’s staying in the village. I bet she’s coming to watch the first task.”

As he said it, his stomach flooded with a wave of molten panic. He didn’t mention this; he and Hermione hadn’t discussed what was coming in the first task much; he had the feeling she didn’t want to think about it.

“She’s gone,” said Hermione, looking right through Harry to-ward the end of the street. “Why don’t we go and have a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks, it’s a bit cold, isn’t it? You don’t have to talk to Ron!” she added irritably, correctly interpreting his silence.

The Three Broomsticks was packed, mainly with Hogwarts stu-dents enjoying their free afternoon, but also with a variety of mag-ical people Harry rarely saw anywhere else. Harry supposed that as Hogsmeade was the only all-wizard village in Britain, it was a bit of a haven for creatures like hags, who were not as adept as wizards at disguising themselves.

It was very hard to move through crowds in the Invisibility Cloak, in case you accidentally trod on someone, which tended to lead to awkward questions. Harry edged slowly toward a spare table in the corner while Hermione went to buy drinks. On his way through the pub, Harry spotted Ron, who was sitting with Fred, George, and Lee Jordan. Resisting the urge to give Ron a good hard poke in the back of the head, he finally reached the table and sat down at it.

Hermione joined him a moment later and slipped him a butter-beer under his cloak.

“I look like such an idiot, sitting here on my own,” she mut-tered. “Lucky I brought something to do.”

And she pulled out a notebook in which she had been keeping a record of S.P.E.W. members. Harry saw his and Ron’s names at the top of the very short list. It seemed a long time ago that they had sat

making up those predictions together, and Hermione had turned up and appointed them secretary and treasurer.

“You know, maybe I should try and get some of the villagers in-volved in S.P.E.W.,” Hermione said thoughtfully, looking around the pub.

“Yeah, right,” said Harry. He took a swig of butterbeer under his cloak. “Hermione, when are you going to give up on this spew stuff?”

“When house-elves have decent wages and working conditions!” she hissed back. “You know, I’m starting to think it’s time for more direct action. I wonder how you get into the school kitchens?”

“No idea, ask Fred and George,” said Harry.

Hermione lapsed into thoughtful silence, while Harry drank his butterbeer, watching the people in the pub. All of them looked cheerful and relaxed. Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbot were swapping Chocolate Frog cards at a nearby table; both of them sporting Support Cedric Diggory! badges on their cloaks. Right over by the door he saw Cho and a large group of her Ravenclaw friends. She wasn’t wearing a Cedric badge though. … This cheered up Harry very slightly. …What wouldn’t he have given to be one of these people, sitting around laughing and talking, with nothing to worry about but homework? He imagined how it would have felt to be here if his name hadn’t come out of the Goblet of Fire. He wouldn’t be wearing the Invisibility Cloak, for one thing. Ron would be sitting with him. The three of them would probably be happily imagining what deadly dangerous task the school champions would be facing on Tuesday. He’d have been really looking forward to it, watching them do whatever it was … cheering on Cedric with everyone else, safe in a seat at the back of the stands. …He wondered how the other champions were feeling. Every time he had seen Cedric lately, he had been surrounded by admirers and looking nervous but excited. Harry glimpsed Fleur Delacour from time to time in the corridors; she

looked exactly as she always did, haughty and unruffled. And Krum just sat in the library, poring over books.

Harry thought of Sirius, and the tight, tense knot in his chest seemed to ease slightly. He would be speaking to him in just over twelve hours, for tonight was the night they were meeting at the common room fire — assuming nothing went wrong, as every-thing else had done lately. …"Look, it's Hagrid!" said Hermione.

The back of Hagrid's enormous shaggy head — he had merci-fully abandoned his bunches — emerged over the crowd. Harry wondered why he hadn't spotted him at once, as Hagrid was so large, but standing up carefully, he saw that Hagrid had been lean-ing low, talking to Professor Moody. Hagrid had his usual enor-mous tankard in front of him, but Moody was drinking from his hip flask. Madam Rosmerta, the pretty landlady, didn't seem to think much of this; she was looking askance at Moody as she col-lected glasses from tables around them. Perhaps she thought it was an insult to her mulled mead, but Harry knew better. Moody had told them all during their last Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson that he preferred to prepare his own food and drink at all times, as it was so easy for Dark wizards to poison an unattended cup.

As Harry watched, he saw Hagrid and Moody get up to leave. He waved, then remembered that Hagrid couldn't see him. Moody, however, paused, his magical eye on the corner where Harry was standing. He tapped Hagrid in the small of the back (being unable to reach his shoulder), muttered something to him, and then the pair of them made their way back across the pub toward Harry and Hermione's table.

"All right, Hermione?" said Hagrid loudly.

"Hello," said Hermione, smiling back.

Moody limped around the table and bent down; Harry thought he was reading the S.P.E.W. notebook, until he muttered, "Nice cloak,

Potter."

Harry stared at him in amazement. The large chunk missing from Moody's nose was particularly obvious at a few inches' dis-tance. Moody grinned.

"Can your eye — I mean, can you — ?"

"Yeah, it can see through Invisibility Cloaks," Moody said qui-etly. "And it's come in useful at times, I can tell you."

Hagrid was beaming down at Harry too. Harry knew Hagrid couldn't see him, but Moody had obviously told Hagrid he was there. Hagrid now bent down on the pretext of reading the S.P.E.W. notebook as well, and said in a whisper so low that only Harry could hear it, "Harry, meet me tonight at midnight at me cabin. Wear that cloak."

Straightening up, Hagrid said loudly, "Nice ter see yeh, Hermione," winked, and departed. Moody followed him.

"Why does Hagrid want me to meet him at midnight?" Harry said, very surprised.

"Does he?" said Hermione, looking startled. "I wonder what he's up to? I don't know whether you should go, Harry. …" She looked nervously around and hissed, "It might make you late for Sirius."

It was true that going down to Hagrid's at midnight would mean cutting his meeting with Sirius very fine indeed; Hermione sug-gested sending Hedwig down to Hagrid's to tell him he couldn't go — always assuming she would consent to take the note, of course — Harry, however, thought it better just to be quick at what-ever Hagrid wanted him for. He was very curious to know what this might be; Hagrid had never asked Harry to visit him so late at night.

At half past eleven that evening, Harry, who had pretended to go up to bed early, pulled the Invisibility Cloak back over himself and crept

back downstairs through the common room. Quite a few people were still in there. The Creevey brothers had managed to get hold of a stack of Support Cedric Diggory! badges and were trying to bewitch them to make them say Support Harry Potter! instead. So far, however, all they had managed to do was get the badges stuck on POTTER STINKS. Harry crept past them to the portrait hole and waited for a minute or so, keeping an eye on his watch. Then Hermione opened the Fat Lady for him from outside as they had planned. He slipped past her with a whispered "Thanks!" and set off through the castle.

The grounds were very dark. Harry walked down the lawn toward the lights shining in Hagrid's cabin. The inside of the enormous Beauxbatons carriage was also lit up; Harry could hear Madame Maxime talking inside it as he knocked on Hagrid's front door.

"You there, Harry?" Hagrid whispered, opening the door and looking around.

"Yeah," said Harry, slipping inside the cabin and pulling the cloak down off his head. "What's up?"

"Got summat ter show yeh," said Hagrid.

There was an air of enormous excitement about Hagrid. He was wearing a flower that resembled an oversized artichoke in his buttonhole. It looked as though he had abandoned the use of axle grease, but he had certainly attempted to comb his hair — Harry could see the comb's broken teeth tangled in it.

"What're you showing me?" Harry said warily, wondering if the skrewts had laid eggs, or Hagrid had managed to buy another giant three-headed dog off a stranger in a pub.

"Come with me, keep quiet, an' keep yerself covered with that cloak," said Hagrid. "We won' take Fang, he won' like it. …"

“Listen, Hagrid, I can’t stay long. … I’ve got to be back up at the castle by one o’clock —”

But Hagrid wasn’t listening; he was opening the cabin door and striding off into the night. Harry hurried to follow and found, to his great surprise, that Hagrid was leading him to the Beauxbatons carriage.

“Hagrid, what — ?”

“Shhh!” said Hagrid, and he knocked three times on the door bearing the crossed golden wands.

Madame Maxime opened it. She was wearing a silk shawl wrapped around her massive shoulders. She smiled when she saw Hagrid.

“Ah, ’Agrid … it is time?”

“Bong-sewer,” said Hagrid, beaming at her, and holding out a hand to help her down the golden steps.

Madame Maxime closed the door behind her, Hagrid offered her his arm, and they set off around the edge of the paddock con-taining Madame Maxime’s giant winged horses, with Harry, totally bewildered, running to keep up with them. Had Hagrid wanted to show him Madame Maxime? He could see her any old time he wanted … she wasn’t exactly hard to miss. …But it seemed that Madame Maxime was in for the same treat as Harry, because after a while she said playfully, “Wair is it you are taking me, ’Agrid?”

“Yeh’ll enjoy this,” said Hagrid gruffly, “worth seein’, trust me. On’y — don’ go tellin’ anyone I showed yeh, right? Yeh’re not s’posed ter know.”

“Of course not,” said Madame Maxime, fluttering her long black eyelashes.

And still they walked, Harry getting more and more irritated as he jogged along in their wake, checking his watch every now and then. Hagrid had some harebrained scheme in hand, which might make him miss Sirius. If they didn't get there soon, he was going to turn around, go straight back to the castle, and leave Hagrid to en-joy his moonlit stroll with Madame Maxime. …But then — when they had walked so far around the perimeter of the forest that the castle and the lake were out of sight — Harry heard something. Men were shouting up ahead … then came a deafening, earsplitting roar. … Hagrid led Madame Maxime around a clump of trees and came to a halt. Harry hurried up alongside them — for a split second, he thought he was seeing bonfires, and men darting around them — and then his mouth fell open.

Dragons.

Four fully grown, enormous, vicious-looking dragons were rear-ing onto their hind legs inside an enclosure fenced with thick planks of wood, roaring and snorting — torrents of fire were shooting into the dark sky from their open, fanged mouths, fifty feet above the ground on their outstretched necks. There was a silvery-blue one with long, pointed horns, snapping and snarling at the wizards on the ground; a smooth-scaled green one, which was writhing and stamping with all its might; a red one with an odd fringe of fine gold spikes around its face, which was shooting mushroom-shaped fire clouds into the air; and a gigantic black one, more lizard-like than the others, which was nearest to them.

At least thirty wizards, seven or eight to each dragon, were attempting to control them, pulling on the chains connected to heavy leather straps around their necks and legs. Mesmerized, Harry looked up, high above him, and saw the eyes of the black dragon, with vertical pupils like a cat's, bulging with either fear or rage, he couldn't tell which. … It was making a horrible noise, a yowling, screeching scream. …"Keep back there, Hagrid!" yelled a wizard near the fence, strain-ing on the chain he was holding. "They can

shoot fire at a range of twenty feet, you know! I've seen this Horntail do forty!"

"Is'n' it beautiful?" said Hagrid softly.

"It's no good!" yelled another wizard. "Stunning Spells, on the count of three!"

Harry saw each of the dragon keepers pull out his wand.

"Stupefy!" they shouted in unison, and the Stunning Spells shot into the darkness like fiery rockets, bursting in showers of stars on the dragons' scaly hides —Harry watched the dragon nearest to them teeter dangerously on its back legs; its jaws stretched wide in a silent howl; its nostrils were suddenly devoid of flame, though still smoking — then, very slowly, it fell. Several tons of sinewy, scaly-black dragon hit the ground with a thud that Harry could have sworn made the trees behind him quake.

The dragon keepers lowered their wands and walked forward to their fallen charges, each of which was the size of a small hill. They hurried to tighten the chains and fasten them securely to iron pegs, which they forced deep into the ground with their wands.

"Wan' a closer look?" Hagrid asked Madame Maxime excitedly. The pair of them moved right up to the fence, and Harry followed. The wizard who had warned Hagrid not to come any closer turned, and Harry realized who it was: Charlie Weasley.

"All right, Hagrid?" he panted, coming over to talk. "They should be okay now — we put them out with a Sleeping Draft on the way here, thought it might be better for them to wake up in the dark and the quiet — but, like you saw, they weren't happy, not happy at all —"

"What breeds you got here, Charlie?" said Hagrid, gazing at the closest dragon, the black one, with something close to reverence. Its

eyes were still just open. Harry could see a strip of gleaming yel-low beneath its wrinkled black eyelid.

“This is a Hungarian Horntail,” said Charlie. “There’s a Com-mon Welsh Green over there, the smaller one — a Swedish Short-Snout, that blue-gray — and a Chinese Fireball, that’s the red.”

Charlie looked around; Madame Maxime was strolling away around the edge of the enclosure, gazing at the stunned dragons.

“I didn’t know you were bringing her, Hagrid,” Charlie said, frowning. “The champions aren’t supposed to know what’s com-ing — she’s bound to tell her student, isn’t she?”

“Jus’ thought she’d like ter see ’em,” shrugged Hagrid, still gaz-ing, enraptured, at the dragons.

“Really romantic date, Hagrid,” said Charlie, shaking his head.

“Four …” said Hagrid, “so it’s one fer each o’ the champions, is it? What’ve they gotta do — fight ’em?”

“Just get past them, I think,” said Charlie. “We’ll be on hand if it gets nasty, Extinguishing Spells at the ready. They wanted nest-ing mothers, I don’t know why … but I tell you this, I don’t envy the one who gets the Horntail. Vicious thing. Its back end’s as dan-gerous as its front, look.”

Charlie pointed toward the Horntail’s tail, and Harry saw long, bronze-colored spikes protruding along it every few inches.

Five of Charlie’s fellow keepers staggered up to the Horntail at that moment, carrying a clutch of huge granite-gray eggs between them in a blanket. They placed them carefully at the Horntail’s side. Hagrid let out a moan of longing.

“I’ve got them counted, Hagrid,” said Charlie sternly. Then he said, “How’s Harry?”

“Fine,” said Hagrid. He was still gazing at the eggs.

“Just hope he’s still fine after he’s faced this lot,” said Charlie grimly, looking out over the dragons’ enclosure. “I didn’t dare tell Mum what he’s got to do for the first task; she’s already having kit-tens about him. …” Charlie imitated his mother’s anxious voice. “ ‘How could they let him enter that tournament, he’s much too young! I thought they were all safe, I thought there was going to be an age limit!’ She was in floods after that Daily Prophet article about him. ‘He still cries about his parents! Oh bless him, I never knew!’ ”

Harry had had enough. Trusting to the fact that Hagrid wouldn’t miss him, with the attractions of four dragons and Madame Maxime to occupy him, he turned silently and began to walk away, back to the castle.

He didn’t know whether he was glad he’d seen what was coming or not. Perhaps this way was better. The first shock was over now. Maybe if he’d seen the dragons for the first time on Tuesday, he would have passed out cold in front of the whole school … but maybe he would anyway. … He was going to be armed with his wand — which, just now, felt like nothing more than a narrow strip of wood — against a fifty-foot-high, scaly, spike-ridden, fire-breathing dragon. And he had to get past it. With everyone watch-ing. How?

Harry sped up, skirting the edge of the forest; he had just under fifteen minutes to get back to the fireside and talk to Sirius, and he couldn’t remember, ever, wanting to talk to someone more than he did right now — when, without warning, he ran into something very solid.

Harry fell backward, his glasses askew, clutching the cloak around him. A voice nearby said, “Ouch! Who’s there?”

Harry hastily checked that the cloak was covering him and lay very still, staring up at the dark outline of the wizard he had hit. He recognized the goatee … it was Karkaroff.

“Who’s there?” said Karkaroff again, very suspiciously, looking around in the darkness. Harry remained still and silent. After a minute or so, Karkaroff seemed to decide that he had hit some sort of animal; he was looking around at waist height, as though ex-pecting to see a dog. Then he crept back under the cover of the trees and started to edge forward toward the place where the drag-ons were.

Very slowly and very carefully, Harry got to his feet and set off again as fast as he could without making too much noise, hurrying through the darkness back toward Hogwarts.

He had no doubt whatsoever what Karkaroff was up to. He had sneaked off his ship to try and find out what the first task was going to be. He might even have spotted Hagrid and Madame Maxime heading off around the forest together — they were hardly difficult to spot at a distance … and now all Karkaroff had to do was fol-low the sound of voices, and he, like Madame Maxime, would know what was in store for the champions.

By the looks of it, the only champion who would be facing the unknown on Tuesday was Cedric.

Harry reached the castle, slipped in through the front doors, and began to climb the marble stairs; he was very out of breath, but he didn’t dare slow down. … He had less than five minutes to get up to the fire. …“Balderdash!” he gasped at the Fat Lady, who was snoozing in her frame in front of the portrait hole.

“If you say so,” she muttered sleepily, without opening her eyes, and the picture swung forward to admit him. Harry climbed in-side. The common room was deserted, and, judging by the fact that it smelled quite normal, Hermione had not needed to set off any Dungbombs to ensure that he and Sirius got privacy.

Harry pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and threw himself into an armchair in front of the fire. The room was in semidarkness; the flames were the only source of light. Nearby, on a table, the Support Cedric Diggory! badges the Creeveys had been trying to improve were glinting in the firelight. They now read POTTER REALLY STINKS. Harry looked back into the flames, and jumped.

Sirius's head was sitting in the fire. If Harry hadn't seen Mr. Dig-gory do exactly this back in the Weasleys' kitchen, it would have scared him out of his wits. Instead, his face breaking into the first smile he had worn for days, he scrambled out of his chair, crouched down by the hearth, and said, "Sirius — how're you doing?"

Sirius looked different from Harry's memory of him. When they had said good-bye, Sirius's face had been gaunt and sunken, sur-rounded by a quantity of long, black, matted hair — but the hair was short and clean now, Sirius's face was fuller, and he looked younger, much more like the only photograph Harry had of him, which had been taken at the Potters' wedding.

"Never mind me, how are you?" said Sirius seriously.

"I'm —" For a second, Harry tried to say "fine" — but he couldn't do it. Before he could stop himself, he was talking more than he'd talked in days — about how no one believed he hadn't entered the tournament of his own free will, how Rita Skeeter had lied about him in the Daily Prophet, how he couldn't walk down a corridor without being sneered at — and about Ron, Ron not believing him, Ron's jealousy …"… and now Hagrid's just shown me what's coming in the first task, and it's dragons, Sirius, and I'm a goner," he finished des-perately.

Sirius looked at him, eyes full of concern, eyes that had not yet lost the look that Azkaban had given them — that deadened, haunted look. He had let Harry talk himself into silence without interruption, but now he said, "Dragons we can deal with, Harry, but we'll get to that in a minute — I haven't got long here … I've broken into a

wizarding house to use the fire, but they could be back at any time. There are things I need to warn you about."

"What?" said Harry, feeling his spirits slip a further few notches. … Surely there could be nothing worse than dragons coming?

"Karkaroff," said Sirius. "Harry, he was a Death Eater. You know what Death Eaters are, don't you?"

"Yes — he — what?"

"He was caught, he was in Azkaban with me, but he got released. I'd bet everything that's why Dumbledore wanted an Auror at Hogwarts this year — to keep an eye on him. Moody caught Karkaroff. Put him into Azkaban in the first place."

"Karkaroff got released?" Harry said slowly — his brain seemed to be struggling to absorb yet another piece of shocking informa-tion. "Why did they release him?"

"He did a deal with the Ministry of Magic," said Sirius bitterly. "He said he'd seen the error of his ways, and then he named names … he put a load of other people into Azkaban in his place. … He's not very popular in there, I can tell you. And since he got out, from what I can tell, he's been teaching the Dark Arts to every student who passes through that school of his. So watch out for the Durmstrang champion as well."

"Okay," said Harry slowly. "But … are you saying Karkaroff put my name in the goblet? Because if he did, he's a really good actor. He seemed furious about it. He wanted to stop me from competing."

"We know he's a good actor," said Sirius, "because he convinced the Ministry of Magic to set him free, didn't he? Now, I've been keeping an eye on the Daily Prophet, Harry —"

"— you and the rest of the world," said Harry bitterly.

"— and reading between the lines of that Skeeter woman's arti-cle last month, Moody was attacked the night before he started at Hogwarts. Yes, I know she says it was another false alarm," Sirius said hastily, seeing Harry about to speak, "but I don't think so, somehow. I think someone tried to stop him from getting to Hog-warts. I think someone knew their job would be a lot more difficult with him around. And no one's going to look into it too closely; Mad-Eye's heard intruders a bit too often. But that doesn't mean he can't still spot the real thing. Moody was the best Auror the Min-istry ever had."

"So … what are you saying?" said Harry slowly. "Karkaroff's trying to kill me? But — why?"

Sirius hesitated.

"I've been hearing some very strange things," he said slowly. "The Death Eaters seem to be a bit more active than usual lately. They showed themselves at the Quidditch World Cup, didn't they? Someone set off the Dark Mark … and then — did you hear about that Ministry of Magic witch who's gone missing?"

"Bertha Jorkins?" said Harry.

"Exactly … she disappeared in Albania, and that's definitely where Voldemort was rumored to be last … and she would have known the Triwizard Tournament was coming up, wouldn't she?"

"Yeah, but … it's not very likely she'd have walked straight into Voldemort, is it?" said Harry.

"Listen, I knew Bertha Jorkins," said Sirius grimly. "She was at Hogwarts when I was, a few years above your dad and me. And she was an idiot. Very nosy, but no brains, none at all. It's not a good combination, Harry. I'd say she'd be very easy to lure into a trap.

"So … so Voldemort could have found out about the tourna-ment?" said Harry. "Is that what you mean? You think Karkaroff might be here

on his orders?"

"I don't know," said Sirius slowly, "I just don't know … Karkaroff doesn't strike me as the type who'd go back to Voldemort unless he knew Voldemort was powerful enough to protect him. But whoever put your name in that goblet did it for a reason, and I can't help thinking the tournament would be a very good way to attack you and make it look like an accident."

"Looks like a really good plan from where I'm standing," said Harry grinning bleakly. "They'll just have to stand back and let the dragons do their stuff."

"Right — these dragons," said Sirius, speaking very quickly now. "There's a way, Harry. Don't be tempted to try a Stunning Spell — dragons are strong and too powerfully magical to be knocked out by a single Stunner, you need about half a dozen wiz-ards at a time to overcome a dragon —"

"Yeah, I know, I just saw," said Harry.

"But you can do it alone," said Sirius. "There is a way, and a sim-ple spell's all you need. Just —"

But Harry held up a hand to silence him, his heart suddenly pounding as though it would burst. He could hear footsteps com-ing down the spiral staircase behind him.

"Go!" he hissed at Sirius. "Go! There's someone coming!"

Harry scrambled to his feet, hiding the fire — if someone saw Sirius's face within the walls of Hogwarts, they would raise an almighty uproar — the Ministry would get dragged in — he, Harry, would be questioned about Sirius's whereabouts —Harry heard a tiny pop! in the fire behind him and knew Sirius had gone. He watched the bottom of the spiral staircase. Who had decided to go for a stroll at one

o'clock in the morning, and stopped Sirius from telling him how to get past a dragon?

It was Ron. Dressed in his maroon paisley pajamas, Ron stopped dead facing Harry across the room, and looked around.

"Who were you talking to?" he said.

"What's that got to do with you?" Harry snarled. "What are you doing down here at this time of night?"

"I just wondered where you —" Ron broke off, shrugging. "Nothing. I'm going back to bed."

"Just thought you'd come nosing around, did you?" Harry shouted. He knew that Ron had no idea what he'd walked in on, knew he hadn't done it on purpose, but he didn't care — at this moment he hated everything about Ron, right down to the several inches of bare ankle showing beneath his pajama trousers.

"Sorry about that," said Ron, his face reddening with anger. "Should've realized you didn't want to be disturbed. I'll let you get on with practicing for your next interview in peace."

Harry seized one of the POTTER REALLY STINKS badges off the table and chucked it, as hard as he could, across the room. It hit Ron on the forehead and bounced off.

"There you go," Harry said. "Something for you to wear on Tuesday. You might even have a scar now, if you're lucky. … That's what you want, isn't it?"

He strode across the room toward the stairs; he half expected Ron to stop him, he would even have liked Ron to throw a punch at him, but Ron just stood there in his too-small pajamas, and Harry, having stormed upstairs, lay awake in bed fuming for a long time afterward and didn't hear him come up to bed.

Chapter 20 The First Task

Harry got up on Sunday morning and dressed so inatten-tively that it was a while before he realized he was trying to pull his hat onto his foot instead of his sock. When he'd finally got all his clothes on the right parts of his body, he hurried off to find Hermione, locating her at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, where she was eating breakfast with Ginny. Feeling too queasy to eat, Harry waited until Hermione had swallowed her last spoonful of porridge, then dragged her out onto the grounds. There, he told her all about the dragons, and about everything Sirius had said, while they took another long walk around the lake.

Alarmed as she was by Sirius's warnings about Karkaroff, Hermione still thought that the dragons were the more pressing problem.

"Let's just try and keep you alive until Tuesday evening," she said desperately, "and then we can worry about Karkaroff."

They walked three times around the lake, trying all the way to think of a simple spell that would subdue a dragon. Nothing what-soever occurred to them, so they retired to the library instead. Here, Harry pulled down every book he could find on dragons, and both of them set to work searching through the large pile.

" 'Talon-clipping by charms … treating scale-rot …' This is no good, this is for nutters like Hagrid who want to keep them healthy. …"

" 'Dragons are extremely difficult to slay, owing to the ancient magic that imbues their thick hides, which none but the most powerful spells can penetrate …' But Sirius said a simple one would do it. …"

"Let's try some simple spellbooks, then," said Harry, throwing aside Men Who Love Dragons Too Much.

He returned to the table with a pile of spellbooks, set them down, and began to flick through each in turn, Hermione whis-pering nonstop at his elbow.

"Well, there are Switching Spells … but what's the point of Switching it? Unless you swapped its fangs for wine-gums or some-thing that would make it less dangerous. … The trouble is, like that book said, not much is going to get through a dragon's hide. … I'd say Transfigure it, but something that big, you really haven't got a hope, I doubt even Professor McGonagall … unless you're supposed to put the spell on yourself? Maybe to give yourself extra powers? But they're not simple spells, I mean, we haven't done any of those in class, I only know about them because I've been do-ing O.W.L. practice papers. …"

"Hermione," Harry said, through gritted teeth, "will you shut up for a bit, please? I'm trying to concentrate."

But all that happened, when Hermione fell silent, was that Harry's brain filled with a sort of blank buzzing, which didn't seem to allow room for concentration. He stared hopelessly down the in-dex of Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed. Instant scalping … but dragons had no hair … pepper breath … that would probably in-crease a dragon's firepower … horn tongue … just what he needed, to give it an extra weapon …"Oh no, he's back again, why can't he read on his stupid ship?" said Hermione irritably as Viktor Krum slouched in, cast a surly look over at the pair of them, and settled himself in a distant cor-ner with a pile of books. "Come on, Harry, we'll go back to the common room … his fan club'll be here in a moment, twittering away. …"

And sure enough, as they left the library, a gang of girls tiptoed past them, one of them wearing a Bulgaria scarf tied around her waist.

Harry barely slept that night. When he awoke on Monday morn-ing, he seriously considered for the first time ever just running away from

Hogwarts. But as he looked around the Great Hall at breakfast time, and thought about what leaving the castle would mean, he knew he couldn't do it. It was the only place he had ever been happy … well, he supposed he must have been happy with his parents too, but he couldn't remember that.

Somehow, the knowledge that he would rather be here and fac-ing a dragon than back on Privet Drive with Dudley was good to know; it made him feel slightly calmer. He finished his bacon with difficulty (his throat wasn't working too well), and as he and Hermione got up, he saw Cedric Diggory leaving the Hufflepuff table.

Cedric still didn't know about the dragons … the only cham-pion who didn't, if Harry was right in thinking that Maxime and Karkaroff would have told Fleur and Krum. …"Hermione, I'll see you in the greenhouses," Harry said, coming to his decision as he watched Cedric leaving the Hall. "Go on, I'll catch you up."

"Harry, you'll be late, the bell's about to ring —"

"I'll catch you up, okay?"

By the time Harry reached the bottom of the marble staircase, Cedric was at the top. He was with a load of sixth-year friends. Harry didn't want to talk to Cedric in front of them; they were among those who had been quoting Rita Skeeter's article at him every time he went near them. He followed Cedric at a distance and saw that he was heading toward the Charms corridor. This gave Harry an idea. Pausing at a distance from them, he pulled out his wand, and took careful aim.

"Diffindo!"

Cedric's bag split. Parchment, quills, and books spilled out of it onto the floor. Several bottles of ink smashed.

“Don’t bother,” said Cedric in an exasperated voice as his friends bent down to help him. “Tell Flitwick I’m coming, go on. …”

This was exactly what Harry had been hoping for. He slipped his wand back into his robes, waited until Cedric’s friends had disappeared into their classroom, and hurried up the corridor, which was now empty of everyone but himself and Cedric.

“Hi,” said Cedric, picking up a copy of A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration that was now splattered with ink. “My bag just split … brand-new and all …”

“Cedric,” said Harry, “the first task is dragons.”

“What?” said Cedric, looking up.

“Dragons,” said Harry, speaking quickly, in case Professor Flit-wick came out to see where Cedric had got to. “They’ve got four, one for each of us, and we’ve got to get past them.”

Cedric stared at him. Harry saw some of the panic he’d been feeling since Saturday night flickering in Cedric’s gray eyes.

“Are you sure?” Cedric said in a hushed voice.

“Dead sure,” said Harry. “I’ve seen them.”

“But how did you find out? We’re not supposed to know. …”

“Never mind,” said Harry quickly — he knew Hagrid would be in trouble if he told the truth. “But I’m not the only one who knows. Fleur and Krum will know by now — Maxime and Karkaroff both saw the dragons too.”

Cedric straightened up, his arms full of inky quills, parchment, and books, his ripped bag dangling off one shoulder. He stared at Harry, and there was a puzzled, almost suspicious look in his eyes.

“Why are you telling me?” he asked.

Harry looked at him in disbelief. He was sure Cedric wouldn’t have asked that if he had seen the dragons himself. Harry wouldn’t have let his worst enemy face those monsters unprepared — well, perhaps Malfoy or Snape …“It’s just … fair, isn’t it?” he said to Cedric. “We all know now … we’re on an even footing, aren’t we?”

Cedric was still looking at him in a slightly suspicious way when Harry heard a familiar clunking noise behind him. He turned around and saw Mad-Eye Moody emerging from a nearby class-room.

“Come with me, Potter,” he growled. “Diggory, off you go.”

Harry stared apprehensively at Moody. Had he overheard them?

“Er — Professor, I’m supposed to be in Herbology —”

“Never mind that, Potter. In my office, please. …”

Harry followed him, wondering what was going to happen to him now. What if Moody wanted to know how he’d found out about the dragons? Would Moody go to Dumbledore and tell on Hagrid, or just turn Harry into a ferret? Well, it might be easier to get past a dragon if he were a ferret, Harry thought dully, he’d be smaller, much less easy to see from a height of fifty feet …He followed Moody into his office. Moody closed the door be-hind them and turned to look at Harry, his magical eye fixed upon him as well as the normal one.

“That was a very decent thing you just did, Potter,” Moody said quietly.

Harry didn’t know what to say; this wasn’t the reaction he had expected at all.

“Sit down,” said Moody, and Harry sat, looking around.

He had visited this office under two of its previous occupants. In Professor Lockhart's day, the walls had been plastered with beam-ing, winking pictures of Professor Lockhart himself. When Lupin had lived here, you were more likely to come across a specimen of some fascinating new Dark creature he had procured for them to study in class. Now, however, the office was full of a number of ex-ceptionally odd objects that Harry supposed Moody had used in the days when he had been an Auror.

On his desk stood what looked like a large, cracked, glass spin-ning top; Harry recognized it at once as a Sneakoscope, because he owned one himself, though it was much smaller than Moody's. In the corner on a small table stood an object that looked something like an extra-squiggly, golden television aerial. It was humming slightly. What appeared to be a mirror hung opposite Harry on the wall, but it was not reflecting the room. Shadowy figures were mov-ing around inside it, none of them clearly in focus.

"Like my Dark Detectors, do you?" said Moody, who was watching Harry closely.

"What's that?" Harry asked, pointing at the squiggly golden aerial.

"Secrecy Sensor. Vibrates when it detects concealment and lies … no use here, of course, too much interference — students in every direction lying about why they haven't done their home-work. Been humming ever since I got here. I had to disable my Sneakoscope because it wouldn't stop whistling. It's extra-sensitive, picks up stuff about a mile around. Of course, it could be picking up more than kid stuff," he added in a growl.

"And what's the mirror for?"

"Oh that's my Foe-Glass. See them out there, skulking around? I'm not really in trouble until I see the whites of their eyes. That's when I open my trunk."

He let out a short, harsh laugh, and pointed to the large trunk under the window. It had seven keyholes in a row. Harry wondered what was in there, until Moody's next question brought him sharply back to earth.

"So … found out about the dragons, have you?"

Harry hesitated. He'd been afraid of this — but he hadn't told Cedric, and he certainly wasn't going to tell Moody, that Hagrid had broken the rules.

"It's all right," said Moody, sitting down and stretching out his wooden leg with a groan. "Cheating's a traditional part of the Tri-wizard Tournament and always has been."

"I didn't cheat," said Harry sharply. "It was — a sort of accident that I found out."

Moody grinned. "I wasn't accusing you, laddie. I've been telling Dumbledore from the start, he can be as high-minded as he likes, but you can bet old Karkaroff and Maxime won't be. They'll have told their champions everything they can. They want to win. They want to beat Dumbledore. They'd like to prove he's only human."

Moody gave another harsh laugh, and his magical eye swiveled around so fast it made Harry feel queasy to watch it.

"So … got any ideas how you're going to get past your dragon yet?" said Moody.

"No," said Harry.

"Well, I'm not going to tell you," said Moody gruffly. "I don't show favoritism, me. I'm just going to give you some good, general advice. And the first bit is — play to your strengths."

"I haven't got any," said Harry, before he could stop himself.

“Excuse me,” growled Moody, “you’ve got strengths if I say you’ve got them. Think now. What are you best at?”

Harry tried to concentrate. What was he best at? Well, that was easy, really —“Quidditch,” he said dully, “and a fat lot of help —”

“That’s right,” said Moody, staring at him very hard, his magical eye barely moving at all. “You’re a damn good flier from what I’ve heard.”

“Yeah, but …” Harry stared at him. “I’m not allowed a broom, I’ve only got my wand —”

“My second piece of general advice,” said Moody loudly, inter-rupting him, “is to use a nice, simple spell that will enable you to get what you need.”

Harry looked at him blankly. What did he need?

“Come on, boy …” whispered Moody. “Put them together … it’s not that difficult. …”

And it clicked. He was best at flying. He needed to pass the dragon in the air. For that, he needed his Firebolt. And for his Fire-bolt, he needed —“Hermione,” Harry whispered, when he had sped into greenhouse three minutes later, uttering a hurried apology to Professor Sprout as he passed her. “Hermione — I need you to help me.”

“What d’you think I’ve been trying to do, Harry?” she whis-pered back, her eyes round with anxiety over the top of the quiver-ing Flutterby Bush she was pruning.

“Hermione, I need to learn how to do a Summoning Charm properly by tomorrow afternoon.”

And so they practiced. They didn’t have lunch, but headed for a free classroom, where Harry tried with all his might to make vari-ous

objects fly across the room toward him. He was still having problems. The books and quills kept losing heart halfway across the room and dropping like stones to the floor.

“Concentrate, Harry, concentrate. …”

“What d’you think I’m trying to do?” said Harry angrily. “A great big dragon keeps popping up in my head for some reason. … Okay, try again. …”

He wanted to skip Divination to keep practicing, but Hermione refused point-blank to skive off Arithmancy, and there was no point in staying without her. He therefore had to endure over an hour of Professor Trelawney, who spent half the lesson telling everyone that the position of Mars with relation to Saturn at that moment meant that people born in July were in great danger of sudden, violent deaths.

“Well, that’s good,” said Harry loudly, his temper getting the better of him, “just as long as it’s not drawn-out. I don’t want to suffer.”

Ron looked for a moment as though he was going to laugh; he certainly caught Harry’s eye for the first time in days, but Harry was still feeling too resentful toward Ron to care. He spent the rest of the lesson trying to attract small objects toward him under the table with his wand. He managed to make a fly zoom straight into his hand, though he wasn’t entirely sure that was his prowess at Summoning Charms — perhaps the fly was just stupid.

He forced down some dinner after Divination, then returned to the empty classroom with Hermione, using the Invisibility Cloak to avoid the teachers. They kept practicing until past midnight. They would have stayed longer, but Peeves turned up and, pre-tending to think that Harry wanted things thrown at him, started chucking chairs across the room. Harry and Hermione left in a hurry before the noise attracted Filch, and went back to the Gryffindor common room, which was now mercifully empty.

At two o'clock in the morning, Harry stood near the fireplace, surrounded by heaps of objects: books, quills, several upturned chairs, an old set of Gobstones, and Neville's toad, Trevor. Only in the last hour had Harry really got the hang of the Summoning Charm.

"That's better, Harry, that's loads better," Hermione said, look-ing exhausted but very pleased.

"Well, now we know what to do next time I can't manage a spell," Harry said, throwing a rune dictionary back to Hermione, so he could try again, "threaten me with a dragon. Right …" He raised his wand once more. "Accio Dictionary!"

The heavy book soared out of Hermione's hand, flew across the room, and Harry caught it.

"Harry, I really think you've got it!" said Hermione delightedly.

"Just as long as it works tomorrow," Harry said. "The Firebolt's going to be much farther away than the stuff in here, it's going to be in the castle, and I'm going to be out there on the grounds. …"

"That doesn't matter," said Hermione firmly "Just as long as you're concentrating really, really hard on it, it'll come. Harry, we'd better get some sleep … you're going to need it."

Harry had been focusing so hard on learning the Summoning Charm that evening that some of his blind panic had left him. It re-turned in full measure, however, on the following morning. The at-mosphere in the school was one of great tension and excitement. Lessons were to stop at midday, giving all the students time to get down to the dragons' enclosure — though of course, they didn't yet know what they would find there.

Harry felt oddly separate from everyone around him, whether they were wishing him good luck or hissing "We'll have a box of tis-sues ready, Potter" as he passed. It was a state of nervousness so ad-

vanced that he wondered whether he mightn't just lose his head when they tried to lead him out to his dragon, and start trying to curse everyone in sight. Time was behaving in a more peculiar fash-ion than ever, rushing past in great dollops, so that one moment he seemed to be sitting down in his first lesson, History of Magic, and the next, walking into lunch … and then (where had the morning gone? the last of the dragon-free hours?), Professor McGonagall was hurrying over to him in the Great Hall. Lots of people were watching.

"Potter, the champions have to come down onto the grounds now. … You have to get ready for your first task."

"Okay," said Harry, standing up, his fork falling onto his plate with a clatter.

"Good luck, Harry," Hermione whispered. "You'll be fine!"

"Yeah," said Harry in a voice that was most unlike his own.

He left the Great Hall with Professor McGonagall. She didn't seem herself either; in fact, she looked nearly as anxious as Her-mione. As she walked him down the stone steps and out into the cold November afternoon, she put her hand on his shoulder.

"Now, don't panic," she said, "just keep a cool head. … We've got wizards standing by to control the situation if it gets out of hand. … The main thing is just to do your best, and nobody will think any the worse of you. … Are you all right?"

"Yes," Harry heard himself say. "Yes, I'm fine."

She was leading him toward the place where the dragons were, around the edge of the forest, but when they approached the clump of trees behind which the enclosure would be clearly visible, Harry saw that a tent had been erected, its entrance facing them, screen-ing the dragons from view.

“You’re to go in here with the other champions,” said Professor McGonagall, in a rather shaky sort of voice, “and wait for your turn, Potter. Mr. Bagman is in there … he’ll be telling you the — the procedure. … Good luck.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, in a flat, distant voice. She left him at the entrance of the tent. Harry went inside.

Fleur Delacour was sitting in a corner on a low wooden stool. She didn’t look nearly as composed as usual, but rather pale and clammy. Viktor Krum looked even surlier than usual, which Harry supposed was his way of showing nerves. Cedric was pacing up and down. When Harry entered, Cedric gave him a small smile, which Harry returned, feeling the muscles in his face working rather hard, as though they had forgotten how to do it.

“Harry! Good-o!” said Bagman happily, looking around at him. “Come in, come in, make yourself at home!”

Bagman looked somehow like a slightly overblown cartoon fig-ure, standing amid all the pale-faced champions. He was wearing his old Wasp robes again.

“Well, now we’re all here — time to fill you in!” said Bagman brightly. “When the audience has assembled, I’m going to be offering each of you this bag” — he held up a small sack of purple silk and shook it at them — “from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are different — er — varieties, you see. And I have to tell you something else too … ah, yes … your task is to collect the golden egg!”

Harry glanced around. Cedric had nodded once, to show that he understood Bagman’s words, and then started pacing around the tent again; he looked slightly green. Fleur Delacour and Krum hadn’t reacted at all. Perhaps they thought they might be sick if they opened their mouths; that was certainly how Harry felt. But they, at least, had volunteered for this. …And in no time at all, hundreds upon hundreds

of pairs of feet could be heard passing the tent, their owners talking excitedly, laughing, joking. … Harry felt as separate from the crowd as though they were a different species. And then — it seemed like about a second later to Harry — Bagman was opening the neck of the purple silk sack.

“Ladies first,” he said, offering it to Fleur Delacour.

She put a shaking hand inside the bag and drew out a tiny, per-fect model of a dragon — a Welsh Green. It had the number two around its neck. And Harry knew, by the fact that Fleur showed no sign of surprise, but rather a determined resignation, that he had been right: Madame Maxime had told her what was coming.

The same held true for Krum. He pulled out the scarlet Chinese Fireball. It had a number three around its neck. He didn’t even blink, just sat back down and stared at the ground.

Cedric put his hand into the bag, and out came the blueish-gray Swedish Short-Snout, the number one tied around its neck. Know-ing what was left, Harry put his hand into the silk bag and pulled out the Hungarian Horntail, and the number four. It stretched its wings as he looked down at it, and bared its minuscule fangs.

“Well, there you are!” said Bagman. “You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which you are to take on the dragons, do you see? Now, I’m going to have to leave you in a moment, because I’m commentating. Mr. Diggory, you’re first, just go out into the enclosure when you hear a whistle, all right? Now … Harry … could I have a quick word? Outside?”

“Er … yes,” said Harry blankly, and he got up and went out of the tent with Bagman, who walked him a short distance away, into the trees, and then turned to him with a fatherly expression on his face.

“Feeling all right, Harry? Anything I can get you?”

“What?” said Harry. “I — no, nothing.”

“Got a plan?” said Bagman, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “Because I don’t mind sharing a few pointers, if you’d like them, you know. I mean,” Bagman continued, lowering his voice still fur-ther, “you’re the underdog here, Harry. … Anything I can do to help …”

“No,” said Harry so quickly he knew he had sounded rude, “no — I — I know what I’m going to do, thanks.”

“Nobody would know, Harry,” said Bagman, winking at him.

“No, I’m fine,” said Harry, wondering why he kept telling peo-ple this, and wondering whether he had ever been less fine. “I’ve got a plan worked out, I —”

A whistle had blown somewhere.

“Good lord, I’ve got to run!” said Bagman in alarm, and he hur-ried off.

Harry walked back to the tent and saw Cedric emerging from it, greener than ever. Harry tried to wish him luck as he walked past, but all that came out of his mouth was a sort of hoarse grunt.

Harry went back inside to Fleur and Krum. Seconds later, they heard the roar of the crowd, which meant Cedric had entered the enclosure and was now face-to-face with the living counterpart of his model. …It was worse than Harry could ever have imagined, sitting there and listening. The crowd screamed … yelled … gasped like a sin-gle many-headed entity, as Cedric did whatever he was doing to get past the Swedish Short-Snout. Krum was still staring at the ground. Fleur had now taken to retracing Cedric’s steps, around and around the tent. And Bagman’s commentary made everything much, much worse. … Horrible pictures formed in Harry’s mind as he heard: “Oooh, narrow miss there, very narrow” … “He’s tak-ing risks, this one!” … “Clever move — pity it didn’t work!”

And then, after about fifteen minutes, Harry heard the deafen-ing roar that could mean only one thing: Cedric had gotten past his dragon and captured the golden egg.

"Very good indeed!" Bagman was shouting. "And now the marks from the judges!"

But he didn't shout out the marks; Harry supposed the judges were holding them up and showing them to the crowd.

"One down, three to go!" Bagman yelled as the whistle blew again. "Miss Delacour, if you please!"

Fleur was trembling from head to foot; Harry felt more warmly toward her than he had done so far as she left the tent with her head held high and her hand clutching her wand. He and Krum were left alone, at opposite sides of the tent, avoiding each other's gaze.

The same process started again. … "Oh I'm not sure that was wise!" they could hear Bagman shouting gleefully. "Oh … nearly! Careful now … good lord, I thought she'd had it then!"

Ten minutes later, Harry heard the crowd erupt into applause once more. … Fleur must have been successful too. A pause, while Fleur's marks were being shown … more clapping … then, for the third time, the whistle.

"And here comes Mr. Krum!" cried Bagman, and Krum slouched out, leaving Harry quite alone.

He felt much more aware of his body than usual; very aware of the way his heart was pumping fast, and his fingers tingling with fear … yet at the same time, he seemed to be outside himself, see-ing the walls of the tent, and hearing the crowd, as though from far away. …"Very daring!" Bagman was yelling, and Harry heard the Chi-nese Fireball emit a horrible, roaring shriek, while the crowd drew its

collective breath. “That’s some nerve he’s showing — and — yes, he’s got the egg!”

Applause shattered the wintery air like breaking glass; Krum had finished — it would be Harry’s turn any moment.

He stood up, noticing dimly that his legs seemed to be made of marshmallow. He waited. And then he heard the whistle blow. He walked out through the entrance of the tent, the panic rising into a crescendo inside him. And now he was walking past the trees, through a gap in the enclosure fence.

He saw everything in front of him as though it was a very highly colored dream. There were hundreds and hundreds of faces staring down at him from stands that had been magicked there since he’d last stood on this spot. And there was the Horntail, at the other end of the enclosure, crouched low over her clutch of eggs, her wings half-furled, her evil, yellow eyes upon him, a monstrous, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, leaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground. The crowd was making a great deal of noise, but whether friendly or not, Harry didn’t know or care. It was time to do what he had to do … to focus his mind, entirely and absolutely, upon the thing that was his only chance. …He raised his wand.

“Accio Firebolt!” he shouted.

Harry waited, every fiber of him hoping, praying. … If it hadn’t worked … if it wasn’t coming … He seemed to be looking at everything around him through some sort of shimmering, trans-parent barrier, like a heat haze, which made the enclosure and the hundreds of faces around him swim strangely. …And then he heard it, speeding through the air behind him; he turned and saw his Firebolt hurtling toward him around the edge of the woods, soaring into the enclosure, and stopping dead in midair beside him, waiting for him to mount. The crowd was mak-ing even more noise. … Bagman was shouting something … but Harry’s ears were not working properly anymore …

listening wasn't important. …He swung his leg over the broom and kicked off from the ground. And a second later, something miraculous happened. …As he soared upward, as the wind rushed through his hair, as the crowd's faces became mere flesh-colored pinpricks below, and the Horntail shrank to the size of a dog, he realized that he had left not only the ground behind, but also his fear. … He was back where he belonged. …This was just another Quidditch match, that was all … just an-other Quidditch match, and that Horntail was just another ugly opposing team. …He looked down at the clutch of eggs and spotted the gold one, gleaming against its cement-colored fellows, residing safely be-tween the dragon's front legs. "Okay," Harry told himself, "diver-sionary tactics … let's go. …"

He dived. The Horntail's head followed him; he knew what it was going to do and pulled out of the dive just in time; a jet of fire had been released exactly where he would have been had he not swerved away … but Harry didn't care … that was no more than dodging a Bludger. …"Great Scott, he can fly!" yelled Bagman as the crowd shrieked and gasped. "Are you watching this, Mr. Krum?"

Harry soared higher in a circle; the Horntail was still following his progress; its head revolving on its long neck — if he kept this up, it would be nicely dizzy — but better not push it too long, or it would be breathing fire again —Harry plummeted just as the Horntail opened its mouth, but this time he was less lucky — he missed the flames, but the tail came whipping up to meet him instead, and as he swerved to the left, one of the long spikes grazed his shoulder, ripping his robes —He could feel it stinging, he could hear screaming and groans from the crowd, but the cut didn't seem to be deep. … Now he zoomed around the back of the Horntail, and a possibility occurred to him. …The Horntail didn't seem to want to take off, she was too protective of her eggs. Though she writhed and twisted, furling and unfurling her wings and keeping those fearsome yellow eyes on Harry, she was afraid to move too far from them … but he had to persuade her to do it, or he'd never get near them. … The trick was to do it carefully, gradually. …He began to fly, first this way, then the

other, not near enough to make her breathe fire to stave him off, but still posing a sufficient threat to ensure she kept her eyes on him. Her head swayed this way and that, watching him out of those vertical pupils, her fangs bared. …He flew higher. The Horntail's head rose with him, her neck now stretched to its fullest extent, still swaying, like a snake before its charmer. …Harry rose a few more feet, and she let out a roar of exaspera-tion. He was like a fly to her, a fly she was longing to swat; her tail thrashed again, but he was too high to reach now. … She shot fire into the air, which he dodged. … Her jaws opened wide. …"Come on," Harry hissed, swerving tantalizingly above her, "come on, come and get me … up you get now …"

And then she reared, spreading her great, black, leathery wings at last, as wide as those of a small airplane — and Harry dived. Before the dragon knew what he had done, or where he had dis-appeared to, he was speeding toward the ground as fast as he could go, toward the eggs now unprotected by her clawed front legs — he had taken his hands off his Firebolt — he had seized the golden egg —And with a huge spurt of speed, he was off, he was soaring out over the stands, the heavy egg safely under his uninjured arm, and it was as though somebody had just turned the volume back up — for the first time, he became properly aware of the noise of the crowd, which was screaming and applauding as loudly as the Irish supporters at the World Cup —"Look at that!" Bagman was yelling. "Will you look at that! Our youngest champion is quickest to get his egg! Well, this is going to shorten the odds on Mr. Potter!"

Harry saw the dragon keepers rushing forward to subdue the Horntail, and, over at the entrance to the enclosure, Professor McGonagall, Professor Moody, and Hagrid hurrying to meet him, all of them waving him toward them, their smiles evident even from this distance. He flew back over the stands, the noise of the crowd pounding his eardrums, and came in smoothly to land, his heart lighter than it had been in weeks. … He had got through the first task, he had survived. …"That was excellent, Potter!" cried Professor McGonagall as he got off the Firebolt — which from her was

extravagant praise. He noticed that her hand shook as she pointed at his shoulder. “You’ll need to see Madam Pomfrey before the judges give out your score. … Over there, she’s had to mop up Diggory already. …”

“Yeh did it, Harry!” said Hagrid hoarsely. “Yeh did it! An’ agains’ the Horntail an’ all, an’ yeh know Charlie said that was the wors’ —”

“Thanks, Hagrid,” said Harry loudly, so that Hagrid wouldn’t blunder on and reveal that he had shown Harry the dragons beforehand.

Professor Moody looked very pleased too; his magical eye was dancing in its socket.

“Nice and easy does the trick, Potter,” he growled.

“Right then, Potter, the first aid tent, please …” said Professor McGonagall.

Harry walked out of the enclosure, still panting, and saw Madam Pomfrey standing at the mouth of a second tent, looking worried.

“Dragons!” she said, in a disgusted tone, pulling Harry inside. The tent was divided into cubicles; he could make out Cedric’s shadow through the canvas, but Cedric didn’t seem to be badly in-jured; he was sitting up, at least. Madam Pomfrey examined Harry’s shoulder, talking furiously all the while. “Last year demen-tors, this year dragons, what are they going to bring into this school next? You’re very lucky … this is quite shallow … it’ll need clean-ing before I heal it up, though. …”

She cleaned the cut with a dab of some purple liquid that smoked and stung, but then poked his shoulder with her wand, and he felt it heal instantly.

“Now, just sit quietly for a minute — sit! And then you can go and get your score.”

She bustled out of the tent and he heard her go next door and say, “How does it feel now, Diggory?”

Harry didn’t want to sit still: He was too full of adrenaline. He got to his feet, wanting to see what was going on outside, but be-fore he’d reached the mouth of the tent, two people had come dart-ing inside — Hermione, followed closely by Ron.

“Harry, you were brilliant!” Hermione said squeakily. There were fingernail marks on her face where she had been clutching it in fear. “You were amazing! You really were!”

But Harry was looking at Ron, who was very white and staring at Harry as though he were a ghost.

“Harry,” he said, very seriously, “whoever put your name in that goblet — I — I reckon they’re trying to do you in!”

It was as though the last few weeks had never happened — as though Harry were meeting Ron for the first time, right after he’d been made champion.

“Caught on, have you?” said Harry coldly. “Took you long enough.”

Hermione stood nervously between them, looking from one to the other. Ron opened his mouth uncertainly. Harry knew Ron was about to apologize and suddenly he found he didn’t need to hear it.

“It’s okay,” he said, before Ron could get the words out. “Forget it.”

“No,” said Ron, “I shouldn’t’ve —”

“Forget it,” Harry said.

Ron grinned nervously at him, and Harry grinned back.

Hermione burst into tears.

“There’s nothing to cry about!” Harry told her, bewildered.

“You two are so stupid!” she shouted, stamping her foot on the ground, tears splashing down her front. Then, before either of them could stop her, she had given both of them a hug and dashed away, now positively howling.

“Barking mad,” said Ron, shaking his head. “Harry, c’mon, they’ll be putting up your scores. …”

Picking up the golden egg and his Firebolt, feeling more elated than he would have believed possible an hour ago, Harry ducked out of the tent, Ron by his side, talking fast.

“You were the best, you know, no competition. Cedric did this weird thing where he Transfigured a rock on the ground … turned it into a dog … he was trying to make the dragon go for the dog instead of him. Well, it was a pretty cool bit of Transfiguration, and it sort of worked, because he did get the egg, but he got burned as well — the dragon changed its mind halfway through and decided it would rather have him than the Labrador; he only just got away. And that Fleur girl tried this sort of charm, I think she was trying to put it into a trance — well, that kind of worked too, it went all sleepy, but then it snored, and this great jet of flame shot out, and her skirt caught fire — she put it out with a bit of water out of her wand. And Krum — you won’t believe this, but he didn’t even think of flying! He was probably the best after you, though. Hit it with some sort of spell right in the eye. Only thing is, it went tram-pling around in agony and squashed half the real eggs — they took marks off for that, he wasn’t supposed to do any damage to them.”

Ron drew breath as he and Harry reached the edge of the enclo-sure. Now that the Horntail had been taken away, Harry could see where the five judges were sitting — right at the other end, in raised seats draped in gold.

“It’s marks out of ten from each one,” Ron said, and Harry, squinting up the field, saw the first judge — Madame Maxime — raise her wand in the air. What looked like a long silver ribbon shot out of it, which twisted itself into a large figure eight.

“Not bad!” said Ron as the crowd applauded. “I suppose she took marks off for your shoulder. …”

Mr. Crouch came next. He shot a number nine into the air.

“Looking good!” Ron yelled, thumping Harry on the back.

Next, Dumbledore. He too put up a nine. The crowd was cheer-ing harder than ever.

Ludo Bagman — ten.

“Ten?” said Harry in disbelief. “But … I got hurt. … What’s he playing at?”

“Harry, don’t complain!” Ron yelled excitedly.

And now Karkaroff raised his wand. He paused for a moment, and then a number shot out of his wand too — four.

“What?” Ron bellowed furiously. “Four? You lousy, biased scum-bag, you gave Krum ten!”

But Harry didn’t care, he wouldn’t have cared if Karkaroff had given him zero; Ron’s indignation on his behalf was worth about a hundred points to him. He didn’t tell Ron this, of course, but his heart felt lighter than air as he turned to leave the enclosure. And it wasn’t just Ron … those weren’t only Gryffindors cheering in the crowd. When it had come to it, when they had seen what he was facing, most of the school had been on his side as well as Cedric’s. … He didn’t care about the Slytherins, he could stand whatever they threw at him now.

“You’re tied in first place, Harry! You and Krum!” said Charlie Weasley, hurrying to meet them as they set off back toward the school. “Listen, I’ve got to run, I’ve got to go and send Mum an owl, I swore I’d tell her what happened — but that was unbeliev-able! Oh yeah — and they told me to tell you you’ve got to hang around for a few more minutes. … Bagman wants a word, back in the champions’ tent.”

Ron said he would wait, so Harry reentered the tent, which somehow looked quite different now: friendly and welcoming. He thought back to how he’d felt while dodging the Horntail, and compared it to the long wait before he’d walked out to face it. … There was no comparison; the wait had been immeasurably worse.

Fleur, Cedric, and Krum all came in together. One side of Cedric’s face was covered in a thick orange paste, which was pre-sumably mending his burn. He grinned at Harry when he saw him.

“Good one, Harry.”

“And you,” said Harry, grinning back.

“Well done, all of you!” said Ludo Bagman, bouncing into the tent and looking as pleased as though he personally had just got past a dragon. “Now, just a quick few words. You’ve got a nice long break before the second task, which will take place at half past nine on the morning of February the twenty-fourth — but we’re giving you something to think about in the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you’re all holding, you will see that they open … see the hinges there? You need to solve the clue inside the egg — because it will tell you what the second task is, and enable you to prepare for it! All clear? Sure? Well, off you go, then!”

Harry left the tent, rejoined Ron, and they started to walk back around the edge of the forest, talking hard; Harry wanted to hear what the other champions had done in more detail. Then, as they rounded the

clump of trees behind which Harry had first heard the dragons roar, a witch leapt out from behind them.

It was Rita Skeeter. She was wearing acid-green robes today; the Quick-Quotes Quill in her hand blended perfectly against them.

“Congratulations, Harry!” she said, beaming at him. “I wonder if you could give me a quick word? How you felt facing that dragon? How you feel now, about the fairness of the scoring?”

“Yeah, you can have a word,” said Harry savagely. “Good-bye.”

And he set off back to the castle with Ron.

Chapter 21 The House-Elf Liberation Front

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery that evening to find Pigwidgeon, so that Harry could send Sirius a letter telling him that he had managed to get past his dragon unscathed. On the way, Harry filled Ron in on everything Sirius had told him about Karkaroff. Though shocked at first to hear that Karkaroff had been a Death Eater, by the time they en-tered the Owlery Ron was saying that they ought to have suspected it all along.

“Fits, doesn’t it?” he said. “Remember what Malfoy said on the train, about his dad being friends with Karkaroff? Now we know where they knew each other. They were probably running around in masks together at the World Cup. … I’ll tell you one thing, though, Harry, if it was Karkaroff who put your name in the gob-let, he’s going to be feeling really stupid now, isn’t he? Didn’t work, did it? You only got a scratch! Come here — I’ll do it —”

Pigwidgeon was so overexcited at the idea of a delivery he was flying around and around Harry’s head, hooting incessantly. Ron snatched Pigwidgeon out of the air and held him still while Harry attached the letter to his leg.

“There’s no way any of the other tasks are going to be that dan-gerous, how could they be?” Ron went on as he carried Pigwidgeon to the window. “You know what? I reckon you could win this tour-nament, Harry, I’m serious.”

Harry knew that Ron was only saying this to make up for his be-havior of the last few weeks, but he appreciated it all the same. Hermione, however, leaned against the Owlery wall, folded her arms, and frowned at Ron.

“Harry’s got a long way to go before he finishes this tourna-ment,” she said seriously. “If that was the first task, I hate to think what’s coming

next."

"Right little ray of sunshine, aren't you?" said Ron. "You and Professor Trelawney should get together sometime."

He threw Pigwidgeon out of the window. Pigwidgeon plum-meted twelve feet before managing to pull himself back up again; the letter attached to his leg was much longer and heavier than usual — Harry hadn't been able to resist giving Sirius a blow-by-blow account of exactly how he had swerved, circled, and dodged the Horntail. They watched Pigwidgeon disappear into the dark-ness, and then Ron said, "Well, we'd better get downstairs for your surprise party, Harry — Fred and George should have nicked enough food from the kitchens by now."

Sure enough, when they entered the Gryffindor common room it exploded with cheers and yells again. There were mountains of cakes and flagons of pumpkin juice and butterbeer on every surface; Lee Jordan had let off some Filibuster's Fireworks, so that the air was thick with stars and sparks; and Dean Thomas, who was very good at drawing, had put up some impressive new banners, most of which depicted Harry zooming around the Horntail's head on his Firebolt, though a couple showed Cedric with his head on fire.

Harry helped himself to food; he had almost forgotten what it was like to feel properly hungry, and sat down with Ron and Hermione. He couldn't believe how happy he felt; he had Ron back on his side, he'd gotten through the first task, and he wouldn't have to face the second one for three months.

"Blimey, this is heavy," said Lee Jordan, picking up the golden egg, which Harry had left on a table, and weighing it in his hands. "Open it, Harry, go on! Let's just see what's inside it!"

"He's supposed to work out the clue on his own," Hermione said swiftly. "It's in the tournament rules. …"

"I was supposed to work out how to get past the dragon on my own too," Harry muttered, so only Hermione could hear him, and she grinned rather guiltily.

"Yeah, go on, Harry, open it!" several people echoed.

Lee passed Harry the egg, and Harry dug his fingernails into the groove that ran all the way around it and prised it open.

It was hollow and completely empty — but the moment Harry opened it, the most horrible noise, a loud and screechy wailing, filled the room. The nearest thing to it Harry had ever heard was the ghost orchestra at Nearly Headless Nick's deathday party, who had all been playing the musical saw.

"Shut it!" Fred bellowed, his hands over his ears.

"What was that?" said Seamus Finnigan, staring at the egg as Harry slammed it shut again. "Sounded like a banshee. … Maybe you've got to get past one of those next, Harry!"

"It was someone being tortured!" said Neville, who had gone very white and spilled sausage rolls all over the floor. "You're going to have to fight the Cruciatus Curse!"

"Don't be a prat, Neville, that's illegal," said George. "They wouldn't use the Cruciatus Curse on the champions. I thought it sounded a bit like Percy singing … maybe you've got to attack him while he's in the shower, Harry."

"Want a jam tart, Hermione?" said Fred.

Hermione looked doubtfully at the plate he was offering her. Fred grinned.

"It's all right," he said. "I haven't done anything to them. It's the custard creams you've got to watch —"

Neville, who had just bitten into a custard cream, choked and spat it out. Fred laughed.

“Just my little joke, Neville. …”

Hermione took a jam tart. Then she said, “Did you get all this from the kitchens, Fred?”

“Yep,” said Fred, grinning at her. He put on a high-pitched squeak and imitated a house-elf. “ ‘Anything we can get you, sir, anything at all!’ They’re dead helpful … get me a roast ox if I said I was peckish.”

“How do you get in there?” Hermione said in an innocently casual sort of voice.

“Easy,” said Fred, “concealed door behind a painting of a bowl of fruit. Just tickle the pear, and it giggles and —” He stopped and looked suspiciously at her. “Why?”

“Nothing,” said Hermione quickly.

“Going to try and lead the house-elves out on strike now, are you?” said George. “Going to give up all the leaflet stuff and try and stir them up into rebellion?”

Several people chortled. Hermione didn’t answer.

“Don’t you go upsetting them and telling them they’ve got to take clothes and salaries!” said Fred warningly “You’ll put them off their cooking!”

Just then, Neville caused a slight diversion by turning into a large canary.

“Oh — sorry, Neville!” Fred shouted over all the laughter. “I for-got — it was the custard creams we hexed —”

Within a minute, however, Neville had molted, and once his feathers had fallen off, he reappeared looking entirely normal. He even joined in laughing.

“Canary Creams!” Fred shouted to the excitable crowd. “George and I invented them — seven Sickles each, a bargain!”

It was nearly one in the morning when Harry finally went up to the dormitory with Ron, Neville, Seamus, and Dean. Before he pulled the curtains of his four-poster shut, Harry set his tiny model of the Hungarian Horntail on the table next to his bed, where it yawned, curled up, and closed its eyes. Really, Harry thought, as he pulled the hangings on his four-poster closed, Hagrid had a point … they were all right, really, dragons. …The start of December brought wind and sleet to Hogwarts. Drafty though the castle always was in winter, Harry was glad of its fires and thick walls every time he passed the Durmstrang ship on the lake, which was pitching in the high winds, its black sails billowing against the dark skies. He thought the Beauxbatons caravan was likely to be pretty chilly too. Hagrid, he noticed, was keeping Madame Maxime’s horses well provided with their preferred drink of single-malt whiskey; the fumes wafting from the trough in the corner of their paddock was enough to make the entire Care of Magical Creatures class light-headed. This was unhelpful, as they were still tending the horrible skrewts and needed their wits about them.

“I’m not sure whether they hibernate or not,” Hagrid told the shivering class in the windy pumpkin patch next lesson. “Thought we’d jus’ try an’ see if they fancied a kip … we’ll jus’ settle ’em down in these boxes. …”

There were now only ten skrewts left; apparently their desire to kill one another had not been exercised out of them. Each of them was now approaching six feet in length. Their thick gray armor; their powerful, scuttling legs; their fire-blasting ends; their stings and their suckers, combined to make the skrewts the most repul-sive things

Harry had ever seen. The class looked dispiritedly at the enormous boxes Hagrid had brought out, all lined with pillows and fluffy blankets.

“We’ll jus’ lead ’em in here,” Hagrid said, “an’ put the lids on, and we’ll see what happens.”

But the skrewts, it transpired, did not hibernate, and did not appreciate being forced into pillow-lined boxes and nailed in. Hagrid was soon yelling, “Don’ panic, now, don’ panic!” while the skrewts rampaged around the pumpkin patch, now strewn with the smoldering wreckage of the boxes. Most of the class — Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle in the lead — had fled into Hagrid’s cabin through the back door and barricaded themselves in; Harry, Ron, and Hermi-one, however, were among those who remained outside trying to help Hagrid. Together they managed to restrain and tie up nine of the skrewts, though at the cost of numerous burns and cuts; finally, only one skrewt was left.

“Don’ frighten him, now!” Hagrid shouted as Ron and Harry used their wands to shoot jets of fiery sparks at the skrewt, which was advancing menacingly on them, its sting arched, quivering, over its back. “Jus’ try an’ slip the rope ’round his sting, so he won’ hurt any o’ the others!”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want that!” Ron shouted angrily as he and Harry backed into the wall of Hagrid’s cabin, still holding the skrewt off with their sparks.

“Well, well, well … this does look like fun.”

Rita Skeeter was leaning on Hagrid’s garden fence, looking in at the mayhem. She was wearing a thick magenta cloak with a furry purple collar today, and her crocodile-skin handbag was over her arm.

Hagrid launched himself forward on top of the skrewt that was cornering Harry and Ron and flattened it; a blast of fire shot out of its

end, withering the pumpkin plants nearby.

“Who’re you?” Hagrid asked Rita Skeeter as he slipped a loop of rope around the skrewt’s sting and tightened it.

“Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter,” Rita replied, beaming at him. Her gold teeth glinted.

“Thought Dumbledore said you weren’ allowed inside the school anymore,” said Hagrid, frowning slightly as he got off the slightly squashed skrewt and started tugging it over to its fellows.

Rita acted as though she hadn’t heard what Hagrid had said.

“What are these fascinating creatures called?” she asked, beam-ing still more widely.

“Blast-Ended Skrewts,” grunted Hagrid.

“Really?” said Rita, apparently full of lively interest. “I’ve never heard of them before … where do they come from?”

Harry noticed a dull red flush rising up out of Hagrid’s wild black beard, and his heart sank. Where had Hagrid got the skrewts from? Hermione, who seemed to be thinking along these lines, said quickly, “They’re very interesting, aren’t they? Aren’t they, Harry?”

“What? Oh yeah … ouch … interesting,” said Harry as she stepped on his foot.

“Ah, you’re here, Harry!” said Rita Skeeter as she looked around. “So you like Care of Magical Creatures, do you? One of your fa-vorite lessons?”

“Yes,” said Harry stoutly. Hagrid beamed at him.

“Lovely,” said Rita. “Really lovely. Been teaching long?” she added to Hagrid.

Harry noticed her eyes travel over Dean (who had a nasty cut across one cheek), Lavender (whose robes were badly singed), Sea-mus (who was nursing several burnt fingers), and then to the cabin windows, where most of the class stood, their noses pressed against the glass waiting to see if the coast was clear.

"This is o'ny me second year," said Hagrid.

"Lovely… I don't suppose you'd like to give an interview, would you? Share some of your experience of magical creatures? The Prophet does a zoological column every Wednesday, as I'm sure you know. We could feature these — er — Bang-Ended Scoots."

"Blast-Ended Skrewts," Hagrid said eagerly. "Er — yeah, why not?"

Harry had a very bad feeling about this, but there was no way of communicating it to Hagrid without Rita Skeeter seeing, so he had to stand and watch in silence as Hagrid and Rita Skeeter made arrangements to meet in the Three Broomsticks for a good long in-terview later that week. Then the bell rang up at the castle, signal-ing the end of the lesson.

"Well, good-bye, Harry!" Rita Skeeter called merrily to him as he set off with Ron and Hermione. "Until Friday night, then, Hagrid!"

"She'll twist everything he says," Harry said under his breath.

"Just as long as he didn't import those skrewts illegally or any-thing," said Hermione desperately. They looked at one another — it was exactly the sort of thing Hagrid might do.

"Hagrid's been in loads of trouble before, and Dumbledore's never sacked him," said Ron consolingly. "Worst that can happen is Hagrid'll have to get rid of the skrewts. Sorry … did I say worst? I meant best."

Harry and Hermione laughed, and, feeling slightly more cheer-ful, went off to lunch.

Harry thoroughly enjoyed double Divination that afternoon; they were still doing star charts and predictions, but now that he and Ron were friends once more, the whole thing seemed very funny again. Professor Trelawney, who had been so pleased with the pair of them when they had been predicting their own horrific deaths, quickly became irritated as they sniggered through her explanation of the various ways in which Pluto could disrupt everyday life.

"I would think," she said, in a mystical whisper that did not con-ceal her obvious annoyance, "that some of us" — she stared very meaningfully at Harry — "might be a little less frivolous had they seen what I have seen during my crystal gazing last night. As I sat here, absorbed in my needlework, the urge to consult the orb over-powered me. I arose, I settled myself before it, and I gazed into its crystalline depths … and what do you think I saw gazing back at me?"

"An ugly old bat in outsize specs?" Ron muttered under his breath.

Harry fought hard to keep his face straight.

"Death, my dears."

Parvati and Lavender both put their hands over their mouths, looking horrified.

"Yes," said Professor Trelawney, nodding impressively, "it comes, ever closer, it circles overhead like a vulture, ever lower … ever lower over the castle. …"

She stared pointedly at Harry, who yawned very widely and obviously.

"It'd be a bit more impressive if she hadn't done it about eighty times before," Harry said as they finally regained the fresh air of the

staircase beneath Professor Trelawney's room. "But if I'd dropped dead every time she's told me I'm going to, I'd be a medical miracle."

"You'd be a sort of extra-concentrated ghost," said Ron, chortling, as they passed the Bloody Baron going in the opposite direction, his wide eyes staring sinisterly. "At least we didn't get homework. I hope Hermione got loads off Professor Vector, I love not working when she is. …"

But Hermione wasn't at dinner, nor was she in the library when they went to look for her afterward. The only person in there was Viktor Krum. Ron hovered behind the bookshelves for a while, watching Krum, debating in whispers with Harry whether he should ask for an autograph — but then Ron realized that six or seven girls were lurking in the next row of books, debating exactly the same thing, and he lost his enthusiasm for the idea.

"Wonder where she's got to?" Ron said as he and Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Dunno … balderdash."

But the Fat Lady had barely begun to swing forward when the sound of racing feet behind them announced Hermione's arrival.

"Harry!" she panted, skidding to a halt beside him (the Fat Lady stared down at her, eyebrows raised). "Harry, you've got to come — you've got to come, the most amazing thing's happened — please —"

She seized Harry's arm and started to try to drag him back along the corridor.

"What's the matter?" Harry said.

"I'll show you when we get there — oh come on, quick —"

Harry looked around at Ron; he looked back at Harry, intrigued.

“Okay,” Harry said, starting off back down the corridor with Hermione, Ron hurrying to keep up.

“Oh don’t mind me!” the Fat Lady called irritably after them. “Don’t apologize for bothering me! I’ll just hang here, wide open, until you get back, shall I?”

“Yeah, thanks!” Ron shouted over his shoulder.

“Hermione, where are we going?” Harry asked, after she had led them down through six floors, and started down the marble stair-case into the entrance hall.

“You’ll see, you’ll see in a minute!” said Hermione excitedly.

She turned left at the bottom of the staircase and hurried toward the door through which Cedric Diggory had gone the night after the Goblet of Fire had regurgitated his and Harry’s names. Harry had never been through here before. He and Ron followed Hermione down a flight of stone steps, but instead of ending up in a gloomy underground passage like the one that led to Snape’s dun-geon, they found themselves in a broad stone corridor, brightly lit with torches, and decorated with cheerful paintings that were mainly of food.

“Oh hang on …” said Harry slowly, halfway down the corridor. “Wait a minute, Hermione. …”

“What?” She turned around to look at him, anticipation all over her face.

“I know what this is about,” said Harry.

He nudged Ron and pointed to the painting just behind Hermione. It showed a gigantic silver fruit bowl.

“Hermione!” said Ron, cottoning on. “You’re trying to rope us into that spew stuff again!”

"No, no, I'm not!" she said hastily. "And it's not spew, Ron —"

"Changed the name, have you?" said Ron, frowning at her. "What are we now, then, the House-Elf Liberation Front? I'm not barging into that kitchen and trying to make them stop work, I'm not doing it —"

"I'm not asking you to!" Hermione said impatiently. "I came down here just now, to talk to them all, and I found — oh come on, Harry, I want to show you!"

She seized his arm again, pulled him in front of the picture of the giant fruit bowl, stretched out her forefinger, and tickled the huge green pear. It began to squirm, chuckling, and suddenly turned into a large green door handle. Hermione seized it, pulled the door open, and pushed Harry hard in the back, forcing him inside.

He had one brief glimpse of an enormous, high-ceilinged room, large as the Great Hall above it, with mounds of glittering brass pots and pans heaped around the stone walls, and a great brick fire-place at the other end, when something small hurtled toward him from the middle of the room, squealing, "Harry Potter, sir! Harry Potter!"

Next second all the wind had been knocked out of him as the squealing elf hit him hard in the midriff, hugging him so tightly he thought his ribs would break.

"D-Dobby?" Harry gasped.

"It is Dobby, sir, it is!" squealed the voice from somewhere around his navel. "Dobby has been hoping and hoping to see Harry Potter, sir, and Harry Potter has come to see him, sir!"

Dobby let go and stepped back a few paces, beaming up at Harry, his enormous, green, tennis-ball-shaped eyes brimming with tears of happiness. He looked almost exactly as Harry remem-bered him; the pencil-shaped nose, the batlike ears, the long fingers and feet — all except the clothes, which were very different.

When Dobby had worked for the Malfoys, he had always worn the same filthy old pillowcase. Now, however, he was wearing the strangest assortment of garments Harry had ever seen; he had done an even worse job of dressing himself than the wizards at the World Cup. He was wearing a tea cozy for a hat, on which he had pinned a number of bright badges; a tie patterned with horseshoes over a bare chest, a pair of what looked like children's soccer shorts, and odd socks. One of these, Harry saw, was the black one Harry had removed from his own foot and tricked Mr. Malfoy into giving Dobby, thereby setting Dobby free. The other was covered in pink and orange stripes.

"Dobby, what're you doing here?" Harry said in amazement.

"Dobby has come to work at Hogwarts, sir!" Dobby squealed excitedly. "Professor Dumbledore gave Dobby and Winky jobs, sir!"

"Winky?" said Harry. "She's here too?"

"Yes, sir, yes!" said Dobby, and he seized Harry's hand and pulled him off into the kitchen between the four long wooden tables that stood there. Each of these tables, Harry noticed as he passed them, was positioned exactly beneath the four House tables above, in the Great Hall. At the moment, they were clear of food, dinner having finished, but he supposed that an hour ago they had been laden with dishes that were then sent up through the ceiling to their counterparts above.

At least a hundred little elves were standing around the kitchen, beaming, bowing, and curtsying as Dobby led Harry past them. They were all wearing the same uniform: a tea towel stamped with the Hogwarts crest, and tied, as Winky's had been, like a toga.

Dobby stopped in front of the brick fireplace and pointed.

"Winky, sir!" he said.

Winky was sitting on a stool by the fire. Unlike Dobby, she had obviously not foraged for clothes. She was wearing a neat little skirt and blouse with a matching blue hat, which had holes in it for her large ears. However, while every one of Dobby's strange collection of garments was so clean and well cared for that it looked brand-new, Winky was plainly not taking care of her clothes at all. There were soup stains all down her blouse and a burn in her skirt.

"Hello, Winky," said Harry.

Winky's lip quivered. Then she burst into tears, which spilled out of her great brown eyes and splashed down her front, just as they had done at the Quidditch World Cup.

"Oh dear," said Hermione. She and Ron had followed Harry and Dobby to the end of the kitchen. "Winky, don't cry, please don't …"

But Winky cried harder than ever. Dobby, on the other hand, beamed up at Harry.

"Would Harry Potter like a cup of tea?" he squeaked loudly, over Winky's sobs.

"Er — yeah, okay," said Harry.

Instantly, about six house-elves came trotting up behind him, bearing a large silver tray laden with a teapot, cups for Harry, Ron, and Hermione, a milk jug, and a large plate of biscuits.

"Good service!" Ron said, in an impressed voice. Hermione frowned at him, but the elves all looked delighted; they bowed very low and retreated.

"How long have you been here, Dobby?" Harry asked as Dobby handed around the tea.

"Only a week, Harry Potter, sir!" said Dobby happily. "Dobby came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir. You see, sir, it is very diffi-cult for a house-elf who has been dismissed to get a new position, sir, very difficult indeed —"

At this, Winky howled even harder, her squashed-tomato of a nose dribbling all down her front, though she made no effort to stem the flow.

"Dobby has traveled the country for two whole years, sir, trying to find work!" Dobby squeaked. "But Dobby hasn't found work, sir, because Dobby wants paying now!"

The house-elves all around the kitchen, who had been listening and watching with interest, all looked away at these words, as though Dobby had said something rude and embarrassing. Hermione, however, said, "Good for you, Dobby!"

"Thank you, miss!" said Dobby, grinning toothily at her. "But most wizards doesn't want a house-elf who wants paying, miss. 'That's not the point of a house-elf,' they says, and they slammed the door in Dobby's face! Dobby likes work, but he wants to wear clothes and he wants to be paid, Harry Potter. … Dobby likes be-ing free!"

The Hogwarts house-elves had now started edging away from Dobby, as though he were carrying something contagious. Winky, however, remained where she was, though there was a definite in-crease in the volume of her crying.

"And then, Harry Potter, Dobby goes to visit Winky, and finds out Winky has been freed too, sir!" said Dobby delightedly.

At this, Winky flung herself forward off her stool and lay face-down on the flagged stone floor, beating her tiny fists upon it and positively screaming with misery. Hermione hastily dropped down to her knees beside her and tried to comfort her, but nothing she said made the

slightest difference. Dobby continued with his story, shouting shrilly over Winky's screeches.

"And then Dobby had the idea, Harry Potter, sir! 'Why doesn't Dobby and Winky find work together?' Dobby says. 'Where is there enough work for two house-elves?' says Winky. And Dobby thinks, and it comes to him, sir! Hogwarts! So Dobby and Winky came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir, and Professor Dumbledore took us on!"

Dobby beamed very brightly, and happy tears welled in his eyes again.

"And Professor Dumbledore says he will pay Dobby, sir, if Dobby wants paying! And so Dobby is a free elf, sir, and Dobby gets a Galleon a week and one day off a month!"

"That's not very much!" Hermione shouted indignantly from the floor, over Winky's continued screaming and fist-beating.

"Professor Dumbledore offered Dobby ten Galleons a week, and weekends off," said Dobby, suddenly giving a little shiver, as though the prospect of so much leisure and riches were frightening, "but Dobby beat him down, miss. … Dobby likes freedom, miss, but he isn't wanting too much, miss, he likes work better."

"And how much is Professor Dumbledore paying you, Winky?" Hermione asked kindly.

If she had thought this would cheer up Winky, she was wildly mistaken. Winky did stop crying, but when she sat up she was glaring at Hermione through her massive brown eyes, her whole face sopping wet and suddenly furious.

"Winky is a disgraced elf, but Winky is not yet getting paid!" she squeaked. "Winky is not sunk so low as that! Winky is properly ashamed of being freed!"

“Ashamed?” said Hermione blankly. “But — Winky, come on! It’s Mr. Crouch who should be ashamed, not you! You didn’t do anything wrong, he was really horrible to you —”

But at these words, Winky clapped her hands over the holes in her hat, flattening her ears so that she couldn’t hear a word, and screeched, “You is not insulting my master, miss! You is not insult-ing Mr. Crouch! Mr. Crouch is a good wizard, miss! Mr. Crouch is right to sack bad Winky!”

“Winky is having trouble adjusting, Harry Potter,” squeaked Dobby confidentially. “Winky forgets she is not bound to Mr. Crouch anymore; she is allowed to speak her mind now, but she won’t do it.”

“Can’t house-elves speak their minds about their masters, then?” Harry asked.

“Oh no, sir, no,” said Dobby, looking suddenly serious. “ ’Tis part of the house-elf’s enslavement, sir. We keeps their secrets and our silence, sir. We upholds the family’s honor, and we never speaks ill of them — though Professor Dumbledore told Dobby he does not insist upon this. Professor Dumbledore said we is free to — to —”

Dobby looked suddenly nervous and beckoned Harry closer. Harry bent forward. Dobby whispered, “He said we is free to call him a — a barmy old codger if we likes, sir!”

Dobby gave a frightened sort of giggle.

“But Dobby is not wanting to, Harry Potter,” he said, talking normally again, and shaking his head so that his ears flapped. “Dobby likes Professor Dumbledore very much, sir, and is proud to keep his secrets and our silence for him.”

“But you can say what you like about the Malfoys now?” Harry asked him, grinning.

A slightly fearful look came into Dobby's immense eyes.

"Dobby — Dobby could," he said doubtfully. He squared his small shoulders. "Dobby could tell Harry Potter that his old mas-ters were — were — bad Dark wizards!"

Dobby stood for a moment, quivering all over, horror-struck by his own daring — then he rushed over to the nearest table and be-gan banging his head on it very hard, squealing, "Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!"

Harry seized Dobby by the back of his tie and pulled him away from the table.

"Thank you, Harry Potter, thank you," said Dobby breathlessly, rubbing his head.

"You just need a bit of practice," Harry said.

"Practice!" squealed Winky furiously. "You is ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dobby, talking that way about your masters!"

"They isn't my masters anymore, Winky!" said Dobby defiantly. "Dobby doesn't care what they think anymore!"

"Oh you is a bad elf, Dobby!" moaned Winky, tears leaking down her face once more. "My poor Mr. Crouch, what is he doing without Winky? He is needing me, he is needing my help! I is look-ing after the Crouches all my life, and my mother is doing it before me, and my grandmother is doing it before her … oh what is they saying if they knew Winky was freed? Oh the shame, the shame!" She buried her face in her skirt again and bawled.

"Winky," said Hermione firmly, "I'm quite sure Mr. Crouch is get-ting along perfectly well without you. We've seen him, you know —"

"You is seeing my master?" said Winky breathlessly, raising her tearstained face out of her skirt once more and goggling at Hermione. "You is seeing him here at Hogwarts?"

"Yes," said Hermione, "he and Mr. Bagman are judges in the Tri-wizard Tournament."

"Mr. Bagman comes too?" squeaked Winky, and to Harry's great surprise (and Ron's and Hermione's too, by the looks on their faces), she looked angry again. "Mr. Bagman is a bad wizard! A very bad wizard! My master isn't liking him, oh no, not at all!"

"Bagman — bad?" said Harry.

"Oh yes," Winky said, nodding her head furiously. "My master is telling Winky some things! But Winky is not saying … Winky — Winky keeps her master's secrets. …"

She dissolved yet again in tears; they could hear her sobbing into her skirt, "Poor master, poor master, no Winky to help him no more!

They couldn't get another sensible word out of Winky. They left her to her crying and finished their tea, while Dobby chatted hap-pily about his life as a free elf and his plans for his wages.

"Dobby is going to buy a sweater next, Harry Potter!" he said happily, pointing at his bare chest.

"Tell you what, Dobby," said Ron, who seemed to have taken a great liking to the elf, "I'll give you the one my mum knits me this Christmas, I always get one from her. You don't mind maroon, do you?"

Dobby was delighted.

"We might have to shrink it a bit to fit you," Ron told him, "but it'll go well with your tea cozy."

As they prepared to take their leave, many of the surrounding elves pressed in upon them, offering snacks to take back upstairs. Hermione refused, with a pained look at the way the elves kept bowing and curtsying, but Harry and Ron loaded their pockets with cream cakes and pies.

“Thanks a lot!” Harry said to the elves, who had all clustered around the door to say good night. “See you, Dobby!”

“Harry Potter … can Dobby come and see you sometimes, sir?” Dobby asked tentatively.

“ ’Course you can,” said Harry, and Dobby beamed.

“You know what?” said Ron, once he, Hermione, and Harry had left the kitchens behind and were climbing the steps into the en-trance hall again. “All these years I’ve been really impressed with Fred and George, nicking food from the kitchens — well, it’s not exactly difficult, is it? They can’t wait to give it away!”

“I think this is the best thing that could have happened to those elves, you know,” said Hermione, leading the way back up the mar-ble staircase. “Dobby coming to work here, I mean. The other elves will see how happy he is, being free, and slowly it’ll dawn on them that they want that too!”

“Let’s hope they don’t look too closely at Winky,” said Harry.

“Oh she’ll cheer up,” said Hermione, though she sounded a bit doubtful. “Once the shock’s worn off, and she’s got used to Hog-warts, she’ll see how much better off she is without that Crouch man.”

“She seems to love him,” said Ron thickly (he had just started on a cream cake).

“Doesn’t think much of Bagman, though, does she?” said Harry. “Wonder what Crouch says at home about him?”

“Probably says he’s not a very good Head of Department,” said Hermione, “and let’s face it … he’s got a point, hasn’t he?”

“I’d still rather work for him than old Crouch,” said Ron. “At least Bagman’s got a sense of humor.”

“Don’t let Percy hear you saying that,” Hermione said, smiling slightly.

“Yeah, well, Percy wouldn’t want to work for anyone with a sense of humor, would he?” said Ron, now starting on a chocolate eclair. “Percy wouldn’t recognize a joke if it danced naked in front of him wearing Dobby’s tea cozy.”

Chapter 22 The Unexpected Task

“Potter! Weasley! Will you pay attention?”

Professor McGonagall’s irritated voice cracked like a whip through the Transfiguration class on Thursday, and Harry and Ron both jumped and looked up.

It was the end of the lesson; they had finished their work; the guinea fowl they had been changing into guinea pigs had been shut away in a large cage on Professor McGonagall’s desk (Neville’s still had feathers); they had copied down their homework from the blackboard (“Describe, with examples, the ways in which Transform-ing Spells must be adapted when performing Cross-Species Switches”). The bell was due to ring at any moment, and Harry and Ron, who had been having a sword fight with a couple of Fred and George’s fake wands at the back of the class, looked up, Ron holding a tin parrot and Harry, a rubber haddock.

“Now that Potter and Weasley have been kind enough to act their age,” said Professor McGonagall, with an angry look at the pair of them as the head of Harry’s haddock drooped and fell silently to the floor — Ron’s parrot’s beak had severed it moments before — “I have something to say to you all.

“The Yule Ball is approaching — a traditional part of the Tri-wizard Tournament and an opportunity for us to socialize with our foreign guests. Now, the ball will be open only to fourth years and above — although you may invite a younger student if you wish —”

Lavender Brown let out a shrill giggle. Parvati Patil nudged her hard in the ribs, her face working furiously as she too fought not to giggle. They both looked around at Harry. Professor McGonagall ignored them, which Harry thought was distinctly unfair, as she had just told off him and Ron.

“Dress robes will be worn,” Professor McGonagall continued, “and the ball will start at eight o’clock on Christmas Day, finishing at midnight in the Great Hall. Now then —”

Professor McGonagall stared deliberately around the class.

“The Yule Ball is of course a chance for us all to — er — let our hair down,” she said, in a disapproving voice.

Lavender giggled harder than ever, with her hand pressed hard against her mouth to stifle the sound. Harry could see what was funny this time: Professor McGonagall, with her hair in a tight bun, looked as though she had never let her hair down in any sense.

“But that does NOT mean,” Professor McGonagall went on, “that we will be relaxing the standards of behavior we expect from Hogwarts students. I will be most seriously displeased if a Gryffin-dor student embarrasses the school in any way.”

The bell rang, and there was the usual scuffle of activity as every-one packed their bags and swung them onto their shoulders.

Professor McGonagall called above the noise, “Potter — a word, if you please.”

Assuming this had something to do with his headless rubber haddock, Harry proceeded gloomily to the teacher’s desk. Professor McGonagall waited until the rest of the class had gone, and then said, “Potter, the champions and their partners —”

“What partners?” said Harry.

Professor McGonagall looked suspiciously at him, as though she thought he was trying to be funny.

“Your partners for the Yule Ball, Potter,” she said coldly. “Your dance partners.”

Harry's insides seemed to curl up and shrivel.

"Dance partners?" He felt himself going red. "I don't dance," he said quickly.

"Oh yes, you do," said Professor McGonagall irritably. "That's what I'm telling you. Traditionally, the champions and their part-ners open the ball."

Harry had a sudden mental image of himself in a top hat and tails, accompanied by a girl in the sort of frilly dress Aunt Petunia always wore to Uncle Vernon's work parties.

"I'm not dancing," he said.

"It is traditional," said Professor McGonagall firmly. "You are a Hogwarts champion, and you will do what is expected of you as a representative of the school. So make sure you get yourself a partner, Potter."

"But — I don't —"

"You heard me, Potter," said Professor McGonagall in a very final sort of way.

A week ago, Harry would have said finding a partner for a dance would be a cinch compared to taking on a Hungarian Horntail. But now that he had done the latter, and was facing the prospect of asking a girl to the ball, he thought he'd rather have another round with the dragon.

Harry had never known so many people to put their names down to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas; he always did, of course, because the alternative was usually going back to Privet Drive, but he had always been very much in the minority before now. This year, however, everyone in the fourth year and above seemed to be staying, and they all seemed to Harry to be obsessed with the com-

ing ball — or at least all the girls were, and it was amazing how many girls Hogwarts suddenly seemed to hold; he had never quite noticed that before. Girls giggling and whispering in the corridors, girls shrieking with laughter as boys passed them, girls excitedly comparing notes on what they were going to wear on Christmas night. …"Why do they have to move in packs?" Harry asked Ron as a dozen or so girls walked past them, sniggering and staring at Harry. "How're you supposed to get one on their own to ask them?"

"Lasso one?" Ron suggested. "Got any idea who you're going to try?"

Harry didn't answer. He knew perfectly well whom he'd like to ask, but working up the nerve was something else. … Cho was a year older than he was; she was very pretty; she was a very good Quidditch player, and she was also very popular.

Ron seemed to know what was going on inside Harry's head.

"Listen, you're not going to have any trouble. You're a cham-pion. You've just beaten a Hungarian Horntail. I bet they'll be queuing up to go with you."

In tribute to their recently repaired friendship, Ron had kept the bitterness in his voice to a bare minimum. Moreover, to Harry's amazement, he turned out to be quite right.

A curly-haired third-year Hufflepuff girl to whom Harry had never spoken in his life asked him to go to the ball with her the very next day. Harry was so taken aback he said no before he'd even stopped to consider the matter. The girl walked off looking rather hurt, and Harry had to endure Dean's, Seamus's, and Ron's taunts about her all through History of Magic. The following day, two more girls asked him, a second year and (to his horror) a fifth year who looked as though she might knock him out if he refused.

"She was quite good-looking," said Ron fairly, after he'd stopped laughing.

“She was a foot taller than me,” said Harry, still unnerved. “Imagine what I’d look like trying to dance with her.”

Hermione’s words about Krum kept coming back to him. “They only like him because he’s famous!” Harry doubted very much if any of the girls who had asked to be his partner so far would have wanted to go to the ball with him if he hadn’t been a school cham-pion. Then he wondered if this would bother him if Cho asked him.

On the whole, Harry had to admit that even with the embar-rassing prospect of opening the ball before him, life had definitely improved since he had got through the first task. He wasn’t attract-ing nearly as much unpleasantness in the corridors anymore, which he suspected had a lot to do with Cedric — he had an idea Cedric might have told the Hufflepuffs to leave Harry alone, in gratitude for Harry’s tip-off about the dragons. There seemed to be fewer Support Cedric Diggory! badges around too. Draco Malfoy, of course, was still quoting Rita Skeeter’s article to him at every possi-ble opportunity, but he was getting fewer and fewer laughs out of it — and just to heighten Harry’s feeling of well-being, no story about Hagrid had appeared in the Daily Prophet.

“She didn’ seem very int’rested in magical creatures, ter tell yeh the truth,” Hagrid said, when Harry, Ron, and Hermione asked him how his interview with Rita Skeeter had gone during the last Care of Magical Creatures lesson of the term. To their very great relief, Hagrid had given up on direct contact with the skrewts now, and they were merely sheltering behind his cabin today, sitting at a trestle table and preparing a fresh selection of food with which to tempt the skrewts.

“She jus’ wanted me ter talk about you, Harry,” Hagrid contin-ued in a low voice. “Well, I told her we’d been friends since I went ter fetch yeh from the Dursleys. ‘Never had to tell him off in four years?’ she said. ‘Never played you up in lessons, has he?’ I told her no, an’ she didn’ seem happy at all. Yeh’d think she wanted me to say yeh were horrible, Harry.”

“ ’Course she did,” said Harry, throwing lumps of dragon liver into a large metal bowl and picking up his knife to cut some more. “She can’t keep writing about what a tragic little hero I am, it’ll get boring.”

“She wants a new angle, Hagrid,” said Ron wisely as he shelled salamander eggs. “You were supposed to say Harry’s a mad delin-quent!”

“But he’s not!” said Hagrid, looking genuinely shocked.

“She should’ve interviewed Snape,” said Harry grimly. “He’d give her the goods on me any day. ‘Potter has been crossing lines ever since he first arrived at this school. …’ ”

“Said that, did he?” said Hagrid, while Ron and Hermione laughed. “Well, yeh might’ve bent a few rules, Harry, bu’ yeh’re all righ’ really, aren’ you?”

“Cheers, Hagrid,” said Harry, grinning.

“You coming to this ball thing on Christmas Day, Hagrid?” said Ron.

“Though’ I might look in on it, yeah,” said Hagrid gruffly. “Should be a good do, I reckon. You’ll be openin’ the dancin’, won’ yeh, Harry? Who’re you takin’?”

“No one, yet,” said Harry, feeling himself going red again. Hag-rid didn’t pursue the subject.

The last week of term became increasingly boisterous as it pro-gressed. Rumors about the Yule Ball were flying everywhere, though Harry didn’t believe half of them — for instance, that Dumbledore had bought eight hundred barrels of mulled mead from Madam Rosmerta. It seemed to be fact, however, that he had booked the Weird Sisters. Exactly who or what the Weird Sisters were Harry didn’t know, never having had access to a wizard’s wire-less, but he deduced from the wild excitement of those who had grown up listening to the WWN

(Wizarding Wireless Network) that they were a very famous musical group.

Some of the teachers, like little Professor Flitwick, gave up trying to teach them much when their minds were so clearly elsewhere; he allowed them to play games in his lesson on Wednesday, and spent most of it talking to Harry about the perfect Summoning Charm Harry had used during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. Other teachers were not so generous. Nothing would ever deflect Professor Binns, for example, from plowing on through his notes on goblin rebellions — as Binns hadn't let his own death stand in the way of continuing to teach, they supposed a small thing like Christmas wasn't going to put him off. It was amazing how he could make even bloody and vicious goblin riots sound as boring as Percy's cauldron-bottom report. Professors McGonagall and Moody kept them working until the very last second of their classes too, and Snape, of course, would no sooner let them play games in class than adopt Harry. Staring nastily around at them all, he informed them that he would be testing them on poison antidotes during the last lesson of the term.

"Evil, he is," Ron said bitterly that night in the Gryffindor com-mon room. "Springing a test on us on the last day. Ruining the last bit of term with a whole load of studying."

"Mmm … you're not exactly straining yourself, though, are you?" said Hermione, looking at him over the top of her Potions notes. Ron was busy building a card castle out of his Exploding Snap pack — a much more interesting pastime than with Muggle cards, because of the chance that the whole thing would blow up at any second.

"It's Christmas, Hermione," said Harry lazily; he was rereading Flying with the Cannons for the tenth time in an armchair near the fire.

Hermione looked severely over at him too. "I'd have thought you'd be doing something constructive, Harry, even if you don't want to learn your antidotes!"

“Like what?” Harry said as he watched Joey Jenkins of the Can-nons belt a Bludger toward a Ballycastle Bats Chaser.

“That egg!” Hermione hissed.

“Come on, Hermione, I’ve got till February the twenty-fourth,” Harry said.

He had put the golden egg upstairs in his trunk and hadn’t opened it since the celebration party after the first task. There were still two and a half months to go until he needed to know what all the screechy wailing meant, after all.

“But it might take weeks to work it out!” said Hermione. “You’re going to look a real idiot if everyone else knows what the next task is and you don’t!”

“Leave him alone, Hermione, he’s earned a bit of a break,” said Ron, and he placed the last two cards on top of the castle and the whole lot blew up, singeing his eyebrows.

“Nice look, Ron … go well with your dress robes, that will.”

It was Fred and George. They sat down at the table with Harry, Ron, and Hermione as Ron felt how much damage had been done.

“Ron, can we borrow Pigwidgeon?” George asked.

“No, he’s off delivering a letter,” said Ron. “Why?”

“Because George wants to invite him to the ball,” said Fred sar-castically.

“Because we want to send a letter, you stupid great prat,” said George.

“Who d’you two keep writing to, eh?” said Ron.

“Nose out, Ron, or I’ll burn that for you too,” said Fred, waving his wand threateningly. “So … you lot got dates for the ball yet?”

“Nope,” said Ron.

“Well, you’d better hurry up, mate, or all the good ones will be gone,” said Fred.

“Who’re you going with, then?” said Ron.

“Angelina,” said Fred promptly, without a trace of embar-rassment.

“What?” said Ron, taken aback. “You’ve already asked her?”

“Good point,” said Fred. He turned his head and called across the common room, “Oi! Angelina!”

Angelina, who had been chatting with Alicia Spinnet near the fire, looked over at him.

“What?” she called back.

“Want to come to the ball with me?”

Angelina gave Fred an appraising sort of look.

“All right, then,” she said, and she turned back to Alicia and car-ried on chatting with a bit of a grin on her face.

“There you go,” said Fred to Harry and Ron, “piece of cake.”

He got to his feet, yawning, and said, “We’d better use a school owl then, George, come on. …”

They left. Ron stopped feeling his eyebrows and looked across the smoldering wreck of his card castle at Harry.

“We should get a move on, you know … ask someone. He’s right. We don’t want to end up with a pair of trolls.”

Hermione let out a sputter of indignation.

“A pair of … what, excuse me?”

“Well — you know,” said Ron, shrugging. “I’d rather go alone than with — with Eloise Midgen, say.”

“Her acne’s loads better lately — and she’s really nice!”

“Her nose is off-center,” said Ron.

“Oh I see,” Hermione said, bristling. “So basically, you’re going to take the best-looking girl who’ll have you, even if she’s com-pletely horrible?”

“Er — yeah, that sounds about right,” said Ron.

“I’m going to bed,” Hermione snapped, and she swept off to-ward the girls’ staircase without another word.

The Hogwarts staff, demonstrating a continued desire to impress the visitors from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, seemed deter-mined to show the castle at its best this Christmas. When the dec-orations went up, Harry noticed that they were the most stunning he had yet seen inside the school. Everlasting icicles had been at-tached to the banisters of the marble staircase; the usual twelve Christmas trees in the Great Hall were bedecked with everything from luminous holly berries to real, hooting, golden owls, and the suits of armor had all been bewitched to sing carols whenever any-one passed them. It was quite something to hear “O Come, All Ye Faithful” sung by an empty helmet that only knew half the words. Several times, Filch the caretaker had to extract Peeves from inside the armor, where he had taken to hiding, filling in the gaps in the songs with lyrics of his own invention, all of which were very rude.

And still, Harry hadn't asked Cho to the ball. He and Ron were getting very nervous now, though as Harry pointed out, Ron would look much less stupid than he would without a partner; Harry was supposed to be starting the dancing with the other champions.

"I suppose there's always Moaning Myrtle," he said gloomily, referring to the ghost who haunted the girls' toilets on the second floor.

"Harry — we've just got to grit our teeth and do it," said Ron on Friday morning, in a tone that suggested they were planning the storming of an impregnable fortress. "When we get back to the common room tonight, we'll both have partners — agreed?"

"Er … okay," said Harry.

But every time he glimpsed Cho that day — during break, and then lunchtime, and once on the way to History of Magic — she was surrounded by friends. Didn't she ever go anywhere alone? Could he perhaps ambush her as she was going into a bathroom? But no — she even seemed to go there with an escort of four or five girls. Yet if he didn't do it soon, she was bound to have been asked by somebody else.

He found it hard to concentrate on Snape's Potions test, and consequently forgot to add the key ingredient — a bezoar — meaning that he received bottom marks. He didn't care, though; he was too busy screwing up his courage for what he was about to do. When the bell rang, he grabbed his bag, and hurried to the dun-geon door.

"I'll meet you at dinner," he said to Ron and Hermione, and he dashed off upstairs.

He'd just have to ask Cho for a private word, that was all. … He hurried off through the packed corridors looking for her, and (rather sooner than he had expected) he found her, emerging from a Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson.

“Er — Cho? Could I have a word with you?”

Giggling should be made illegal, Harry thought furiously, as all the girls around Cho started doing it. She didn’t, though. She said, “Okay,” and followed him out of earshot of her classmates.

Harry turned to look at her and his stomach gave a weird lurch as though he had missed a step going downstairs.

“Er,” he said.

He couldn’t ask her. He couldn’t. But he had to. Cho stood there looking puzzled, watching him.

The words came out before Harry had quite got his tongue around them.

“Wangoballwime?”

“Sorry?” said Cho.

“D’you — d’you want to go to the ball with me?” said Harry. Why did he have to go red now? Why?

“Oh!” said Cho, and she went red too. “Oh Harry, I’m really sorry,” and she truly looked it. “I’ve already said I’ll go with some-one else.”

“Oh,” said Harry.

It was odd; a moment before his insides had been writhing like snakes, but suddenly he didn’t seem to have any insides at all.

“Oh okay,” he said, “no problem.”

“I’m really sorry,” she said again.

“That’s okay,” said Harry.

They stood there looking at each other, and then Cho said, “Well —”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“Well, ’bye,” said Cho, still very red. She walked away.

Harry called after her, before he could stop himself.

“Who’re you going with?”

“Oh — Cedric,” she said. “Cedric Diggory.”

“Oh right,” said Harry.

His insides had come back again. It felt as though they had been filled with lead in their absence.

Completely forgetting about dinner, he walked slowly back up to Gryffindor Tower, Cho’s voice echoing in his ears with every step he took. “Cedric — Cedric Diggory.” He had been starting to quite like Cedric — prepared to overlook the fact that he had once beaten him at Quidditch, and was handsome, and popular, and nearly everyone’s favorite champion. Now he suddenly realized that Cedric was in fact a useless pretty boy who didn’t have enough brains to fill an eggcup.

“Fairy lights,” he said dully to the Fat Lady — the password had been changed the previous day.

“Yes, indeed, dear!” she trilled, straightening her new tinsel hair band as she swung forward to admit him.

Entering the common room, Harry looked around, and to his surprise he saw Ron sitting ashen-faced in a distant corner. Ginny was sitting with him, talking to him in what seemed to be a low, soothing voice.

“What’s up, Ron?” said Harry, joining them.

Ron looked up at Harry, a sort of blind horror in his face.

“Why did I do it?” he said wildly. “I don’t know what made me do it!”

“What?” said Harry.

“He — er — just asked Fleur Delacour to go to the ball with him,” said Ginny. She looked as though she was fighting back a smile, but she kept patting Ron’s arm sympathetically.

“You what?” said Harry.

“I don’t know what made me do it!” Ron gasped again. “What was I playing at? There were people — all around — I’ve gone mad — everyone watching! I was just walking past her in the en-trance hall — she was standing there talking to Diggory — and it sort of came over me — and I asked her!”

Ron moaned and put his face in his hands. He kept talking, though the words were barely distinguishable.

“She looked at me like I was a sea slug or something. Didn’t even answer. And then — I dunno — I just sort of came to my senses and ran for it.”

“She’s part veela,” said Harry. “You were right — her grand-mother was one. It wasn’t your fault, I bet you just walked past when she was turning on the old charm for Diggory and got a blast of it — but she was wasting her time. He’s going with Cho Chang.”

Ron looked up.

“I asked her to go with me just now,” Harry said dully, “and she told me.”

Ginny had suddenly stopped smiling.

“This is mad,” said Ron. “We’re the only ones left who haven’t got anyone — well, except Neville. Hey — guess who he asked?

Hermione!"

"What?" said Harry, completely distracted by this startling news.

"Yeah, I know!" said Ron, some of the color coming back into his face as he started to laugh. "He told me after Potions! Said she's always been really nice, helping him out with work and stuff — but she told him she was already going with someone. Ha! As if! She just didn't want to go with Neville … I mean, who would?"

"Don't!" said Ginny, annoyed. "Don't laugh —"

Just then Hermione climbed in through the portrait hole.

"Why weren't you two at dinner?" she said, coming over to join them.

"Because — oh shut up laughing, you two — because they've both just been turned down by girls they asked to the ball!" said Ginny.

That shut Harry and Ron up.

"Thanks a bunch, Ginny," said Ron sourly.

"All the good-looking ones taken, Ron?" said Hermione loftily. "Eloise Midgen starting to look quite pretty now, is she? Well, I'm sure you'll find someone somewhere who'll have you."

But Ron was staring at Hermione as though suddenly seeing her in a whole new light.

"Hermione, Neville's right — you are a girl. …"

"Oh well spotted," she said acidly.

"Well — you can come with one of us!"

"No, I can't," snapped Hermione.

“Oh come on,” he said impatiently, “we need partners, we’re go-ing to look really stupid if we haven’t got any, everyone else has …”

“I can’t come with you,” said Hermione, now blushing, “because I’m already going with someone.”

“No, you’re not!” said Ron. “You just said that to get rid of Neville!”

“Oh did I?” said Hermione, and her eyes flashed dangerously. “Just because it’s taken you three years to notice, Ron, doesn’t mean no one else has spotted I’m a girl!”

Ron stared at her. Then he grinned again.

“Okay, okay, we know you’re a girl,” he said. “That do? Will you come now?”

“I’ve already told you!” Hermione said very angrily. “I’m going with someone else!”

And she stormed off toward the girls’ dormitories again.

“She’s lying,” said Ron flatly, watching her go.

“She’s not,” said Ginny quietly.

“Who is it then?” said Ron sharply.

“I’m not telling you, it’s her business,” said Ginny.

“Right,” said Ron, who looked extremely put out, “this is getting stupid. Ginny, you can go with Harry, and I’ll just —”

“I can’t,” said Ginny, and she went scarlet too. “I’m going with — with Neville. He asked me when Hermione said no, and I thought … well … I’m not going to be able to go otherwise, I’m not in fourth year.” She looked extremely miserable. “I think I’ll go and have dinner,” she

said, and she got up and walked off to the portrait hole, her head bowed.

Ron goggled at Harry.

"What's got into them?" he demanded.

But Harry had just seen Parvati and Lavender come in through the portrait hole. The time had come for drastic action.

"Wait here," he said to Ron, and he stood up, walked straight up to Parvati, and said, "Parvati? Will you go to the ball with me?"

Parvati went into a fit of giggles. Harry waited for them to sub-side, his fingers crossed in the pocket of his robes.

"Yes, all right then," she said finally, blushing furiously.

"Thanks," said Harry, in relief. "Lavender — will you go with Ron?"

"She's going with Seamus," said Parvati, and the pair of them giggled harder than ever.

Harry sighed.

"Can't you think of anyone who'd go with Ron?" he said, lower-ing his voice so that Ron wouldn't hear.

"What about Hermione Granger?" said Parvati.

"She's going with someone else."

Parvati looked astonished.

"Ooooh — who?" she said keenly.

Harry shrugged. "No idea," he said. "So what about Ron?"

“Well …” said Parvati slowly, “I suppose my sister might … Padma, you know … in Ravenclaw. I’ll ask her if you like.”

“Yeah, that would be great,” said Harry. “Let me know, will you?”

And he went back over to Ron, feeling that this ball was a lot more trouble than it was worth, and hoping very much that Padma Patil’s nose was dead center.

Chapter 23 The Yule Ball

Despite the very heavy load of homework that the fourth years had been given for the holidays, Harry was in no mood to work when term ended, and spent the week leading up to Christmas enjoying himself as fully as possible along with everyone else. Gryffindor Tower was hardly less crowded now than during term-time; it seemed to have shrunk slightly too, as its inhabitants were being so much rowdier than usual. Fred and George had had a great success with their Canary Creams, and for the first couple of days of the holidays, people kept bursting into feather all over the place. Before long, however, all the Gryffindors had learned to treat food anybody else offered them with extreme caution, in case it had a Canary Cream concealed in the center, and George con-fided to Harry that he and Fred were now working on developing something else. Harry made a mental note never to accept so much as a crisp from Fred and George in future. He still hadn't forgotten Dudley and the Ton-Tongue Toffee.

Snow was falling thickly upon the castle and its grounds now. The pale blue Beauxbatons carriage looked like a large, chilly, frosted pumpkin next to the iced gingerbread house that was Ha-grid's cabin, while the Durmstrang ship's portholes were glazed with ice, the rigging white with frost. The house-elves down in the kitchen were outdoing themselves with a series of rich, warming stews and savory puddings, and only Fleur Delacour seemed to be able to find anything to complain about.

"It is too 'eavy, all zis 'Ogwarts food," they heard her saying grumpily as they left the Great Hall behind her one evening (Ron skulking behind Harry, keen not to be spotted by Fleur). "I will not fit into my dress robes!"

"Oooh there's a tragedy," Hermione snapped as Fleur went out into the entrance hall. "She really thinks a lot of herself, that one, doesn't

she?”

“Hermione — who are you going to the ball with?” said Ron.

He kept springing this question on her, hoping to startle her into a response by asking it when she least expected it. However, Hermione merely frowned and said, “I’m not telling you, you’ll just make fun of me.”

“You’re joking, Weasley!” said Malfoy, behind them. “You’re not telling me someone’s asked that to the ball? Not the long-molared Mudblood?”

Harry and Ron both whipped around, but Hermione said loudly, waving to somebody over Malfoy’s shoulder, “Hello, Pro-fessor Moody!”

Malfoy went pale and jumped backward, looking wildly around for Moody, but he was still up at the staff table, finishing his stew.

“Twitchy little ferret, aren’t you, Malfoy?” said Hermione scathingly, and she, Harry, and Ron went up the marble staircase laughing heartily.

“Hermione,” said Ron, looking sideways at her, suddenly frown-ing, “your teeth …”

“What about them?” she said.

“Well, they’re different … I’ve just noticed. …”

“Of course they are — did you expect me to keep those fangs Malfoy gave me?”

“No, I mean, they’re different to how they were before he put that hex on you. … They’re all … straight and — and normal-sized.”

Hermione suddenly smiled very mischievously, and Harry noticed it too: It was a very different smile from the one he remembered.

“Well … when I went up to Madam Pomfrey to get them shrunk, she held up a mirror and told me to stop her when they were back to how they normally were,” she said. “And I just … let her carry on a bit.” She smiled even more widely. “Mum and Dad won’t be too pleased. I’ve been trying to persuade them to let me shrink them for ages, but they wanted me to carry on with my braces. You know, they’re dentists, they just don’t think teeth and magic should — look! Pigwidgeon’s back!”

Ron’s tiny owl was twittering madly on the top of the icicle-laden banisters, a scroll of parchment tied to his leg. People passing him were pointing and laughing, and a group of third-year girls paused and said, “Oh look at the weeny owl! Isn’t he cute?”

“Stupid little feathery git!” Ron hissed, hurrying up the stairs and snatching up Pigwidgeon. “You bring letters to the addressee! You don’t hang around showing off!”

Pigwidgeon hooted happily, his head protruding over Ron’s fist. The third-year girls all looked very shocked.

“Clear off!” Ron snapped at them, waving the fist holding Pigwidgeon, who hooted more happily than ever as he soared through the air. “Here — take it, Harry,” Ron added in an undertone as the third-year girls scuttled away looking scandalized. He pulled Sir-ius’s reply off Pigwidgeon’s leg, Harry pocketed it, and they hurried back to Gryffindor Tower to read it.

Everyone in the common room was much too busy in letting off more holiday steam to observe what anyone else was up to. Ron, Harry, and Hermione sat apart from everyone else by a dark window that was gradually filling up with snow, and Harry read out:Dear Harry,

Congratulations on getting past the Horntail. Whoever put your name in that goblet shouldn't be feeling too happy right now! I was going to suggest a Conjunctivitis Curse, as a dragon's eyes are its weakest point — "That's what Krum did!" Hermione whispered — but your way was better, I'm impressed.

Don't get complacent, though, Harry. You've only done one task; whoever put you in for the tournament's got plenty more opportunity if they're trying to hurt you. Keep your eyes open — particularly when the person we discussed is around — and concentrate on keeping yourself out of trouble.

Keep in touch, I still want to hear about anything unusual.

Sirius

"He sounds exactly like Moody," said Harry quietly, tucking the letter away again inside his robes. " 'Constant vigilance!' You'd think I walk around with my eyes shut, banging off the walls. …"

"But he's right, Harry," said Hermione, "you have still got two tasks to do. You really ought to have a look at that egg, you know, and start working out what it means. …"

"Hermione, he's got ages!" snapped Ron. "Want a game of chess, Harry?"

"Yeah, okay," said Harry. Then, spotting the look on Hermione's face, he said, "Come on, how'm I supposed to concentrate with all this noise going on? I won't even be able to hear the egg over this lot."

"Oh I suppose not," she sighed, and she sat down to watch their chess match, which culminated in an exciting checkmate of Ron's, involving a couple of recklessly brave pawns and a very violent bishop.

Harry awoke very suddenly on Christmas Day. Wondering what had caused his abrupt return to consciousness, he opened his eyes, and saw something with very large, round, green eyes staring back at him in the darkness, so close they were almost nose to nose.

“Dobby!” Harry yelled, scrambling away from the elf so fast he almost fell out of bed. “Don’t do that!”

“Dobby is sorry, sir!” squeaked Dobby anxiously, jumping back-ward with his long fingers over his mouth. “Dobby is only wanting to wish Harry Potter ‘Merry Christmas’ and bring him a present, sir! Harry Potter did say Dobby could come and see him some-times, sir!”

“It’s okay,” said Harry, still breathing rather faster than usual, while his heart rate returned to normal. “Just — just prod me or something in future, all right, don’t bend over me like that. …”

Harry pulled back the curtains around his four-poster, took his glasses from his bedside table, and put them on. His yell had awoken Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville. All of them were peering through the gaps in their own hangings, heavy-eyed and tousle-haired.

“Someone attacking you, Harry?” Seamus asked sleepily.

“No, it’s just Dobby,” Harry muttered. “Go back to sleep.”

“Nah … presents!” said Seamus, spotting the large pile at the foot of his bed. Ron, Dean, and Neville decided that now they were awake they might as well get down to some present-opening too. Harry turned back to Dobby, who was now standing nervously next to Harry’s bed, still looking worried that he had upset Harry. There was a Christmas bauble tied to the loop on top of his tea cozy.

“Can Dobby give Harry Potter his present?” he squeaked tentatively.

“ ’Course you can,” said Harry. “Er … I’ve got something for you too.”

It was a lie; he hadn't bought anything for Dobby at all, but he quickly opened his trunk and pulled out a particularly knobbly rolled-up pair of socks. They were his oldest and foulest, mustard yellow, and had once belonged to Uncle Vernon. The reason they were extra-knobbly was that Harry had been using them to cush-ion his Sneakoscope for over a year now. He pulled out the Sneako-scope and handed the socks to Dobby, saying, "Sorry, I forgot to wrap them. …"

But Dobby was utterly delighted.

"Socks are Dobby's favorite, favorite clothes, sir!" he said, rip-ping off his odd ones and pulling on Uncle Vernon's. "I has seven now, sir. … But sir …" he said, his eyes widening, having pulled both socks up to their highest extent, so that they reached to the bottom of his shorts, "they has made a mistake in the shop, Harry Potter, they is giving you two the same!"

"Ah, no, Harry, how come you didn't spot that?" said Ron, grin-ning over from his own bed, which was now strewn with wrapping paper. "Tell you what, Dobby — here you go — take these two, and you can mix them up properly. And here's your sweater."

He threw Dobby a pair of violet socks he had just unwrapped, and the hand-knitted sweater Mrs. Weasley had sent. Dobby looked quite overwhelmed.

"Sir is very kind!" he squeaked, his eyes brimming with tears again, bowing deeply to Ron. "Dobby knew sir must be a great wizard, for he is Harry Potter's greatest friend, but Dobby did not know that he was also as generous of spirit, as noble, as selfless —"

"They're only socks," said Ron, who had gone slightly pink around the ears, though he looked rather pleased all the same. "Wow, Harry —" He had just opened Harry's present, a Chudley Cannon hat. "Cool!" He jammed it onto his head, where it clashed horribly with his hair.

Dobby now handed Harry a small package, which turned out to be — socks.

“Dobby is making them himself, sir!” the elf said happily. “He is buying the wool out of his wages, sir!”

The left sock was bright red and had a pattern of broomsticks upon it; the right sock was green with a pattern of Snitches.

“They’re … they’re really … well, thanks, Dobby,” said Harry, and he pulled them on, causing Dobby’s eyes to leak with happi-ness again.

“Dobby must go now, sir, we is already making Christmas dinner in the kitchens!” said Dobby, and he hurried out of the dor-mitory, waving good-bye to Ron and the others as he passed.

Harry’s other presents were much more satisfactory than Dobby’s odd socks — with the obvious exception of the Dursleys’, which consisted of a single tissue, an all-time low — Harry sup-posed they too were remembering the Ton-Tongue Toffee. Hermione had given Harry a book called Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland; Ron, a bulging bag of Dungbombs; Sirius, a handy penknife with attachments to unlock any lock and undo any knot; and Hagrid, a vast box of sweets including all Harry’s fa-vorites: Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans, Chocolate Frogs, Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum, and Fizzing Whizbees. There was also, of course, Mrs. Weasley’s usual package, including a new sweater (green, with a picture of a dragon on it — Harry supposed Charlie had told her all about the Horntail), and a large quantity of homemade mince pies.

Harry and Ron met up with Hermione in the common room, and they went down to breakfast together. They spent most of the morning in Gryffindor Tower, where everyone was enjoying their presents, then returned to the Great Hall for a magnificent lunch, which included at least a hundred turkeys and Christmas pud-dings, and large piles of Cribbage’s Wizarding Crackers.

They went out onto the grounds in the afternoon; the snow was untouched except for the deep channels made by the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students on their way up to the castle. Hermione chose to watch Harry and the Weasleys' snowball fight rather than join in, and at five o'clock said she was going back upstairs to get ready for the ball.

"What, you need three hours?" said Ron, looking at her incred-ulously and paying for his lapse in concentration when a large snowball, thrown by George, hit him hard on the side of the head. "Who're you going with?" he yelled after Hermione, but she just waved and disappeared up the stone steps into the castle.

There was no Christmas tea today, as the ball included a feast, so at seven o'clock, when it had become hard to aim properly, the oth-ers abandoned their snowball fight and trooped back to the com-mon room. The Fat Lady was sitting in her frame with her friend Violet from downstairs, both of them extremely tipsy, empty boxes of chocolate liqueurs littering the bottom of her picture.

"Lairy fights, that's the one!" she giggled when they gave the password, and she swung forward to let them inside.

Harry, Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville changed into their dress robes up in their dormitory, all of them looking very self-conscious, but none as much as Ron, who surveyed himself in the long mirror in the corner with an appalled look on his face. There was just no getting around the fact that his robes looked more like a dress than anything else. In a desperate attempt to make them look more manly, he used a Severing Charm on the ruff and cuffs. It worked fairly well; at least he was now lace-free, although he had-n't done a very neat job, and the edges still looked depressingly frayed as the boys set off downstairs.

"I still can't work out how you two got the best-looking girls in the year," muttered Dean.

“Animal magnetism,” said Ron gloomily, pulling stray threads out of his cuffs.

The common room looked strange, full of people wearing dif-ferent colors instead of the usual mass of black. Parvati was waiting for Harry at the foot of the stairs. She looked very pretty indeed, in robes of shocking pink, with her long dark plait braided with gold, and gold bracelets glimmering at her wrists. Harry was relieved to see that she wasn’t giggling.

“You — er — look nice,” he said awkwardly.

“Thanks,” she said. “Padma’s going to meet you in the entrance hall,” she added to Ron.

“Right,” said Ron, looking around. “Where’s Hermione?”

Parvati shrugged. “Shall we go down then, Harry?”

“Okay,” said Harry, wishing he could just stay in the common room. Fred winked at Harry as he passed him on the way out of the portrait hole.

The entrance hall was packed with students too, all milling around waiting for eight o’clock, when the doors to the Great Hall would be thrown open. Those people who were meeting partners from different Houses were edging through the crowd trying to find one another. Parvati found her sister, Padma, and led her over to Harry and Ron.

“Hi,” said Padma, who was looking just as pretty as Parvati in robes of bright turquoise. She didn’t look too enthusiastic about having Ron as a partner, though; her dark eyes lingered on the frayed neck and sleeves of his dress robes as she looked him up and down.

“Hi,” said Ron, not looking at her, but staring around at the crowd. “Oh no …”

He bent his knees slightly to hide behind Harry, because Fleur Delacour was passing, looking stunning in robes of silver-gray satin, and accompanied by the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain, Roger Davies. When they had disappeared, Ron stood straight again and stared over the heads of the crowd.

“Where is Hermione?” he said again.

A group of Slytherins came up the steps from their dungeon common room. Malfoy was in front; he was wearing dress robes of black velvet with a high collar, which in Harry’s opinion made him look like a vicar. Pansy Parkinson in very frilly robes of pale pink was clutching Malfoy’s arm. Crabbe and Goyle were both wearing green; they resembled moss-colored boulders, and neither of them, Harry was pleased to see, had managed to find a partner.

The oak front doors opened, and everyone turned to look as the Durmstrang students entered with Professor Karkaroff. Krum was at the front of the party, accompanied by a pretty girl in blue robes Harry didn’t know. Over their heads he saw that an area of lawn right in front of the castle had been transformed into a sort of grotto full of fairy lights — meaning hundreds of actual living fairies were sitting in the rosebushes that had been conjured there, and fluttering over the statues of what seemed to be Father Christ-mas and his reindeer.

Then Professor McGonagall’s voice called, “Champions over here, please!”

Parvati readjusted her bangles, beaming; she and Harry said “See you in a minute” to Ron and Padma and walked forward, the chat-tering crowd parting to let them through. Professor McGonagall, who was wearing dress robes of red tartan and had arranged a rather ugly wreath of thistles around the brim of her hat, told them to wait on one side of the doors while everyone else went inside; they were to enter the Great Hall in procession when the rest of the students had sat down. Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies stationed themselves

nearest the doors; Davies looked so stunned by his good fortune in having Fleur for a partner that he could hardly take his eyes off her. Cedric and Cho were close to Harry too; he looked away from them so he wouldn't have to talk to them. His eyes fell instead on the girl next to Krum. His jaw dropped.

It was Hermione.

But she didn't look like Hermione at all. She had done some-thing with her hair; it was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny, and twisted up into an elegant knot at the back of her head. She was wearing robes made of a floaty, periwinkle-blue material, and she was holding herself differently, somehow — or maybe it was merely the absence of the twenty or so books she usually had slung over her back. She was also smiling — rather nervously, it was true — but the reduction in the size of her front teeth was more noticeable than ever; Harry couldn't understand how he hadn't spotted it before.

"Hi, Harry!" she said. "Hi, Parvati!"

Parvati was gazing at Hermione in unflattering disbelief. She wasn't the only one either; when the doors to the Great Hall opened, Krum's fan club from the library stalked past, throwing Hermione looks of deepest loathing. Pansy Parkinson gaped at her as she walked by with Malfoy, and even he didn't seem to be able to find an insult to throw at her. Ron, however, walked right past Hermione without looking at her.

Once everyone else was settled in the Hall, Professor McGona-gall told the champions and their partners to get in line in pairs and to follow her. They did so, and everyone in the Great Hall ap-plauded as they entered and started walking up toward a large round table at the top of the Hall, where the judges were sitting.

The walls of the Hall had all been covered in sparkling silver frost, with hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crossing the starry black ceiling. The House tables had vanished; instead, there were

about a hundred smaller, lantern-lit ones, each seating about a dozen people.

Harry concentrated on not tripping over his feet. Parvati seemed to be enjoying herself; she was beaming around at everybody, steer-ing Harry so forcefully that he felt as though he were a show dog she was putting through its paces. He caught sight of Ron and Padma as he neared the top table. Ron was watching Hermione pass with narrowed eyes. Padma was looking sulky.

Dumbledore smiled happily as the champions approached the top table, but Karkaroff wore an expression remarkably like Ron's as he watched Krum and Hermione draw nearer. Ludo Bagman, tonight in robes of bright purple with large yellow stars, was clap-ping as enthusiastically as any of the students; and Madame Maxime, who had changed her usual uniform of black satin for a flowing gown of lavender silk, was applauding them politely. But Mr. Crouch, Harry suddenly realized, was not there. The fifth seat at the table was occupied by Percy Weasley.

When the champions and their partners reached the table, Percy drew out the empty chair beside him, staring pointedly at Harry. Harry took the hint and sat down next to Percy, who was wearing brand-new, navy-blue dress robes and an expression of such smug-ness that Harry thought it ought to be fined.

"I've been promoted," Percy said before Harry could even ask, and from his tone, he might have been announcing his election as supreme ruler of the universe. "I'm now Mr. Crouch's personal as-sistant, and I'm here representing him."

"Why didn't he come?" Harry asked. He wasn't looking forward to being lectured on cauldron bottoms all through dinner.

"I'm afraid to say Mr. Crouch isn't well, not well at all. Hasn't been right since the World Cup. Hardly surprising — overwork. He's not as young as he was — though still quite brilliant, of course, the mind

remains as great as it ever was. But the World Cup was a fiasco for the whole Ministry, and then, Mr. Crouch suffered a huge personal shock with the misbehavior of that house-elf of his, Blinky, or whatever she was called. Naturally, he dismissed her im-mediately afterward, but — well, as I say, he's getting on, he needs looking after, and I think he's found a definite drop in his home comforts since she left. And then we had the tournament to arrange, and the aftermath of the Cup to deal with — that revolt-ing Skeeter woman buzzing around — no, poor man, he's having a well earned, quiet Christmas. I'm just glad he knew he had some-one he could rely upon to take his place."

Harry wanted very much to ask whether Mr. Crouch had stopped calling Percy "Weatherby" yet, but resisted the temptation.

There was no food as yet on the glittering golden plates, but small menus were lying in front of each of them. Harry picked his up uncertainly and looked around — there were no waiters. Dumbledore, however, looked carefully down at his own menu, then said very clearly to his plate, "Pork chops!"

And pork chops appeared. Getting the idea, the rest of the table placed their orders with their plates too. Harry glanced up at Hermione to see how she felt about this new and more compli-cated method of dining — surely it meant plenty of extra work for the house-elves? — but for once, Hermione didn't seem to be thinking about S.P.E.W. She was deep in talk with Viktor Krum and hardly seemed to notice what she was eating.

It now occurred to Harry that he had never actually heard Krum speak before, but he was certainly talking now, and very enthusias-tically at that.

"Veil, ve have a castle also, not as big as this, nor as comfortable, I am thinking," he was telling Hermione. "Ve have just four floors, and the fires are lit only for magical purposes. But ve have grounds larger

even than these — though in vinter, ve have very little day-light, so ve are not enjoying them. But in summer ve are flying every day, over the lakes and the mountains —"

"Now, now, Viktor!" said Karkaroff with a laugh that didn't reach his cold eyes, "don't go giving away anything else, now, or your charming friend will know exactly where to find us!"

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling. "Igor, all this secrecy … one would almost think you didn't want visitors."

"Well, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff, displaying his yellowing teeth to their fullest extent, "we are all protective of our private domains, are we not? Do we not jealously guard the halls of learn-ing that have been entrusted to us? Are we not right to be proud that we alone know our school's secrets, and right to protect them?"

"Oh I would never dream of assuming I know all Hogwarts' se-crets, Igor," said Dumbledore amicably. "Only this morning, for instance, I took a wrong turning on the way to the bathroom and found myself in a beautifully proportioned room I have never seen before, containing a really rather magnificent collection of cham-ber pots. When I went back to investigate more closely, I discov-ered that the room had vanished. But I must keep an eye out for it. Possibly it is only accessible at five-thirty in the morning. Or it may only appear at the quarter moon — or when the seeker has an ex-ceptionally full bladder."

Harry snorted into his plate of goulash. Percy frowned, but Harry could have sworn Dumbledore had given him a very small wink.

Meanwhile Fleur Delacour was criticizing the Hogwarts decora-tions to Roger Davies.

"Zis is nothing," she said dismissively, looking around at the sparkling walls of the Great Hall. "At ze Palace of Beauxbatons, we 'ave ice sculptures all around ze dining chamber at Chreestmas. Zey do not

melt, of course … zey are like ’uge statues of diamond, glittering around ze place. And ze food is seemply superb. And we ’ave choirs of wood nymphs, ’oo serenade us as we eat. We ’ave none of zis ugly armor in ze ’alls, and eef a poltergeist ever entaired into Beauxbatons, ’e would be expelled like zat.” She slapped her hand onto the table impatiently.

Roger Davies was watching her talk with a very dazed look on his face, and he kept missing his mouth with his fork. Harry had the impression that Davies was too busy staring at Fleur to take in a word she was saying.

“Absolutely right,” he said quickly, slapping his own hand down on the table in imitation of Fleur. “Like that. Yeah.”

Harry looked around the Hall. Hagrid was sitting at one of the other staff tables; he was back in his horrible hairy brown suit and gazing up at the top table. Harry saw him give a small wave, and looking around, saw Madame Maxime return it, her opals glitter-ing in the candlelight.

Hermione was now teaching Krum to say her name properly; he kept calling her “Hermy-own.”

“Her-my-oh-nee,” she said slowly and clearly.

“Herm-own-ninny.”

“Close enough,” she said, catching Harry’s eye and grinning.

When all the food had been consumed, Dumbledore stood up and asked the students to do the same. Then, with a wave of his wand, all the tables zoomed back along the walls leaving the floor clear, and then he conjured a raised platform into existence along the right wall. A set of drums, several guitars, a lute, a cello, and some bagpipes were set upon it.

The Weird Sisters now trooped up onto the stage to wildly enthusiastic applause; they were all extremely hairy and dressed in black robes that had been artfully ripped and torn. They picked up their instruments, and Harry, who had been so interested in watch-ing them that he had almost forgotten what was coming, suddenly realized that the lanterns on all the other tables had gone out, and that the other champions and their partners were standing up.

“Come on!” Parvati hissed. “We’re supposed to dance!”

Harry tripped over his dress robes as he stood up. The Weird Sis-ters struck up a slow, mournful tune; Harry walked onto the brightly lit dance floor, carefully avoiding catching anyone’s eye (he could see Seamus and Dean waving at him and sniggering), and next moment, Parvati had seized his hands, placed one around her waist, and was holding the other tightly in hers.

It wasn’t as bad as it could have been, Harry thought, revolving slowly on the spot (Parvati was steering). He kept his eyes fixed over the heads of the watching people, and very soon many of them too had come onto the dance floor, so that the champions were no longer the center of attention. Neville and Ginny were dancing nearby — he could see Ginny wincing frequently as Neville trod on her feet — and Dumbledore was waltzing with Madame Maxime. He was so dwarfed by her that the top of his pointed hat barely tickled her chin; however, she moved very gracefully for a woman so large. Mad-Eye Moody was doing an extremely ungainly two-step with Professor Sinistra, who was nervously avoiding his wooden leg.

“Nice socks, Potter,” Moody growled as he passed, his magical eye staring through Harry’s robes.

“Oh — yeah, Dobby the house-elf knitted them for me,” said Harry, grinning.

“He is so creepy!” Parvati whispered as Moody clunked away. “I don’t think that eye should be allowed!”

Harry heard the final, quavering note from the bagpipe with re-lief. The Weird Sisters stopped playing, applause filled the hall once more, and Harry let go of Parvati at once.

“Let’s sit down, shall we?”

“Oh — but — this is a really good one!” Parvati said as the Weird Sisters struck up a new song, which was much faster.

“No, I don’t like it,” Harry lied, and he led her away from the dance floor, past Fred and Angelina, who were dancing so exhuberantly that people around them were backing away in fear of injury, and over to the table where Ron and Padma were sitting.

“How’s it going?” Harry asked Ron, sitting down and opening a bottle of butterbeer.

Ron didn’t answer. He was glaring at Hermione and Krum, who were dancing nearby. Padma was sitting with her arms and legs crossed, one foot jiggling in time to the music. Every now and then she threw a disgruntled look at Ron, who was completely ignoring her. Parvati sat down on Harry’s other side, crossed her arms and legs too, and within minutes was asked to dance by a boy from Beauxbatons.

“You don’t mind, do you, Harry?” Parvati said.

“What?” said Harry, who was now watching Cho and Cedric.

“Oh never mind,” snapped Parvati, and she went off with the boy from Beauxbatons. When the song ended, she did not return.

Hermione came over and sat down in Parvati’s empty chair. She was a bit pink in the face from dancing.

“Hi,” said Harry. Ron didn’t say anything.

"It's hot, isn't it?" said Hermione, fanning herself with her hand. "Viktor's just gone to get some drinks."

Ron gave her a withering look. "Viktor?" he said. "Hasn't he asked you to call him Vicky yet?"

Hermione looked at him in surprise. "What's up with you?" she said.

"If you don't know," said Ron scathingly, "I'm not going to tell you."

Hermione stared at him, then at Harry, who shrugged.

"Ron, what — ?"

"He's from Durmstrang!" spat Ron. "He's competing against Harry! Against Hogwarts! You — you're —" Ron was obviously casting around for words strong enough to describe Hermione's crime, "fraternizing with the enemy, that's what you're doing!"

Hermione's mouth fell open.

"Don't be so stupid!" she said after a moment. "The enemy! Honestly — who was the one who was all excited when they saw him arrive? Who was the one who wanted his autograph? Who's got a model of him up in their dormitory?"

Ron chose to ignore this. "I s'pose he asked you to come with him while you were both in the library?"

"Yes, he did," said Hermione, the pink patches on her cheeks glowing more brightly. "So what?"

"What happened — trying to get him to join spew, were you?"

"No, I wasn't! If you really want to know, he — he said he'd been coming up to the library every day to try and talk to me, but he hadn't been able to pluck up the courage!"

Hermione said this very quickly, and blushed so deeply that she was the same color as Parvati's robes.

"Yeah, well — that's his story," said Ron nastily.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Obvious, isn't it? He's Karkaroff's student, isn't he? He knows who you hang around with. … He's just trying to get closer to Harry — get inside information on him — or get near enough to jinx him —"

Hermione looked as though Ron had slapped her. When she spoke, her voice quivered.

"For your information, he hasn't asked me one single thing about Harry, not one —"

Ron changed tack at the speed of light.

"Then he's hoping you'll help him find out what his egg means! I suppose you've been putting your heads together during those cozy little library sessions —"

"I'd never help him work out that egg!" said Hermione, looking outraged. "Never. How could you say something like that — I want Harry to win the tournament, Harry knows that, don't you, Harry?"

"You've got a funny way of showing it," sneered Ron.

"This whole tournament's supposed to be about getting to know foreign wizards and making friends with them!" said Hermione hotly.

"No it isn't!" shouted Ron. "It's about winning!"

People were starting to stare at them.

"Ron," said Harry quietly, "I haven't got a problem with Hermione coming with Krum —"

But Ron ignored Harry too.

“Why don’t you go and find Vicky, he’ll be wondering where you are,” said Ron.

“Don’t call him Vicky!”

Hermione jumped to her feet and stormed off across the dance floor, disappearing into the crowd. Ron watched her go with a mix-ture of anger and satisfaction on his face.

“Are you going to ask me to dance at all?” Padma asked him.

“No,” said Ron, still glaring after Hermione.

“Fine,” snapped Padma, and she got up and went to join Parvati and the Beauxbatons boy, who conjured up one of his friends to join them so fast that Harry could have sworn he had zoomed him there by a Summoning Charm.

“Vare is Herm-own-ninny?” said a voice.

Krum had just arrived at their table clutching two butterbeers.

“No idea,” said Ron mulishly, looking up at him. “Lost her, have you?”

Krum was looking surly again.

“Veil, if you see her, tell her I haff drinks,” he said, and he slouched off.

“Made friends with Viktor Krum, have you, Ron?”

Percy had bustled over, rubbing his hands together and looking extremely pompous. “Excellent! That’s the whole point, you know — international magical cooperation!”

To Harry's displeasure, Percy now took Padma's vacated seat. The top table was now empty; Professor Dumbledore was dancing with Professor Sprout, Ludo Bagman with Professor McGonagall; Madame Maxime and Hagrid were cutting a wide path around the dance floor as they waltzed through the students, and Karkaroff was nowhere to be seen. When the next song ended, everybody applauded once more, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman kiss Professor McGonagall's hand and make his way back through the crowds, at which point Fred and George accosted him.

"What do they think they're doing, annoying senior Ministry members?" Percy hissed, watching Fred and George suspiciously. "No respect …"

Ludo Bagman shook off Fred and George fairly quickly, how-ever, and, spotting Harry, waved and came over to their table.

"I hope my brothers weren't bothering you, Mr. Bagman?" said Percy at once.

"What? Oh not at all, not at all!" said Bagman. "No, they were just telling me a bit more about those fake wands of theirs. Won-dering if I could advise them on the marketing. I've promised to put them in touch with a couple of contacts of mine at Zonko's Joke Shop. …"

Percy didn't look happy about this at all, and Harry was prepared to bet he would be rushing to tell Mrs. Weasley about this the mo-ment he got home. Apparently Fred and George's plans had grown even more ambitious lately, if they were hoping to sell to the pub-lic. Bagman opened his mouth to ask Harry something, but Percy diverted him.

"How do you feel the tournament's going, Mr. Bagman? Our department's quite satisfied — the hitch with the Goblet of Fire" — he glanced at Harry — "was a little unfortunate, of course, but it seems to have gone very smoothly since, don't you think?"

“Oh yes,” Bagman said cheerfully, “it’s all been enormous fun. How’s old Barty doing? Shame he couldn’t come.”

“Oh I’m sure Mr. Crouch will be up and about in no time,” said Percy importantly, “but in the meantime, I’m more than willing to take up the slack. Of course, it’s not all attending balls” — he laughed airily — “oh no, I’ve had to deal with all sorts of things that have cropped up in his absence — you heard Ali Bashir was caught smuggling a consignment of flying carpets into the coun-try? And then we’ve been trying to persuade the Transylvanians to sign the International Ban on Dueling. I’ve got a meeting with their Head of Magical Cooperation in the new year —”

“Let’s go for a walk,” Ron muttered to Harry, “get away from Percy. …”

Pretending they wanted more drinks, Harry and Ron left the table, edged around the dance floor, and slipped out into the en-trance hall. The front doors stood open, and the fluttering fairy lights in the rose garden winked and twinkled as they went down the front steps, where they found themselves surrounded by bushes; winding, ornamental paths; and large stone statues. Harry could hear splashing water, which sounded like a fountain. Here and there, people were sitting on carved benches. He and Ron set off along one of the winding paths through the rosebushes, but they had gone only a short way when they heard an unpleasantly familiar voice.

“… don’t see what there is to fuss about, Igor.”

“Severus, you cannot pretend this isn’t happening!” Karkaroff’s voice sounded anxious and hushed, as though keen not to be over-heard. “It’s been getting clearer and clearer for months. I am be-coming seriously concerned, I can’t deny it —”

“Then flee,” said Snape’s voice curtly. “Flee — I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts.”

Snape and Karkaroff came around the corner. Snape had his wand out and was blasting rosebushes apart, his expression most ill-natured. Squeals issued from many of the bushes, and dark shapes emerged from them.

“Ten points from Ravenclaw, Fawcett!” Snape snarled as a girl ran past him. “And ten points from Hufflepuff too, Stebbins!” as a boy went rushing after her. “And what are you two doing?” he added, catching sight of Harry and Ron on the path ahead. Karkaroff, Harry saw, looked slightly discomposed to see them standing there. His hand went nervously to his goatee, and he began winding it around his finger.

“We’re walking,” Ron told Snape shortly. “Not against the law, is it?”

“Keep walking, then!” Snape snarled, and he brushed past them, his long black cloak billowing out behind him. Karkaroff hurried away after Snape. Harry and Ron continued down the path.

“What’s got Karkaroff all worried?” Ron muttered.

“And since when have he and Snape been on first-name terms?” said Harry slowly.

They had reached a large stone reindeer now, over which they could see the sparkling jets of a tall fountain. The shadowy out-lines of two enormous people were visible on a stone bench, watching the water in the moonlight. And then Harry heard Hagrid speak.

“Momen’ I saw yeh, I knew,” he was saying, in an oddly husky voice.

Harry and Ron froze. This didn’t sound like the sort of scene they ought to walk in on, somehow. … Harry looked around, back up the path, and saw Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies stand-ing half-concealed in a rosebush nearby. He tapped Ron on the shoulder and jerked his head toward them, meaning that they could easily sneak off that way without being noticed (Fleur and Davies looked very busy

to Harry), but Ron, eyes widening in hor-ror at the sight of Fleur, shook his head vigorously, and pulled Harry deeper into the shadows behind the reindeer.

“What did you know, ’Agrid?” said Madame Maxime, a purr in her low voice.

Harry definitely didn’t want to listen to this; he knew Hagrid would hate to be overheard in a situation like this (he certainly would have) — if it had been possible he would have put his fin-gers in his ears and hummed loudly, but that wasn’t really an op-tion. Instead he tried to interest himself in a beetle crawling along the stone reindeer’s back, but the beetle just wasn’t interesting enough to block out Hagrid’s next words.

“I jus’ knew … knew you were like me. … Was it yer mother or yer father?”

“I — I don’t know what you mean, ’Agrid. …”

“It was my mother,” said Hagrid quietly. “She was one o’ the las’ ones in Britain. ’Course, I can’ remember her too well … she left, see. When I was abou’ three. She wasn’ really the maternal sort. Well … it’s not in their natures, is it? Dunno what happened to her … might be dead fer all I know. …”

Madame Maxime didn’t say anything. And Harry, in spite of himself, took his eyes off the beetle and looked over the top of the reindeer’s antlers, listening. … He had never heard Hagrid talk about his childhood before.

“Me dad was broken-hearted when she wen’. Tiny little bloke, my dad was. By the time I was six I could lift him up an’ put him on top o’ the dresser if he annoyed me. Used ter make him laugh. …” Hagrid’s deep voice broke. Madame Maxime was lis-tening, motionless, apparently staring at the silvery fountain. “Dad raised me … but he died, o’ course, jus’ after I started school. Sorta had ter make me own

way after that. Dumbledore was a real help, mind. Very kind ter me, he was. …”

Hagrid pulled out a large spotted silk handkerchief and blew his nose heavily.

“So … anyway … enough abou’ me. What about you? Which side you got it on?”

But Madame Maxime had suddenly got to her feet.

“It is chilly,” she said — but whatever the weather was doing, it was nowhere near as cold as her voice. “I think I will go in now.”

“Eh?” said Hagrid blankly. “No, don’ go! I’ve — I’ve never met another one before!”

“Anuzzer what, precisely?” said Madame Maxime, her tone icy.

Harry could have told Hagrid it was best not to answer; he stood there in the shadows gritting his teeth, hoping against hope he wouldn’t — but it was no good.

“Another half-giant, o’ course!” said Hagrid.

“ ’Ow dare you!” shrieked Madame Maxime. Her voice exploded through the peaceful night air like a foghorn; behind him, Harry heard Fleur and Roger fall out of their rosebush. “I ’ave nevair been more insulted in my life! ’Alf-giant? Moi? I ’ave — I ’ave big bones!”

She stormed away; great multicolored swarms of fairies rose into the air as she passed, angrily pushing aside bushes. Hagrid was still sitting on the bench, staring after her. It was much too dark to make out his expression. Then, after about a minute, he stood up and strode away, not back to the castle, but off out into the dark grounds in the direction of his cabin.

“C’mon,” Harry said, very quietly to Ron. “Let’s go. …”

But Ron didn’t move.

“What’s up?” said Harry, looking at him.

Ron looked around at Harry, his expression very serious indeed.

“Did you know?” he whispered. “About Hagrid being half-giant?”

“No,” Harry said, shrugging. “So what?”

He knew immediately, from the look Ron was giving him, that he was once again revealing his ignorance of the wizarding world. Brought up by the Dursleys, there were many things that wizards took for granted that were revelations to Harry, but these surprises had become fewer with each successive year. Now, however, he could tell that most wizards would not have said “So what?” upon finding out that one of their friends had a giantess for a mother.

“I’ll explain inside,” said Ron quietly, “c’mon. …”

Fleur and Roger Davies had disappeared, probably into a more private clump of bushes. Harry and Ron returned to the Great Hall. Parvati and Padma were now sitting at a distant table with a whole crowd of Beauxbatons boys, and Hermione was once more dancing with Krum. Harry and Ron sat down at a table far re-moved from the dance floor.

“So?” Harry prompted Ron. “What’s the problem with giants?”

“Well, they’re … they’re …” Ron struggled for words. “… not very nice,” he finished lamely.

“Who cares?” Harry said. “There’s nothing wrong with Hagrid!”

“I know there isn’t, but … blimey, no wonder he keeps it quiet,” Ron said, shaking his head. “I always thought he’d got in the way of a bad

Engorgement Charm when he was a kid or some-thing. Didn't like to mention it. …"

"But what's it matter if his mother was a giantess?" said Harry.

"Well … no one who knows him will care, 'cos they'll know he's not dangerous," said Ron slowly. "But … Harry, they're just vicious, giants. It's like Hagrid said, it's in their natures, they're like trolls … they just like killing, everyone knows that. There aren't any left in Britain now, though."

"What happened to them?"

"Well, they were dying out anyway, and then loads got them-selves killed by Aurors. There're supposed to be giants abroad, though. … They hide out in mountains mostly. …"

"I don't know who Maxime thinks she's kidding," Harry said, watching Madame Maxime sitting alone at the judges' table, looking very somber. "If Hagrid's half-giant, she definitely is. Big bones … the only thing that's got bigger bones than her is a dinosaur."

Harry and Ron spent the rest of the ball discussing giants in their corner, neither of them having any inclination to dance. Harry tried not to watch Cho and Cedric too much; it gave him a strong desire to kick something.

When the Weird Sisters finished playing at midnight, everyone gave them a last, loud round of applause and started to wend their way into the entrance hall. Many people were expressing the wish that the ball could have gone on longer, but Harry was perfectly happy to be going to bed; as far as he was concerned, the evening hadn't been much fun.

Out in the entrance hall, Harry and Ron saw Hermione saying good night to Krum before he went back to the Durmstrang ship. She gave Ron a very cold look and swept past him up the marble staircase

without speaking. Harry and Ron followed her, but halfway up the staircase Harry heard someone calling him.

"Hey — Harry!"

It was Cedric Diggory. Harry could see Cho waiting for him in the entrance hall below.

"Yeah?" said Harry coldly as Cedric ran up the stairs toward him.

Cedric looked as though he didn't want to say whatever it was in front of Ron, who shrugged, looking bad-tempered, and continued to climb the stairs.

"Listen …" Cedric lowered his voice as Ron disappeared. "I owe you one for telling me about the dragons. You know that golden egg? Does yours wail when you open it?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"Well … take a bath, okay?"

"What?"

"Take a bath, and — er — take the egg with you, and — er — just mull things over in the hot water. It'll help you think. … Trust me.

Harry stared at him.

"Tell you what," Cedric said, "use the prefects' bathroom. Fourth door to the left of that statue of Boris the Bewildered on the fifth floor. Password's 'pine fresh.' Gotta go … want to say good night —"

He grinned at Harry again and hurried back down the stairs to Cho.

Harry walked back to Gryffindor Tower alone. That had been extremely strange advice. Why would a bath help him to work out what the wailing egg meant? Was Cedric pulling his leg? Was he

trying to make Harry look like a fool, so Cho would like him even more by comparison?

The Fat Lady and her friend Vi were snoozing in the picture over the portrait hole. Harry had to yell “Fairy lights!” before he woke them up, and when he did, they were extremely irritated. He climbed into the common room and found Ron and Hermione having a blazing row. Standing ten feet apart, they were bellowing at each other, each scarlet in the face.

“Well, if you don’t like it, you know what the solution is, don’t you?” yelled Hermione; her hair was coming down out of its ele-gant bun now, and her face was screwed up in anger.

“Oh yeah?” Ron yelled back. “What’s that?”

“Next time there’s a ball, ask me before someone else does, and not as a last resort!”

Ron mouthed soundlessly like a goldfish out of water as Hermione turned on her heel and stormed up the girls’ staircase to bed. Ron turned to look at Harry.

“Well,” he sputtered, looking thunderstruck, “well — that just proves — completely missed the point —”

Harry didn’t say anything. He liked being back on speaking terms with Ron too much to speak his mind right now — but he somehow thought that Hermione had gotten the point much bet-ter than Ron had.

Chapter 24 Rita Skeeter's Scoop

Everybody got up late on Boxing Day. The Gryffindor com-mon room was much quieter than it had been lately, many yawns punctuating the lazy conversations. Hermione's hair was bushy again; she confessed to Harry that she had used liberal amounts of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion on it for the ball, "but it's way too much bother to do every day," she said matter-of-factly, scratching a purring Crookshanks behind the ears.

Ron and Hermione seemed to have reached an unspoken agree-ment not to discuss their argument. They were being quite friendly to each other, though oddly formal. Ron and Harry wasted no time in telling Hermione about the conversation they had overheard be-tween Madame Maxime and Hagrid, but Hermione didn't seem to find the news that Hagrid was a half-giant nearly as shocking as Ron did.

"Well, I thought he must be," she said, shrugging. "I knew he couldn't be pure giant because they're about twenty feet tall. But honestly, all this hysteria about giants. They can't all be horri-ble. … It's the same sort of prejudice that people have toward werewolves. … It's just bigotry, isn't it?"

Ron looked as though he would have liked to reply scathingly, but perhaps he didn't want another row, because he contented him-self with shaking his head disbelievingly while Hermione wasn't looking.

It was time now to think of the homework they had neglected during the first week of the holidays. Everybody seemed to be feel-ing rather flat now that Christmas was over — everybody except Harry, that is, who was starting (once again) to feel slightly nervous.

The trouble was that February the twenty-fourth looked a lot closer from this side of Christmas, and he still hadn't done any-thing about working out the clue inside the golden egg. He there-fore started

taking the egg out of his trunk every time he went up to the dormitory, opening it, and listening intently, hoping that this time it would make some sense. He strained to think what the sound reminded him of, apart from thirty musical saws, but he had never heard anything else like it. He closed the egg, shook it vigor-ously, and opened it again to see if the sound had changed, but it hadn't. He tried asking the egg questions, shouting over all the wailing, but nothing happened. He even threw the egg across the room — though he hadn't really expected that to help.

Harry had not forgotten the hint that Cedric had given him, but his less-than-friendly feelings toward Cedric just now meant that he was keen not to take his help if he could avoid it. In any case, it seemed to him that if Cedric had really wanted to give Harry a hand, he would have been a lot more explicit. He, Harry, had told Cedric exactly what was coming in the first task — and Cedric's idea of a fair exchange had been to tell Harry to take a bath. Well, he didn't need that sort of rubbishy help — not from someone who kept walking down corridors hand in hand with Cho, anyway. And so the first day of the new term arrived, and Harry set off to lessons, weighed down with books, parchment, and quills as usual, but also with the lurking worry of the egg heavy in his stomach, as though he were carrying that around with him too.

Snow was still thick upon the grounds, and the greenhouse win-dows were covered in condensation so thick that they couldn't see out of them in Herbology. Nobody was looking forward to Care of Magical Creatures much in this weather, though as Ron said, the skrewts would probably warm them up nicely, either by chasing them, or blasting off so forcefully that Hagrid's cabin would catch fire.

When they arrived at Hagrid's cabin, however, they found an el-derly witch with closely cropped gray hair and a very prominent chin standing before his front door.

“Hurry up, now, the bell rang five minutes ago,” she barked at them as they struggled toward her through the snow.

“Who’re you?” said Ron, staring at her. “Where’s Hagrid?”

“My name is Professor Grubbly-Plank,” she said briskly. “I am your temporary Care of Magical Creatures teacher.”

“Where’s Hagrid?” Harry repeated loudly.

“He is indisposed,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank shortly.

Soft and unpleasant laughter reached Harry’s ears. He turned; Draco Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins were joining the class. All of them looked gleeful, and none of them looked surprised to see Professor Grubbly-Plank.

“This way, please,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank, and she strode off around the paddock where the Beauxbatons horses were shiver-ing. Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed her, looking back over their shoulders at Hagrid’s cabin. All the curtains were closed. Was Hagrid in there, alone and ill?

“What’s wrong with Hagrid?” Harry said, hurrying to catch up with Professor Grubbly-Plank.

“Never you mind,” she said as though she thought he was being nosy.

“I do mind, though,” said Harry hotly. “What’s up with him?”

Professor Grubbly-Plank acted as though she couldn’t hear him. She led them past the paddock where the huge Beauxbatons horses were standing, huddled against the cold, and toward a tree on the edge of the forest, where a large and beautiful unicorn was tethered.

Many of the girls “ooooohed!” at the sight of the unicorn.

“Oh it’s so beautiful!” whispered Lavender Brown. “How did she get it? They’re supposed to be really hard to catch!”

The unicorn was so brightly white it made the snow all around look gray. It was pawing the ground nervously with its golden hooves and throwing back its horned head.

“Boys keep back!” barked Professor Grubbly-Plank, throwing out an arm and catching Harry hard in the chest. “They prefer the woman’s touch, unicorns. Girls to the front, and approach with care, come on, easy does it. …”

She and the girls walked slowly forward toward the unicorn, leaving the boys standing near the paddock fence, watching. The moment Professor Grubbly-Plank was out of earshot, Harry turned to Ron.

“What d’you reckon’s wrong with him? You don’t think a skrewt — ?”

“Oh he hasn’t been attacked, Potter, if that’s what you’re think-ing,” said Malfoy softly. “No, he’s just too ashamed to show his big, ugly face.”

“What d’you mean?” said Harry sharply.

Malfoy put his hand inside the pocket of his robes and pulled out a folded page of newsprint.

“There you go,” he said. “Hate to break it to you, Potter. …”

He smirked as Harry snatched the page, unfolded it, and read it, with Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville looking over his shoulder. It was an article topped with a picture of Hagrid looking extremely shifty.

DUMBLEDORE’S GIANT MISTAKE

Albus Dumbledore, eccentric Headmaster of Hog-warts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has never been afraid to make controversial

staff appoint-ments, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. In September of this year, he hired Alastor “Mad-Eye” Moody, the notoriously jinx-happy ex-Auror, to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, a decision that caused many raised eyebrows at the Ministry of Magic, given Moody’s well-known habit of at-tacking anybody who makes a sudden movement in his presence. Mad-Eye Moody, however, looks responsible and kindly when set beside the part-human Dumbledore employs to teach Care of Magical Creatures.

Rubeus Hagrid, who admits to being expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, has enjoyed the position of gamekeeper at the school ever since, a job secured for him by Dumbledore. Last year, however, Hagrid used his mysterious influence over the headmaster to secure the additional post of Care of Magical Creatures teacher, over the heads of many better-qualified candidates.

An alarmingly large and ferocious-looking man, Hagrid has been using his newfound authority to terrify the students in his care with a succession of horrific creatures. While Dumbledore turns a blind eye, Hagrid has maimed several pupils during a series of lessons that many admit to being “very frightening.”

“I was attacked by a hippogriff, and my friend Vincent Crabbe got a bad bite off a flobberworm,” says Draco Malfoy, a fourth-year student. “We all hate Hagrid, but we’re just too scared to say anything.”

Hagrid has no intention of ceasing his campaign of intimidation, however. In conversation with a Daily Prophet reporter last month, he admitted breeding creatures he has dubbed “Blast-Ended Skrewts,” highly dangerous crosses between manticores and fire-crabs. The creation of new breeds of magical creature is, of course, an activity usually closely observed by the Department for the Regu-lation and Control of Magical Creatures. Hagrid, however, considers himself to be above such petty restrictions.

“I was just having some fun,” he says, before hastily changing the subject.

As if this were not enough, the Daily Prophet has now unearthed evidence that Hagrid is not — as he has always pretended — a pure-blood wizard. He is not, in fact, even pure human. His mother, we can exclusively reveal, is none other than the giantess Fridwulfa, whose whereabouts are cur-rently unknown.

Bloodthirsty and brutal, the giants brought themselves to the point of extinction by warring amongst themselves during the last century. The handful that remained joined the ranks of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and were responsible for some of the worst mass Muggle killings of his reign of terror.

While many of the giants who served He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were killed by Aurors work-ing against the Dark Side, Fridwulfa was not among them. It is possible she escaped to one of the giant communities still existing in foreign mountain ranges. If his antics during Care of Mag-ical Creatures lessons are any guide, however, Frid-wulfa’s son appears to have inherited her brutal nature.

In a bizarre twist, Hagrid is reputed to have developed a close friendship with the boy who brought around You-Know-Who’s fall from power — thereby driving Hagrid’s own mother, like the rest of You-Know-Who’s supporters, into hiding. Perhaps Harry Potter is unaware of the un-pleasant truth about his large friend — but Albus Dumbledore surely has a duty to ensure that Harry Potter, along with his fellow students, is warned about the dangers of associating with part-giants.

Harry finished reading and looked up at Ron, whose mouth was hanging open.

“How did she find out?” he whispered.

But that wasn’t what was bothering Harry.

“What d’you mean, ‘we all hate Hagrid’?” Harry spat at Malfoy. “What’s this rubbish about him” — he pointed at Crabbe — “get-ting a bad bite off a flobberworm? They haven’t even got teeth!”

Crabbe was sniggering, apparently very pleased with himself.

“Well, I think this should put an end to the oaf’s teaching ca-reer,” said Malfoy, his eyes glinting. “Half-giant … and there was me thinking he’d just swallowed a bottle of Skele-Gro when he was young. … None of the mummies and daddies are going to like this at all. … They’ll be worried he’ll eat their kids, ha, ha. …”

“You —”

“Are you paying attention over there?”

Professor Grubbly-Plank’s voice carried over to the boys; the girls were all clustered around the unicorn now, stroking it. Harry was so angry that the Daily Prophet article shook in his hands as he turned to stare unseeingly at the unicorn, whose many magical properties Professor Grubbly-Plank was now enumerating in a loud voice, so that the boys could hear too.

“I hope she stays, that woman!” said Parvati Patil when the lesson had ended and they were all heading back to the castle for lunch. “That’s more what I thought Care of Magical Creatures would be like … proper creatures like unicorns, not monsters. …”

“What about Hagrid?” Harry said angrily as they went up the steps.

“What about him?” said Parvati in a hard voice. “He can still be gamekeeper, can’t he?”

Parvati had been very cool toward Harry since the ball. He sup-posed that he ought to have paid her a bit more attention, but she seemed to have had a good time all the same. She was certainly telling anybody

who would listen that she had made arrangements to meet the boy from Beauxbatons in Hogsmeade on the next weekend trip.

“That was a really good lesson,” said Hermione as they entered the Great Hall. “I didn’t know half the things Professor Grubbly-Plank told us about uni —”

“Look at this!” Harry snarled, and he shoved the Daily Prophet article under Hermione’s nose.

Hermione’s mouth fell open as she read. Her reaction was ex-actly the same as Ron’s.

“How did that horrible Skeeter woman find out? You don’t think Hagrid told her?”

“No,” said Harry, leading the way over to the Gryffindor table and throwing himself into a chair, furious. “He never even told us, did he? I reckon she was so mad he wouldn’t give her loads of hor-rible stuff about me, she went ferreting around to get him back.”

“Maybe she heard him telling Madame Maxime at the ball,” said Hermione quietly.

“We’d have seen her in the garden!” said Ron. “Anyway, she’s not supposed to come into school anymore, Hagrid said Dumbledore banned her. …”

“Maybe she’s got an Invisibility Cloak,” said Harry, ladling chicken casserole onto his plate and splashing it everywhere in his anger. “Sort of thing she’d do, isn’t it, hide in bushes listening to people.”

“Like you and Ron did, you mean,” said Hermione.

“We weren’t trying to hear him!” said Ron indignantly. “We didn’t have any choice! The stupid prat, talking about his giantess mother where anyone could have heard him!”

“We’ve got to go and see him,” said Harry. “This evening, after Divination. Tell him we want him back … you do want him back?” he shot at Hermione.

“I — well, I’m not going to pretend it didn’t make a nice change, having a proper Care of Magical Creatures lesson for once — but I do want Hagrid back, of course I do!” Hermione added hastily, quailing under Harry’s furious stare.

So that evening after dinner, the three of them left the castle once more and went down through the frozen grounds to Hagrid’s cabin. They knocked, and Fang’s booming barks answered.

“Hagrid, it’s us!” Harry shouted, pounding on the door. “Open up!

Hagrid didn’t answer. They could hear Fang scratching at the door, whining, but it didn’t open. They hammered on it for ten more minutes; Ron even went and banged on one of the windows, but there was no response.

“What’s he avoiding us for?” Hermione said when they had finally given up and were walking back to the school. “He surely doesn’t think we’d care about him being half-giant?”

But it seemed that Hagrid did care. They didn’t see a sign of him all week. He didn’t appear at the staff table at mealtimes, they didn’t see him going about his gamekeeper duties on the grounds, and Professor Grubbly-Plank continued to take the Care of Magical Creatures classes. Malfoy was gloating at every possible opportunity.

“Missing your half-breed pal?” he kept whispering to Harry whenever there was a teacher around, so that he was safe from Harry’s retaliation. “Missing the elephant-man?”

There was a Hogsmeade visit halfway through January. Hermi-one was very surprised that Harry was going to go.

“I just thought you’d want to take advantage of the common room being quiet,” she said. “Really get to work on that egg.”

“Oh I — I reckon I’ve got a pretty good idea what it’s about now,” Harry lied.

“Have you really?” said Hermione, looking impressed. “Well done!”

Harry’s insides gave a guilty squirm, but he ignored them. He still had five weeks to work out that egg clue, after all, and that was ages … whereas if he went into Hogsmeade, he might run into Hagrid, and get a chance to persuade him to come back.

He, Ron, and Hermione left the castle together on Saturday and set off through the cold, wet grounds toward the gates. As they passed the Durmstrang ship moored in the lake, they saw Viktor Krum emerge onto the deck, dressed in nothing but swimming trunks. He was very skinny indeed, but apparently a lot tougher than he looked, because he climbed up onto the side of the ship, stretched out his arms, and dived, right into the lake.

“He’s mad!” said Harry, staring at Krum’s dark head as it bobbed out into the middle of the lake. “It must be freezing, it’s January!”

“It’s a lot colder where he comes from,” said Hermione. “I sup-pose it feels quite warm to him.”

“Yeah, but there’s still the giant squid,” said Ron. He didn’t sound anxious — if anything, he sounded hopeful. Hermione no-ticed his tone of voice and frowned.

“He’s really nice, you know,” she said. “He’s not at all like you’d think, coming from Durmstrang. He likes it much better here, he told me.”

Ron said nothing. He hadn’t mentioned Viktor Krum since the ball, but Harry had found a miniature arm under his bed on Box-ing Day,

which had looked very much as though it had been snapped off a small model figure wearing Bulgarian Quidditch robes.

Harry kept his eyes skinned for a sign of Hagrid all the way down the slushy High Street, and suggested a visit to the Three Broomsticks once he had ascertained that Hagrid was not in any of the shops.

The pub was as crowded as ever, but one quick look around at all the tables told Harry that Hagrid wasn't there. Heart sinking, he went up to the bar with Ron and Hermione, ordered three butter-beers from Madam Rosmerta, and thought gloomily that he might just as well have stayed behind and listened to the egg wailing after all.

"Doesn't he ever go into the office?" Hermione whispered sud-denly. "Look!"

She pointed into the mirror behind the bar, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman reflected there, sitting in a shadowy corner with a bunch of goblins. Bagman was talking very fast in a low voice to the goblins, all of whom had their arms crossed and were looking rather menacing.

It was indeed odd, Harry thought, that Bagman was here at the Three Broomsticks on a weekend when there was no Triwizard event, and therefore no judging to be done. He watched Bagman in the mirror. He was looking strained again, quite as strained as he had that night in the forest before the Dark Mark had appeared. But just then Bagman glanced over at the bar, saw Harry, and stood up.

"In a moment, in a moment!" Harry heard him say brusquely to the goblins, and Bagman hurried through the pub toward Harry, his boyish grin back in place.

"Harry!" he said. "How are you? Been hoping to run into you! Everything going all right?"

"Fine, thanks," said Harry.

“Wonder if I could have a quick, private word, Harry?” said Bag-man eagerly. “You couldn’t give us a moment, you two, could you?”

“Er — okay,” said Ron, and he and Hermione went off to find a table.

Bagman led Harry along the bar to the end furthest from Madam Rosmerta.

“Well, I just thought I’d congratulate you again on your splendid performance against that Horntail, Harry,” said Bagman. “Really superb.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, but he knew this couldn’t be all that Bag-man wanted to say, because he could have congratulated Harry in front of Ron and Hermione. Bagman didn’t seem in any particular rush to spill the beans, though. Harry saw him glance into the mirror over the bar at the goblins, who were all watching him and Harry in silence through their dark, slanting eyes.

“Absolute nightmare,” said Bagman to Harry in an undertone, noticing Harry watching the goblins too. “Their English isn’t too good … it’s like being back with all the Bulgarians at the Quid-ditch World Cup … but at least they used sign language another human could recognize. This lot keep gabbling in Gobblede-gook … and I only know one word of Gobbledegook. Bladvak. It means ‘pickax.’ I don’t like to use it in case they think I’m threat-ening them.”

He gave a short, booming laugh.

“What do they want?” Harry said, noticing how the goblins were still watching Bagman very closely.

“Er — well …” said Bagman, looking suddenly nervous. “They … er … they’re looking for Barry Crouch.”

“Why are they looking for him here?” said Harry. “He’s at the Ministry in London, isn’t he?”

"Er … as a matter of fact, I've no idea where he is," said Bag-man. "He's sort of … stopped coming to work. Been absent for a couple of weeks now. Young Percy, his assistant, says he's ill. Ap-parently he's just been sending instructions in by owl. But would you mind not mentioning that to anyone, Harry? Because Rita Skeeter's still poking around everywhere she can, and I'm willing to bet she'd work up Barty's illness into something sinister. Probably say he's gone missing like Bertha Jorkins."

"Have you heard anything about Bertha Jorkins?" Harry asked.

"No," said Bagman, looking strained again. "I've got people looking, of course …" (About time, thought Harry) "and it's all very strange. She definitely arrived in Albania, because she met her second cousin there. And then she left the cousin's house to go south and see an aunt … and she seems to have vanished without trace en route. Blowed if I can see where she's got to … she doesn't seem the type to elope, for instance … but still. … What are we doing, talking about goblins and Bertha Jorkins? I really wanted to ask you" — he lowered his voice — "how are you getting on with your golden egg?"

"Er … not bad," Harry said untruthfully.

Bagman seemed to know he wasn't being honest.

"Listen, Harry," he said (still in a very low voice), "I feel very bad about all this … you were thrown into this tournament, you didn't volunteer for it… and if …" (his voice was so quiet now, Harry had to lean closer to listen) "if I can help at all … a prod in the right direction … I've taken a liking to you … the way you got past that dragon! … well, just say the word."

Harry stared up into Bagman's round, rosy face and his wide, baby-blue eyes.

"We're supposed to work out the clues alone, aren't we?" he said, careful to keep his voice casual and not sound as though he was ac-

cusing the head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports of breaking the rules.

“Well … well, yes,” said Bagman impatiently, “but — come on, Harry — we all want a Hogwarts victory, don’t we?”

“Have you offered Cedric help?” Harry said.

The smallest of frowns creased Bagman’s smooth face. “No, I haven’t,” he said. “I — well, like I say, I’ve taken a liking to you. Just thought I’d offer …”

“Well, thanks,” said Harry, “but I think I’m nearly there with the egg … couple more days should crack it.”

He wasn’t entirely sure why he was refusing Bagman’s help, ex-cept that Bagman was almost a stranger to him, and accepting his assistance would feel somehow much more like cheating than ask-ing advice from Ron, Hermione, or Sirius.

Bagman looked almost affronted, but couldn’t say much more as Fred and George turned up at that point.

“Hello, Mr. Bagman,” said Fred brightly. “Can we buy you a drink?”

“Er … no,” said Bagman, with a last disappointed glance at Harry, “no, thank you, boys …”

Fred and George looked quite as disappointed as Bagman, who was surveying Harry as though he had let him down badly.

“Well, I must dash,” he said. “Nice seeing you all. Good luck, Harry.”

He hurried out of the pub. The goblins all slid off their chairs and exited after him. Harry went to rejoin Ron and Hermione.

“What did he want?” Ron said, the moment Harry had sat down.

"He offered to help me with the golden egg," said Harry.

"He shouldn't be doing that!" said Hermione, looking very shocked. "He's one of the judges! And anyway, you've already worked it out — haven't you?"

"Er … nearly," said Harry.

"Well, I don't think Dumbledore would like it if he knew Bag-man was trying to persuade you to cheat!" said Hermione, still looking deeply disapproving. "I hope he's trying to help Cedric as much!"

"He's not, I asked," said Harry.

"Who cares if Diggory's getting help?" said Ron. Harry privately agreed.

"Those goblins didn't look very friendly," said Hermione, sip-ping her butterbeer. "What were they doing here?"

"Looking for Crouch, according to Bagman," said Harry. "He's still ill. Hasn't been into work."

"Maybe Percy's poisoning him," said Ron. "Probably thinks if Crouch snuffs it he'll be made head of the Department of Interna-tional Magical Cooperation."

Hermione gave Ron a don't-joke-about-things-like-that look, and said, "Funny, goblins looking for Mr. Crouch. … They'd nor-mally deal with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

"Crouch can speak loads of different languages, though," said Harry. "Maybe they need an interpreter."

"Worrying about poor 'ickle goblins, now, are you?" Ron asked Hermione. "Thinking of starting up S.P.U.G. or something? Soci-ety for the Protection of Ugly Goblins?"

“Ha, ha, ha,” said Hermione sarcastically. “Goblins don’t need protection. Haven’t you been listening to what Professor Binns has been telling us about goblin rebellions?”

“No,” said Harry and Ron together.

“Well, they’re quite capable of dealing with wizards,” said Hermione, taking another sip of butterbeer. “They’re very clever. They’re not like house-elves, who never stick up for themselves.”

“Uh-oh,” said Ron, staring at the door.

Rita Skeeter had just entered. She was wearing banana-yellow robes today; her long nails were painted shocking pink, and she was accompanied by her paunchy photographer. She bought drinks, and she and the photographer made their way through the crowds to a table nearby, Harry, Ron, and Hermione glaring at her as she approached. She was talking fast and looking very satisfied about something.

“… didn’t seem very keen to talk to us, did he, Bozo? Now, why would that be, do you think? And what’s he doing with a pack of goblins in tow anyway? Showing them the sights … what non-sense … he was always a bad liar. Reckon something’s up? Think we should do a bit of digging? ‘Disgraced Ex-Head of Magical Games and Sports, Ludo Bagman …’ Snappy start to a sentence, Bozo — we just need to find a story to fit it —”

“Trying to ruin someone else’s life?” said Harry loudly.

A few people looked around. Rita Skeeter’s eyes widened behind her jeweled spectacles as she saw who had spoken.

“Harry!” she said, beaming. “How lovely! Why don’t you come and join — ?”

“I wouldn’t come near you with a ten-foot broomstick,” said Harry furiously. “What did you do that to Hagrid for, eh?”

Rita Skeeter raised her heavily penciled eyebrows.

“Our readers have a right to the truth, Harry. I am merely doing my —”

“Who cares if he’s half-giant?” Harry shouted. “There’s nothing wrong with him!”

The whole pub had gone very quiet. Madam Rosmerta was star-ing over from behind the bar, apparently oblivious to the fact that the flagon she was filling with mead was overflowing.

Rita Skeeter’s smile flickered very slightly, but she hitched it back almost at once; she snapped open her crocodile-skin handbag, pulled out her Quick-Quotes Quill, and said, “How about giving me an interview about the Hagrid you know, Harry? The man be-hind the muscles? Your unlikely friendship and the reasons behind it. Would you call him a father substitute?”

Hermione stood up very abruptly, her butterbeer clutched in her hand as though it were a grenade.

“You horrible woman,” she said, through gritted teeth, “you don’t care, do you, anything for a story, and anyone will do, won’t they? Even Ludo Bagman —”

“Sit down, you silly little girl, and don’t talk about things you don’t understand,” said Rita Skeeter coldly, her eyes hardening as they fell on Hermione. “I know things about Ludo Bagman that would make your hair curl … not that it needs it —” she added, eyeing Hermione’s bushy hair.

“Let’s go,” said Hermione, “c’mon, Harry — Ron …”

They left; many people were staring at them as they went. Harry glanced back as they reached the door. Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill was out; it was zooming backward and forward over a piece of parchment on the table.

"She'll be after you next, Hermione," said Ron in a low and wor-ried voice as they walked quickly back up the street.

"Let her try!" said Hermione defiantly; she was shaking with rage. "I'll show her! Silly little girl, am I? Oh, I'll get her back for this. First Harry, then Hagrid …"

"You don't want to go upsetting Rita Skeeter," said Ron ner-vously. "I'm serious, Hermione, she'll dig up something on you —"

"My parents don't read the Daily Prophet. She can't scare me into hiding!" said Hermione, now striding along so fast that it was all Harry and Ron could do to keep up with her. The last time Harry had seen Hermione in a rage like this, she had hit Draco Malfoy around the face. "And Hagrid isn't hiding anymore! He should never have let that excuse for a human being upset him! Come on!"

Breaking into a run, she led them all the way back up the road, through the gates flanked by winged boars, and up through the grounds to Hagrid's cabin.

The curtains were still drawn, and they could hear Fang barking as they approached.

"Hagrid!" Hermione shouted, pounding on his front door. "Ha-grid, that's enough! We know you're in there! Nobody cares if your mum was a giantess, Hagrid! You can't let that foul Skeeter woman do this to you! Hagrid, get out here, you're just being —"

The door opened. Hermione said, "About t — !" and then stopped, very suddenly, because she had found herself face-to-face, not with Hagrid, but with Albus Dumbledore.

“Good afternoon,” he said pleasantly, smiling down at them.

“We — er — we wanted to see Hagrid,” said Hermione in a rather small voice.

“Yes, I surmised as much,” said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. “Why don’t you come in?”

“Oh … um … okay,” said Hermione.

She, Ron, and Harry went into the cabin; Fang launched him-self upon Harry the moment he entered, barking madly and trying to lick his ears. Harry fended off Fang and looked around.

Hagrid was sitting at his table, where there were two large mugs of tea. He looked a real mess. His face was blotchy, his eyes swollen, and he had gone to the other extreme where his hair was con-cerned; far from trying to make it behave, it now looked like a wig of tangled wire.

“Hi, Hagrid,” said Harry.

Hagrid looked up.

“ ’Lo,” he said in a very hoarse voice.

“More tea, I think,” said Dumbledore, closing the door behind Harry, Ron, and Hermione, drawing out his wand, and twiddling it; a revolving tea tray appeared in midair along with a plate of cakes. Dumbledore magicked the tray onto the table, and everybody sat down. There was a slight pause, and then Dumbledore said, “Did you by any chance hear what Miss Granger was shouting, Hagrid?”

Hermione went slightly pink, but Dumbledore smiled at her and continued, “Hermione, Harry, and Ron still seem to want to know you, judging by the way they were attempting to break down the door.”

“Of course we still want to know you!” Harry said, staring at Hagrid. “You don’t think anything that Skeeter cow — sorry, Pro-fessor,” he added quickly, looking at Dumbledore.

“I have gone temporarily deaf and haven’t any idea what you said, Harry,” said Dumbledore, twiddling his thumbs and staring at the ceiling.

“Er — right,” said Harry sheepishly. “I just meant — Hagrid, how could you think we’d care what that — woman — wrote about you?”

Two fat tears leaked out of Hagrid’s beetle-black eyes and fell slowly into his tangled beard.

“Living proof of what I’ve been telling you, Hagrid,” said Dum-bledore, still looking carefully up at the ceiling. “I have shown you the letters from the countless parents who remember you from their own days here, telling me in no uncertain terms that if I sacked you, they would have something to say about it —”

“Not all of ’em,” said Hagrid hoarsely. “Not all of ’em wan’ me ter stay.”

“Really, Hagrid, if you are holding out for universal popularity, I’m afraid you will be in this cabin for a very long time,” said Dum-bledore, now peering sternly over his half-moon spectacles. “Not a week has passed since I became headmaster of this school when I haven’t had at least one owl complaining about the way I run it. But what should I do? Barricade myself in my study and refuse to talk to anybody?”

“Yeh — yeh’re not half-giant!” said Hagrid croakily.

“Hagrid, look what I’ve got for relatives!” Harry said furiously. “Look at the Dursleys!”

“An excellent point,” said Professor Dumbledore. “My own brother, Aberforth, was prosecuted for practicing inappropriate charms on a

goat. It was all over the papers, but did Aberforth hide? No, he did not! He held his head high and went about his business as usual! Of course, I'm not entirely sure he can read, so that may not have been bravery. …"

"Come back and teach, Hagrid," said Hermione quietly, "please come back, we really miss you."

Hagrid gulped. More tears leaked out down his cheeks and into his tangled beard.

Dumbledore stood up. "I refuse to accept your resignation, Hagrid, and I expect you back at work on Monday," he said. "You will join me for breakfast at eight-thirty in the Great Hall. No ex-cuses. Good afternoon to you all."

Dumbledore left the cabin, pausing only to scratch Fang's ears. When the door had shut behind him, Hagrid began to sob into his dustbin-lid-sized hands. Hermione kept patting his arm, and at last, Hagrid looked up, his eyes very red indeed, and said, "Great man, Dumbledore … great man …"

"Yeah, he is," said Ron. "Can I have one of these cakes, Hagrid?"

"Help yerself," said Hagrid, wiping his eyes on the back of his hand. "Ar, he's righ', o' course — yeh're all righ' … I bin stupid … my ol' dad woulda bin ashamed o' the way I've bin behavin'. …" More tears leaked out, but he wiped them away more forcefully, and said, "Never shown you a picture of my old dad, have I? Here …"

Hagrid got up, went over to his dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out a picture of a short wizard with Hagrid's crinkled black eyes, beaming as he sat on top of Hagrid's shoulder. Hagrid was a good seven or eight feet tall, judging by the apple tree beside him, but his face was beardless, young, round, and smooth — he looked hardly older than eleven.

“Tha’ was taken jus’ after I got inter Hogwarts,” Hagrid croaked. “Dad was dead chuffed … thought I migh’ not be a wizard, see, ’cos me mum … well, anyway. ’Course, I never was great shakes at magic, really … but at least he never saw me expelled. Died, see, in me second year. …“Dumbledore was the one who stuck up for me after Dad went. Got me the gamekeeper job … trusts people, he does. Gives ’em second chances … tha’s what sets him apar’ from other heads, see. He’ll accept anyone at Hogwarts, s’long as they’ve got the talent. Knows people can turn out okay even if their families weren’ … well … all tha’ respectable. But some don’ understand that. There’s some who’d always hold it against yeh … there’s some who’d even pretend they just had big bones rather than stand up an’ say — I am what I am, an’ I’m not ashamed. ‘Never be ashamed,’ my ol’ dad used ter say, ‘there’s some who’ll hold it against you, but they’re not worth botherin’ with.’ An’ he was right. I’ve bin an idiot. I’m not botherin’ with her no more, I promise yeh that. Big bones … I’ll give her big bones.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another nervously; Harry would rather have taken fifty Blast-Ended Skrewts for a walk than admit to Hagrid that he had overheard him talking to Madame Maxime, but Hagrid was still talking, apparently unaware that he had said anything odd.

“Yeh know wha’, Harry?” he said, looking up from the photo-graph of his father, his eyes very bright, “when I firs’ met you, you reminded me o’ me a bit. Mum an’ Dad gone, an’ you was feelin’ like yeh wouldn’ fit in at Hogwarts, remember? Not sure yeh were really up to it … an’ now look at yeh, Harry! School champion!”

He looked at Harry for a moment and then said, very seriously, “Yeh know what I’d love, Harry? I’d love yeh ter win, I really would. It’d show ’em all … yeh don’ have ter be pureblood ter do it. Yeh don’ have ter be ashamed of what yeh are. It’d show ’em Dumble-dore’s the one who’s got it righ’, lettin’ anyone in as long as they can do magic. How you doin’ with that egg, Harry?”

“Great,” said Harry. “Really great.”

Hagrid’s miserable face broke into a wide, watery smile.

“Tha’s my boy … you show ’em, Harry, you show ’em. Beat ’em all.”

Lying to Hagrid wasn’t quite like lying to anyone else. Harry went back to the castle later that afternoon with Ron and Her-mione, unable to banish the image of the happy expression on Hagrid’s whiskery face as he had imagined Harry winning the tour-nament. The incomprehensible egg weighed more heavily than ever on Harry’s conscience that evening, and by the time he had got into bed, he had made up his mind — it was time to shelve his pride and see if Cedric’s hint was worth anything.

Chapter 25 The Egg and the Eye

As Harry had no idea how long a bath he would need to work out the secret of the golden egg, he decided to do it at night, when he would be able to take as much time as he wanted. Reluctant though he was to accept more favors from Cedric, he also decided to use the prefects' bathroom; far fewer people were allowed in there, so it was much less likely that he would be disturbed.

Harry planned his excursion carefully, because he had been caught out of bed and out-of-bounds by Filch the caretaker in the middle of the night once before, and had no desire to repeat the experience. The Invisibility Cloak would, of course, be essential, and as an added precaution, Harry thought he would take the Marauder's Map, which, next to the cloak, was the most useful aid to rule-breaking Harry owned. The map showed the whole of Hog-warts, including its many shortcuts and secret passageways and, most important of all, it revealed the people inside the castle as minuscule, labeled dots, moving around the corridors, so that Harry would be forewarned if somebody was approaching the bathroom.

On Thursday night, Harry sneaked up to bed, put on the cloak, crept back downstairs, and, just as he had done on the night when Hagrid had shown him the dragons, waited for the portrait hole to open. This time it was Ron who waited outside to give the Fat Lady the password ("banana fritters"). "Good luck," Ron muttered, climbing into the room as Harry crept out past him.

It was awkward moving under the cloak tonight, because Harry had the heavy egg under one arm and the map held in front of his nose with the other. However, the moonlit corridors were empty and silent, and by checking the map at strategic intervals, Harry was able to ensure that he wouldn't run into anyone he wanted to avoid. When he reached the statue of Boris the Bewildered, a lost-looking wizard with his gloves on the wrong hands, he located the right door, leaned

close to it, and muttered the password, “Pine fresh,” just as Cedric had told him.

The door creaked open. Harry slipped inside, bolted the door behind him, and pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, looking around.

His immediate reaction was that it would be worth becoming a prefect just to be able to use this bathroom. It was softly lit by a splendid candle-filled chandelier, and everything was made of white marble, including what looked like an empty, rectangular swimming pool sunk into the middle of the floor. About a hundred golden taps stood all around the pool’s edges, each with a differ-ently colored jewel set into its handle. There was also a diving board. Long white linen curtains hung at the windows; a large pile of fluffy white towels sat in a corner, and there was a single golden-framed painting on the wall. It featured a blonde mermaid who was fast asleep on a rock, her long hair over her face. It fluttered every time she snored.

Harry moved forward, looking around, his footsteps echoing off the walls. Magnificent though the bathroom was — and quite keen though he was to try out a few of those taps — now he was here he couldn’t quite suppress the feeling that Cedric might have been having him on. How on earth was this supposed to help solve the mystery of the egg? Nevertheless, he put one of the fluffy towels, the cloak, the map, and the egg at the side of the swimming-pool-sized bath, then knelt down and turned on a few of the taps.

He could tell at once that they carried different sorts of bubble bath mixed with the water, though it wasn’t bubble bath as Harry had ever experienced it. One tap gushed pink and blue bubbles the size of footballs; another poured ice-white foam so thick that Harry thought it would have supported his weight if he’d cared to test it; a third sent heavily perfumed purple clouds hovering over the sur-face of the water. Harry amused himself for a while turning the taps on and off, particularly enjoying the effect of one whose jet bounced off the surface of the water in large arcs. Then, when the deep pool was full

of hot water, foam, and bubbles, which took a very short time considering its size, Harry turned off all the taps, pulled off his pajamas, slippers, and dressing gown, and slid into the water.

It was so deep that his feet barely touched the bottom, and he actually did a couple of lengths before swimming back to the side and treading water, staring at the egg. Highly enjoyable though it was to swim in hot and foamy water with clouds of different-colored steam wafting all around him, no stroke of brilliance came to him, no sudden burst of understanding.

Harry stretched out his arms, lifted the egg in his wet hands, and opened it. The wailing, screeching sound filled the bathroom, echoing and reverberating off the marble walls, but it sounded just as incomprehensible as ever, if not more so with all the echoes. He snapped it shut again, worried that the sound would attract Filch, wondering whether that hadn't been Cedric's plan — and then, making him jump so badly that he dropped the egg, which clat-tered away across the bathroom floor, someone spoke.

"I'd try putting it in the water, if I were you."

Harry had swallowed a considerable amount of bubbles in shock. He stood up, sputtering, and saw the ghost of a very glum-looking girl sitting cross-legged on top of one of the taps. It was Moaning Myrtle, who was usually to be heard sobbing in the S-bend of a toilet three floors below.

"Myrtle!" Harry said in outrage, "I'm — I'm not wearing anything!"

The foam was so dense that this hardly mattered, but he had a nasty feeling that Myrtle had been spying on him from out of one of the taps ever since he had arrived.

"I closed my eyes when you got in," she said, blinking at him through her thick spectacles. "You haven't been to see me for ages."

“Yeah … well …” said Harry, bending his knees slightly, just to make absolutely sure Myrtle couldn’t see anything but his head, “I’m not supposed to come into your bathroom, am I? It’s a girls’ one.”

“You didn’t used to care,” said Myrtle miserably. “You used to be in there all the time.”

This was true, though only because Harry, Ron, and Hermione had found Myrtle’s out-of-order toilets a convenient place to brew Polyjuice Potion in secret — a forbidden potion that had turned him and Ron into living replicas of Crabbe and Goyle for an hour, so that they could sneak into the Slytherin common room.

“I got told off for going in there,” said Harry, which was half-true; Percy had once caught him coming out of Myrtle’s bathroom. “I thought I’d better not come back after that.”

“Oh … I see …” said Myrtle, picking at a spot on her chin in a morose sort of way. “Well… anyway … I’d try the egg in the water. That’s what Cedric Diggory did.”

“Have you been spying on him too?” said Harry indignantly. “What d’you do, sneak up here in the evenings to watch the pre-fects take baths?”

“Sometimes,” said Myrtle, rather slyly, “but I’ve never come out to speak to anyone before.”

“I’m honored,” said Harry darkly. “You keep your eyes shut!”

He made sure Myrtle had her glasses well covered before hoist-ing himself out of the bath, wrapping the towel firmly around his waist, and going to retrieve the egg. Once he was back in the water, Myrtle peered through her fingers and said, “Go on, then … open it under the water!”

Harry lowered the egg beneath the foamy surface and opened it … and this time, it did not wail. A gurgling song was coming out of it, a song whose words he couldn't distinguish through the water.

"You need to put your head under too," said Myrtle, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying bossing him around. "Go on!"

Harry took a great breath and slid under the surface — and now, sitting on the marble bottom of the bubble-filled bath, he heard a chorus of eerie voices singing to him from the open egg in his hands:"Come seek us where our voices sound,We cannot sing above the ground,And while you're searching ponder this:We've taken what you'll sorely miss,An hour long you'll have to look,And to recover what we took,

But past an hour — the prospect's black,Too late, it's gone, it won't come back."

Harry let himself float back upward and broke the bubbly sur-face, shaking his hair out of his eyes.

"Hear it?" said Myrtle.

"Yeah … 'Come seek us where our voices sound …' and if I need persuading … hang on, I need to listen again. …"

He sank back beneath the water. It took three more underwater renditions of the egg's song before Harry had it memorized; then he trod water for a while, thinking hard, while Myrtle sat and watched him.

"I've got to go and look for people who can't use their voices above the ground. …" he said slowly. "Er … who could that be?"

"Slow, aren't you?"

He had never seen Moaning Myrtle so cheerful, apart from the day when a dose of Polyjuice Potion had given Hermione the hairy face and tail of a cat. Harry stared around the bathroom, thinking … if the voices could only be heard underwater, then it made sense for them to belong to underwater creatures. He ran this theory past Myrtle, who smirked at him.

"Well, that's what Diggory thought," she said. "He lay there talking to himself for ages about it. Ages and ages … nearly all the bubbles had gone. …"

"Underwater …" Harry said slowly. "Myrtle … what lives in the lake, apart from the giant squid?"

"Oh all sorts," she said. "I sometimes go down there … some-times don't have any choice, if someone flushes my toilet when I'm not expecting it. …"

Trying not to think about Moaning Myrtle zooming down a pipe to the lake with the contents of a toilet, Harry said, "Well, does anything in there have a human voice? Hang on —"

Harry's eyes had fallen on the picture of the snoozing mermaid on the wall.

"Myrtle, there aren't merpeople in there, are there?"

"Oooh, very good," she said, her thick glasses twinkling, "it took Diggory much longer than that! And that was with her awake too" — Myrtle jerked her head toward the mermaid with an ex-pression of great dislike on her glum face — "giggling and showing off and flashing her fins. …"

"That's it, isn't it?" said Harry excitedly. "The second task's to go and find the merpeople in the lake and … and …"

But he suddenly realized what he was saying, and he felt the excitement drain out of him as though someone had just pulled a plug in his stomach. He wasn't a very good swimmer; he'd never had much practice. Dudley had had lessons in his youth, but Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, no doubt hoping that Harry would drown one day, hadn't bothered to give him any. A couple of lengths of this bath were all very well, but that lake was very large, and very deep … and merpeople would surely live right at the bottom. …"Myrtle," Harry said slowly, "how am I supposed to breathe?"

At this, Myrtle's eyes filled with sudden tears again.

"Tactless!" she muttered, groping in her robes for a handker-chief.

"What's tactless?" said Harry, bewildered.

"Talking about breathing in front of me!" she said shrilly, and her voice echoed loudly around the bathroom. "When I can't … when I haven't … not for ages …"

She buried her face in her handkerchief and sniffed loudly. Harry remembered how touchy Myrtle had always been about be-ing dead, but none of the other ghosts he knew made such a fuss about it.

"Sorry," he said impatiently. "I didn't mean — I just forgot …"

"Oh yes, very easy to forget Myrtle's dead," said Myrtle, gulping, looking at him out of swollen eyes. "Nobody missed me even when I was alive. Took them hours and hours to find my body — I know, I was sitting there waiting for them. Olive Hornby came into the bathroom — 'Are you in here again, sulking, Myrtle?' she said, 'because Professor Dippet asked me to look for you —' And then she saw my body … ooooh, she didn't forget it until her dying day, I made sure of that … followed her around and reminded her, I did. I remember at her brother's wedding —"

But Harry wasn't listening; he was thinking about the merpeo-ple's song again. "We've taken what you'll sorely miss." That sounded as though they were going to steal something of his, something he had to get back. What were they going to take?

"— and then, of course, she went to the Ministry of Magic to stop me stalking her, so I had to come back here and live in my toilet."

"Good," said Harry vaguely. "Well, I'm a lot further on than I was. … Shut your eyes again, will you? I'm getting out."

He retrieved the egg from the bottom of the bath, climbed out, dried himself, and pulled on his pajamas and dressing gown again.

"Will you come and visit me in my bathroom again sometime?" Moaning Myrtle asked mournfully as Harry picked up the Invisi-bility Cloak.

"Er … I'll try," Harry said, though privately thinking the only way he'd be visiting Myrtle's bathroom again was if every other toi-let in the castle got blocked. "See you, Myrtle … thanks for your help."

" 'Bye, 'bye," she said gloomily, and as Harry put on the Invisi-bility Cloak he saw her zoom back up the tap.

Out in the dark corridor, Harry examined the Marauder's Map to check that the coast was still clear. Yes, the dots belonging to Filch and his cat, Mrs. Norris, were safely in their office … noth-ing else seemed to be moving apart from Peeves, though he was bouncing around the trophy room on the floor above. … Harry had taken his first step back toward Gryffindor Tower when some-thing else on the map caught his eye … something distinctly odd.

Peeves was not the only thing that was moving. A single dot was flitting around a room in the bottom left-hand corner — Snape's office. But the dot wasn't labeled "Severus Snape" … it was Bartemius Crouch.

Harry stared at the dot. Mr. Crouch was supposed to be too ill to go to work or to come to the Yule Ball — so what was he doing, sneaking into Hogwarts at one o'clock in the morning? Harry watched closely as the dot moved around and around the room, pausing here and there. …Harry hesitated, thinking … and then his curiosity got the bet-ter of him. He turned and set off in the opposite direction toward the nearest staircase. He was going to see what Crouch was up to.

Harry walked down the stairs as quietly as possible, though the faces in some of the portraits still turned curiously at the squeak of a floorboard, the rustle of his pajamas. He crept along the corridor be-low, pushed aside a tapestry about halfway along, and proceeded down a narrower staircase, a shortcut that would take him down two floors. He kept glancing down at the map, wondering … It just did-n't seem in character, somehow, for correct, law-abiding Mr. Crouch to be sneaking around somebody else's office this late at night. …And then, halfway down the staircase, not thinking about what he was doing, not concentrating on anything but the peculiar be-havior of Mr. Crouch, Harry's leg suddenly sank right through the trick step Neville always forgot to jump. He gave an ungainly wob-ble, and the golden egg, still damp from the bath, slipped from un-der his arm. He lurched forward to try and catch it, but too late; the egg fell down the long staircase with a bang as loud as a bass drum on every step — the Invisibility Cloak slipped — Harry snatched at it, and the Marauder's Map fluttered out of his hand and slid down six stairs, where, sunk in the step to above his knee, he couldn't reach it.

The golden egg fell through the tapestry at the bottom of the staircase, burst open, and began wailing loudly in the corridor be-low. Harry pulled out his wand and struggled to touch the Ma-rauder's Map, to wipe it blank, but it was too far away to reach —Pulling the cloak back over himself Harry straightened up, lis-tening hard with his eyes screwed up with fear … and, almost immediately —"PEEVES!"

It was the unmistakable hunting cry of Filch the caretaker. Harry could hear his rapid, shuffling footsteps coming nearer and nearer,

his wheezy voice raised in fury.

“What’s this racket? Wake up the whole castle, will you? I’ll have you, Peeves, I’ll have you, you’ll … and what is this?”

Filch’s footsteps halted; there was a clink of metal on metal and the wailing stopped — Filch had picked up the egg and closed it. Harry stood very still, one leg still jammed tightly in the magical step, listening. Any moment now, Filch was going to pull aside the tapestry, expecting to see Peeves … and there would be no Peeves … but if he came up the stairs, he would spot the Ma-rauder’s Map … and Invisibility Cloak or not, the map would show “Harry Potter” standing exactly where he was.

“Egg?” Filch said quietly at the foot of the stairs. “My sweet!” — Mrs. Norris was obviously with him — “This is a Triwizard clue! This belongs to a school champion!”

Harry felt sick; his heart was hammering very fast —“PEEVES!” Filch roared gleefully. “You’ve been stealing!”

He ripped back the tapestry below, and Harry saw his horrible, pouchy face and bulging, pale eyes staring up the dark and (to Filch) deserted staircase.

“Hiding, are you?” he said softly. “I’m coming to get you, Peeves. … You’ve gone and stolen a Triwizard clue, Peeves. … Dumbledore’ll have you out of here for this, you filthy, pilfering poltergeist. …”

Filch started to climb the stairs, his scrawny, dust-colored cat at his heels. Mrs. Norris’s lamp-like eyes, so very like her master’s, were fixed directly upon Harry. He had had occasion before now to wonder whether the Invisibility Cloak worked on cats. … Sick with apprehension, he watched Filch drawing nearer and nearer in his old flannel dressing gown — he tried desperately to pull his trapped leg free, but it merely sank a few more inches — any sec-ond now, Filch

was going to spot the map or walk right into him —“Filch? What’s going on?”

Filch stopped a few steps below Harry and turned. At the foot of the stairs stood the only person who could make Harry’s situation worse: Snape. He was wearing a long gray nightshirt and he looked livid.

“It’s Peeves, Professor,” Filch whispered malevolently. “He threw this egg down the stairs.”

Snape climbed up the stairs quickly and stopped beside Filch. Harry gritted his teeth, convinced his loudly thumping heart would give him away at any second. …“Peeves?” said Snape softly, staring at the egg in Filch’s hands. “But Peeves couldn’t get into my office. …”

“This egg was in your office, Professor?”

“Of course not,” Snape snapped. “I heard banging and wailing —”

“Yes, Professor, that was the egg —”

“— I was coming to investigate —”

“— Peeves threw it, Professor —”

“— and when I passed my office, I saw that the torches were lit and a cupboard door was ajar! Somebody has been searching it!”

“But Peeves couldn’t —”

“I know he couldn’t, Filch!” Snape snapped again. “I seal my office with a spell none but a wizard could break!” Snape looked up the stairs, straight through Harry, and then down into the corridor be-low. “I want you to come and help me search for the intruder, Filch.”

“I — yes, Professor — but —”

Filch looked yearningly up the stairs, right through Harry, who could see that he was very reluctant to forgo the chance of corner-ing Peeves. Go, Harry pleaded with him silently, go with Snape … go … Mrs. Norris was peering around Filch's legs. … Harry had the distinct impression that she could smell him. … Why had he filled that bath with so much perfumed foam?

"The thing is, Professor," said Filch plaintively, "the headmaster will have to listen to me this time. Peeves has been stealing from a student, it might be my chance to get him thrown out of the castle once and for all —"

"Filch, I don't give a damn about that wretched poltergeist; it's my office that's —"

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

Snape stopped talking very abruptly. He and Filch both looked down at the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Mad-Eye Moody limp into sight through the narrow gap between their heads. Moody was wearing his old traveling cloak over his nightshirt and leaning on his staff as usual.

"Pajama party, is it?" he growled up the stairs.

"Professor Snape and I heard noises, Professor," said Filch at once. "Peeves the Poltergeist, throwing things around as usual — and then Professor Snape discovered that someone had broken into his off —"

"Shut up!" Snape hissed to Filch.

Moody took a step closer to the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Moody's magical eye travel over Snape, and then, unmistakably, onto himself.

Harry's heart gave a horrible jolt. Moody could see through Invisi-bility Cloaks … he alone could see the full strangeness of the scene: Snape in his nightshirt, Filch clutching the egg, and he, Harry, trapped

in the stairs behind them. Moody's lopsided gash of a mouth opened in surprise. For a few seconds, he and Harry stared straight into each other's eyes. Then Moody closed his mouth and turned his blue eye upon Snape again.

"Did I hear that correctly, Snape?" he asked slowly. "Someone broke into your office?"

"It is unimportant," said Snape coldly.

"On the contrary," growled Moody, "it is very important. Who'd want to break into your office?"

"A student, I daresay," said Snape. Harry could see a vein flick-ering horribly on Snape's greasy temple. "It has happened before. Potion ingredients have gone missing from my private store cup-board … students attempting illicit mixtures, no doubt. …"

"Reckon they were after potion ingredients, eh?" said Moody. "Not hiding anything else in your office, are you?"

Harry saw the edge of Snape's sallow face turn a nasty brick color, the vein in his temple pulsing more rapidly.

"You know I'm hiding nothing, Moody," he said in a soft and dangerous voice, "as you've searched my office pretty thoroughly yourself."

Moody's face twisted into a smile. "Auror's privilege, Snape. Dumbledore told me to keep an eye —"

"Dumbledore happens to trust me," said Snape through clenched teeth. "I refuse to believe that he gave you orders to search my office!"

" 'Course Dumbledore trusts you," growled Moody. "He's a trusting man, isn't he? Believes in second chances. But me — I say there are

spots that don't come off, Snape. Spots that never come off, d'you know what I mean?"

Snape suddenly did something very strange. He seized his left forearm convulsively with his right hand, as though something on it had hurt him.

Moody laughed. "Get back to bed, Snape."

"You don't have the authority to send me anywhere!" Snape hissed, letting go of his arm as though angry with himself. "I have as much right to prowl this school after dark as you do!"

"Prowl away," said Moody, but his voice was full of menace. "I look forward to meeting you in a dark corridor some time. … You've dropped something, by the way. …"

With a stab of horror, Harry saw Moody point at the Marauder's Map, still lying on the staircase six steps below him. As Snape and Filch both turned to look at it, Harry threw caution to the winds; he raised his arms under the cloak and waved furiously at Moody to attract his attention, mouthing "It's mine! Mine!"

Snape had reached out for it, a horrible expression of dawning comprehension on his face —"Accio Parchment!"

The map flew up into the air, slipped through Snape's out-stretched fingers, and soared down the stairs into Moody's hand.

"My mistake," Moody said calmly. "It's mine — must've dropped it earlier —"

But Snape's black eyes were darting from the egg in Filch's arms to the map in Moody's hand, and Harry could tell he was putting two and two together, as only Snape could. …"Potter," he said quietly.

“What’s that?” said Moody calmly, folding up the map and pocketing it.

“Potter!” Snape snarled, and he actually turned his head and stared right at the place where Harry was, as though he could sud-denly see him. “That egg is Potter’s egg. That piece of parchment belongs to Potter. I have seen it before, I recognize it! Potter is here! Potter, in his Invisibility Cloak!”

Snape stretched out his hands like a blind man and began to move up the stairs; Harry could have sworn his over-large nostrils were dilating, trying to sniff Harry out — trapped, Harry leaned backward, trying to avoid Snape’s fingertips, but any moment now —“There’s nothing there, Snape!” barked Moody, “but I’ll be happy to tell the headmaster how quickly your mind jumped to Harry Potter!”

“Meaning what?” Snape turned again to look at Moody, his hands still outstretched, inches from Harry’s chest.

“Meaning that Dumbledore’s very interested to know who’s got it in for that boy!” said Moody, limping nearer still to the foot of the stairs. “And so am I, Snape … very interested. …” The torch-light flickered across his mangled face, so that the scars, and the chunk missing from his nose, looked deeper and darker than ever.

Snape was looking down at Moody, and Harry couldn’t see the expression on his face. For a moment, nobody moved or said any-thing. Then Snape slowly lowered his hands.

“I merely thought,” said Snape, in a voice of forced calm, “that if Potter was wandering around after hours again … it’s an unfortu-nate habit of his … he should be stopped. For — for his own safety.”

“Ah, I see,” said Moody softly. “Got Potter’s best interests at heart, have you?”

There was a pause. Snape and Moody were still staring at each other. Mrs. Norris gave a loud meow, still peering around Filch's legs, looking for the source of Harry's bubble-bath smell.

"I think I will go back to bed," Snape said curtly.

"Best idea you've had all night," said Moody. "Now, Filch, if you'll just give me that egg —"

"No!" said Filch, clutching the egg as though it were his first-born son. "Professor Moody, this is evidence of Peeves' treachery!"

"It's the property of the champion he stole it from," said Moody. "Hand it over, now."

Snape swept downstairs and passed Moody without another word. Filch made a chirruping noise to Mrs. Norris, who stared blankly at Harry for a few more seconds before turning and fol-lowing her master. Still breathing very fast, Harry heard Snape walking away down the corridor; Filch handed Moody the egg and disappeared from view too, muttering to Mrs. Norris. "Never mind, my sweet … we'll see Dumbledore in the morning … tell him what Peeves was up to. …"

A door slammed. Harry was left staring down at Moody, who placed his staff on the bottommost stair and started to climb labo-riously toward him, a dull clunk on every other step.

"Close shave, Potter," he muttered.

"Yeah … I — er … thanks," said Harry weakly.

"What is this thing?" said Moody, drawing the Marauders Map out of his pocket and unfolding it.

"Map of Hogwarts," said Harry, hoping Moody was going to pull him out of the staircase soon; his leg was really hurting him.

“Merlin’s beard,” Moody whispered, staring at the map, his mag-ical eye going haywire. “This … this is some map, Potter!”

“Yeah, it’s … quite useful,” Harry said. His eyes were starting to water from the pain. “Er — Professor Moody, d’you think you could help me — ?”

“What? Oh! Yes … yes, of course …”

Moody took hold of Harry’s arms and pulled; Harry’s leg came free of the trick step, and he climbed onto the one above it. Moody was still gazing at the map.

“Potter …” he said slowly, “you didn’t happen, by any chance, to see who broke into Snape’s office, did you? On this map, I mean?”

“Er … yeah, I did …” Harry admitted. “It was Mr. Crouch.”

Moody’s magical eye whizzed over the entire surface of the map. He looked suddenly alarmed.

“Crouch?” he said. “You’re — you’re sure, Potter?”

“Positive,” said Harry.

“Well, he’s not here anymore,” said Moody, his eye still whizzing over the map. “Crouch … that’s very — very interesting. …”

He said nothing for almost a minute, still staring at the map. Harry could tell that this news meant something to Moody and very much wanted to know what it was. He wondered whether he dared ask. Moody scared him slightly … yet Moody had just helped him avoid an awful lot of trouble. …“Er … Professor Moody … why d’you reckon Mr. Crouch wanted to look around Snape’s office?”

Moody’s magical eye left the map and fixed, quivering, upon Harry. It was a penetrating glare, and Harry had the impression that Moody

was sizing him up, wondering whether to answer or not, or how much to tell him.

"Put it this way, Potter," Moody muttered finally, "they say old Mad-Eye's obsessed with catching Dark wizards … but I'm noth-ing — nothing — compared to Barty Crouch."

He continued to stare at the map. Harry was burning to know more.

"Professor Moody?" he said again. "D'you think … could this have anything to do with … maybe Mr. Crouch thinks there's something going on. …"

"Like what?" said Moody sharply.

Harry wondered how much he dare say. He didn't want Moody to guess that he had a source of information outside Hogwarts; that might lead to tricky questions about Sirius.

"I don't know," Harry muttered, "odd stuff's been happening lately, hasn't it? It's been in the Daily Prophet … the Dark Mark at the World Cup, and the Death Eaters and everything. …"

Both of Moody's mismatched eyes widened.

"You're a sharp boy, Potter," he said. His magical eye roved back to the Marauder's Map. "Crouch could be thinking along those lines," he said slowly. "Very possible … there have been some funny rumors flying around lately — helped along by Rita Skeeter, of course. It's making a lot of people nervous, I reckon." A grim smile twisted his lopsided mouth. "Oh if there's one thing I hate," he muttered, more to himself than to Harry, and his magical eye was fixed on the left-hand corner of the map, "it's a Death Eater who walked free. …"

Harry stared at him. Could Moody possibly mean what Harry thought he meant?

“And now I want to ask you a question, Potter,” said Moody in a more businesslike tone.

Harry’s heart sank; he had thought this was coming. Moody was going to ask where he had got this map, which was a very dubious magical object — and the story of how it had fallen into his hands incriminated not only him, but his own father, Fred and George Weasley, and Professor Lupin, their last Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Moody waved the map in front of Harry, who braced himself —“Can I borrow this?”

“Oh!” said Harry.

He was very fond of his map, but on the other hand, he was extremely relieved that Moody wasn’t asking where he’d got it, and there was no doubt that he owed Moody a favor.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Good boy,” growled Moody. “I can make good use of this … this might be exactly what I’ve been looking for. … Right, bed, Potter, come on, now. …”

They climbed to the top of the stairs together, Moody still ex-amining the map as though it was a treasure the like of which he had never seen before. They walked in silence to the door of Moody’s office, where he stopped and looked up at Harry.

“You ever thought of a career as an Auror, Potter?”

“No,” said Harry, taken aback.

“You want to consider it,” said Moody, nodding and looking at Harry thoughtfully. “Yes, indeed … and incidentally … I’m guessing you weren’t just taking that egg for a walk tonight?”

“Er — no,” said Harry, grinning. “I’ve been working out the clue.”

Moody winked at him, his magical eye going haywire again.

“Nothing like a nighttime stroll to give you ideas, Potter. … See you in the morning. …”

He went back into his office, staring down at the Marauder’s Map again, and closed the door behind him.

Harry walked slowly back to Gryffindor Tower, lost in thought about Snape, and Crouch, and what it all meant. … Why was Crouch pretending to be ill, if he could manage to get to Hogwarts when he wanted to? What did he think Snape was concealing in his office?

And Moody thought he, Harry, ought to be an Auror! Interest-ing idea … but somehow, Harry thought, as he got quietly into his four-poster ten minutes later, the egg and the cloak now safely back in his trunk, he thought he’d like to check how scarred the rest of them were before he chose it as a career.

Chapter 26 The Second Task

“You said you’d already worked out that egg clue!” said Hermione indignantly.

“Keep your voice down!” said Harry crossly. “I just need to — sort of fine-tune it, all right?”

He, Ron, and Hermione were sitting at the very back of the Charms class with a table to themselves. They were supposed to be practicing the opposite of the Summoning Charm today — the Banishing Charm. Owing to the potential for nasty accidents when objects kept flying across the room, Professor Flitwick had given each student a stack of cushions on which to practice, the theory being that these wouldn’t hurt anyone if they went off target. It was a good theory, but it wasn’t working very well. Neville’s aim was so poor that he kept accidentally sending much heavier things flying across the room — Professor Flitwick, for instance.

“Just forget the egg for a minute, all right?” Harry hissed as Pro-fessor Flitwick went whizzing resignedly past them, landing on top of a large cabinet. “I’m trying to tell you about Snape and Moody. …”

This class was an ideal cover for a private conversation, as every-one was having far too much fun to pay them any attention. Harry had been recounting his adventures of the previous night in whis-pered installments for the last half hour.

“Snape said Moody’s searched his office as well?” Ron whispered, his eyes alight with interest as he Banished a cushion with a sweep of his wand (it soared into the air and knocked Parvati’s hat off). “What … d’you reckon Moody’s here to keep an eye on Snape as well as Karkaroff?”

“Well, I dunno if that’s what Dumbledore asked him to do, but he’s definitely doing it,” said Harry, waving his wand without pay-ing much

attention, so that his cushion did an odd sort of belly flop off the desk. “Moody said Dumbledore only lets Snape stay here because he’s giving him a second chance or something. …”

“What?” said Ron, his eyes widening, his next cushion spinning high into the air, ricocheting off the chandelier, and dropping heavily onto Flitwick’s desk. “Harry … maybe Moody thinks Snape put your name in the Goblet of Fire!”

“Oh Ron,” said Hermione, shaking her head sceptically, “we thought Snape was trying to kill Harry before, and it turned out he was saving Harry’s life, remember?”

She Banished a cushion and it flew across the room and landed in the box they were all supposed to be aiming at. Harry looked at Hermione, thinking … it was true that Snape had saved his life once, but the odd thing was, Snape definitely loathed him, just as he’d loathed Harry’s father when they had been at school together. Snape loved taking points from Harry, and had certainly never missed an opportunity to give him punishments, or even to suggest that he should be suspended from the school.

“I don’t care what Moody says,” Hermione went on. “Dumble-dore’s not stupid. He was right to trust Hagrid and Professor Lupin, even though loads of people wouldn’t have given them jobs, so why shouldn’t he be right about Snape, even if Snape is a bit —”

“— evil,” said Ron promptly. “Come on, Hermione, why are all these Dark wizard catchers searching his office, then?”

“Why has Mr. Crouch been pretending to be ill?” said Hermi-one, ignoring Ron. “It’s a bit funny, isn’t it, that he can’t manage to come to the Yule Ball, but he can get up here in the middle of the night when he wants to?”

“You just don’t like Crouch because of that elf, Winky,” said Ron, sending a cushion soaring into the window.

“You just want to think Snape’s up to something,” said Her-mione, sending her cushion zooming neatly into the box.

“I just want to know what Snape did with his first chance, if he’s on his second one,” said Harry grimly, and his cushion, to his very great surprise, flew straight across the room and landed neatly on top of Hermione’s.

Obedient to Sirius’s wish of hearing about anything odd at Hog-warts, Harry sent him a letter by brown owl that night, explaining all about Mr. Crouch breaking into Snape’s office, and Moody and Snape’s conversation. Then Harry turned his attention in earnest to the most urgent problem facing him: how to survive underwater for an hour on the twenty-fourth of February.

Ron quite liked the idea of using the Summoning Charm again — Harry had explained about Aqua-Lungs, and Ron couldn’t see why Harry shouldn’t Summon one from the nearest Muggle town. Hermione squashed this plan by pointing out that, in the un-likely event that Harry managed to learn how to operate an Aqua-Lung within the set limit of an hour, he was sure to be disqualified for breaking the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy — it was too much to hope that no Muggles would spot an Aqua-Lung zooming across the countryside to Hogwarts.

“Of course, the ideal solution would be for you to Transfigure yourself into a submarine or something,” Hermione said. “If only we’d done human Transfiguration already! But I don’t think we start that until sixth year, and it can go badly wrong if you don’t know what you’re doing. …”

“Yeah, I don’t fancy walking around with a periscope sticking out of my head,” said Harry. “I s’pose I could always attack some-one in front of Moody; he might do it for me. …”

“I don’t think he’d let you choose what you wanted to be turned into, though,” said Hermione seriously. “No, I think your best chance is

some sort of charm."

So Harry, thinking that he would soon have had enough of the library to last him a lifetime, buried himself once more among the dusty volumes, looking for any spell that might enable a hu-man to survive without oxygen. However, though he, Ron, and Hermione searched through their lunchtimes, evenings, and whole weekends — though Harry asked Professor McGonagall for a note of permission to use the Restricted Section, and even asked the ir-ritable, vulture-like librarian, Madam Pince, for help — they found nothing whatsoever that would enable Harry to spend an hour underwater and live to tell the tale.

Familiar flutterings of panic were starting to disturb Harry now, and he was finding it difficult to concentrate in class again. The lake, which Harry had always taken for granted as just another fea-ture of the grounds, drew his eyes whenever he was near a class-room window, a great, iron-gray mass of chilly water, whose dark and icy depths were starting to seem as distant as the moon.

Just as it had before he faced the Horntail, time was slipping away as though somebody had bewitched the clocks to go extra-fast. There was a week to go before February the twenty-fourth (there was still time) … there were five days to go (he was bound to find something soon) … three days to go (please let me find something … please) … With two days left, Harry started to go off food again. The only good thing about breakfast on Monday was the return of the brown owl he had sent to Sirius. He pulled off the parchment, unrolled it, and saw the shortest letter Sirius had ever written to him.

Send date of next Hogsmeade weekend by return owl.

Harry turned the parchment over and looked at the back, hop-ing to see something else, but it was blank.

"Weekend after next," whispered Hermione, who had read the note over Harry's shoulder. "Here — take my quill and send this owl back

straight away."

Harry scribbled the dates down on the back of Sirius's letter, tied it onto the brown owl's leg, and watched it take flight again. What had he expected? Advice on how to survive underwater? He had been so intent on telling Sirius all about Snape and Moody he had completely forgotten to mention the egg's clue.

"What's he want to know about the next Hogsmeade weekend for?" said Ron.

"Dunno," said Harry dully. The momentary happiness that had flared inside him at the sight of the owl had died. "Come on … Care of Magical Creatures."

Whether Hagrid was trying to make up for the Blast-Ended Skrewts, or because there were now only two skrewts left, or be-cause he was trying to prove he could do anything that Professor Grubbly-Plank could, Harry didn't know, but Hagrid had been continuing her lessons on unicorns ever since he'd returned to work. It turned out that Hagrid knew quite as much about uni-corns as he did about monsters, though it was clear that he found their lack of poisonous fangs disappointing.

Today he had managed to capture two unicorn foals. Unlike full-grown unicorns, they were pure gold. Parvati and Lavender went into transports of delight at the sight of them, and even Pansy Parkinson had to work hard to conceal how much she liked them.

"Easier ter spot than the adults," Hagrid told the class. "They turn silver when they're abou' two years old, an' they grow horns at aroun' four. Don' go pure white till they're full grown, 'round about seven. They're a bit more trustin' when they're babies … don' mind boys so much. … C'mon, move in a bit, yeh can pat 'em if yeh want … give 'em a few o' these sugar lumps. …"You okay, Harry?" Hagrid muttered, moving aside slightly, while most of the others swarmed around the baby unicorns.

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“Jus’ nervous, eh?” said Hagrid.

“Bit,” said Harry.

“Harry,” said Hagrid, clapping a massive hand on his shoulder, so that Harry’s knees buckled under its weight, “I’d’ve bin worried before I saw yeh take on tha’ Horntail, but I know now yeh can do anythin’ yeh set yer mind ter. I’m not worried at all. Yeh’re goin’ ter be fine. Got yer clue worked out, haven’ yeh?”

Harry nodded, but even as he did so, an insane urge to confess that he didn’t have any idea how to survive at the bottom of the lake for an hour came over him. He looked up at Hagrid — per-haps he had to go into the lake sometimes, to deal with the crea-tures in it? He looked after everything else on the grounds, after all —“Yeh’re goin’ ter win,” Hagrid growled, patting Harry’s shoulder again, so that Harry actually felt himself sink a couple of inches into the soft ground. “I know it. I can feel it. Yeh’re goin’ ter win, Harry.”

Harry just couldn’t bring himself to wipe the happy, confident smile off Hagrid’s face. Pretending he was interested in the young unicorns, he forced a smile in return, and moved forward to pat them with the others.

By the evening before the second task, Harry felt as though he were trapped in a nightmare. He was fully aware that even if, by some miracle, he managed to find a suitable spell, he’d have a real job mastering it overnight. How could he have let this happen? Why hadn’t he got to work on the egg’s clue sooner? Why had he ever let his mind wander in class — what if a teacher had once mentioned how to breathe underwater?

He sat with Hermione and Ron in the library as the sun set out-side, tearing feverishly through page after page of spells, hidden from one another by the massive piles of books on the desk in front of each of

them. Harry's heart gave a huge leap every time he saw the word "water" on a page, but more often than not it was merely "Take two pints of water, half a pound of shredded mandrake leaves, and a newt …"

"I don't reckon it can be done," said Ron's voice flatly from the other side of the table. "There's nothing. Nothing. Closest was that thing to dry up puddles and ponds, that Drought Charm, but that was nowhere near powerful enough to drain the lake."

"There must be something," Hermione muttered, moving a candle closer to her. Her eyes were so tired she was poring over the tiny print of Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes with her nose about an inch from the page. "They'd never have set a task that was undoable."

"They have," said Ron. "Harry, just go down to the lake tomor-row, right, stick your head in, yell at the merpeople to give back whatever they've nicked, and see if they chuck it out. Best you can do, mate."

"There's a way of doing it!" Hermione said crossly. "There just has to be!"

She seemed to be taking the library's lack of useful information on the subject as a personal insult; it had never failed her before.

"I know what I should have done," said Harry, resting, face-down, on Saucy Tricks for Tricky Sorts. "I should've learned to be an Animagus like Sirius."

An Animagus was a wizard who could transform into an animal.

"Yeah, you could've turned into a goldfish any time you wanted!" said Ron.

"Or a frog," yawned Harry. He was exhausted.

"It takes years to become an Animagus, and then you have to register yourself and everything," said Hermione vaguely, now squinting down the index of Weird Wizarding Dilemmas and Their Solutions. "Professor McGonagall told us, remember … you've got to register yourself with the Improper Use of Magic Office … what animal you become, and your markings, so you can't abuse it. …"

"Hermione, I was joking," said Harry wearily. "I know I haven't got a chance of turning into a frog by tomorrow morning. …"

"Oh this is no use," Hermione said, snapping shut Weird Wiz-arding Dilemmas. "Who on earth wants to make their nose hair grow into ringlets?"

"I wouldn't mind," said Fred Weasley's voice. "Be a talking point, wouldn't it?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up. Fred and George had just emerged from behind some bookshelves.

"What're you two doing here?" Ron asked.

"Looking for you," said George. "McGonagall wants you, Ron. And you, Hermione."

"Why?" said Hermione, looking surprised.

"Dunno … she was looking a bit grim, though," said Fred.

"We're supposed to take you down to her office," said George.

Ron and Hermione stared at Harry, who felt his stomach drop. Was Professor McGonagall about to tell Ron and Hermione off? Perhaps she'd noticed how much they were helping him, when he ought to be working out how to do the task alone?

“We’ll meet you back in the common room,” Hermione told Harry as she got up to go with Ron — both of them looked very anxious. “Bring as many of these books as you can, okay?”

“Right,” said Harry uneasily.

By eight o’clock, Madam Pince had extinguished all the lamps and came to chivvy Harry out of the library. Staggering under the weight of as many books as he could carry, Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room, pulled a table into a corner, and con-tinued to search. There was nothing in Madcap Magic for Wacky Warlocks … nothing in A Guide to Medieval Sorcery … not one mention of underwater exploits in An Anthology of Eighteenth-Century Charms, or in Dreadful Denizens of the Deep, or Powers You Never Knew You Had and What to Do with Them Now You’ve Wised Up.

Crookshanks crawled into Harry’s lap and curled up, purring deeply. The common room emptied slowly around Harry. People kept wishing him luck for the next morning in cheery, confident voices like Hagrid’s, all of them apparently convinced that he was about to pull off another stunning performance like the one he had managed in the first task. Harry couldn’t answer them, he just nod-ded, feeling as though there were a golfball stuck in his throat. By ten to midnight, he was alone in the room with Crookshanks. He had searched all the remaining books, and Ron and Hermione had not come back.

It’s over, he told himself. You can’t do it. You’ll just have to go down to the lake in the morning and tell the judges. …He imagined himself explaining that he couldn’t do the task. He pictured Bagman’s look of round-eyed surprise, Karkaroff’s satis-fied, yellow-toothed smile. He could almost hear Fleur Delacour saying “I knew it … ’e is too young, ’e is only a little boy.” He saw Malfoy flashing his POTTER STINKS badge at the front of the crowd, saw Hagrid’s crestfallen, disbelieving face. …Forgetting that Crookshanks was on his lap, Harry stood up very suddenly; Crookshanks hissed angrily as he landed on the floor, gave Harry a disgusted look, and stalked away with his bot-tlebrush

tail in the air, but Harry was already hurrying up the spi-ral staircase to his dormitory. … He would grab the Invisibility Cloak and go back to the library, he'd stay there all night if he had to. …"Lumos," Harry whispered fifteen minutes later as he opened the library door.

Wand tip alight, he crept along the bookshelves, pulling down more books — books of hexes and charms, books on merpeople and water monsters, books on famous witches and wizards, on magical inventions, on anything at all that might include one pass-ing reference to underwater survival. He carried them over to a table, then set to work, searching them by the narrow beam of his wand, occasionally checking his watch. …One in the morning … two in the morning … the only way he could keep going was to tell himself, over and over again, next book … in the next one … the next one …The mermaid in the painting in the prefects' bathroom was laugh-ing. Harry was bobbing like a cork in bubbly water next to her rock, while she held his Firebolt over his head.

"Come and get it!" she giggled maliciously. "Come on, jump!"

"I can't," Harry panted, snatching at the Firebolt, and struggling not to sink. "Give it to me!"

But she just poked him painfully in the side with the end of the broomstick, laughing at him.

"That hurts — get off — ouch —"

"Harry Potter must wake up, sir!"

"Stop poking me —"

"Dobby must poke Harry Potter, sir, he must wake up!"

Harry opened his eyes. He was still in the library; the Invisibil-ity Cloak had slipped off his head as he'd slept, and the side of his face

was stuck to the pages of Where There's a Wand, There's a Way. He sat up, straightening his glasses, blinking in the bright daylight.

"Harry Potter needs to hurry!" squeaked Dobby. "The second task starts in ten minutes, and Harry Potter —"

"Ten minutes?" Harry croaked. "Ten — ten minutes?"

He looked down at his watch. Dobby was right. It was twenty past nine. A large, dead weight seemed to fall through Harry's chest into his stomach.

"Hurry, Harry Potter!" squeaked Dobby, plucking at Harry's sleeve. "You is supposed to be down by the lake with the other champions, sir!"

"It's too late, Dobby," Harry said hopelessly. "I'm not doing the task, I don't know how —"

"Harry Potter will do the task!" squeaked the elf. "Dobby knew Harry had not found the right book, so Dobby did it for him!"

"What?" said Harry. "But you don't know what the second task is —"

"Dobby knows, sir! Harry Potter has to go into the lake and find his Wheezy —"

"Find my what?"

"— and take his Wheezy back from the merpeople!"

"What's a Wheezy?"

"Your Wheezy, sir, your Wheezy — Wheezy who is giving Dobby his sweater!"

Dobby plucked at the shrunken maroon sweater he was now wearing over his shorts.

"What?" Harry gasped. "They've got … they've got Ron?"

"The thing Harry Potter will miss most, sir!" squeaked Dobby. " 'But past an hour —' "

"— 'the prospect's black,' " Harry recited, staring, horror-struck, at the elf. " 'Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.' Dobby — what've I got to do?"

"You has to eat this, sir!" squeaked the elf, and he put his hand in the pocket of his shorts and drew out a ball of what looked like slimy, grayish-green rat tails. "Right before you go into the lake, sir — gillyweed!"

"What's it do?" said Harry, staring at the gillyweed.

"It will make Harry Potter breathe underwater, sir!"

"Dobby," said Harry frantically, "listen — are you sure about this?"

He couldn't quite forget that the last time Dobby had tried to "help" him, he had ended up with no bones in his right arm.

"Dobby is quite sure, sir!" said the elf earnestly. "Dobby hears things, sir, he is a house-elf, he goes all over the castle as he lights the fires and mops the floors. Dobby heard Professor McGonagall and Professor Moody in the staffroom, talking about the next task. … Dobby cannot let Harry Potter lose his Wheezy!"

Harry's doubts vanished. Jumping to his feet he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, stuffed it into his bag, grabbed the gillyweed, and put it into his pocket, then tore out of the library with Dobby at his heels.

"Dobby is supposed to be in the kitchens, sir!" Dobby squealed as they burst into the corridor. "Dobby will be missed — good luck, Harry Potter, sir, good luck!"

“See you later, Dobby!” Harry shouted, and he sprinted along the corridor and down the stairs, three at a time.

The entrance hall contained a few last-minute stragglers, all leaving the Great Hall after breakfast and heading through the double oak doors to watch the second task. They stared as Harry flashed past, sending Colin and Dennis Creevey flying as he leapt down the stone steps and out onto the bright, chilly grounds.

As he pounded down the lawn he saw that the seats that had encircled the dragons’ enclosure in November were now ranged along the opposite bank, rising in stands that were packed to the bursting point and reflected in the lake below. The excited babble of the crowd echoed strangely across the water as Harry ran flat-out around the other side of the lake toward the judges, who were sit-ting at another gold-draped table at the water’s edge. Cedric, Fleur, and Krum were beside the judges’ table, watching Harry sprint to-ward them.

“I’m … here …” Harry panted, skidding to a halt in the mud and accidentally splattering Fleur’s robes.

“Where have you been?” said a bossy, disapproving voice. “The task’s about to start!”

Harry looked around. Percy Weasley was sitting at the judges’ table — Mr. Crouch had failed to turn up again.

“Now, now, Percy!” said Ludo Bagman, who was looking in-tensely relieved to see Harry. “Let him catch his breath!”

Dumbledore smiled at Harry, but Karkaroff and Madame Maxime didn’t look at all pleased to see him. … It was obvious from the looks on their faces that they had thought he wasn’t going to turn up.

Harry bent over, hands on his knees, gasping for breath; he had a stitch in his side that felt as though he had a knife between his ribs, but there was no time to get rid of it; Ludo Bagman was now moving

among the champions, spacing them along the bank at in-tervals of ten feet. Harry was on the very end of the line, next to Krum, who was wearing swimming trunks and was holding his wand ready.

“All right, Harry?” Bagman whispered as he moved Harry a few feet farther away from Krum. “Know what you’re going to do?”

“Yeah,” Harry panted, massaging his ribs.

Bagman gave Harry’s shoulder a quick squeeze and returned to the judges’ table; he pointed his wand at his throat as he had done at the World Cup, said, “Sonorus!” and his voice boomed out across the dark water toward the stands.

“Well, all our champions are ready for the second task, which will start on my whistle. They have precisely an hour to recover what has been taken from them. On the count of three, then. One … two … three!”

The whistle echoed shrilly in the cold, still air; the stands erupted with cheers and applause; without looking to see what the other champions were doing, Harry pulled off his shoes and socks, pulled the handful of gillyweed out of his pocket, stuffed it into his mouth, and waded out into the lake.

It was so cold he felt the skin on his legs searing as though this were fire, not icy water. His sodden robes weighed him down as he walked in deeper; now the water was over his knees, and his rapidly numbing feet were slipping over silt and flat, slimy stones. He was chewing the gillyweed as hard and fast as he could; it felt unpleas-antly slimy and rubbery, like octopus tentacles. Waist-deep in the freezing water he stopped, swallowed, and waited for something to happen.

He could hear laughter in the crowd and knew he must look stu-pid, walking into the lake without showing any sign of magical power. The part of him that was still dry was covered in goose pim-ples; half immersed in the icy water, a cruel breeze lifting his hair, Harry started to shiver violently. He avoided looking at the stands; the laughter was

becoming louder, and there were catcalls and jeer-ing from the Slytherins. …Then, quite suddenly, Harry felt as though an invisible pillow had been pressed over his mouth and nose. He tried to draw breath, but it made his head spin; his lungs were empty, and he suddenly felt a piercing pain on either side of his neck —Harry clapped his hands around his throat and felt two large slits just below his ears, flapping in the cold air. … He had gills. With-out pausing to think, he did the only thing that made sense — he flung himself forward into the water.

The first gulp of icy lake water felt like the breath of life. His head had stopped spinning; he took another great gulp of water and felt it pass smoothly through his gills, sending oxygen back to his brain. He stretched out his hands in front of him and stared at them. They looked green and ghostly under the water, and they had become webbed. He twisted around and looked at his bare feet — they had become elongated and the toes were webbed too: It looked as though he had sprouted flippers.

The water didn't feel icy anymore either … on the contrary, he felt pleasantly cool and very light. … Harry struck out once more, marveling at how far and fast his flipper-like feet propelled him through the water, and noticing how clearly he could see, and how he no longer seemed to need to blink. He had soon swum so far into the lake that he could no longer see the bottom. He flipped over and dived into its depths.

Silence pressed upon his ears as he soared over a strange, dark, foggy landscape. He could only see ten feet around him, so that as he sped through the water new scenes seemed to loom suddenly out of the oncoming darkness: forests of rippling, tangled black weed, wide plains of mud littered with dull, glimmering stones. He swam deeper and deeper, out toward the middle of the lake, his eyes wide, staring through the eerily gray-lit water around him to the shadows beyond, where the water became opaque.

Small fish flickered past him like silver darts. Once or twice he thought he saw something larger moving ahead of him, but when he got nearer, he discovered it to be nothing but a large, blackened log, or a dense clump of weed. There was no sign of any of the other champions, merpeople, Ron — nor, thankfully, the giant squid.

Light green weed stretched ahead of him as far as he could see, two feet deep, like a meadow of very overgrown grass. Harry was staring unblinkingly ahead of him, trying to discern shapes through the gloom … and then, without warning, something grabbed hold of his ankle.

Harry twisted his body around and saw a grindylow, a small, horned water demon, poking out of the weed, its long fingers clutched tightly around Harry's leg, its pointed fangs bared — Harry stuck his webbed hand quickly inside his robes and fumbled for his wand. By the time he had grasped it, two more grindylows had risen out of the weed, had seized handfuls of Harry's robes, and were attempting to drag him down.

"Relashio!" Harry shouted, except that no sound came out. … A large bubble issued from his mouth, and his wand, instead of send-ing sparks at the grindylows, pelted them with what seemed to be a jet of boiling water, for where it struck them, angry red patches appeared on their green skin. Harry pulled his ankle out of the grindylows grip and swam, as fast as he could, occasionally sending more jets of hot water over his shoulder at random; every now and then he felt one of the grindylows snatch at his foot again, and he kicked out, hard; finally, he felt his foot connect with a horned skull, and looking back, saw the dazed grindylow floating away, cross-eyed, while its fellows shook their fists at Harry and sank back into the weed.

Harry slowed down a little, slipped his wand back inside his robes, and looked around, listening again. He turned full circle in the water, the silence pressing harder than ever against his eardrums. He knew he must be even deeper in the lake now, but nothing was moving but the rippling weed.

“How are you getting on?”

Harry thought he was having a heart attack. He whipped around and saw Moaning Myrtle floating hazily in front of him, gazing at him through her thick, pearly glasses.

“Myrtle!” Harry tried to shout — but once again, nothing came out of his mouth but a very large bubble. Moaning Myrtle actually giggled.

“You want to try over there!” she said, pointing. “I won’t come with you. … I don’t like them much, they always chase me when I get too close. …”

Harry gave her the thumbs-up to show his thanks and set off once more, careful to swim a bit higher over the weed to avoid any more grindylows that might be lurking there.

He swam on for what felt like at least twenty minutes. He was passing over vast expanses of black mud now, which swirled murk-ily as he disturbed the water. Then, at long last, he heard a snatch of haunting mersong.

“An hour long you’ll have to look,And to recover what we took …”

Harry swam faster and soon saw a large rock emerge out of the muddy water ahead. It had paintings of merpeople on it; they were carrying spears and chasing what looked like the giant squid. Harry swam on past the rock, following the mersong.

“… your time’s half gone, so tarry notLest what you seek stays here to rot. …”

A cluster of crude stone dwellings stained with algae loomed suddenly out of the gloom on all sides. Here and there at the dark windows, Harry saw faces … faces that bore no resemblance at all to the painting of the mermaid in the prefects’ bathroom. …The merpeople had grayish skin and long, wild, dark green hair. Their

eyes were yellow, as were their broken teeth, and they wore thick ropes of pebbles around their necks. They leered at Harry as he swam past; one or two of them emerged from their caves to watch him better, their powerful, silver fish tails beating the water, spears clutched in their hands.

Harry sped on, staring around, and soon the dwellings became more numerous; there were gardens of weed around some of them, and he even saw a pet grindylow tied to a stake outside one door. Merpeople were emerging on all sides now, watching him eagerly, pointing at his webbed hands and gills, talking behind their hands to one another. Harry sped around a corner and a very strange sight met his eyes.

A whole crowd of merpeople was floating in front of the houses that lined what looked like a mer-version of a village square. A choir of merpeople was singing in the middle, calling the cham-pions toward them, and behind them rose a crude sort of statue; a gigantic merperson hewn from a boulder. Four people were bound tightly to the tail of the stone merperson.

Ron was tied between Hermione and Cho Chang. There was also a girl who looked no older than eight, whose clouds of silvery hair made Harry feel sure that she was Fleur Delacour's sister. All four of them appeared to be in a very deep sleep. Their heads were lolling onto their shoulders, and fine streams of bubbles kept issu-ing from their mouths.

Harry sped toward the hostages, half expecting the merpeople to lower their spears and charge at him, but they did nothing. The ropes of weed tying the hostages to the statue were thick, slimy, and very strong. For a fleeting second he thought of the knife Sirius had bought him for Christmas — locked in his trunk in the castle a quarter of a mile away, no use to him whatsoever.

He looked around. Many of the merpeople surrounding them were carrying spears. He swam swiftly toward a seven-foot-tall merman

with a long green beard and a choker of shark fangs and tried to mime a request to borrow the spear. The merman laughed and shook his head.

“We do not help,” he said in a harsh, croaky voice.

“Come ON!” Harry said fiercely (but only bubbles issued from his mouth), and he tried to pull the spear away from the merman, but the merman yanked it back, still shaking his head and laughing.

Harry swirled around, staring about. Something sharp … any-thing … There were rocks littering the lake bottom. He dived and snatched up a particularly jagged one and returned to the statue. He began to hack at the ropes binding Ron, and after several min-utes’ hard work, they broke apart. Ron floated, unconscious, a few inches above the lake bottom, drifting a little in the ebb of the water.

Harry looked around. There was no sign of any of the other champions. What were they playing at? Why didn’t they hurry up? He turned back to Hermione, raised the jagged rock, and began to hack at her bindings too —At once, several pairs of strong gray hands seized him. Half a dozen mermen were pulling him away from Hermione, shaking their green-haired heads, and laughing.

“You take your own hostage,” one of them said to him. “Leave the others …”

“No way!” said Harry furiously — but only two large bubbles came out.

“Your task is to retrieve your own friend … leave the others …”

“She’s my friend too!” Harry yelled, gesturing toward Hermione, an enormous silver bubble emerging soundlessly from his lips. “And I don’t want them to die either!”

Cho's head was on Hermione's shoulder; the small silver-haired girl was ghostly green and pale. Harry struggled to fight off the mermen, but they laughed harder than ever, holding him back. Harry looked wildly around. Where were the other champions? Would he have time to take Ron to the surface and come back down for Hermione and the others? Would he be able to find them again? He looked down at his watch to see how much time was left — it had stopped working.

But then the merpeople around him pointed excitedly over his head. Harry looked up and saw Cedric swimming toward them. There was an enormous bubble around his head, which made his features look oddly wide and stretched.

"Got lost!" he mouthed, looking panic-stricken. "Fleur and Krum're coming now!"

Feeling enormously relieved, Harry watched Cedric pull a knife out of his pocket and cut Cho free. He pulled her upward and out of sight.

Harry looked around, waiting. Where were Fleur and Krum? Time was getting short, and according to the song, the hostages would be lost after an hour. …The merpeople started screeching animatedly. Those holding Harry loosened their grip, staring behind them. Harry turned and saw something monstrous cutting through the water toward them: a human body in swimming trunks with the head of a shark. … It was Krum. He appeared to have transfigured himself — but badly.

The shark-man swam straight to Hermione and began snapping and biting at her ropes; the trouble was that Krum's new teeth were positioned very awkwardly for biting anything smaller than a dol-phin, and Harry was quite sure that if Krum wasn't careful, he was going to rip Hermione in half. Darting forward, Harry hit Krum hard on the shoulder and held up the jagged stone. Krum seized it and began to cut Hermione free. Within seconds, he had done it; he grabbed

Hermione around the waist, and without a backward glance, began to rise rapidly with her toward the surface.

Now what? Harry thought desperately. If he could be sure that Fleur was coming. … But still no sign. There was nothing to be done except …He snatched up the stone, which Krum had dropped, but the mermen now closed in around Ron and the little girl, shaking their heads at him. Harry pulled out his wand.

“Get out of the way!”

Only bubbles flew out of his mouth, but he had the distinct impression that the mermen had understood him, because they suddenly stopped laughing. Their yellowish eyes were fixed upon Harry’s wand, and they looked scared. There might be a lot more of them than there were of him, but Harry could tell, by the looks on their faces, that they knew no more magic than the giant squid did.

“You’ve got until three!” Harry shouted; a great stream of bub-bles burst from him, but he held up three fingers to make sure they got the message. “One …” (he put down a finger) “two …” (he put down a second one) —They scattered. Harry darted forward and began to hack at the ropes binding the small girl to the statue, and at last she was free. He seized the little girl around the waist, grabbed the neck of Ron’s robes, and kicked off from the bottom.

It was very slow work. He could no longer use his webbed hands to propel himself forward; he worked his flippers furiously, but Ron and Fleur’s sister were like potato-filled sacks dragging him back down. … He fixed his eyes skyward, though he knew he must still be very deep, the water above him was so dark. …Merpeople were rising with him. He could see them swirling around him with ease, watching him struggle through the wa-ter. … Would they pull him back down to the depths when the time was up? Did they perhaps eat humans? Harry’s legs were seiz-ing up with the effort to keep swimming; his shoulders were aching horribly with the effort of dragging Ron and the girl. …He

was drawing breath with extreme difficulty. He could feel pain on the sides of his neck again … he was becoming very aware of how wet the water was in his mouth … yet the darkness was definitely thinning now … he could see daylight above him. …He kicked hard with his flippers and discovered that they were nothing more than feet … water was flooding through his mouth into his lungs … he was starting to feel dizzy, but he knew light and air were only ten feet above him … he had to get there … he had to …Harry kicked his legs so hard and fast it felt as though his mus-cles were screaming in protest; his very brain felt waterlogged, he couldn't breathe, he needed oxygen, he had to keep going, he could not stop —And then he felt his head break the surface of the lake; wonder-ful, cold, clear air was making his wet face sting; he gulped it down, feeling as though he had never breathed properly before, and, pant-ing, pulled Ron and the little girl up with him. All around him, wild, green-haired heads were emerging out of the water with him, but they were smiling at him.

The crowd in the stands was making a great deal of noise; shout-ing and screaming, they all seemed to be on their feet; Harry had the impression they thought that Ron and the little girl might be dead, but they were wrong … both of them had opened their eyes; the girl looked scared and confused, but Ron merely expelled a great spout of water, blinked in the bright light, turned to Harry, and said, "Wet, this, isn't it?" Then he spotted Fleur's sister. "What did you bring her for?"

"Fleur didn't turn up, I couldn't leave her," Harry panted.

"Harry, you prat," said Ron, "you didn't take that song thing se-riously, did you? Dumbledore wouldn't have let any of us drown!"

"The song said —"

"It was only to make sure you got back inside the time limit!" said Ron. "I hope you didn't waste time down there acting the hero!"

Harry felt both stupid and annoyed. It was all very well for Ron; he'd been asleep, he hadn't felt how eerie it was down in the lake, surrounded by spear-carrying merpeople who'd looked more than capable of murder.

"C'mon," Harry said shortly, "help me with her, I don't think she can swim very well."

They pulled Fleur's sister through the water, back toward the bank where the judges stood watching, twenty merpeople accompanying them like a guard of honor, singing their horrible screechy songs.

Harry could see Madam Pomfrey fussing over Hermione, Krum, Cedric, and Cho, all of whom were wrapped in thick blankets. Dumbledore and Ludo Bagman stood beaming at Harry and Ron from the bank as they swam nearer, but Percy, who looked very white and somehow much younger than usual, came splashing out to meet them. Meanwhile Madame Maxime was trying to restrain Fleur Delacour, who was quite hysterical, fighting tooth and nail to return to the water.

"Gabrielle! Gabrielle! Is she alive? Is she 'urt?"

"She's fine!" Harry tried to tell her, but he was so exhausted he could hardly talk, let alone shout.

Percy seized Ron and was dragging him back to the bank ("Ger-roff, Percy, I'm all right!"); Dumbledore and Bagman were pulling Harry upright; Fleur had broken free of Madame Maxime and was hugging her sister.

"It was ze grindylows … zey attacked me … oh Gabrielle, I thought … I thought …"

"Come here, you," said Madam Pomfrey. She seized Harry and pulled him over to Hermione and the others, wrapped him so tightly in a blanket that he felt as though he were in a straitjacket, and forced a

measure of very hot potion down his throat. Steam gushed out of his ears.

“Harry, well done!” Hermione cried. “You did it, you found out how all by yourself!”

“Well —” said Harry. He would have told her about Dobby, but he had just noticed Karkaroff watching him. He was the only judge who had not left the table; the only judge not showing signs of pleasure and relief that Harry, Ron, and Fleur’s sister had got back safely. “Yeah, that’s right,” said Harry, raising his voice slightly so that Karkaroff could hear him.

“You haff a water beetle in your hair, Herm-own-ninny,” said Krum. Harry had the impression that Krum was drawing her at-tention back onto himself; perhaps to remind her that he had just rescued her from the lake, but Hermione brushed away the beetle impatiently and said, “You’re well outside the time limit, though, Harry. … Did it take you ages to find us?”

“No … I found you okay. …”

Harry’s feeling of stupidity was growing. Now he was out of the water, it seemed perfectly clear that Dumbledore’s safety precau-tions wouldn’t have permitted the death of a hostage just because their champion hadn’t turned up. Why hadn’t he just grabbed Ron and gone? He would have been first back. … Cedric and Krum hadn’t wasted time worrying about anyone else; they hadn’t taken the mersong seriously. …Dumbledore was crouching at the water’s edge, deep in conver-sation with what seemed to be the chief merperson, a particularly wild and ferocious-looking female. He was making the same sort of screechy noises that the merpeople made when they were above wa-ter; clearly, Dumbledore could speak Mermish. Finally he straight-ened up, turned to his fellow judges, and said, “A conference before we give the marks, I think.”

The judges went into a huddle. Madam Pomfrey had gone to rescue Ron from Percy's clutches; she led him over to Harry and the others, gave him a blanket and some Pepperup Potion, then went to fetch Fleur and her sister. Fleur had many cuts on her face and arms and her robes were torn, but she didn't seem to care, nor would she allow Madam Pomfrey to clean them.

"Look after Gabrielle," she told her, and then she turned to Harry. "You saved 'er," she said breathlessly. "Even though she was not your 'ostage."

"Yeah," said Harry, who was now heartily wishing he'd left all three girls tied to the statue.

Fleur bent down, kissed Harry twice on each cheek (he felt his face burn and wouldn't have been surprised if steam was coming out of his ears again), then said to Ron, "And you too — you 'elped —"

"Yeah," said Ron, looking extremely hopeful, "yeah, a bit —"

Fleur swooped down on him too and kissed him. Hermione looked simply furious, but just then, Ludo Bagman's magically magnified voice boomed out beside them, making them all jump, and causing the crowd in the stands to go very quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision. Merchieftainess Murcus has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have therefore decided to award marks out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows. …"Fleur Delacour, though she demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm, was attacked by grindylows as she ap-proached her goal, and failed to retrieve her hostage. We award her twenty-five points."

Applause from the stands.

"I deserved zero," said Fleur throatily, shaking her magnificent head.

“Cedric Diggory, who also used the Bubble-Head Charm, was first to return with his hostage, though he returned one minute outside the time limit of an hour.” Enormous cheers from the Huf-flepuffs in the crowd; Harry saw Cho give Cedric a glowing look. “We therefore award him forty-seven points.”

Harry’s heart sank. If Cedric had been outside the time limit, he most certainly had been.

“Viktor Krum used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was second to return with his hostage. We award him forty points.”

Karkaroff clapped particularly hard, looking very superior.

“Harry Potter used gillyweed to great effect,” Bagman contin-ued. “He returned last, and well outside the time limit of an hour. However, the Merchieftainess informs us that Mr. Potter was first to reach the hostages, and that the delay in his return was due to his determination to return all hostages to safety, not merely his own.”

Ron and Hermione both gave Harry half-exasperated, half-commiserating looks.

“Most of the judges,” and here, Bagman gave Karkaroff a very nasty look, “feel that this shows moral fiber and merits full marks. However … Mr. Potter’s score is forty-five points.”

Harry’s stomach leapt — he was now tying for first place with Cedric. Ron and Hermione, caught by surprise, stared at Harry, then laughed and started applauding hard with the rest of the crowd.

“There you go, Harry!” Ron shouted over the noise. “You weren’t being thick after all — you were showing moral fiber!”

Fleur was clapping very hard too, but Krum didn’t look happy at all. He attempted to engage Hermione in conversation again, but she

was too busy cheering Harry to listen.

“The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June,” continued Bagman. “The champions will be noti-fied of what is coming precisely one month beforehand. Thank you all for your support of the champions.”

It was over, Harry thought dazedly, as Madam Pomfrey began herding the champions and hostages back to the castle to get into dry clothes … it was over, he had got through … he didn’t have to worry about anything now until June the twenty-fourth. …Next time he was in Hogsmeade, Harry decided as he walked back up the stone steps into the castle, he was going to buy Dobby a pair of socks for every day of the year.

Chapter 27 Padfoot Returns

One of the best things about the aftermath of the second task was that everybody was very keen to hear details of what had happened down in the lake, which meant that Ron was getting to share Harry's limelight for once. Harry noticed that Ron's ver-sion of events changed subtly with every retelling. At first, he gave what seemed to be the truth; it tallied with Hermione's story, any-way — Dumbledore had put all the hostages into a bewitched sleep in Professor McGonagall's office, first assuring them that they would be quite safe, and would awake when they were back above the water. One week later, however, Ron was telling a thrilling tale of kidnap in which he struggled single-handedly against fifty heav-ily armed merpeople who had to beat him into submission before tying him up.

"But I had my wand hidden up my sleeve," he assured Padma Patil, who seemed to be a lot keener on Ron now that he was get-ting so much attention and was making a point of talking to him every time they passed in the corridors. "I could've taken those mer-idiots any time I wanted."

"What were you going to do, snore at them?" said Hermione waspishly. People had been teasing her so much about being the thing that Viktor Krum would most miss that she was in a rather tetchy mood.

Ron's ears went red, and thereafter, he reverted to the bewitched sleep version of events.

As they entered March the weather became drier, but cruel winds skinned their hands and faces every time they went out onto the grounds. There were delays in the post because the owls kept being blown off course. The brown owl that Harry had sent to Sir-ius with the dates of the Hogsmeade weekend turned up at break-fast on Friday morning with half its feathers sticking up the wrong way; Harry

had no sooner torn off Sirius's reply than it took flight, clearly afraid it was going to be sent outside again.

Sirius's letter was almost as short as the previous one.

Be at stile at end of road out of Hogsmeade (past Dervish and Banges) at two o'clock on Saturday afternoon. Bring as much food as you can.

"He hasn't come back to Hogsmeade?" said Ron incredulously.

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" said Hermione.

"I can't believe him," said Harry tensely, "if he's caught …"

"Made it so far, though, hasn't he?" said Ron. "And it's not like the place is swarming with dementors anymore."

Harry folded up the letter, thinking. If he was honest with him-self, he really wanted to see Sirius again. He therefore approached the final lesson of the afternoon — double Potions — feeling con-siderably more cheerful than he usually did when descending the steps to the dungeons.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in a huddle outside the classroom door with Pansy Parkinson's gang of Slytherin girls. All of them were looking at something Harry couldn't see and snig-gering heartily. Pansy's pug-like face peered excitedly around Goyle's broad back as Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached.

"There they are, there they are!" she giggled, and the knot of Slytherins broke apart. Harry saw that Pansy had a magazine in her hands — Witch Weekly. The moving picture on the front showed a curly-haired witch who was smiling toothily and pointing at a large sponge cake with her wand.

“You might find something to interest you in there, Granger!” Pansy said loudly, and she threw the magazine at Hermione, who caught it, looking startled. At that moment, the dungeon door opened, and Snape beckoned them all inside.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron headed for a table at the back of the dungeon as usual. Once Snape had turned his back on them to write up the ingredients of today’s potion on the blackboard, Hermione hastily rifled through the magazine under the desk. At last, in the center pages, Hermione found what they were looking for. Harry and Ron leaned in closer. A color photograph of Harry headed a short piece entitled:Harry Potter’s Secret HeartacheA boy like no other, perhaps — yet a boy suffering all the usual pangs of adolescence, writes Rita Skeeter. Deprived of love since the tragic demise of his parents, fourteen-year-old Harry Potter thought he had found solace in his steady girlfriend at Hogwarts, Muggle-born Hermione Granger. Little did he know that he would shortly be suffer-ing yet another emotional blow in a life already lit-tered with personal loss.

Miss Granger, a plain but ambitious girl, seems to have a taste for famous wizards that Harry alone cannot satisfy. Since the arrival at Hogwarts of Vik-tor Krum, Bulgarian Seeker and hero of the last World Quidditch Cup, Miss Granger has been toy-ing with both boys’ affections. Krum, who is openly smitten with the devious Miss Granger, has already invited her to visit him in Bulgaria over the summer holidays, and insists that he has “never felt this way about any other girl.”

However, it might not be Miss Granger’s doubt-ful natural charms that have captured these unfor-tunate boys’ interest.

“She’s really ugly,” says Pansy Parkinson, a pretty and vivacious fourth-year student, “but she’d be well up to making a Love Potion, she’s quite brainy. I think that’s how she’s doing it.”

Love Potions are, of course, banned at Hog-warts, and no doubt Albus Dumbledore will want to investigate these claims. In the meantime, Harry Potter's well-wishers must hope that, next time, he bestows his heart on a worthier candidate.

"I told you!" Ron hissed at Hermione as she stared down at the article. "I told you not to annoy Rita Skeeter! She's made you out to be some sort of — of scarlet woman!"

Hermione stopped looking astonished and snorted with laughter. "Scarlet woman?" she repeated, shaking with suppressed giggles as she looked around at Ron.

"It's what my mum calls them," Ron muttered, his ears going red.

"If that's the best Rita can do, she's losing her touch," said Her-mione, still giggling, as she threw Witch Weekly onto the empty chair beside her. "What a pile of old rubbish."

She looked over at the Slytherins, who were all watching her and Harry closely across the room to see if they had been upset by the article. Hermione gave them a sarcastic smile and a wave, and she, Harry, and Ron started unpacking the ingredients they would need for their Wit-Sharpening Potion.

"There's something funny, though," said Hermione ten minutes later, holding her pestle suspended over a bowl of scarab beetles. "How could Rita Skeeter have known … ?"

"Known what?" said Ron quickly. "You haven't been mixing up Love Potions, have you?"

"Don't be stupid," Hermione snapped, starting to pound up her beetles again. "No, it's just … how did she know Viktor asked me to visit him over the summer?"

Hermione blushed scarlet as she said this and determinedly avoided Ron's eyes.

"What?" said Ron, dropping his pestle with a loud clunk.

"He asked me right after he'd pulled me out of the lake," Hermione muttered. "After he'd got rid of his shark's head. Madam Pomfrey gave us both blankets and then he sort of pulled me away from the judges so they wouldn't hear, and he said, if I wasn't doing anything over the summer, would I like to —"

"And what did you say?" said Ron, who had picked up his pestle and was grinding it on the desk, a good six inches from his bowl, because he was looking at Hermione.

"And he did say he'd never felt the same way about anyone else," Hermione went on, going so red now that Harry could almost feel the heat coming from her, "but how could Rita Skeeter have heard him? She wasn't there … or was she? Maybe she has got an Invisi-bility Cloak; maybe she sneaked onto the grounds to watch the sec-ond task. …"

"And what did you say?" Ron repeated, pounding his pestle down so hard that it dented the desk.

"Well, I was too busy seeing whether you and Harry were okay to —"

"Fascinating though your social life undoubtedly is, Miss Granger," said an icy voice right behind them, and all three of them jumped, "I must ask you not to discuss it in my class. Ten points from Gryffindor."

Snape had glided over to their desk while they were talking. The whole class was now looking around at them; Malfoy took the opportunity to flash POTTER STINKS across the dungeon at Harry.

“Ah … reading magazines under the table as well?” Snape added, snatching up the copy of Witch Weekly. “A further ten points from Gryffindor … oh but of course …” Snape’s black eyes glit-tered as they fell on Rita Skeeter’s article. “Potter has to keep up with his press cuttings. …”

The dungeon rang with the Slytherins’ laughter, and an un-pleasant smile curled Snape’s thin mouth. To Harry’s fury, he began to read the article aloud.

“ ‘Harry Potter’s Secret Heartache … dear, dear, Potter, what’s ail-ing you now? ‘A boy like no other, perhaps …’ ”

Harry could feel his face burning. Snape was pausing at the end of every sentence to allow the Slytherins a hearty laugh. The article sounded ten times worse when read by Snape. Even Hermione was blushing scarlet now.

“ ‘… Harry Potter’s well-wishers must hope that, next time, he be-stows his heart upon a worthier candidate.’ How very touching,” sneered Snape, rolling up the magazine to continued gales of laughter from the Slytherins. “Well, I think I had better separate the three of you, so you can keep your minds on your potions rather than on your tangled love lives. Weasley, you stay here. Miss Granger, over there, beside Miss Parkinson. Potter — that table in front of my desk. Move. Now.”

Furious, Harry threw his ingredients and his bag into his caul-dron and dragged it up to the front of the dungeon to the empty table. Snape followed, sat down at his desk and watched Harry un-load his cauldron. Determined not to look at Snape, Harry re-sumed the mashing of his scarab beetles, imagining each one to have Snape’s face.

“All this press attention seems to have inflated your already over-large head, Potter,” said Snape quietly, once the rest of the class had settled down again.

Harry didn't answer. He knew Snape was trying to provoke him; he had done this before. No doubt he was hoping for an excuse to take a round fifty points from Gryffindor before the end of the class.

"You might be laboring under the delusion that the entire wiz-arding world is impressed with you," Snape went on, so quietly that no one else could hear him (Harry continued to pound his scarab beetles, even though he had already reduced them to a very fine powder), "but I don't care how many times your picture ap-pears in the papers. To me, Potter, you are nothing but a nasty lit-tle boy who considers rules to be beneath him."

Harry tipped the powdered beetles into his cauldron and started cutting up his ginger roots. His hands were shaking slightly out of anger, but he kept his eyes down, as though he couldn't hear what Snape was saying to him.

"So I give you fair warning, Potter," Snape continued in a softer and more dangerous voice, "pint-sized celebrity or not — if I catch you breaking into my office one more time —"

"I haven't been anywhere near your office!" said Harry angrily, forgetting his feigned deafness.

"Don't lie to me," Snape hissed, his fathomless black eyes boring into Harry's. "Boomslang skin. Gillyweed. Both come from my private stores, and I know who stole them."

Harry stared back at Snape, determined not to blink or to look guilty. In truth, he hadn't stolen either of these things from Snape. Hermione had taken the boomslang skin back in their second year — they had needed it for the Polyjuice Potion — and while Snape had suspected Harry at the time, he had never been able to prove it. Dobby, of course, had stolen the gillyweed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry lied coldly.

“You were out of bed on the night my office was broken into!” Snape hissed. “I know it, Potter! Now, Mad-Eye Moody might have joined your fan club, but I will not tolerate your behavior! One more nighttime stroll into my office, Potter, and you will pay!

“Right,” said Harry coolly, turning back to his ginger roots. “I’ll bear that in mind if I ever get the urge to go in there.”

Snape’s eyes flashed. He plunged a hand into the inside of his black robes. For one wild moment, Harry thought Snape was about to pull out his wand and curse him — then he saw that Snape had drawn out a small crystal bottle of a completely clear po-tion. Harry stared at it.

“Do you know what this is, Potter?” Snape said, his eyes glitter-ing dangerously again.

“No,” said Harry, with complete honesty this time.

“It is Veritaserum — a Truth Potion so powerful that three drops would have you spilling your innermost secrets for this entire class to hear,” said Snape viciously. “Now, the use of this potion is con-trolled by very strict Ministry guidelines. But unless you watch your step, you might just find that my hand slips” — he shook the crystal bottle slightly — “right over your evening pumpkin juice. And then, Potter … then we’ll find out whether you’ve been in my office or not.”

Harry said nothing. He turned back to his ginger roots once more, picked up his knife, and started slicing them again. He didn’t like the sound of that Truth Potion at all, nor would he put it past Snape to slip him some. He repressed a shudder at the thought of what might come spilling out of his mouth if Snape did it … quite apart from landing a whole lot of people in trouble — Hermione and Dobby for a start — there were all the other things he was concealing … like the fact that he was in contact with Sirius … and — his insides squirmed at the thought — how he felt about Cho. … He tipped his ginger roots into the cauldron too, and wondered whether he ought to take a leaf out of Moody’s book and start drinking only from a private hip flask.

There was a knock on the dungeon door.

“Enter,” said Snape in his usual voice.

The class looked around as the door opened. Professor Karkaroff came in. Everyone watched him as he walked up toward Snape’s desk. He was twisting his finger around his goatee and looking agitated.

“We need to talk,” said Karkaroff abruptly when he had reached Snape. He seemed so determined that nobody should hear what he was saying that he was barely opening his lips; it was as though he were a rather poor ventriloquist. Harry kept his eyes on his ginger roots, listening hard.

“I’ll talk to you after my lesson, Karkaroff,” Snape muttered, but Karkaroff interrupted him.

“I want to talk now, while you can’t slip off, Severus. You’ve been avoiding me.”

“After the lesson,” Snape snapped.

Under the pretext of holding up a measuring cup to see if he’d poured out enough armadillo bile, Harry sneaked a sidelong glance at the pair of them. Karkaroff looked extremely worried, and Snape looked angry.

Karkaroff hovered behind Snape’s desk for the rest of the double period. He seemed intent on preventing Snape from slipping away at the end of class. Keen to hear what Karkaroff wanted to say, Harry deliberately knocked over his bottle of armadillo bile with two minutes to go to the bell, which gave him an excuse to duck down behind his cauldron and mop up while the rest of the class moved noisily toward the door.

“What’s so urgent?” he heard Snape hiss at Karkaroff.

“This,” said Karkaroff, and Harry, peering around the edge of his cauldron, saw Karkaroff pull up the left-hand sleeve of his robe and show Snape something on his inner forearm.

“Well?” said Karkaroff, still making every effort not to move his lips. “Do you see? It’s never been this clear, never since —”

“Put it away!” snarled Snape, his black eyes sweeping the class-room.

“But you must have noticed —” Karkaroff began in an agitated voice.

“We can talk later, Karkaroff!” spat Snape. “Potter! What are you doing?”

“Clearing up my armadillo bile, Professor,” said Harry inno-cently, straightening up and showing Snape the sodden rag he was holding.

Karkaroff turned on his heel and strode out of the dungeon. He looked both worried and angry. Not wanting to remain alone with an exceptionally angry Snape, Harry threw his books and ingredi-ents back into his bag and left at top speed to tell Ron and Hermione what he had just witnessed.

They left the castle at noon the next day to find a weak silver sun shining down upon the grounds. The weather was milder than it had been all year, and by the time they arrived in Hogsmeade, all three of them had taken off their cloaks and thrown them over their shoulders. The food Sirius had told them to bring was in Harry’s bag; they had sneaked a dozen chicken legs, a loaf of bread, and a flask of pumpkin juice from the lunch table.

They went into Gladrags Wizardwear to buy a present for Dobby, where they had fun selecting the most lurid socks they could find, including a pair patterned with flashing gold and silver stars, and another that screamed loudly when they became too smelly. Then, at

half past one, they made their way up the High Street, past Dervish and Banges, and out toward the edge of the village.

Harry had never been in this direction before. The winding lane was leading them out into the wild countryside around Hogsmeade. The cottages were fewer here, and their gardens larger; they were walking toward the foot of the mountain in whose shadow Hogsmeade lay. Then they turned a corner and saw a stile at the end of the lane. Waiting for them, its front paws on the topmost bar, was a very large, shaggy black dog, which was carrying some newspapers in its mouth and looking very familiar. …"Hello, Sirius," said Harry when they had reached him.

The black dog sniffed Harry's bag eagerly, wagged its tail once, then turned and began to trot away from them across the scrubby patch of ground that rose to meet the rocky foot of the mountain. Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed over the stile and followed.

Sirius led them to the very foot of the mountain, where the ground was covered with boulders and rocks. It was easy for him, with his four paws, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione were soon out of breath. They followed Sirius higher, up onto the mountain itself. For nearly half an hour they climbed a steep, winding, and stony path, following Sirius's wagging tail, sweating in the sun, the shoul-der straps of Harry's bag cutting into his shoulders.

Then, at last, Sirius slipped out of sight, and when they reached the place where he had vanished, they saw a narrow fissure in the rock. They squeezed into it and found themselves in a cool, dimly lit cave. Tethered at the end of it, one end of his rope around a large rock, was Buckbeak the hippogriff. Half gray horse, half giant ea-gle, Buckbeak's fierce orange eye flashed at the sight of them. All three of them bowed low to him, and after regarding them imperi-ously for a moment, Buckbeak bent his scaly front knees and al-lowed Hermione to rush forward and stroke his feathery neck. Harry, however, was looking at the black dog, which had just turned into his godfather.

Sirius was wearing ragged gray robes; the same ones he had been wearing when he had left Azkaban. His black hair was longer than it had been when he had appeared in the fire, and it was untidy and matted once more. He looked very thin.

"Chicken!" he said hoarsely after removing the old Daily Prophets from his mouth and throwing them down onto the cave floor.

Harry pulled open his bag and handed over the bundle of chicken legs and bread.

"Thanks," said Sirius, opening it, grabbing a drumstick, sitting down on the cave floor, and tearing off a large chunk with his teeth. "I've been living off rats mostly. Can't steal too much food from Hogsmeade; I'd draw attention to myself."

He grinned up at Harry, but Harry returned the grin only reluctantly.

"What're you doing here, Sirius?" he said.

"Fulfilling my duty as godfather," said Sirius, gnawing on the chicken bone in a very doglike way. "Don't worry about it, I'm pre-tending to be a lovable stray."

He was still grinning, but seeing the anxiety in Harry's face, said more seriously, "I want to be on the spot. Your last letter … well, let's just say things are getting fishier. I've been stealing the paper every time someone throws one out, and by the looks of things, I'm not the only one who's getting worried."

He nodded at the yellowing Daily Prophets on the cave floor, and Ron picked them up and unfolded them. Harry, however, contin-ued to stare at Sirius.

"What if they catch you? What if you're seen?"

“You three and Dumbledore are the only ones around here who know I’m an Animagus,” said Sirius, shrugging, and continuing to devour the chicken leg.

Ron nudged Harry and passed him the Daily Prophets. There were two: The first bore the headline Mystery Illness of Bartemius Crouch, the second, Ministry Witch Still Missing — Minister of Magic Now Personally Involved.

Harry scanned the story about Crouch. Phrases jumped out at him: hasn’t been seen in public since November … house appears deserted … St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries decline comment … Ministry refuses to confirm rumors of critical illness. …“They’re making it sound like he’s dying,” said Harry slowly. “But he can’t be that ill if he managed to get up here. …”

“My brother’s Crouch’s personal assistant,” Ron informed Sirius. “He says Crouch is suffering from overwork.”

“Mind you, he did look ill, last time I saw him up close,” said Harry slowly, still reading the story. “The night my name came out of the goblet. …”

“Getting his comeuppance for sacking Winky, isn’t he?” said Hermione, an edge to her voice. She was stroking Buckbeak, who was crunching up Sirius’s chicken bones. “I bet he wishes he hadn’t done it now — bet he feels the difference now she’s not there to look after him.”

“Hermione’s obsessed with house-elfs,” Ron muttered to Sirius, casting Hermione a dark look. Sirius, however, looked interested.

“Crouch sacked his house-elf?”

“Yeah, at the Quidditch World Cup,” said Harry, and he launched into the story of the Dark Mark’s appearance, and Winky being found with Harry’s wand clutched in her hand, and Mr. Crouch’s fury. When

Harry had finished, Sirius was on his feet again and had started pacing up and down the cave.

“Let me get this straight,” he said after a while, brandishing a fresh chicken leg. “You first saw the elf in the Top Box. She was sav-ing Crouch a seat, right?”

“Right,” said Harry, Ron, and Hermione together.

“But Crouch didn’t turn up for the match?”

“No,” said Harry. “I think he said he’d been too busy.”

Sirius paced all around the cave in silence. Then he said, “Harry, did you check your pockets for your wand after you’d left the Top Box?”

“Erm …” Harry thought hard. “No,” he said finally. “I didn’t need to use it before we got in the forest. And then I put my hand in my pocket, and all that was in there were my Omnioculars.” He stared at Sirius. “Are you saying whoever conjured the Mark stole my wand in the Top Box?”

“It’s possible,” said Sirius.

“Winky didn’t steal that wand!” Hermione insisted.

“The elf wasn’t the only one in that box,” said Sirius, his brow furrowed as he continued to pace. “Who else was sitting behind you?”

“Loads of people,” said Harry. “Some Bulgarian ministers … Cornelius Fudge … the Malfoys …”

“The Malfoys!” said Ron suddenly, so loudly that his voice echoed all around the cave, and Buckbeak tossed his head ner-vously. “I bet it was Lucius Malfoy!”

“Anyone else?” said Sirius.

“No one,” said Harry.

“Yes, there was, there was Ludo Bagman,” Hermione reminded him.

“Oh yeah …”

“I don’t know anything about Bagman except that he used to be Beater for the Wimbourne Wasps,” said Sirius, still pacing. “What’s he like?”

“He’s okay,” said Harry. “He keeps offering to help me with the Triwizard Tournament.”

“Does he, now?” said Sirius, frowning more deeply. “I wonder why he’d do that?”

“Says he’s taken a liking to me,” said Harry.

“Hmm,” said Sirius, looking thoughtful.

“We saw him in the forest just before the Dark Mark appeared,” Hermione told Sirius. “Remember?” she said to Harry and Ron.

“Yeah, but he didn’t stay in the forest, did he?” said Ron. “The moment we told him about the riot, he went off to the campsite.”

“How d’you know?” Hermione shot back. “How d’you know where he Disapparated to?”

“Come off it,” said Ron incredulously. “Are you saying you reckon Ludo Bagman conjured the Dark Mark?”

“It’s more likely he did it than Winky,” said Hermione stubbornly.

“Told you,” said Ron, looking meaningfully at Sirius, “told you she’s obsessed with house —”

But Sirius held up a hand to silence Ron.

“When the Dark Mark had been conjured, and the elf had been discovered holding Harry’s wand, what did Crouch do?”

“Went to look in the bushes,” said Harry, “but there wasn’t any-one else there.”

“Of course,” Sirius muttered, pacing up and down, “of course, he’d want to pin it on anyone but his own elf … and then he sacked her?”

“Yes,” said Hermione in a heated voice, “he sacked her, just be-cause she hadn’t stayed in her tent and let herself get trampled —”

“Hermione, will you give it a rest with the elf!” said Ron.

Sirius shook his head and said, “She’s got the measure of Crouch better than you have, Ron. If you want to know what a man’s like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals.”

He ran a hand over his unshaven face, evidently thinking hard.

“All these absences of Barty Crouch’s … he goes to the trouble of making sure his house-elf saves him a seat at the Quidditch World Cup, but doesn’t bother to turn up and watch. He works very hard to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament, and then stops coming to that too. … It’s not like Crouch. If he’s ever taken a day off work because of illness before this, I’ll eat Buckbeak.”

“D’you know Crouch, then?” said Harry.

Sirius’s face darkened. He suddenly looked as menacing as he had the night when Harry first met him, the night when Harry still believed Sirius to be a murderer.

“Oh I know Crouch all right,” he said quietly. “He was the one who gave the order for me to be sent to Azkaban — without a trial.”

“What?” said Ron and Hermione together.

“You’re kidding!” said Harry.

“No, I’m not,” said Sirius, taking another great bite of chicken. “Crouch used to be Head of the Department of Magical Law En-forcement, didn’t you know?”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione shook their heads.

“He was tipped for the next Minister of Magic,” said Sirius. “He’s a great wizard, Barty Crouch, powerfully magical — and power-hungry. Oh never a Voldemort supporter,” he said, reading the look on Harry’s face. “No, Barty Crouch was always very out-spoken against the Dark Side. But then a lot of people who were against the Dark Side … well, you wouldn’t understand … you’re too young. …”

“That’s what my dad said at the World Cup,” said Ron, with a trace of irritation in his voice. “Try us, why don’t you?”

A grin flashed across Sirius’s thin face.

“All right, I’ll try you. …” He walked once up the cave, back again, and then said, “Imagine that Voldemort’s powerful now. You don’t know who his supporters are, you don’t know who’s working for him and who isn’t; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able to stop themselves. You’re scared for yourself, and your family, and your friends. Every week, news comes of more deaths, more disappearances, more tortur-ing … the Ministry of Magic’s in disarray, they don’t know what to do, they’re trying to keep everything hidden from the Muggles, but meanwhile, Muggles are dying too. Terror everywhere … panic … confusion … that’s how it used to be.

“Well, times like that bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. Crouch’s principles might’ve been good in the be-ginning — I wouldn’t know. He rose quickly through the Ministry, and he started ordering very harsh measures against Voldemort’s supporters. The Aurors were given new powers — powers to kill rather than capture,

for instance. And I wasn't the only one who was handed straight to the dementors without trial. Crouch fought violence with violence, and authorized the use of the Unforgivable Curses against suspects. I would say he became as ruthless and cruel as many on the Dark Side. He had his supporters, mind you — plenty of people thought he was going about things the right way, and there were a lot of witches and wizards clamoring for him to take over as Minister of Magic. When Voldemort disappeared, it looked like only a matter of time until Crouch got the top job. But then something rather unfortunate happened. …" Sirius smiled grimly. "Crouch's own son was caught with a group of Death Eaters who'd managed to talk their way out of Azkaban. Appar-ently they were trying to find Voldemort and return him to power."

"Crouch's son was caught?" gasped Hermione.

"Yep," said Sirius, throwing his chicken bone to Buckbeak, flinging himself back down on the ground beside the loaf of bread, and tearing it in half. "Nasty little shock for old Barty, I'd imagine. Should have spent a bit more time at home with his family, shouldn't he? Ought to have left the office early once in a while … gotten to know his own son."

He began to wolf down large pieces of bread.

"Was his son a Death Eater?" said Harry.

"No idea," said Sirius, still stuffing down bread. "I was in Azka-ban myself when he was brought in. This is mostly stuff I've found out since I got out. The boy was definitely caught in the company of people I'd bet my life were Death Eaters — but he might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, just like the house-elf."

"Did Crouch try and get his son off?" Hermione whispered.

Sirius let out a laugh that was much more like a bark.

"Crouch let his son off? I thought you had the measure of him, Hermione! Anything that threatened to tarnish his reputation had to go; he had dedicated his whole life to becoming Minister of Magic. You saw him dismiss a devoted house-elf because she asso-ciated him with the Dark Mark again — doesn't that tell you what he's like? Crouch's fatherly affection stretched just far enough to give his son a trial, and by all accounts, it wasn't much more than an excuse for Crouch to show how much he hated the boy … then he sent him straight to Azkaban."

"He gave his own son to the dementors?" asked Harry quietly.

"That's right," said Sirius, and he didn't look remotely amused now. "I saw the dementors bringing him in, watched them through the bars in my cell door. He can't have been more than nineteen. They took him into a cell near mine. He was screaming for his mother by nightfall. He went quiet after a few days, though … they all went quiet in the end … except when they shrieked in their sleep. …"

For a moment, the deadened look in Sirius's eyes became more pronounced than ever, as though shutters had closed behind them.

"So he's still in Azkaban?" Harry said.

"No," said Sirius dully. "No, he's not in there anymore. He died about a year after they brought him in."

"He died?"

"He wasn't the only one," said Sirius bitterly. "Most go mad in there, and plenty stop eating in the end. They lose the will to live. You could always tell when a death was coming, because the de-mentors could sense it, they got excited. That boy looked pretty sickly when he arrived. Crouch being an important Ministry mem-ber, he and his wife were allowed a deathbed visit. That was the last time I saw Barty Crouch, half carrying his wife past my cell. She died herself, apparently, shortly afterward. Grief. Wasted away just like the boy.

Crouch never came for his son's body. The dementors buried him outside the fortress; I watched them do it."

Sirius threw aside the bread he had just lifted to his mouth and instead picked up the flask of pumpkin juice and drained it.

"So old Crouch lost it all, just when he thought he had it made," he continued, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "One moment, a hero, poised to become Minister of Magic … next, his son dead, his wife dead, the family name dishonored, and, so I've heard since I escaped, a big drop in popularity. Once the boy had died, people started feeling a bit more sympathetic toward the son and started asking how a nice young lad from a good family had gone so badly astray. The conclusion was that his father never cared much for him. So Cornelius Fudge got the top job, and Crouch was shunted sideways into the Department of International Magi-cal Cooperation."

There was a long silence. Harry was thinking of the way Crouch's eyes had bulged as he'd looked down at his disobedient house-elf back in the wood at the Quidditch World Cup. This, then, must have been why Crouch had overreacted to Winky being found beneath the Dark Mark. It had brought back memories of his son, and the old scandal, and his fall from grace at the Ministry.

"Moody says Crouch is obsessed with catching Dark wizards," Harry told Sirius.

"Yeah, I've heard it's become a bit of a mania with him," said Sir-ius, nodding. "If you ask me, he still thinks he can bring back the old popularity by catching one more Death Eater."

"And he sneaked up here to search Snape's office!" said Ron tri-umphantly, looking at Hermione.

"Yes, and that doesn't make sense at all," said Sirius.

"Yeah, it does!" said Ron excitedly, but Sirius shook his head.

"Listen, if Crouch wants to investigate Snape, why hasn't he been coming to judge the tournament? It would be an ideal excuse to make regular visits to Hogwarts and keep an eye on him."

"So you think Snape could be up to something, then?" asked Harry, but Hermione broke in.

"Look, I don't care what you say, Dumbledore trusts Snape —"

"Oh give it a rest, Hermione," said Ron impatiently. "I know Dumbledore's brilliant and everything, but that doesn't mean a re-ally clever Dark wizard couldn't fool him —"

"Why did Snape save Harry's life in the first year, then? Why didn't he just let him die?"

"I dunno — maybe he thought Dumbledore would kick him out —"

"What d'you think, Sirius?" Harry said loudly, and Ron and Hermione stopped bickering to listen.

"I think they've both got a point," said Sirius, looking thought-fully at Ron and Hermione. "Ever since I found out Snape was teach-ing here, I've wondered why Dumbledore hired him. Snape's always been fascinated by the Dark Arts, he was famous for it at school. Slimy, oily, greasy-haired kid, he was," Sirius added, and Harry and Ron grinned at each other. "Snape knew more curses when he arrived at school than half the kids in seventh year, and he was part of a gang of Slytherins who nearly all turned out to be Death Eaters."

Sirius held up his fingers and began ticking off names.

"Rosier and Wilkes — they were both killed by Aurors the year before Voldemort fell. The Lestranges — they're a married couple — they're in Azkaban. Avery — from what I've heard he wormed his way out of trouble by saying he'd been acting under the Imperius Curse — he's still at large. But as far as I know, Snape was never even accused of

being a Death Eater — not that that means much. Plenty of them were never caught. And Snape's certainly clever and cunning enough to keep himself out of trouble."

"Snape knows Karkaroff pretty well, but he wants to keep that quiet," said Ron.

"Yeah, you should've seen Snape's face when Karkaroff turned up in Potions yesterday!" said Harry quickly. "Karkaroff wanted to talk to Snape, he says Snape's been avoiding him. Karkaroff looked really worried. He showed Snape something on his arm, but I couldn't see what it was."

"He showed Snape something on his arm?" said Sirius, looking frankly bewildered. He ran his fingers distractedly through his filthy hair, then shrugged again. "Well, I've no idea what that's about … but if Karkaroff's genuinely worried, and he's going to Snape for answers …"

Sirius stared at the cave wall, then made a grimace of frustration.

"There's still the fact that Dumbledore trusts Snape, and I know Dumbledore trusts where a lot of other people wouldn't, but I just can't see him letting Snape teach at Hogwarts if he'd ever worked for Voldemort."

"Why are Moody and Crouch so keen to get into Snape's office then?" said Ron stubbornly.

"Well," said Sirius slowly, "I wouldn't put it past Mad-Eye to have searched every single teacher's office when he got to Hog-warts. He takes his Defense Against the Dark Arts seriously, Moody. I'm not sure he trusts anyone at all, and after the things he's seen, it's not surprising. I'll say this for Moody, though, he never killed if he could help it. Always brought people in alive where pos-sible. He was tough, but he never descended to the level of the Death Eaters. Crouch, though … he's a different matter … is he really ill? If he is,

why did he make the effort to drag himself up to Snape's office? And if he's not … what's he up to? What was he doing at the World Cup that was so important he didn't turn up in the Top Box? What's he been doing while he should have been judging the tournament?"

Sirius lapsed into silence, still staring at the cave wall. Buckbeak was ferreting around on the rocky floor, looking for bones he might have overlooked. Finally, Sirius looked up at Ron.

"You say your brother's Crouch's personal assistant? Any chance you could ask him if he's seen Crouch lately?"

"I can try," said Ron doubtfully. "Better not make it sound like I reckon Crouch is up to anything dodgy, though. Percy loves Crouch."

"And you might try and find out whether they've got any leads on Bertha Jorkins while you're at it," said Sirius, gesturing to the second copy of the Daily Prophet.

"Bagman told me they hadn't," said Harry.

"Yes, he's quoted in the article in there," said Sirius, nodding at the paper. "Blustering on about how bad Bertha's memory is. Well, maybe she's changed since I knew her, but the Bertha I knew wasn't forgetful at all — quite the reverse. She was a bit dim, but she had an excellent memory for gossip. It used to get her into a lot of trou-ble; she never knew when to keep her mouth shut. I can see her being a bit of a liability at the Ministry of Magic … maybe that's why Bagman didn't bother to look for her for so long. …"

Sirius heaved an enormous sigh and rubbed his shadowed eyes.

"What's the time?"

Harry checked his watch, then remembered it hadn't been work-ing since it had spent over an hour in the lake.

"It's half past three," said Hermione.

"You'd better get back to school," Sirius said, getting to his feet. "Now listen …" He looked particularly hard at Harry. "I don't want you lot sneaking out of school to see me, all right? Just send notes to me here. I still want to hear about anything odd. But you're not to go leaving Hogwarts without permission; it would be an ideal opportunity for someone to attack you."

"No one's tried to attack me so far, except a dragon and a couple of grindylows," Harry said, but Sirius scowled at him.

"I don't care … I'll breathe freely again when this tournament's over, and that's not until June. And don't forget, if you're talking about me among yourselves, call me Snuffles, okay?"

He handed Harry the empty napkin and flask and went to pat Buckbeak good-bye. "I'll walk to the edge of the village with you," said Sirius, "see if I can scrounge another paper."

He transformed into the great black dog before they left the cave, and they walked back down the mountainside with him, across the boulder-strewn ground, and back to the stile. Here he allowed each of them to pat him on the head, before turning and setting off at a run around the outskirts of the village. Harry, Ron, and Hermione made their way back into Hogsmeade and up to-ward Hogwarts.

"Wonder if Percy knows all that stuff about Crouch?" Ron said as they walked up the drive to the castle. "But maybe he doesn't care … it'd probably just make him admire Crouch even more. Yeah, Percy loves rules. He'd just say Crouch was refusing to break them for his own son."

"Percy would never throw any of his family to the dementors," said Hermione severely.

“I don’t know,” said Ron. “If he thought we were standing in the way of his career … Percy’s really ambitious, you know. …”

They walked up the stone steps into the entrance hall, where the delicious smells of dinner wafted toward them from the Great Hall.

“Poor old Snuffles,” said Ron, breathing deeply. “He must really like you, Harry. … Imagine having to live off rats.”

Chapter 28 The Madness of Mr. Crouch

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery after breakfast on Sunday to send a letter to Percy, asking, as Sirius had suggested, whether he had seen Mr. Crouch lately. They used Hedwig, because it had been so long since she'd had a job. When they had watched her fly out of sight through the Owlery window, they proceeded down to the kitchen to give Dobby his new socks.

The house-elves gave them a very cheery welcome, bowing and curtsying and bustling around making tea again. Dobby was ecsta-tic about his present.

"Harry Potter is too good to Dobby!" he squeaked, wiping large tears out of his enormous eyes.

"You saved my life with that gillyweed, Dobby, you really did," said Harry.

"No chance of more of those eclairs, is there?" said Ron, who was looking around at the beaming and bowing house-elves.

"You've just had breakfast!" said Hermione irritably, but a great silver platter of eclairs was already zooming toward them, sup-ported by four elves.

"We should get some stuff to send up to Snuffles," Harry muttered.

"Good idea," said Ron. "Give Pig something to do. You couldn't give us a bit of extra food, could you?" he said to the surrounding elves, and they bowed delightedly and hurried off to get some more.

"Dobby, where's Winky?" said Hermione, who was looking around.

"Winky is over there by the fire, miss," said Dobby quietly, his ears drooping slightly.

“Oh dear,” said Hermione as she spotted Winky.

Harry looked over at the fireplace too. Winky was sitting on the same stool as last time, but she had allowed herself to become so filthy that she was not immediately distinguishable from the smoke-blackened brick behind her. Her clothes were ragged and unwashed. She was clutching a bottle of butterbeer and swaying slightly on her stool, staring into the fire. As they watched her, she gave an enormous hiccup.

“Winky is getting through six bottles a day now,” Dobby whis-pered to Harry.

“Well, it’s not strong, that stuff,” Harry said.

But Dobby shook his head. “ ’Tis strong for a house-elf, sir,” he said.

Winky hiccuped again. The elves who had brought the eclairs gave her disapproving looks as they returned to work.

“Winky is pining, Harry Potter,” Dobby whispered sadly. “Winky wants to go home. Winky still thinks Mr. Crouch is her master, sir, and nothing Dobby says will persuade her that Profes-sor Dumbledore is her master now.”

“Hey, Winky,” said Harry, struck by a sudden inspiration, walk-ing over to her, and bending down, “you don’t know what Mr. Crouch might be up to, do you? Because he’s stopped turning up to judge the Triwizard Tournament.”

Winky’s eyes flickered. Her enormous pupils focused on Harry. She swayed slightly again and then said, “M — Master is stopped — hic — coming?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “we haven’t seen him since the first task. The Daily Prophet’s saying he’s ill.”

Winky swayed some more, staring blurrily at Harry.

“Master — hic — ill?”

Her bottom lip began to tremble.

“But we’re not sure if that’s true,” said Hermione quickly.

“Master is needing his — hic — Winky!” whimpered the elf. “Master cannot — hic — manage — hic — all by himself. …”

“Other people manage to do their own housework, you know, Winky,” Hermione said severely.

“Winky — hic — is not only — hic — doing housework for Mr. Crouch!” Winky squeaked indignantly, swaying worse than ever and slopping butterbeer down her already heavily stained blouse. “Master is — hic — trusting Winky with — hic — the most important — hic — the most secret —”

“What?” said Harry.

But Winky shook her head very hard, spilling more butterbeer down herself.

“Winky keeps — hic — her master’s secrets,” she said muti-nously, swaying very heavily now, frowning up at Harry with her eyes crossed. “You is — hic— nosing, you is.”

“Winky must not talk like that to Harry Potter!” said Dobby an-grily. “Harry Potter is brave and noble and Harry Potter is not nosy!

“He is nosing — hic — into my master’s — hic — private and secret — hic — Winky is a good house-elf — hic — Winky keeps her silence — hic — people trying to — hic — pry and poke — hic —”

Winky’s eyelids drooped and suddenly, without warning, she slid off her stool into the hearth, snoring loudly. The empty bottle of

butterbeer rolled away across the stone-flagged floor. Half a dozen house-elves came hurrying forward, looking disgusted. One of them picked up the bottle; the others covered Winky with a large checked tablecloth and tucked the ends in neatly, hiding her from view.

“We is sorry you had to see that, sirs and miss!” squeaked a nearby elf, shaking his head and looking very ashamed. “We is hop-ing you will not judge us all by Winky, sirs and miss!”

“She’s unhappy!” said Hermione, exasperated. “Why don’t you try and cheer her up instead of covering her up?”

“Begging your pardon, miss,” said the house-elf, bowing deeply again, “but house-elves has no right to be unhappy when there is work to be done and masters to be served.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake!” Hermione cried. “Listen to me, all of you! You’ve got just as much right as wizards to be unhappy! You’ve got the right to wages and holidays and proper clothes, you don’t have to do everything you’re told — look at Dobby!”

“Miss will please keep Dobby out of this,” Dobby mumbled, looking scared. The cheery smiles had vanished from the faces of the house-elves around the kitchen. They were suddenly looking at Hermione as though she were mad and dangerous.

“We has your extra food!” squeaked an elf at Harry’s elbow, and he shoved a large ham, a dozen cakes, and some fruit into Harry’s arms. “Good-bye!”

The house-elves crowded around Harry, Ron, and Hermione and began shunting them out of the kitchen, many little hands pushing in the smalls of their backs.

“Thank you for the socks, Harry Potter!” Dobby called miser-ably from the hearth, where he was standing next to the lumpy tablecloth that was Winky.

“You couldn’t keep your mouth shut, could you, Hermione?” said Ron angrily as the kitchen door slammed shut behind them. “They won’t want us visiting them now! We could’ve tried to get more stuff out of Winky about Crouch!”

“Oh as if you care about that!” scoffed Hermione. “You only like coming down here for the food!”

It was an irritable sort of day after that. Harry got so tired of Ron and Hermione sniping at each other over their homework in the common room that he took Sirius’s food up to the Owlery that evening on his own.

Pigwidgeon was much too small to carry an entire ham up to the mountain by himself, so Harry enlisted the help of two school screech owls as well. When they had set off into the dusk, looking extremely odd carrying the large package between them, Harry leaned on the windowsill, looking out at the grounds, at the dark, rustling treetops of the Forbidden Forest, and the rippling sails of the Durmstrang ship. An eagle owl flew through the coil of smoke rising from Hagrid’s chimney; it soared toward the castle, around the Owlery, and out of sight. Looking down, Harry saw Hagrid digging energetically in front of his cabin. Harry wondered what he was doing; it looked as though he were making a new vegetable patch. As he watched, Madame Maxime emerged from the Beaux-batons carriage and walked over to Hagrid. She appeared to be try-ing to engage him in conversation. Hagrid leaned upon his spade, but did not seem keen to prolong their talk, because Madame Maxime returned to the carriage shortly afterward.

Unwilling to go back to Gryffindor Tower and listen to Ron and Hermione snarling at each other, Harry watched Hagrid digging until the darkness swallowed him and the owls around Harry be-gan to awake, swooshing past him into the night.

By breakfast the next day Ron's and Hermione's bad moods had burnt out, and to Harry's relief, Ron's dark predictions that the house-elves would send substandard food up to the Gryffindor table because Hermione had insulted them proved false; the bacon, eggs, and kippers were quite as good as usual.

When the post owls arrived, Hermione looked up eagerly; she seemed to be expecting something.

"Percy won't've had time to answer yet," said Ron. "We only sent Hedwig yesterday."

"No, it's not that," said Hermione. "I've taken out a subscription to the Daily Prophet. I'm getting sick of finding everything out from the Slytherins."

"Good thinking!" said Harry, also looking up at the owls. "Hey, Hermione, I think you're in luck —"

A gray owl was soaring down toward Hermione.

"It hasn't got a newspaper, though," she said, looking disap-pointed. "It's —"

But to her bewilderment, the gray owl landed in front of her plate, closely followed by four barn owls, a brown owl, and a tawny.

"How many subscriptions did you take out?" said Harry, seizing Hermione's goblet before it was knocked over by the cluster of owls, all of whom were jostling close to her, trying to deliver their own letter first.

"What on earth — ?" Hermione said, taking the letter from the gray owl, opening it, and starting to read. "Oh really!" she sput-tered, going rather red.

"What's up?" said Ron.

“It’s — oh how ridiculous —”

She thrust the letter at Harry, who saw that it was not handwrit-ten, but composed from pasted letters that seemed to have been cut out of the Daily Prophet.

You are a WickEd giRL. HarRy PotTER desErvesBeTteR. GO back wherE you cAMe from mUGgle.

“They’re all like it!” said Hermione desperately, opening one let-ter after another. “ ‘Harry Potter can do much better than the likes of you. …’ ‘You deserve to be boiled in frog spawn. …’ Ouch!”

She had opened the last envelope, and yellowish-green liquid smelling strongly of petrol gushed over her hands, which began to erupt in large yellow boils.

“Undiluted bubotuber pus!” said Ron, picking up the envelope gingerly and sniffing it.

“Ow!” said Hermione, tears starting in her eyes as she tried to rub the pus off her hands with a napkin, but her fingers were now so thickly covered in painful sores that it looked as though she were wearing a pair of thick, knobbly gloves.

“You’d better get up to the hospital wing,” said Harry as the owls around Hermione took flight. “We’ll tell Professor Sprout where you’ve gone. …”

“I warned her!” said Ron as Hermione hurried out of the Great Hall, cradling her hands. “I warned her not to annoy Rita Skeeter! Look at this one …” He read out one of the letters Hermione had left behind: “ ‘I read in Witch Weekly about how you are playing Harry Potter false and that boy has had enough hardship and I will be sending you a curse by next post as soon as I can find a big enough en-velope.’ Blimey, she’d better watch out for herself.”

Hermione didn't turn up for Herbology. As Harry and Ron left the greenhouse for their Care of Magical Creatures class, they saw Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle descending the stone steps of the castle. Pansy Parkinson was whispering and giggling behind them with her gang of Slytherin girls. Catching sight of Harry, Pansy called, "Potter, have you split up with your girlfriend? Why was she so up-set at breakfast?"

Harry ignored her; he didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing how much trouble the Witch Weekly article had caused.

Hagrid, who had told them last lesson that they had finished with unicorns, was waiting for them outside his cabin with a fresh supply of open crates at his feet. Harry's heart sank at the sight of the crates — surely not another skrewt hatching? — but when he got near enough to see inside, he found himself looking at a num-ber of fluffy black creatures with long snouts. Their front paws were curiously flat, like spades, and they were blinking up at the class, looking politely puzzled at all the attention.

"These're nifflers," said Hagrid, when the class had gathered around. "Yeh find 'em down mines mostly. They like sparkly stuff. … There yeh go, look."

One of the nifflers had suddenly leapt up and attempted to bite Pansy Parkinson's watch off her wrist. She shrieked and jumped backward.

"Useful little treasure detectors," said Hagrid happily. "Thought we'd have some fun with 'em today. See over there?" He pointed at the large patch of freshly turned earth Harry had watched him dig-ging from the Owlery window. "I've buried some gold coins. I've got a prize fer whoever picks the niffler that digs up most. Jus' take off all yer valuables, an' choose a niffler, an' get ready ter set 'em loose."

Harry took off his watch, which he was only wearing out of habit, as it didn't work anymore, and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he picked up

a niffler. It put its long snout in Harry's ear and sniffed enthusiastically. It was really quite cuddly.

"Hang on," said Hagrid, looking down into the crate, "there's a spare niffler here … who's missin'? Where's Hermione?"

"She had to go to the hospital wing," said Ron.

"We'll explain later," Harry muttered; Pansy Parkinson was listening.

It was easily the most fun they had ever had in Care of Magical Creatures. The nifflers dived in and out of the patch of earth as though it were water, each scurrying back to the student who had released it and spitting gold into their hands. Ron's was particularly efficient; it had soon filled his lap with coins.

"Can you buy these as pets, Hagrid?" he asked excitedly as his niffler dived back into the soil, splattering his robes.

"Yer mum wouldn' be happy, Ron," said Hagrid, grinning. "They wreck houses, nifflers. I reckon they've nearly got the lot, now," he added, pacing around the patch of earth while the nifflers continued to dive. "I on'y buried a hundred coins. Oh there y'are, Hermione!"

Hermione was walking toward them across the lawn. Her hands were very heavily bandaged and she looked miserable. Pansy Parkinson was watching her beadily.

"Well, let's check how yeh've done!" said Hagrid. "Count yer coins! An' there's no point tryin' ter steal any, Goyle," he added, his beetle-black eyes narrowed. "It's leprechaun gold. Vanishes after a few hours."

Goyle emptied his pockets, looking extremely sulky. It turned out that Ron's niffler had been most successful, so Hagrid gave him an enormous slab of Honeydukes chocolate for a prize. The bell rang across the grounds for lunch; the rest of the class set off back to the

castle, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione stayed behind to help Hagrid put the nifflers back in their boxes. Harry noticed Madame Maxime watching them out of her carriage window.

“What yeh done ter your hands, Hermione?” said Hagrid, look-ing concerned.

Hermione told him about the hate mail she had received that morning, and the envelope full of bubotuber pus.

“Aaah, don’ worry,” said Hagrid gently, looking down at her. “I got some o’ those letters an’ all, after Rita Skeeter wrote abou’ me mum. ‘Yeh’re a monster an’ yeh should be put down.’ ‘Yer mother killed innocent people an’ if you had any decency you’d jump in a lake.’ ”

“No!” said Hermione, looking shocked.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid, heaving the niffler crates over by his cabin wall. “They’re jus’ nutters, Hermione. Don’ open ’em if yeh get any more. Chuck ’em straigh’ in the fire.”

“You missed a really good lesson,” Harry told Hermione as they headed back toward the castle. “They’re good, nifflers, aren’t they, Ron?”

Ron, however, was frowning at the chocolate Hagrid had given him. He looked thoroughly put out about something.

“What’s the matter?” said Harry. “Wrong flavor?”

“No,” said Ron shortly. “Why didn’t you tell me about the gold?”

“What gold?” said Harry.

“The gold I gave you at the Quidditch World Cup,” said Ron. “The leprechaun gold I gave you for my Omniocculars. In the Top Box. Why didn’t you tell me it disappeared?”

Harry had to think for a moment before he realized what Ron was talking about.

“Oh …” he said, the memory coming back to him at last. “I dunno … I never noticed it had gone. I was more worried about my wand, wasn’t I?”

They climbed the steps into the entrance hall and went into the Great Hall for lunch.

“Must be nice,” Ron said abruptly, when they had sat down and started serving themselves roast beef and Yorkshire puddings. “To have so much money you don’t notice if a pocketful of Galleons goes missing.”

“Listen, I had other stuff on my mind that night!” said Harry impatiently. “We all did, remember?”

“I didn’t know leprechaun gold vanishes,” Ron muttered. “I thought I was paying you back. You shouldn’t’ve given me that Chudley Cannon hat for Christmas.”

“Forget it, all right?” said Harry.

Ron speared a roast potato on the end of his fork, glaring at it. Then he said, “I hate being poor.”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Neither of them re-ally knew what to say.

“It’s rubbish,” said Ron, still glaring down at his potato. “I don’t blame Fred and George for trying to make some extra money. Wish I could. Wish I had a niffler.”

“Well, we know what to get you next Christmas,” said Hermi-one brightly. Then, when Ron continued to look gloomy, she said, “Come on, Ron, it could be worse. At least your fingers aren’t full of pus.”

Hermione was having a lot of difficulty managing her knife and fork, her fingers were so stiff and swollen. “I hate that Skeeter woman!” she burst out savagely. “I’ll get her back for this if it’s the last thing I do!”

Hate mail continued to arrive for Hermione over the following week, and although she followed Hagrid’s advice and stopped opening it, several of her ill-wishers sent Howlers, which exploded at the Gryffindor table and shrieked insults at her for the whole Hall to hear. Even those people who didn’t read Witch Weekly knew all about the supposed Harry-Krum-Hermione triangle now. Harry was getting sick of telling people that Hermione wasn’t his girlfriend.

“It’ll die down, though,” he told Hermione, “if we just ignore it. … People got bored with that stuff she wrote about me last time —”

“I want to know how she’s listening into private conversations when she’s supposed to be banned from the grounds!” said Hermione angrily.

Hermione hung back in their next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson to ask Professor Moody something. The rest of the class was very eager to leave; Moody had given them such a rigorous test of hex-deflection that many of them were nursing small injuries. Harry had such a bad case of Twitchy Ears, he had to hold his hands clamped over them as he walked away from the class.

“Well, Rita’s definitely not using an Invisibility Cloak!” Hermione panted five minutes later, catching up with Harry and Ron in the entrance hall and pulling Harry’s hand away from one of his wiggling ears so that he could hear her. “Moody says he didn’t see her anywhere near the judges’ table at the second task, or any-where near the lake!”

“Hermione, is there any point in telling you to drop this?” said Ron.

“No!” said Hermione stubbornly. “I want to know how she heard me talking to Viktor! And how she found out about Hagrid’s mum!”

“Maybe she had you bugged,” said Harry.

“Bugged?” said Ron blankly. “What … put fleas on her or something?”

Harry started explaining about hidden microphones and record-ing equipment. Ron was fascinated, but Hermione interrupted them.

“Aren’t you two ever going to read Hogwarts, A History?”

“What’s the point?” said Ron. “You know it by heart, we can just ask you.”

“All those substitutes for magic Muggles use — electricity, com-puters, and radar, and all those things — they all go haywire around Hogwarts, there’s too much magic in the air. No, Rita’s us-ing magic to eavesdrop, she must be. … If I could just find out what it is … ooh, if it’s illegal, I’ll have her …”

“Haven’t we got enough to worry about?” Ron asked her. “Do we have to start a vendetta against Rita Skeeter as well?”

“I’m not asking you to help!” Hermione snapped. “I’ll do it on my own!”

She marched back up the marble staircase without a backward glance. Harry was quite sure she was going to the library.

“What’s the betting she comes back with a box of I Hate Rita Skeeter badges?” said Ron.

Hermione, however, did not ask Harry and Ron to help her pur-sue vengeance against Rita Skeeter, for which they were both grate-ful, because their workload was mounting ever higher in the days before the Easter holidays. Harry frankly marveled at the fact that Hermione could research magical methods of eavesdropping as well as

everything else they had to do. He was working flat-out just to get through all their homework, though he made a point of sending regular food packages up to the cave in the mountain for Sirius; after last summer, Harry had not forgotten what it felt like to be continually hungry. He enclosed notes to Sirius, telling him that nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and that they were still waiting for an answer from Percy.

Hedwig didn't return until the end of the Easter holidays. Percy's letter was enclosed in a package of Easter eggs that Mrs. Weasley had sent. Both Harry's and Ron's were the size of dragon eggs and full of homemade toffee. Hermione's, however, was smaller than a chicken egg. Her face fell when she saw it.

"Your mum doesn't read Witch Weekly, by any chance, does she, Ron?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah," said Ron, whose mouth was full of toffee. "Gets it for the recipes."

Hermione looked sadly at her tiny egg.

"Don't you want to see what Percy's written?" Harry asked her hastily.

Percy's letter was short and irritated.

As I am constantly telling the Daily Prophet, Mr. Crouch is taking a well-deserved break. He is sending in regular owls with instructions. No, I haven't actually seen him, but I think I can be trusted to know my own superior's handwriting. I have quite enough to do at the moment without trying to quash these ridiculous rumors. Please don't bother me again unless it's something important. Happy Easter.

The start of the summer term would normally have meant that Harry was training hard for the last Quidditch match of the season. This year, however, it was the third and final task in the Triwizard Tournament for which he needed to prepare, but he still didn't know

what he would have to do. Finally, in the last week of May, Professor McGonagall held him back in Transfiguration.

“You are to go down to the Quidditch field tonight at nine o’clock, Potter,” she told him. “Mr. Bagman will be there to tell the champions about the third task.”

So at half past eight that night, Harry left Ron and Hermione in Gryffindor Tower and went downstairs. As he crossed the entrance hall, Cedric came up from the Hufflepuff common room.

“What d’you reckon it’s going to be?” he asked Harry as they went together down the stone steps, out into the cloudy night. “Fleur keeps going on about underground tunnels; she reckons we’ve got to find treasure.”

“That wouldn’t be too bad,” said Harry, thinking that he would simply ask Hagrid for a niftier to do the job for him.

They walked down the dark lawn to the Quidditch stadium, turned through a gap in the stands, and walked out onto the field.

“What’ve they done to it?” Cedric said indignantly, stopping dead.

The Quidditch field was no longer smooth and flat. It looked as though somebody had been building long, low walls all over it that twisted and crisscrossed in every direction.

“They’re hedges!” said Harry, bending to examine the nearest one.

“Hello there!” called a cheery voice.

Ludo Bagman was standing in the middle of the field with Krum and Fleur. Harry and Cedric made their way toward them, climbing over the hedges. Fleur beamed at Harry as he came nearer. Her attitude toward him had changed completely since he had saved her sister from the lake.

“Well, what d’you think?” said Bagman happily as Harry and Cedric climbed over the last hedge. “Growing nicely, aren’t they? Give them a month and Hagrid’ll have them twenty feet high. Don’t worry,” he added, grinning, spotting the less-than-happy expressions on Harry’s and Cedric’s faces, “you’ll have your Quid-ditch field back to normal once the task is over! Now, I imagine you can guess what we’re making here?”

No one spoke for a moment. Then —“Maze,” grunted Krum.

“That’s right!” said Bagman. “A maze. The third task’s really very straightforward. The Triwizard Cup will be placed in the center of the maze. The first champion to touch it will receive full marks.”

“We seemply ’ave to get through the maze?” said Fleur.

“There will be obstacles,” said Bagman happily, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Hagrid is providing a number of creatures … then there will be spells that must be broken … all that sort of thing, you know. Now, the champions who are leading on points will get a head start into the maze.” Bagman grinned at Harry and Cedric. “Then Mr. Krum will enter … then Miss Delacour. But you’ll all be in with a fighting chance, depending how well you get past the obstacles. Should be fun, eh?”

Harry, who knew only too well the kind of creatures that Hagrid was likely to provide for an event like this, thought it was unlikely to be any fun at all. However, he nodded politely like the other champions.

“Very well … if you haven’t got any questions, we’ll go back up to the castle, shall we, it’s a bit chilly. …”

Bagman hurried alongside Harry as they began to wend their way out of the growing maze. Harry had the feeling that Bagman was going to start offering to help him again, but just then, Krum tapped Harry on the shoulder.

“Could I haff a vord?”

“Yeah, all right,” said Harry, slightly surprised.

“Vill you valk vith me?”

“Okay,” said Harry curiously.

Bagman looked slightly perturbed.

“I’ll wait for you, Harry, shall I?”

“No, it’s okay, Mr. Bagman,” said Harry, suppressing a smile, “I think I can find the castle on my own, thanks.”

Harry and Krum left the stadium together, but Krum did not set a course for the Durmstrang ship. Instead, he walked toward the forest.

“What’re we going this way for?” said Harry as they passed Hagrid’s cabin and the illuminated Beauxbatons carriage.

“Don’t vant to be overheard,” said Krum shortly.

When at last they had reached a quiet stretch of ground a short way from the Beauxbatons horses’ paddock, Krum stopped in the shade of the trees and turned to face Harry.

“I vant to know,” he said, glowering, “vot there is between you and Hermy-own-ninny.”

Harry, who from Krum’s secretive manner had expected some-thing much more serious than this, stared up at Krum in amaze-ment.

“Nothing,” he said. But Krum glowered at him, and Harry, somehow struck anew by how tall Krum was, elaborated. “We’re friends. She’s not my girlfriend and she never has been. It’s just that Skeeter woman making things up.”

“Hermy-own-ninny talks about you very often,” said Krum, looking suspiciously at Harry.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “because we’re friends.”

He couldn’t quite believe he was having this conversation with Viktor Krum, the famous International Quidditch player. It was as though the eighteen-year-old Krum thought he, Harry, was an equal — a real rival —“You haff never … you haff not …”

“No,” said Harry very firmly.

Krum looked slightly happier. He stared at Harry for a few sec-onds, then said, “You fly very vell. I vos votching at the first task.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, grinning broadly and suddenly feeling much taller himself. “I saw you at the Quidditch World Cup. The Wronski Feint, you really —”

But something moved behind Krum in the trees, and Harry, who had some experience of the sort of thing that lurked in the for-est, instinctively grabbed Krum’s arm and pulled him around.

“Vot is it?”

Harry shook his head, staring at the place where he’d seen move-ment. He slipped his hand inside his robes, reaching for his wand.

Suddenly a man staggered out from behind a tall oak. For a mo-ment, Harry didn’t recognize him … then he realized it was Mr. Crouch.

He looked as though he had been traveling for days. The knees of his robes were ripped and bloody, his face scratched; he was unshaven and gray with exhaustion. His neat hair and mustache were both in need of a wash and a trim. His strange appearance, however, was nothing to the way he was behaving. Muttering and gesticulating, Mr. Crouch appeared to be talking to someone that he alone could see.

He reminded Harry vividly of an old tramp he had seen once when out shopping with the Dursleys. That man too had been conversing wildly with thin air; Aunt Petunia had seized Dudley's hand and pulled him across the road to avoid him; Uncle Vernon had then treated the family to a long rant about what he would like to do with beggars and vagrants.

"Vosn't he a judge?" said Krum, staring at Mr. Crouch. "Isn't he vith your Ministry?"

Harry nodded, hesitated for a moment, then walked slowly to-ward Mr. Crouch, who did not look at him, but continued to talk to a nearby tree.

"… and when you've done that, Weatherby, send an owl to Dumbledore confirming the number of Durmstrang students who will be attending the tournament, Karkaroff has just sent word there will be twelve. …"

"Mr. Crouch?" said Harry cautiously.

"… and then send another owl to Madame Maxime, because she might want to up the number of students she's bringing, now Karkaroff's made it a round dozen … do that, Weatherby, will you? Will you? Will …"

Mr. Crouch's eyes were bulging. He stood staring at the tree, muttering soundlessly at it. Then he staggered sideways and fell to his knees.

"Mr. Crouch?" Harry said loudly. "Are you all right?"

Crouch's eyes were rolling in his head. Harry looked around at Krum, who had followed him into the trees, and was looking down at Crouch in alarm.

"Vot is wrong with him?"

“No idea,” Harry muttered. “Listen, you’d better go and get someone —”

“Dumbledore!” gasped Mr. Crouch. He reached out and seized a handful of Harry’s robes, dragging him closer, though his eyes were staring over Harry’s head. “I need … see … Dumble-dore. …”

“Okay,” said Harry, “if you get up, Mr. Crouch, we can go up to the —”

“I’ve done … stupid … thing …” Mr. Crouch breathed. He looked utterly mad. His eyes were rolling and bulging, and a trickle of spittle was sliding down his chin. Every word he spoke seemed to cost him a terrible effort. “Must … tell … Dumbledore …”

“Get up, Mr. Crouch,” said Harry loudly and clearly. “Get up, I’ll take you to Dumbledore!”

Mr. Crouch’s eyes rolled forward onto Harry.

“Who … you?” he whispered.

“I’m a student at the school,” said Harry, looking around at Krum for some help, but Krum was hanging back, looking ex-tremely nervous.

“You’re not … his?” whispered Crouch, his mouth sagging.

“No,” said Harry, without the faintest idea what Crouch was talking about.

“Dumbledore’s?”

“That’s right,” said Harry.

Crouch was pulling him closer; Harry tried to loosen Crouch’s grip on his robes, but it was too powerful.

“Warn … Dumbledore …”

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let go of me," said Harry. "Just let go, Mr. Crouch, and I'll get him. …"

"Thank you, Weatherby, and when you have done that, I would like a cup of tea. My wife and son will be arriving shortly, we are at-tending a concert tonight with Mr. and Mrs. Fudge."

Crouch was now talking fluently to a tree again, and seemed completely unaware that Harry was there, which surprised Harry so much he didn't notice that Crouch had released him.

"Yes, my son has recently gained twelve O.W.L.s, most satisfac-tory, yes, thank you, yes, very proud indeed. Now, if you could bring me that memo from the Andorran Minister of Magic, I think I will have time to draft a response. …"

"You stay here with him!" Harry said to Krum. "I'll get Dumb-ledore, I'll be quicker, I know where his office is —"

"He is mad," said Krum doubtfully, staring down at Crouch, who was still gabbling to the tree, apparently convinced it was Percy.

"Just stay with him," said Harry, starting to get up, but his movement seemed to trigger another abrupt change in Mr. Crouch, who seized him hard around the knees and pulled Harry back to the ground.

"Don't … leave … me!" he whispered, his eyes bulging again. "I … escaped … must warn … must tell … see Dumbledore … my fault … all my fault … Bertha … dead … all my fault … my son … my fault … tell Dumbledore … Harry Potter … the Dark Lord … stronger … Harry Potter …"

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let me go, Mr. Crouch!" said Harry. He looked furiously around at Krum. "Help me, will you?"

Looking extremely apprehensive, Krum moved forward and squatted down next to Mr. Crouch.

“Just keep him here,” said Harry, pulling himself free of Mr. Crouch. “I’ll be back with Dumbledore.”

“Hurry, von’t you?” Krum called after him as Harry sprinted away from the forest and up through the dark grounds. They were deserted; Bagman, Cedric, and Fleur had disappeared. Harry tore up the stone steps, through the oak front doors, and off up the marble staircase, toward the second floor.

Five minutes later he was hurtling toward a stone gargoyle standing halfway along an empty corridor.

“Sher — sherbet lemon!” he panted at it.

This was the password to the hidden staircase to Dumbledore’s office — or at least, it had been two years ago. The password had evidently changed, however, for the stone gargoyle did not spring to life and jump aside, but stood frozen, glaring at Harry malevolently.

“Move!” Harry shouted at it. “C’mon!”

But nothing at Hogwarts had ever moved just because he shouted at it; he knew it was no good. He looked up and down the dark corridor. Perhaps Dumbledore was in the staffroom? He started running as fast as he could toward the staircase —“POTTER!”

Harry skidded to a halt and looked around. Snape had just emerged from the hidden staircase behind the stone gargoyle. The wall was sliding shut behind him even as he beckoned Harry back toward him.

“What are you doing here, Potter?”

“I need to see Professor Dumbledore!” said Harry, running back up the corridor and skidding to a standstill in front of Snape in-stead. “It’s Mr. Crouch … he’s just turned up … he’s in the for-est … he’s asking —”

“What is this rubbish?” said Snape, his black eyes glittering. “What are you talking about?”

“Mr. Crouch!” Harry shouted. “From the Ministry! He’s ill or something — he’s in the forest, he wants to see Dumbledore! Just give me the password up to —”

“The headmaster is busy, Potter,” said Snape, his thin mouth curling into an unpleasant smile.

“I’ve got to tell Dumbledore!” Harry yelled.

“Didn’t you hear me, Potter?”

Harry could tell Snape was thoroughly enjoying himself, deny-ing Harry the thing he wanted when he was so panicky.

“Look,” said Harry angrily, “Crouch isn’t right — he’s — he’s out of his mind — he says he wants to warn —”

The stone wall behind Snape slid open. Dumbledore was stand-ing there, wearing long green robes and a mildly curious expression. “Is there a problem?” he said, looking between Harry and Snape.

“Professor!” Harry said, sidestepping Snape before Snape could speak, “Mr. Crouch is here — he’s down in the forest, he wants to speak to you!”

Harry expected Dumbledore to ask questions, but to his relief, Dumbledore did nothing of the sort.

“Lead the way,” he said promptly, and he swept off along the corridor behind Harry, leaving Snape standing next to the gargoyle and looking twice as ugly.

“What did Mr. Crouch say, Harry?” said Dumbledore as they walked swiftly down the marble staircase.

“Said he wants to warn you … said he’s done something terrible … he mentioned his son … and Bertha Jorkins … and — and Voldemort … something about Voldemort getting stronger. …”

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore, and he quickened his pace as they hurried out into the pitch-darkness.

“He’s not acting normally,” Harry said, hurrying along beside Dumbledore. “He doesn’t seem to know where he is. He keeps talking like he thinks Percy Weasley’s there, and then he changes, and says he needs to see you. … I left him with Vik-tor Krum.”

“You did?” said Dumbledore sharply, and he began to take longer strides still, so that Harry was running to keep up. “Do you know if anybody else saw Mr. Crouch?”

“No,” said Harry. “Krum and I were talking, Mr. Bagman had just finished telling us about the third task, we stayed behind, and then we saw Mr. Crouch coming out of the forest —”

“Where are they?” said Dumbledore as the Beauxbatons carriage emerged from the darkness.

“Over here,” said Harry, moving in front of Dumbledore, lead-ing the way through the trees. He couldn’t hear Crouch’s voice any-more, but he knew where he was going; it hadn’t been much past the Beauxbatons carriage … somewhere around here. …“Viktor?” Harry shouted.

No one answered.

“They were here,” Harry said to Dumbledore. “They were defi-nitely somewhere around here. …”

“Lumos,” Dumbledore said, lighting his wand and holding it up.

Its narrow beam traveled from black trunk to black trunk, illu-minating the ground. And then it fell upon a pair of feet.

Harry and Dumbledore hurried forward. Krum was sprawled on the forest floor. He seemed to be unconscious. There was no sign at all of Mr. Crouch. Dumbledore bent over Krum and gently lifted one of his eyelids.

"Stunned," he said softly. His half-moon glasses glittered in the wandlight as he peered around at the surrounding trees.

"Should I go and get someone?" said Harry. "Madam Pomfrey?"

"No," said Dumbledore swiftly. "Stay here."

He raised his wand into the air and pointed it in the direction of Hagrid's cabin. Harry saw something silvery dart out of it and streak away through the trees like a ghostly bird. Then Dumble-dore bent over Krum again, pointed his wand at him, and mut-tered, "Rennervate."

Krum opened his eyes. He looked dazed. When he saw Dumb-ledore, he tried to sit up, but Dumbledore put a hand on his shoul-der and made him lie still.

"He attacked me!" Krum muttered, putting a hand up to his head. "The old madman attacked me! I vos looking around to see vare Potter had gone and he attacked from behind!"

"Lie still for a moment," Dumbledore said.

The sound of thunderous footfalls reached them, and Hagrid came panting into sight with Fang at his heels. He was carrying his crossbow.

"Professor Dumbledore!" he said, his eyes widening. "Harry — what the — ?"

“Hagrid, I need you to fetch Professor Karkaroff,” said Dumble-dore. “His student has been attacked. When you’ve done that, kindly alert Professor Moody —”

“No need, Dumbledore,” said a wheezy growl. “I’m here.”

Moody was limping toward them, leaning on his staff, his wand lit.

“Damn leg,” he said furiously. “Would’ve been here quicker … what’s happened? Snape said something about Crouch —”

“Crouch?” said Hagrid blankly.

“Karkaroff, please, Hagrid!” said Dumbledore sharply.

“Oh yeah … right y’are, Professor …” said Hagrid, and he turned and disappeared into the dark trees, Fang trotting after him.

“I don’t know where Barty Crouch is,” Dumbledore told Moody, “but it is essential that we find him.”

“I’m onto it,” growled Moody, and he pulled out his wand and limped off into the forest.

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke again until they heard the unmistakable sounds of Hagrid and Fang returning. Karkaroff was hurrying along behind them. He was wearing his sleek silver furs, and he looked pale and agitated.

“What is this?” he cried when he saw Krum on the ground and Dumbledore and Harry beside him. “What’s going on?”

“I vos attacked!” said Krum, sitting up now and rubbing his head. “Mr. Crouch or votever his name —”

“Crouch attacked you? Crouch attacked you? The Triwizard judge?”

“Igor,” Dumbledore began, but Karkaroff had drawn himself up, clutching his furs around him, looking livid.

“Treachery!” he bellowed, pointing at Dumbledore. “It is a plot! You and your Ministry of Magic have lured me here under false pretenses, Dumbledore! This is not an equal competition! First you sneak Potter into the tournament, though he is underage! Now one of your Ministry friends attempts to put my champion out of action! I smell double-dealing and corruption in this whole affair, and you, Dumbledore, you, with your talk of closer international wizarding links, of rebuilding old ties, of forgetting old differ-ences — here’s what I think of you!”

Karkaroff spat onto the ground at Dumbledore’s feet. In one swift movement, Hagrid seized the front of Karkaroff’s furs, lifted him into the air, and slammed him against a nearby tree.

“Apologize!” Hagrid snarled as Karkaroff gasped for breath, Hagrid’s massive fist at his throat, his feet dangling in midair.

“Hagrid, no!” Dumbledore shouted, his eyes flashing.

Hagrid removed the hand pinning Karkaroff to the tree, and Karkaroff slid all the way down the trunk and slumped in a huddle at its roots; a few twigs and leaves showered down upon his head.

“Kindly escort Harry back up to the castle, Hagrid,” said Dum-bledore sharply.

Breathing heavily, Hagrid gave Karkaroff a glowering look.

“Maybe I’d better stay here, Headmaster. …”

“You will take Harry back to school, Hagrid,” Dumbledore re-peated firmly. “Take him right up to Gryffindor Tower. And Harry — I want you to stay there. Anything you might want to do — any owls you might want to send — they can wait until morning, do you understand me?”

"Er — yes," said Harry, staring at him. How had Dumbledore known that, at that very moment, he had been thinking about sending Pigwidgeon straight to Sirius, to tell him what had happened?

"I'll leave Fang with yeh, Headmaster," Hagrid said, staring menacingly at Karkaroff, who was still sprawled at the foot of the tree, tangled in furs and tree roots. "Stay, Fang. C'mon, Harry."

They marched in silence past the Beauxbatons carriage and up toward the castle.

"How dare he," Hagrid growled as they strode past the lake. "How dare he accuse Dumbledore. Like Dumbledore'd do anythin' like that. Like Dumbledore wanted you in the tournament in the firs' place. Worried! I dunno when I seen Dumbledore more wor-ried than he's bin lately. An' you!" Hagrid suddenly said angrily to Harry, who looked up at him, taken aback. "What were yeh doin', wanderin' off with ruddy Krum? He's from Durmstrang, Harry! Coulda jinxed yeh right there, couldn' he? Hasn' Moody taught yeh nothin'? 'Magine lettin' him lure yeh off on yer own —"

"Krum's all right!" said Harry as they climbed the steps into the entrance hall. "He wasn't trying to jinx me, he just wanted to talk about Hermione —"

"I'll be havin' a few words with her, an' all," said Hagrid grimly, stomping up the stairs. "The less you lot 'ave ter do with these foreigners, the happier yeh'll be. Yeh can' trust any of 'em."

"You were getting on all right with Madame Maxime," Harry said, annoyed.

"Don' you talk ter me abou' her!" said Hagrid, and he looked quite frightening for a moment. "I've got her number now! Tryin' ter get back in me good books, tryin' ter get me ter tell her what's comin' in the third task. Ha! You can' trust any of 'em!"

Hagrid was in such a bad mood, Harry was quite glad to say good-bye to him in front of the Fat Lady. He clambered through the portrait hole into the common room and hurried straight for the corner where Ron and Hermione were sitting, to tell them what had happened.

Chapter 29 The Dream

“It comes down to this,” said Hermione, rubbing her forehead. “Either Mr. Crouch attacked Viktor, or somebody else at-tacked both of them when Viktor wasn’t looking.”

“It must’ve been Crouch,” said Ron at once. “That’s why he was gone when Harry and Dumbledore got there. He’d done a runner.”

“I don’t think so,” said Harry, shaking his head. “He seemed really weak — I don’t reckon he was up to Disapparating or any-thing.”

“You can’t Disapparate on the Hogwarts grounds, haven’t I told you enough times?” said Hermione.

“Okay … how’s this for a theory,” said Ron excitedly. “Krum attacked Crouch — no, wait for it — and then Stunned himself!”

“And Mr. Crouch evaporated, did he?” said Hermione coldly.

“Oh yeah …”

It was daybreak. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had crept out of their dormitories very early and hurried up to the Owlery together to send a note to Sirius. Now they were standing looking out at the misty grounds. All three of them were puffy-eyed and pale because they had been talking late into the night about Mr. Crouch.

“Just go through it again, Harry,” said Hermione. “What did Mr. Crouch actually say?”

“I’ve told you, he wasn’t making much sense,” said Harry. “He said he wanted to warn Dumbledore about something. He defi-nitely mentioned Bertha Jorkins, and he seemed to think she was dead. He kept saying stuff was his fault. … He mentioned his son.”

“Well, that was his fault,” said Hermione testily.

“He was out of his mind,” said Harry. “Half the time he seemed to think his wife and son were still alive, and he kept talking to Percy about work and giving him instructions.”

“And … remind me what he said about You-Know-Who?” said Ron tentatively.

“I’ve told you,” Harry repeated dully. “He said he’s getting stronger.”

There was a pause. Then Ron said in a falsely confident voice, “But he was out of his mind, like you said, so half of it was proba-bly just raving. …”

“He was sanest when he was trying to talk about Voldemort,” said Harry, and Ron winced at the sound of the name. “He was having real trouble stringing two words together, but that was when he seemed to know where he was, and know what he wanted to do. He just kept saying he had to see Dumbledore.”

Harry turned away from the window and stared up into the rafters. The many perches were half-empty; every now and then, another owl would swoop in through one of the windows, return-ing from its night’s hunting with a mouse in its beak.

“If Snape hadn’t held me up,” Harry said bitterly, “we might’ve got there in time. ‘The headmaster is busy, Potter … what’s this rubbish, Potter?’ Why couldn’t he have just got out of the way?”

“Maybe he didn’t want you to get there!” said Ron quickly. “Maybe — hang on — how fast d’you reckon he could’ve gotten down to the forest? D’you reckon he could’ve beaten you and Dumbledore there?”

“Not unless he can turn himself into a bat or something,” said Harry.

“Wouldn’t put it past him,” Ron muttered.

“We need to see Professor Moody,” said Hermione. “We need to find out whether he found Mr. Crouch.”

“If he had the Marauder’s Map on him, it would’ve been easy,” said Harry.

“Unless Crouch was already outside the grounds,” said Ron, “because it only shows up to the boundaries, doesn’t —”

“Shh!” said Hermione suddenly.

Somebody was climbing the steps up to the Owlery. Harry could hear two voices arguing, coming closer and closer.

“— that’s blackmail, that is, we could get into a lot of trouble for that —”

“— we’ve tried being polite; it’s time to play dirty, like him. He wouldn’t like the Ministry of Magic knowing what he did —”

“I’m telling you, if you put that in writing, it’s blackmail!”

“Yeah, and you won’t be complaining if we get a nice fat payoff, will you?”

The Owlery door banged open. Fred and George came over the threshold, then froze at the sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

“What’re you doing here?” Ron and Fred said at the same time.

“Sending a letter,” said Harry and George in unison.

“What, at this time?” said Hermione and Fred.

Fred grinned.

“Fine — we won’t ask you what you’re doing, if you don’t ask us,” he said.

He was holding a sealed envelope in his hands. Harry glanced at it, but Fred, whether accidentally or on purpose, shifted his hand so that the name on it was covered.

"Well, don't let us hold you up," Fred said, making a mock bow and pointing at the door.

Ron didn't move. "Who're you blackmailing?" he said.

The grin vanished from Fred's face. Harry saw George half glance at Fred, before smiling at Ron.

"Don't be stupid, I was only joking," he said easily.

"Didn't sound like that," said Ron.

Fred and George looked at each other. Then Fred said abruptly, "I've told you before, Ron, keep your nose out if you like it the shape it is. Can't see why you would, but —"

"It's my business if you're blackmailing someone," said Ron. "George's right, you could end up in serious trouble for that."

"Told you, I was joking," said George. He walked over to Fred, pulled the letter out of his hands, and began attaching it to the leg of the nearest barn owl. "You're starting to sound a bit like our dear older brother, you are, Ron. Carry on like this and you'll be made a prefect."

"No, I won't!" said Ron hotly.

George carried the barn owl over to the window and it took off. George turned around and grinned at Ron.

"Well, stop telling people what to do then. See you later."

He and Fred left the Owlery. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another.

“You don’t think they know something about all this, do you?” Hermione whispered. “About Crouch and everything?”

“No,” said Harry. “If it was something that serious, they’d tell someone. They’d tell Dumbledore.”

Ron, however, was looking uncomfortable.

“What’s the matter?” Hermione asked him.

“Well …” said Ron slowly, “I dunno if they would. They’re … they’re obsessed with making money lately, I noticed it when I was hanging around with them — when — you know —”

“We weren’t talking.” Harry finished the sentence for him. “Yeah, but blackmail …”

“It’s this joke shop idea they’ve got,” said Ron. “I thought they were only saying it to annoy Mum, but they really mean it, they want to start one. They’ve only got a year left at Hog-warts, they keep going on about how it’s time to think about their future, and Dad can’t help them, and they need gold to get started.”

Hermione was looking uncomfortable now.

“Yes, but … they wouldn’t do anything against the law to get gold.”

“Wouldn’t they?” said Ron, looking skeptical. “I dunno … they don’t exactly mind breaking rules, do they?”

“Yes, but this is the law,” said Hermione, looking scared. “This isn’t some silly school rule. … They’ll get a lot more than detention for blackmail! Ron … maybe you’d better tell Percy. …”

“Are you mad?” said Ron. “Tell Percy? He’d probably do a Crouch and turn them in.” He stared at the window through which Fred and

Georges owl had departed, then said, “Come on, let’s get some breakfast.”

“D’you think it’s too early to go and see Professor Moody?” Hermione said as they went down the spiral staircase.

“Yes,” said Harry. “He’d probably blast us through the door if we wake him at the crack of dawn; he’ll think we’re trying to attack him while he’s asleep. Let’s give it till break.”

History of Magic had rarely gone so slowly. Harry kept checking Ron’s watch, having finally discarded his own, but Ron’s was mov-ing so slowly he could have sworn it had stopped working too. All three of them were so tired they could happily have put their heads down on the desks and slept; even Hermione wasn’t taking her usual notes, but was sitting with her head on her hand, gazing at Professor Binns with her eyes out of focus.

When the bell finally rang, they hurried out into the corridors toward the Dark Arts classroom and found Professor Moody leav-ing it. He looked as tired as they felt. The eyelid of his normal eye was drooping, giving his face an even more lopsided appearance than usual.

“Professor Moody?” Harry called as they made their way toward him through the crowd.

“Hello, Potter,” growled Moody. His magical eye followed a couple of passing first years, who sped up, looking nervous; it rolled into the back of Moody’s head and watched them around the corner before he spoke again.

“Come in here.”

He stood back to let them into his empty classroom, limped in after them, and closed the door.

“Did you find him?” Harry asked without preamble. “Mr. Crouch?”

“No,” said Moody. He moved over to his desk, sat down, stretched out his wooden leg with a slight groan, and pulled out his hip flask.

“Did you use the map?” Harry said.

“Of course,” said Moody, taking a swig from his flask. “Took a leaf out of your book, Potter. Summoned it from my office into the forest. He wasn’t anywhere on there.”

“So he did Disapparate?” said Ron.

“You can’t Disapparate on the grounds, Ron!” said Hermione. “There are other ways he could have disappeared, aren’t there, Professor?”

Moody’s magical eye quivered as it rested on Hermione. “You’re another one who might think about a career as an Auror,” he told her. “Mind works the right way, Granger.”

Hermione flushed pink with pleasure.

“Well, he wasn’t invisible,” said Harry. “The map shows invisi-ble people. He must’ve left the grounds, then.”

“But under his own steam?” said Hermione eagerly, “or because someone made him?”

“Yeah, someone could’ve — could’ve pulled him onto a broom and flown off with him, couldn’t they?” said Ron quickly, looking hopefully at Moody as if he too wanted to be told he had the mak-ings of an Auror.

“We can’t rule out kidnap,” growled Moody.

“So,” said Ron, “d’you reckon he’s somewhere in Hogsmeade?”

“Could be anywhere,” said Moody, shaking his head. “Only thing we know for sure is that he’s not here.”

He yawned widely, so that his scars stretched, and his lopsided mouth revealed a number of missing teeth. Then he said, “Now, Dumbledore’s told me you three fancy yourselves as investigators, but there’s nothing you can do for Crouch. The Ministry’ll be look-ing for him now, Dumbledore’s notified them. Potter, you just keep your mind on the third task.”

“What?” said Harry. “Oh yeah …”

He hadn’t given the maze a single thought since he’d left it with Krum the previous night.

“Should be right up your street, this one,” said Moody, looking up at Harry and scratching his scarred and stubbly chin. “From what Dumbledore’s said, you’ve managed to get through stuff like this plenty of times. Broke your way through a series of obstacles guarding the Sorcerer’s Stone in your first year, didn’t you?”

“We helped,” Ron said quickly. “Me and Hermione helped.”

Moody grinned.

“Well, help him practice for this one, and I’ll be very surprised if he doesn’t win,” said Moody. “In the meantime … constant vigi-lance, Potter. Constant vigilance.” He took another long draw from his hip flask, and his magical eye swiveled onto the window. The topmost sail of the Durmstrang ship was visible through it.

“You two,” counseled Moody, his normal eye on Ron and Hermione, “you stick close to Potter, all right? I’m keeping an eye on things, but all the same … you can never have too many eyes out.”

* * *

Sirius sent their owl back the very next morning. It fluttered down beside Harry at the same moment that a tawny owl landed in front of Hermione, clutching a copy of the Daily Prophet in its beak. She took the newspaper, scanned the first few pages, said, “Ha! She has-n’t got wind of Crouch!” then joined Ron and Harry in reading what Sirius had to say on the mysterious events of the night before last.

Harry — what do you think you are playing at, walking off into the forest with Viktor Krum? I want you to swear, by return owl, that you are not going to go walking with anyone else at night. There is somebody highly dangerous at Hogwarts. It is clear to me that they wanted to stop Crouch from seeing Dumbledore and you were probably feet away from them in the dark. You could have been killed.

Your name didn’t get into the Goblet of Fire by accident. If someone’s trying to attack you, they’re on their last chance. Stay close to Ron and Hermione, do not leave Gryffindor Tower after hours, and arm yourself for the third task. Practice Stun-ning and Disarming. A few hexes wouldn’t go amiss either. There’s nothing you can do about Crouch. Keep your head down and look after yourself. I’m waiting for your letter giving me your word you won’t stray out-of-bounds again.

Sirius

“Who’s he, to lecture me about being out-of-bounds?” said Harry in mild indignation as he folded up Sirius’s letter and put it inside his robes. “After all the stuff he did at school!”

“He’s worried about you!” said Hermione sharply. “Just like Moody and Hagrid! So listen to them!”

“No one’s tried to attack me all year,” said Harry. “No one’s done anything to me at all —”

“Except put your name in the Goblet of Fire,” said Hermione. “And they must’ve done that for a reason, Harry. Snuffles is right. Maybe

they've been biding their time. Maybe this is the task they're going to get you."

"Look," said Harry impatiently, "let's say Sirius is right, and someone Stunned Krum to kidnap Crouch. Well, they would've been in the trees near us, wouldn't they? But they waited till I was out of the way until they acted, didn't they? So it doesn't look like I'm their target, does it?"

"They couldn't have made it look like an accident if they'd mur-dered you in the forest!" said Hermione. "But if you die during a task —"

"They didn't care about attacking Krum, did they?" said Harry. "Why didn't they just polish me off at the same time? They could've made it look like Krum and I had a duel or something."

"Harry, I don't understand it either," said Hermione desperately. "I just know there are a lot of odd things going on, and I don't like it. … Moody's right — Sirius is right — you've got to get in train-ing for the third task, straight away. And you make sure you write back to Sirius and promise him you're not going to go sneaking off alone again."

The Hogwarts grounds never looked more inviting than when Harry had to stay indoors. For the next few days he spent all of his free time either in the library with Hermione and Ron, looking up hexes, or else in empty classrooms, which they sneaked into to practice. Harry was concentrating on the Stunning Spell, which he had never used before. The trouble was that practicing it involved certain sacrifices on Ron's and Hermione's part.

"Can't we kidnap Mrs. Norris?" Ron suggested on Monday lunchtime as he lay flat on his back in the middle of their Charms classroom, having just been Stunned and reawoken by Harry for the fifth time in a row. "Let's Stun her for a bit. Or you could use Dobby, Harry, I bet he'd do anything to help you. I'm not com-plaining or anything" — he got gingerly to his feet, rubbing his backside — "but I'm aching all over. …"

“Well, you keep missing the cushions, don’t you!” said Hermi-one impatiently, rearranging the pile of cushions they had used for the Banishing Spell, which Flitwick had left in a cabinet. “Just try and fall backward!”

“Once you’re Stunned, you can’t aim too well, Hermione!” said Ron angrily. “Why don’t you take a turn?”

“Well, I think Harry’s got it now, anyway,” said Hermione hastily. “And we don’t have to worry about Disarming, because he’s been able to do that for ages. … I think we ought to start on some of these hexes this evening.”

She looked down the list they had made in the library.

“I like the look of this one,” she said, “this Impediment Curse. Should slow down anything that’s trying to attack you, Harry. We’ll start with that one.”

The bell rang. They hastily shoved the cushions back into Flitwick’s cupboard and slipped out of the classroom.

“See you at dinner!” said Hermione, and she set off for Arith-mancy, while Harry and Ron headed toward North Tower, and Divination. Broad strips of dazzling gold sunlight fell across the corridor from the high windows. The sky outside was so brightly blue it looked as though it had been enameled.

“It’s going to be boiling in Trelawney’s room, she never puts out that fire,” said Ron as they started up the staircase toward the silver ladder and the trapdoor.

He was quite right. The dimly lit room was swelteringly hot. The fumes from the perfumed fire were heavier than ever. Harry’s head swam as he made his way over to one of the curtained win-dows. While Professor Trelawney was looking the other way, disen-tangling her shawl from a lamp, he opened it an inch or so and settled back in

his chintz armchair, so that a soft breeze played across his face. It was extremely comfortable.

"My dears," said Professor Trelawney, sitting down in her winged armchair in front of the class and peering around at them all with her strangely enlarged eyes, "we have almost finished our work on planetary divination. Today, however, will be an excellent opportunity to examine the effects of Mars, for he is placed most interestingly at the present time. If you will all look this way, I will dim the lights. …"

She waved her wand and the lamps went out. The fire was the only source of light now. Professor Trelawney bent down and lifted, from under her chair, a miniature model of the solar system, contained within a glass dome. It was a beautiful thing; each of the moons glimmered in place around the nine planets and the fiery sun, all of them hanging in thin air beneath the glass. Harry watched lazily as Professor Trelawney began to point out the fasci-nating angle Mars was making to Neptune. The heavily perfumed fumes washed over him, and the breeze from the window played across his face. He could hear an insect humming gently some-where behind the curtain. His eyelids began to droop. …He was riding on the back of an eagle owl, soaring through the clear blue sky toward an old, ivy-covered house set high on a hill-side. Lower and lower they flew, the wind blowing pleasantly in Harry's face, until they reached a dark and broken window in the upper story of the house and entered. Now they were flying along a gloomy passageway, to a room at the very end … through the door they went, into a dark room whose windows were boarded up. …Harry had left the owl's back … he was watching, now, as it fluttered across the room, into a chair with its back to him. … There were two dark shapes on the floor beside the chair … both of them were stirring. …One was a huge snake … the other was a man … a short, bald-ing man, a man with watery eyes and a pointed nose … he was wheezing and sobbing on the hearth rug. …"You are in luck, Wormtail," said a cold, high-pitched voice from the depths of the chair in which the owl had landed. "You are very fortunate indeed. Your blunder has not ruined everything. He is dead."

“My Lord!” gasped the man on the floor. “My Lord, I am … I am so pleased … and so sorry. …”

“Nagini,” said the cold voice, “you are out of luck. I will not be feeding Wormtail to you, after all … but never mind, never mind … there is still Harry Potter. …”

The snake hissed. Harry could see its tongue fluttering.

“Now, Wormtail,” said the cold voice, “perhaps one more little reminder why I will not tolerate another blunder from you. …”

“My Lord … no … I beg you …”

The tip of a wand emerged from around the back of the chair. It was pointing at Wormtail.

“Crucio!” said the cold voice.

Wormtail screamed, screamed as though every nerve in his body were on fire, the screaming filled Harry’s ears as the scar on his forehead seared with pain; he was yelling too. … Voldemort would hear him, would know he was there. …“Harry! Harry!”

Harry opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of Professor Trelawney’s room with his hands over his face. His scar was still burning so badly that his eyes were watering. The pain had been real. The whole class was standing around him, and Ron was kneel-ing next to him, looking terrified.

“You all right?” he said.

“Of course he isn’t!” said Professor Trelawney, looking thor-oughly excited. Her great eyes loomed over Harry, gazing at him. “What was it, Potter? A premonition? An apparition? What did you see?”

“Nothing,” Harry lied. He sat up. He could feel himself shaking. He couldn’t stop himself from looking around, into the shadows behind him; Voldemort’s voice had sounded so close. …“You were clutching your scar!” said Professor Trelawney. “You were rolling on the floor, clutching your scar! Come now, Potter, I have experience in these matters!”

Harry looked up at her.

“I need to go to the hospital wing, I think,” he said. “Bad headache.”

“My dear, you were undoubtedly stimulated by the extraordi-nary clairvoyant vibrations of my room!” said Professor Trelawney “If you leave now, you may lose the opportunity to see further than you have ever —”

“I don’t want to see anything except a headache cure,” said Harry.

He stood up. The class backed away. They all looked unnerved.

“See you later,” Harry muttered to Ron, and he picked up his bag and headed for the trapdoor, ignoring Professor Trelawney, who was wearing an expression of great frustration, as though she had just been denied a real treat.

When Harry reached the bottom of her stepladder, however, he did not set off for the hospital wing. He had no intention whatsoever of going there. Sirius had told him what to do if his scar hurt him again, and Harry was going to follow his advice: He was going straight to Dumbledore’s office. He marched down the corridors, thinking about what he had seen in the dream … it had been as vivid as the one that had awoken him on Privet Drive. … He ran over the details in his mind, trying to make sure he could remember them. … He had heard Voldemort accusing Wormtail of making a blunder … but the owl had brought good news, the blunder had been repaired, somebody was dead … so Wormtail was not going to be fed to the snake … he, Harry, was going to be fed to it instead. …Harry had walked right past

the stone gargoyle guarding the en-trance to Dumbledore's office without noticing. He blinked, looked around, realized what he had done, and retraced his steps, stopping in front of it. Then he remembered that he didn't know the password.

"Sherbet lemon?" he tried tentatively.

The gargoyle did not move.

"Okay," said Harry, staring at it, "Pear Drop. Er — Licorice Wand. Fizzing Whizbee. Drooble's Best Blowing Gum. Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans … oh no, he doesn't like them, does he? … oh just open, can't you?" he said angrily. "I really need to see him, it's urgent!"

The gargoyle remained immovable.

Harry kicked it, achieving nothing but an excruciating pain in his big toe.

"Chocolate Frog!" he yelled angrily, standing on one leg. "Sugar Quill! Cockroach Cluster!"

The gargoyle sprang to life and jumped aside. Harry blinked.

"Cockroach Cluster?" he said, amazed. "I was only joking. …"

He hurried through the gap in the walls and stepped onto the foot of a spiral stone staircase, which moved slowly upward as the doors closed behind him, taking him up to a polished oak door with a brass door knocker.

He could hear voices from inside the office. He stepped off the moving staircase and hesitated, listening.

"Dumbledore, I'm afraid I don't see the connection, don't see it at all!" It was the voice of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. "Ludo says

Bertha's perfectly capable of getting herself lost. I agree we would have expected to have found her by now, but all the same, we've no evidence of foul play, Dumbledore, none at all. As for her disappearance being linked with Barty Crouch's!"

"And what do you thinks happened to Barty Crouch, Minister?" said Moody's growling voice.

"I see two possibilities, Alastor," said Fudge. "Either Crouch has finally cracked — more than likely, I'm sure you'll agree, given his personal history — lost his mind, and gone wandering off some-where —"

"He wandered extremely quickly, if that is the case, Cornelius," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Or else — well …" Fudge sounded embarrassed. "Well, I'll reserve judgment until after I've seen the place where he was found, but you say it was just past the Beauxbatons carriage? Dumbledore, you know what that woman is?"

"I consider her to be a very able headmistress — and an excel-lent dancer," said Dumbledore quietly.

"Dumbledore, come!" said Fudge angrily. "Don't you think you might be prejudiced in her favor because of Hagrid? They don't all turn out harmless — if, indeed, you can call Hagrid harmless, with that monster fixation he's got —"

"I no more suspect Madame Maxime than Hagrid," said Dum-bledore, just as calmly. "I think it possible that it is you who are prejudiced, Cornelius."

"Can we wrap up this discussion?" growled Moody.

"Yes, yes, let's go down to the grounds, then," said Fudge impa-tiently.

"No, it's not that," said Moody, "it's just that Potter wants a word with you, Dumbledore. He's just outside the door."

Chapter 30 The Pensieve

The door of the office opened.

“Hello, Potter,” said Moody. “Come in, then.”

Harry walked inside. He had been inside Dumbledore’s office once before; it was a very beautiful, circular room, lined with pic-tures of previous headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts, all of whom were fast asleep, their chests rising and falling gently.

Cornelius Fudge was standing beside Dumbledore’s desk, wear-ing his usual pinstriped cloak and holding his lime-green bowler hat.

“Harry!” said Fudge jovially, moving forward. “How are you?”

“Fine,” Harry lied.

“We were just talking about the night when Mr. Crouch turned up on the grounds,” said Fudge. “It was you who found him, was it not?”

“Yes,” said Harry. Then, feeling it was pointless to pretend that he hadn’t overheard what they had been saying, he added, “I didn’t see Madame Maxime anywhere, though, and she’d have a job hid-ing, wouldn’t she?”

Dumbledore smiled at Harry behind Fudge’s back, his eyes twinkling.

“Yes, well,” said Fudge, looking embarrassed, “we’re about to go for a short walk on the grounds, Harry, if you’ll excuse us … per-haps if you just go back to your class —”

“I wanted to talk to you, Professor,” Harry said quickly, looking at Dumbledore, who gave him a swift, searching look.

“Wait here for me, Harry,” he said. “Our examination of the grounds will not take long.”

They trooped out in silence past him and closed the door. After a minute or so, Harry heard the clunks of Moody’s wooden leg growing fainter in the corridor below. He looked around.

“Hello, Fawkes,” he said.

Fawkes, Professor Dumbledore’s phoenix, was standing on his golden perch beside the door. The size of a swan, with magnificent scarlet-and-gold plumage, he swished his long tail and blinked benignly at Harry.

Harry sat down in a chair in front of Dumbledore’s desk. For several minutes, he sat and watched the old headmasters and head-mistresses snoozing in their frames, thinking about what he had just heard, and running his fingers over his scar. It had stopped hurting now.

He felt much calmer, somehow, now that he was in Dumble-dore’s office, knowing he would shortly be telling him about the dream. Harry looked up at the walls behind the desk. The patched and ragged Sorting Hat was standing on a shelf. A glass case next to it held a magnificent silver sword with large rubies set into the hilt, which Harry recognized as the one he himself had pulled out of the Sorting Hat in his second year. The sword had once belonged to Godric Gryffindor, founder of Harry’s House. He was gazing at it, remembering how it had come to his aid when he had thought all hope was lost, when he noticed a patch of silvery light, dancing and shimmering on the glass case. He looked around for the source of the light and saw a sliver of silver-white shining brightly from within a black cabinet behind him, whose door had not been closed properly. Harry hesitated, glanced at Fawkes, then got up, walked across the office, and pulled open the cabinet door.

A shallow stone basin lay there, with odd carvings around the edge: runes and symbols that Harry did not recognize. The silvery light was coming from the basin's contents, which were like noth-ing Harry had ever seen before. He could not tell whether the sub-stance was liquid or gas. It was a bright, whitish silver, and it was moving ceaselessly; the surface of it became ruffled like water be-neath wind, and then, like clouds, separated and swirled smoothly. It looked like light made liquid — or like wind made solid — Harry couldn't make up his mind.

He wanted to touch it, to find out what it felt like, but nearly four years' experience of the magical world told him that sticking his hand into a bowl full of some unknown substance was a very stupid thing to do. He therefore pulled his wand out of the inside of his robes, cast a nervous look around the office, looked back at the contents of the basin, and prodded them.

The surface of the silvery stuff inside the basin began to swirl very fast.

Harry bent closer, his head right inside the cabinet. The silvery substance had become transparent; it looked like glass. He looked down into it, expecting to see the stone bottom of the basin — and saw instead an enormous room below the surface of the mysterious substance, a room into which he seemed to be looking through a circular window in the ceiling.

The room was dimly lit; he thought it might even be under-ground, for there were no windows, merely torches in brackets such as the ones that illuminated the walls of Hogwarts. Lowering his face so that his nose was a mere inch away from the glassy sub-stance, Harry saw that rows and rows of witches and wizards were seated around every wall on what seemed to be benches rising in levels. An empty chair stood in the very center of the room. There was something about the chair that gave Harry an ominous feeling. Chains encircled the arms of it, as though its occupants were usu-ally tied to it.

Where was this place? It surely wasn't Hogwarts; he had never seen a room like that here in the castle. Moreover, the crowd in the mysterious room at the bottom of the basin was comprised of adults, and Harry knew there were not nearly that many teachers at Hogwarts. They seemed, he thought, to be waiting for something; even though he could only see the tops of their hats, all of their faces seemed to be pointing in one direction, and none of them were talking to one another.

The basin being circular, and the room he was observing square, Harry could not make out what was going on in the corners of it. He leaned even closer, tilting his head, trying to see …The tip of his nose touched the strange substance into which he was staring.

Dumbledore's office gave an almighty lurch — Harry was thrown forward and pitched headfirst into the substance inside the basin — But his head did not hit the stone bottom. He was falling through something icy-cold and black; it was like being sucked into a dark whirlpool —And suddenly, Harry found himself sitting on a bench at the end of the room inside the basin, a bench raised high above the others. He looked up at the high stone ceiling, expecting to see the circu-lar window through which he had just been staring, but there was nothing there but dark, solid stone.

Breathing hard and fast, Harry looked around him. Not one of the witches and wizards in the room (and there were at least two hundred of them) was looking at him. Not one of them seemed to have noticed that a fourteen-year-old boy had just dropped from the ceiling into their midst. Harry turned to the wizard next to him on the bench and uttered a loud cry of surprise that reverberated around the silent room.

He was sitting right next to Albus Dumbledore.

"Professor!" Harry said in a kind of strangled whisper. "I'm sorry — I didn't mean to — I was just looking at that basin in your cabinet — I

— where are we?”

But Dumbledore didn’t move or speak. He ignored Harry com-pletely. Like every other wizard on the benches, he was staring into the far corner of the room, where there was a door.

Harry gazed, nonplussed, at Dumbledore, then around at the silently watchful crowd, then back at Dumbledore. And then it dawned on him. …Once before, Harry had found himself somewhere that nobody could see or hear him. That time, he had fallen through a page in an enchanted diary, right into somebody else’s memory … and unless he was very much mistaken, something of the sort had hap-pened again. …Harry raised his right hand, hesitated, and then waved it ener-getically in front of Dumbledore’s face. Dumbledore did not blink, look around at Harry, or indeed move at all. And that, in Harry’s opinion, settled the matter. Dumbledore wouldn’t ignore him like that. He was inside a memory, and this was not the present-day Dumbledore. Yet it couldn’t be that long ago … the Dumbledore sitting next to him now was silver-haired, just like the present-day Dumbledore. But what was this place? What were all these wizards waiting for?

Harry looked around more carefully. The room, as he had sus-pected when observing it from above, was almost certainly under-ground — more of a dungeon than a room, he thought. There was a bleak and forbidding air about the place; there were no pictures on the walls, no decorations at all; just these serried rows of benches, rising in levels all around the room, all positioned so that they had a clear view of that chair with the chains on its arms.

Before Harry could reach any conclusions about the place in which they were, he heard footsteps. The door in the corner of the dungeon opened and three people entered — or at least one man, flanked by two dementors.

Harry's insides went cold. The dementors — tall, hooded crea-tures whose faces were concealed — were gliding slowly toward the chair in the center of the room, each grasping one of the man's arms with their dead and rotten-looking hands. The man between them looked as though he was about to faint, and Harry couldn't blame him … he knew the dementors could not touch him inside a memory, but he remembered their power only too well. The watching crowd recoiled slightly as the dementors placed the man in the chained chair and glided back out of the room. The door swung shut behind them.

Harry looked down at the man now sitting in the chair and saw that it was Karkaroff.

Unlike Dumbledore, Karkaroff looked much younger; his hair and goatee were black. He was not dressed in sleek furs, but in thin and ragged robes. He was shaking. Even as Harry watched, the chains on the arms of the chair glowed suddenly gold and snaked their way up Karkaroff's arms, binding him there.

"Igor Karkaroff," said a curt voice to Harry's left. Harry looked around and saw Mr. Crouch standing up in the middle of the bench beside him. Crouch's hair was dark, his face was much less lined, he looked fit and alert. "You have been brought from Azka-ban to present evidence to the Ministry of Magic. You have given us to understand that you have important information for us."

Karkaroff straightened himself as best he could, tightly bound to the chair.

"I have, sir," he said, and although his voice was very scared, Harry could still hear the familiar unctuous note in it. "I wish to be of use to the Ministry. I wish to help. I — I know that the Ministry is trying to — to round up the last of the Dark Lord's supporters. I am eager to assist in any way I can. …"

There was a murmur around the benches. Some of the wizards and witches were surveying Karkaroff with interest, others with

pronounced mistrust. Then Harry heard, quite distinctly, from Dumbledore's other side, a familiar, growling voice saying, "Filth."

Harry leaned forward so that he could see past Dumbledore. Mad-Eye Moody was sitting there — except that there was a very noticeable difference in his appearance. He did not have his magi-cal eye, but two normal ones. Both were looking down upon Karkaroff, and both were narrowed in intense dislike.

"Crouch is going to let him out," Moody breathed quietly to Dumbledore. "He's done a deal with him. Took me six months to track him down, and Crouch is going to let him go if he's got enough new names. Let's hear his information, I say, and throw him straight back to the dementors."

Dumbledore made a small noise of dissent through his long, crooked nose.

"Ah, I was forgetting … you don't like the dementors, do you, Albus?" said Moody with a sardonic smile.

"No," said Dumbledore calmly, "I'm afraid I don't. I have long felt the Ministry is wrong to ally itself with such creatures."

"But for filth like this …" Moody said softly.

"You say you have names for us, Karkaroff," said Mr. Crouch. "Let us hear them, please."

"You must understand," said Karkaroff hurriedly, "that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named operated always in the greatest secrecy. … He preferred that we — I mean to say, his supporters — and I re-gret now, very deeply, that I ever counted myself among them —"

"Get on with it," sneered Moody.

"— we never knew the names of every one of our fellows — He alone knew exactly who we all were —"

"Which was a wise move, wasn't it, as it prevented someone like you, Karkaroff, from turning all of them in," muttered Moody.

"Yet you say you have some names for us?" said Mr. Crouch.

"I — I do," said Karkaroff breathlessly. "And these were impor-tant supporters, mark you. People I saw with my own eyes doing his bidding. I give this information as a sign that I fully and totally re-nounce him, and am filled with a remorse so deep I can barely —"

"These names are?" said Mr. Crouch sharply.

Karkaroff drew a deep breath.

"There was Antonin Dolohov," he said. "I — I saw him torture countless Muggles and — and non-supporters of the Dark Lord."

"And helped him do it," murmured Moody.

"We have already apprehended Dolohov," said Crouch. "He was caught shortly after yourself."

"Indeed?" said Karkaroff, his eyes widening. "I — I am de-lighted to hear it!"

But he didn't look it. Harry could tell that this news had come as a real blow to him. One of his names was worthless.

"Any others?" said Crouch coldly.

"Why, yes … there was Rosier," said Karkaroff hurriedly. "Evan Rosier."

"Rosier is dead," said Crouch. "He was caught shortly after you were too. He preferred to fight rather than come quietly and was killed in

the struggle.”

“Took a bit of me with him, though,” whispered Moody to Harry’s right. Harry looked around at him once more, and saw him indicating the large chunk out of his nose to Dumbledore.

“No — no more than Rosier deserved!” said Karkaroff, a real note of panic in his voice now. Harry could see that he was starting to worry that none of his information would be of any use to the Ministry. Karkaroff’s eyes darted toward the door in the corner, be-hind which the dementors undoubtedly still stood, waiting.

“Any more?” said Crouch.

“Yes!” said Karkaroff. “There was Travers — he helped murder the McKinnons! Mulciber — he specialized in the Imperius Curse, forced countless people to do horrific things! Rookwood, who was a spy, and passed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named useful informa-tion from inside the Ministry itself!”

Harry could tell that, this time, Karkaroff had struck gold. The watching crowd was all murmuring together.

“Rookwood?” said Mr. Crouch, nodding to a witch sitting in front of him, who began scribbling upon her piece of parchment. “Augustus Rookwood of the Department of Mysteries?”

“The very same,” said Karkaroff eagerly. “I believe he used a net-work of well-placed wizards, both inside the Ministry and out, to collect information —”

“But Travers and Mulciber we have,” said Mr. Crouch. “Very well, Karkaroff, if that is all, you will be returned to Azkaban while we decide —”

“Not yet!” cried Karkaroff, looking quite desperate. “Wait, I have more!”

Harry could see him sweating in the torchlight, his white skin contrasting strongly with the black of his hair and beard.

"Snape!" he shouted. "Severus Snape!"

"Snape has been cleared by this council," said Crouch disdain-fully. "He has been vouched for by Albus Dumbledore."

"No!" shouted Karkaroff, straining at the chains that bound him to the chair. "I assure you! Severus Snape is a Death Eater!"

Dumbledore had gotten to his feet.

"I have given evidence already on this matter," he said calmly. "Severus Snape was indeed a Death Eater. However, he rejoined our side before Lord Voldemort's downfall and turned spy for us, at great personal risk. He is now no more a Death Eater than I am."

Harry turned to look at Mad-Eye Moody. He was wearing a look of deep skepticism behind Dumbledore's back.

"Very well, Karkaroff," Crouch said coldly, "you have been of as-sistance. I shall review your case. You will return to Azkaban in the meantime. …"

Mr. Crouch's voice faded. Harry looked around; the dungeon was dissolving as though it were made of smoke; everything was fading; he could see only his own body — all else was swirling darkness. … And then, the dungeon returned. Harry was sitting in a different seat, still on the highest bench, but now to the left side of Mr. Crouch. The atmosphere seemed quite different: relaxed, even cheerful. The witches and wizards all around the walls were talking to one another, almost as though they were at some sort of sporting event. Harry noticed a witch halfway up the rows of benches op-posite. She had short blonde hair, was wearing magenta robes, and was sucking the end of an acid-green quill. It was, unmistakably, a younger Rita Skeeter. Harry looked around; Dumbledore was sit-ting beside him

again, wearing different robes. Mr. Crouch looked more tired and somehow fiercer, gaunter. … Harry understood. It was a different memory, a different day … a different trial.

The door in the corner opened, and Ludo Bagman walked into the room.

This was not, however, a Ludo Bagman gone to seed, but a Ludo Bagman who was clearly at the height of his Quidditch-playing fitness. His nose wasn't broken now; he was tall and lean and muscular. Bagman looked nervous as he sat down in the chained chair, but it did not bind him there as it had bound Karkaroff, and Bag-man, perhaps taking heart from this, glanced around at the watch-ing crowd, waved at a couple of them, and managed a small smile.

"Ludo Bagman, you have been brought here in front of the Council of Magical Law to answer charges relating to the activities of the Death Eaters," said Mr. Crouch. "We have heard the evidence against you, and are about to reach our verdict. Do you have any-thing to add to your testimony before we pronounce judgment?"

Harry couldn't believe his ears. Ludo Bagman, a Death Eater?

"Only," said Bagman, smiling awkwardly, "well — I know I've been a bit of an idiot —"

One or two wizards and witches in the surrounding seats smiled indulgently. Mr. Crouch did not appear to share their feelings. He was staring down at Ludo Bagman with an expression of the ut-most severity and dislike.

"You never spoke a truer word, boy," someone muttered dryly to Dumbledore behind Harry. He looked around and saw Moody sitting there again. "If I didn't know he'd always been dim, I'd have said some of those Bludgers had permanently affected his brain. …"

“Ludovic Bagman, you were caught passing information to Lord Voldemort’s supporters,” said Mr. Crouch. “For this, I suggest a term of imprisonment in Azkaban lasting no less than —”

But there was an angry outcry from the surrounding benches. Several of the witches and wizards around the walls stood up, shak-ing their heads, and even their fists, at Mr. Crouch.

“But I’ve told you, I had no idea!” Bagman called earnestly over the crowd’s babble, his round blue eyes widening. “None at all! Old Rookwood was a friend of my dad’s … never crossed my mind he was in with You-Know-Who! I thought I was collecting informa-tion for our side! And Rookwood kept talking about getting me a job in the Ministry later on … once my Quidditch days are over, you know … I mean, I can’t keep getting hit by Bludgers for the rest of my life, can I?”

There were titters from the crowd.

“It will be put to the vote,” said Mr. Crouch coldly. He turned to the right-hand side of the dungeon. “The jury will please raise their hands … those in favor of imprisonment …”

Harry looked toward the right-hand side of the dungeon. Not one person raised their hand. Many of the witches and wizards around the walls began to clap. One of the witches on the jury stood up.

“Yes?” barked Crouch.

“We’d just like to congratulate Mr. Bagman on his splendid per-formance for England in the Quidditch match against Turkey last Saturday,” the witch said breathlessly.

Mr. Crouch looked furious. The dungeon was ringing with ap-plause now. Bagman got to his feet and bowed, beaming.

“Despicable,” Mr. Crouch spat at Dumbledore, sitting down as Bagman walked out of the dungeon. “Rookwood get him a job indeed. … The day Ludo Bagman joins us will be a sad day indeed for the Ministry. …”

And the dungeon dissolved again. When it had returned, Harry looked around. He and Dumbledore were still sitting beside Mr. Crouch, but the atmosphere could not have been more different. There was total silence, broken only by the dry sobs of a frail, wispy-looking witch in the seat next to Mr. Crouch. She was clutching a handkerchief to her mouth with trembling hands. Harry looked up at Crouch and saw that he looked gaunter and grayer than ever before. A nerve was twitching in his temple.

“Bring them in,” he said, and his voice echoed through the silent dungeon.

The door in the corner opened yet again. Six dementors entered this time, flanking a group of four people. Harry saw the people in the crowd turn to look up at Mr. Crouch. A few of them whispered to one another.

The dementors placed each of the four people in the four chairs with chained arms that now stood on the dungeon floor. There was a thickset man who stared blankly up at Crouch; a thinner and more nervous-looking man, whose eyes were darting around the crowd; a woman with thick, shining dark hair and heavily hooded eyes, who was sitting in the chained chair as though it were a throne; and a boy in his late teens, who looked nothing short of petrified. He was shivering, his straw-colored hair all over his face, his freckled skin milk-white. The wispy little witch beside Crouch began to rock backward and forward in her seat, whimpering into her handkerchief.

Crouch stood up. He looked down upon the four in front of him, and there was pure hatred in his face.

“You have been brought here before the Council of Magical Law,” he said clearly, “so that we may pass judgment on you, for a crime so heinous —”

“Father,” said the boy with the straw-colored hair. “Father … please …”

“— that we have rarely heard the like of it within this court,” said Crouch, speaking more loudly, drowning out his son’s voice. “We have heard the evidence against you. The four of you stand accused of capturing an Auror — Frank Longbottom — and subjecting him to the Cruciatus Curse, believing him to have knowledge of the present whereabouts of your exiled master, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named —”

“Father, I didn’t!” shrieked the boy in chains below. “I didn’t, I swear it, Father, don’t send me back to the dementors —”

“You are further accused,” bellowed Mr. Crouch, “of using the Cruciatus Curse on Frank Longbottom’s wife, when he would not give you information. You planned to restore He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to power, and to resume the lives of violence you presumably led while he was strong. I now ask the jury —”

“Mother!” screamed the boy below, and the wispy little witch beside Crouch began to sob, rocking backward and forward. “Mother, stop him, Mother, I didn’t do it, it wasn’t me!”

“I now ask the jury,” shouted Mr. Crouch, “to raise their hands if they believe, as I do, that these crimes deserve a life sentence in Azkaban!”

In unison, the witches and wizards along the right-hand side of the dungeon raised their hands. The crowd around the walls began to clap as it had for Bagman, their faces full of savage triumph. The boy began to scream.

“No! Mother, no! I didn’t do it, I didn’t do it, I didn’t know! Don’t send me there, don’t let him!”

The dementors were gliding back into the room. The boys’ three companions rose quietly from their seats; the woman with the heavy-lidded eyes looked up at Crouch and called, “The Dark Lord will rise again, Crouch! Throw us into Azkaban; we will wait! He will rise again and will come for us, he will reward us beyond any of his other supporters! We alone were faithful! We alone tried to find him!”

But the boy was trying to fight off the dementors, even though Harry could see their cold, draining power starting to affect him. The crowd was jeering, some of them on their feet, as the woman swept out of the dungeon, and the boy continued to struggle.

“I’m your son!” he screamed up at Crouch. “I’m your son!”

“You are no son of mine!” bellowed Mr. Crouch, his eyes bulging suddenly. “I have no son!”

The wispy witch beside him gave a great gasp and slumped in her seat. She had fainted. Crouch appeared not to have noticed.

“Take them away!” Crouch roared at the dementors, spit flying from his mouth. “Take them away, and may they rot there!”

“Father! Father, I wasn’t involved! No! No! Father, please!”

“I think, Harry, it is time to return to my office,” said a quiet voice in Harry’s ear.

Harry started. He looked around. Then he looked on his other side.

There was an Albus Dumbledore sitting on his right, watching Crouch’s son being dragged away by the dementors — and there was an Albus Dumbledore on his left, looking right at him.

“Come,” said the Dumbledore on his left, and he put his hand under Harry’s elbow. Harry felt himself rising into the air; the dun-geon dissolved around him; for a moment, all was blackness, and then he felt as though he had done a slow-motion somersault, sud-denly landing flat on his feet, in what seemed like the dazzling light of Dumbledore’s sunlit office. The stone basin was shimmering in the cabinet in front of him, and Albus Dumbledore was standing beside him.

“Professor,” Harry gasped, “I know I shouldn’t’ve — I didn’t mean — the cabinet door was sort of open and —”

“I quite understand,” said Dumbledore. He lifted the basin, car-ried it over to his desk, placed it upon the polished top, and sat down in the chair behind it. He motioned for Harry to sit down opposite him.

Harry did so, staring at the stone basin. The contents had re-turned to their original, silvery-white state, swirling and rippling beneath his gaze.

“What is it?” Harry asked shakily.

“This? It is called a Pensieve,” said Dumbledore. “I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind.”

“Er,” said Harry, who couldn’t truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

“At these times,” said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, “I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one’s leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you under-stand, when they are in this form.”

“You mean … that stuff’s your thoughts?” Harry said, staring at the swirling white substance in the basin.

“Certainly,” said Dumbledore. “Let me show you.”

Dumbledore drew his wand out of the inside of his robes and placed the tip into his own silvery hair, near his temple. When he took the wand away, hair seemed to be clinging to it — but then Harry saw that it was in fact a glistening strand of the same strange silvery-white substance that filled the Pensieve. Dumbledore added this fresh thought to the basin, and Harry, astonished, saw his own face swimming around the surface of the bowl. Dumbledore placed his long hands on either side of the Pensieve and swirled it, rather as a gold prospector would pan for fragments of gold … and Harry saw his own face change smoothly into Snape’s, who opened his mouth and spoke to the ceiling, his voice echoing slightly.

“It’s coming back … Karkaroff’s too … stronger and clearer than ever …”

“A connection I could have made without assistance,” Dumble-dore sighed, “but never mind.” He peered over the top of his half-moon spectacles at Harry, who was gaping at Snape’s face, which was continuing to swirl around the bowl. “I was using the Pensieve when Mr. Fudge arrived for our meeting and put it away rather hastily. Undoubtedly I did not fasten the cabinet door properly. Naturally, it would have attracted your attention.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry mumbled.

Dumbledore shook his head. “Curiosity is not a sin,” he said. “But we should exercise caution with our curiosity … yes, in-deed …”

Frowning slightly, he prodded the thoughts within the basin with the tip of his wand. Instantly, a figure rose out of it, a plump, scowling girl of about sixteen, who began to revolve slowly, with her feet still in the basin. She took no notice whatsoever of Harry or Professor Dumbledore. When she spoke, her voice echoed as Snape’s had done, as though it were coming from the depths of the stone basin. “He put a hex on me, Professor Dumbledore, and I was only teasing

him, sir. I only said I'd seen him kissing Florence behind the greenhouses last Thursday. …"

"But why, Bertha," said Dumbledore sadly, looking up at the now silently revolving girl, "why did you have to follow him in the first place?"

"Bertha?" Harry whispered, looking up at her. "Is that — was that Bertha Jorkins?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, prodding the thoughts in the basin again; Bertha sank back into them, and they became silvery and opaque once more. "That was Bertha as I remember her at school."

The silvery light from the Pensieve illuminated Dumbledore's face, and it struck Harry suddenly how very old he was looking. He knew, of course, that Dumbledore was getting on in years, but somehow he never really thought of Dumbledore as an old man.

"So, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "Before you got lost in my thoughts, you wanted to tell me something."

"Yes," said Harry. "Professor — I was in Divination just now, and — er — I fell asleep."

He hesitated here, wondering if a reprimand was coming, but Dumbledore merely said, "Quite understandable. Continue."

"Well, I had a dream," said Harry. "A dream about Lord Volde-mort. He was torturing Wormtail … you know who Wormtail —"

"I do know," said Dumbledore promptly. "Please continue."

"Voldemort got a letter from an owl. He said something like, Wormtail's blunder had been repaired. He said someone was dead. Then he said, Wormtail wouldn't be fed to the snake — there was a snake beside his chair. He said — he said he'd be feeding me to it,

instead. Then he did the Cruciatus Curse on Wormtail — and my scar hurt," Harry said. "It woke me up, it hurt so badly."

Dumbledore merely looked at him.

"Er — that's all," said Harry.

"I see," said Dumbledore quietly. "I see. Now, has your scar hurt at any other time this year, excepting the time it woke you up over the summer?"

"No, I — how did you know it woke me up over the summer?" said Harry, astonished.

"You are not Sirius's only correspondent," said Dumbledore. "I have also been in contact with him ever since he left Hogwarts last year. It was I who suggested the mountainside cave as the safest place for him to stay."

Dumbledore got up and began walking up and down behind his desk. Every now and then, he placed his wand tip to his temple, re-moved another shining silver thought, and added it to the Pen-sieve. The thoughts inside began to swirl so fast that Harry couldn't make out anything clearly: It was merely a blur of color.

"Professor?" he said quietly, after a couple of minutes.

Dumbledore stopped pacing and looked at Harry.

"My apologies," he said quietly. He sat back down at his desk.

"D'you — d'you know why my scar's hurting me?"

Dumbledore looked very intently at Harry for a moment, and then said, "I have a theory, no more than that. … It is my belief that your scar hurts both when Lord Voldemort is near you, and when he is feeling a particularly strong surge of hatred."

"But … why?"

"Because you and he are connected by the curse that failed," said Dumbledore. "That is no ordinary scar."

"So you think … that dream … did it really happen?"

"It is possible," said Dumbledore. "I would say — probable. Harry — did you see Voldemort?"

"No," said Harry. "Just the back of his chair. But — there wouldn't have been anything to see, would there? I mean, he hasn't got a body, has he? But … but then how could he have held the wand?" Harry said slowly.

"How indeed?" muttered Dumbledore. "How indeed …"

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke for a while. Dumbledore was gazing across the room, and, every now and then, placing his wand tip to his temple and adding another shining silver thought to the seething mass within the Pensieve.

"Professor," Harry said at last, "do you think he's getting stronger?"

"Voldemort?" said Dumbledore, looking at Harry over the Pen-sieve. It was the characteristic, piercing look Dumbledore had given him on other occasions, and always made Harry feel as though Dumbledore were seeing right through him in a way that even Moody's magical eye could not. "Once again, Harry, I can only give you my suspicions."

Dumbledore sighed again, and he looked older, and wearier, than ever.

"The years of Voldemort's ascent to power," he said, "were marked with disappearances. Bertha Jorkins has vanished without a trace in the place where Voldemort was certainly known to be last. Mr. Crouch too has disappeared … within these very grounds. And there

was a third disappearance, one which the Ministry, I re-gret to say, do not consider of any importance, for it concerns a Muggle. His name was Frank Bryce, he lived in the village where Voldemort's father grew up, and he has not been seen since last August. You see, I read the Muggle newspapers, unlike most of my Ministry friends."

Dumbledore looked very seriously at Harry.

"These disappearances seem to me to be linked. The Ministry disagrees — as you may have heard, while waiting outside my office."

Harry nodded. Silence fell between them again, Dumbledore extracting thoughts every now and then. Harry felt as though he ought to go, but his curiosity held him in his chair.

"Professor?" he said again.

"Yes, Harry?" said Dumbledore.

"Er … could I ask you about … that court thing I was in … in the Pensieve?"

"You could," said Dumbledore heavily. "I attended it many times, but some trials come back to me more clearly than oth-ers … particularly now. …"

"You know — you know the trial you found me in? The one with Crouch's son? Well … were they talking about Neville's parents?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a very sharp look. "Has Neville never told you why he has been brought up by his grandmother?" he said.

Harry shook his head, wondering, as he did so, how he could have failed to ask Neville this, in almost four years of knowing him.

"Yes, they were talking about Neville's parents," said Dumble-dore. "His father, Frank, was an Auror just like Professor Moody. He and his wife were tortured for information about Voldemort's whereabouts after he lost his powers, as you heard."

"So they're dead?" said Harry quietly.

"No," said Dumbledore, his voice full of a bitterness Harry had never heard there before. "They are insane. They are both in St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. I believe Neville visits them, with his grandmother, during the holidays. They do not recognize him."

Harry sat there, horror-struck. He had never known … never, in four years, bothered to find out …"The Longbottoms were very popular," said Dumbledore. "The attacks on them came after Voldemort's fall from power, just when everyone thought they were safe. Those attacks caused a wave of fury such as I have never known. The Ministry was under great pressure to catch those who had done it. Unfortunately, the Longbottoms' evidence was — given their condition — none too reliable."

"Then Mr. Crouch's son might not have been involved?" said Harry slowly.

Dumbledore shook his head.

"As to that, I have no idea."

Harry sat in silence once more, watching the contents of the Pensieve swirl. There were two more questions he was burning to ask … but they concerned the guilt of living people. …"Er," he said, "Mr. Bagman …"

"… has never been accused of any Dark activity since," said Dumbledore calmly.

“Right,” said Harry hastily, staring at the contents of the Pen-sieve again, which were swirling more slowly now that Dumble-dore had stopped adding thoughts. “And … er …”

But the Pensieve seemed to be asking his question for him. Snape’s face was swimming on the surface again. Dumbledore glanced down into it, and then up at Harry.

“No more has Professor Snape,” he said.

Harry looked into Dumbledore’s light blue eyes, and the thing he really wanted to know spilled out of his mouth before he could stop it.

“What made you think he’d really stopped supporting Volde-mort, Professor?”

Dumbledore held Harry’s gaze for a few seconds, and then said, “That, Harry, is a matter between Professor Snape and myself.”

Harry knew that the interview was over; Dumbledore did not look angry, yet there was a finality in his tone that told Harry it was time to go. He stood up, and so did Dumbledore.

“Harry,” he said as Harry reached the door. “Please do not speak about Neville’s parents to anybody else. He has the right to let peo-ple know, when he is ready.”

“Yes, Professor,” said Harry, turning to go.

“And —”

Harry looked back. Dumbledore was standing over the Pensieve, his face lit from beneath by its silvery spots of light, looking older than ever. He stared at Harry for a moment, and then said, “Good luck with the third task.”

Chapter 31 The Third Task

“Dumbledore reckons You-Know-Who’s getting stronger again as well?” Ron whispered.

Everything Harry had seen in the Pensieve, nearly everything Dumbledore had told and shown him afterward, he had now shared with Ron and Hermione — and, of course, with Sirius, to whom Harry had sent an owl the moment he had left Dumble-dore’s office. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat up late in the common room once again that night, talking it all over until Harry’s mind was reeling, until he understood what Dumbledore had meant about a head becoming so full of thoughts that it would have been a relief to siphon them off.

Ron stared into the common room fire. Harry thought he saw Ron shiver slightly, even though the evening was warm.

“And he trusts Snape?” Ron said. “He really trusts Snape, even though he knows he was a Death Eater?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

Hermione had not spoken for ten minutes. She was sitting with her forehead in her hands, staring at her knees. Harry thought she too looked as though she could have done with a Pensieve.

“Rita Skeeter,” she muttered finally.

“How can you be worrying about her now?” said Ron, in utter disbelief.

“I’m not worrying about her,” Hermione said to her knees. “I’m just thinking … remember what she said to me in the Three Broomsticks? ‘I know things about Ludo Bagman that would make your hair curl.’ This is what she meant, isn’t it? She reported his trial, she knew he’d passed information to the Death Eaters. And Winky too, remember …

'Ludo Bagman's a bad wizard.' Mr. Crouch would have been furious he got off, he would have talked about it at home."

"Yeah, but Bagman didn't pass information on purpose, did he?"

Hermione shrugged.

"And Fudge reckons Madame Maxime attacked Crouch?" Ron said, turning back to Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry, "but he's only saying that because Crouch disappeared near the Beauxbatons carriage."

"We never thought of her, did we?" said Ron slowly. "Mind you, she's definitely got giant blood, and she doesn't want to admit it —"

"Of course she doesn't," said Hermione sharply, looking up. "Look what happened to Hagrid when Rita found out about his mother. Look at Fudge, jumping to conclusions about her, just be-cause she's part giant. Who needs that sort of prejudice? I'd proba-bly say I had big bones if I knew that's what I'd get for telling the truth."

Hermione looked at her watch. "We haven't done any practic-ing!" she said, looking shocked. "We were going to do the Impedi-ment Curse! We'll have to really get down to it tomorrow! Come on, Harry, you need to get some sleep."

Harry and Ron went slowly upstairs to their dormitory. As Harry pulled on his pajamas, he looked over at Neville's bed. True to his word to Dumbledore, he had not told Ron and Hermione about Neville's parents. As Harry took off his glasses and climbed into his four-poster, he imagined how it must feel to have parents still living but unable to recognize you. He often got sympathy from strangers for being an orphan, but as he listened to Neville's snores, he thought that Neville deserved it more than he did. Lying in the darkness, Harry felt a rush of anger and hate toward the peo-ple who had tortured Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. … He remem-bered the jeers of the crowd as

Crouch's son and his companions had been dragged from the court by the dementors. … He under-stood how they had felt. … Then he remembered the milk-white face of the screaming boy and realized with a jolt that he had died a year later. …It was Voldemort, Harry thought, staring up at the canopy of his bed in the darkness, it all came back to Voldemort. … He was the one who had torn these families apart, who had ruined all these lives. …Ron and Hermione were supposed to be studying for their exams, which would finish on the day of the third task, but they were putting most of their efforts into helping Harry prepare.

"Don't worry about it," Hermione said shortly when Harry pointed this out to them and said he didn't mind practicing on his own for a while, "at least we'll get top marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts. We'd never have found out about all these hexes in class."

"Good training for when we're all Aurors," said Ron excitedly, attempting the Impediment Curse on a wasp that had buzzed into the room and making it stop dead in midair.

The mood in the castle as they entered June became excited and tense again. Everyone was looking forward to the third task, which would take place a week before the end of term. Harry was practic-ing hexes at every available moment. He felt more confident about this task than either of the others. Difficult and dangerous though it would undoubtedly be, Moody was right: Harry had managed to find his way past monstrous creatures and enchanted barriers be-fore now, and this time he had some notice, some chance to pre-pare himself for what lay ahead.

Tired of walking in on Harry, Hermione, and Ron all over the school, Professor McGonagall had given them permission to use the empty Transfiguration classroom at lunchtimes. Harry had soon mastered the Impediment Curse, a spell to slow down and ob-struct attackers; the Reductor Curse, which would enable him to blast solid objects out of his way; and the Four-Point Spell, a useful discovery of Hermione's

that would make his wand point due north, therefore enabling him to check whether he was going in the right direction within the maze. He was still having trouble with the Shield Charm, though. This was supposed to cast a temporary, invisible wall around himself that deflected minor curses; Hermi-one managed to shatter it with a well-placed Jelly-Legs Jinx, and Harry wobbled around the room for ten minutes afterward before she had looked up the counter-jinx.

“You’re still doing really well, though,” Hermione said encour-agingly, looking down her list and crossing off those spells they had already learned. “Some of these are bound to come in handy.”

“Come and look at this,” said Ron, who was standing by the window. He was staring down onto the grounds. “What’s Malfoy doing?”

Harry and Hermione went to see. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in the shadow of a tree below. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be keeping a lookout; both were smirking. Malfoy was holding his hand up to his mouth and speaking into it.

“He looks like he’s using a walkie-talkie,” said Harry curiously.

“He can’t be,” said Hermione, “I’ve told you, those sorts of things don’t work around Hogwarts. Come on, Harry,” she added briskly, turning away from the window and moving back into the middle of the room, “let’s try that Shield Charm again.”

Sirius was sending daily owls now. Like Hermione, he seemed to want to concentrate on getting Harry through the last task before they concerned themselves with anything else. He reminded Harry in every letter that whatever might be going on outside the walls of Hogwarts was not Harry’s responsibility, nor was it within his power to influence it.

If Voldemort is really getting stronger again, he wrote, my priority is to ensure your safety. He cannot hope to lay hands on you while you are under Dumbledore’s protection, but all the same, take no

risks:Concentrate on getting through that maze safely, and then we can turn our attention to other matters.

Harry's nerves mounted as June the twenty-fourth drew closer, but they were not as bad as those he had felt before the first and sec-ond tasks. For one thing, he was confident that, this time, he had done everything in his power to prepare for the task. For another, this was the final hurdle, and however well or badly he did, the tour-nament would at last be over, which would be an enormous relief.

Breakfast was a very noisy affair at the Gryffindor table on the morning of the third task. The post owls appeared, bringing Harry a good-luck card from Sirius. It was only a piece of parchment, folded over and bearing a muddy paw print on its front, but Harry appreciated it all the same. A screech owl arrived for Hermione, carrying her morning copy of the Daily Prophet as usual. She un-folded the paper, glanced at the front page, and spat out a mouth-ful of pumpkin juice all over it.

"What?" said Harry and Ron together, staring at her.

"Nothing," said Hermione quickly, trying to shove the paper out of sight, but Ron grabbed it. He stared at the headline and said, "No way. Not today. That old cow."

"What?" said Harry. "Rita Skeeter again?"

"No," said Ron, and just like Hermione, he attempted to push the paper out of sight.

"It's about me, isn't it?" said Harry.

"No," said Ron, in an entirely unconvincing tone.

But before Harry could demand to see the paper, Draco Malfoy shouted across the Great Hall from the Slytherin table.

“Hey, Potter! Potter! How’s your head? You feeling all right? Sure you’re not going to go berserk on us?”

Malfoy was holding a copy of the Daily Prophet too. Slytherins up and down the table were sniggering, twisting in their seats to see Harry’s reaction.

“Let me see it,” Harry said to Ron. “Give it here.”

Very reluctantly, Ron handed over the newspaper. Harry turned it over and found himself staring at his own picture, beneath the banner headline:HARRY POTTER

“DISTURBED AND DANGEROUS”

The boy who defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is unstable and possibly dangerous, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Alarming evi-dence has recently come to light about Harry Pot-ter’s strange behavior, which casts doubts upon his suitability to compete in a demanding competition like the Triwizard Tournament, or even to attend Hogwarts School.

Potter, the Daily Prophet can exclusively reveal, regularly collapses at school, and is often heard to complain of pain in the scar on his forehead (relic of the curse with which You-Know-Who attempted to kill him). On Monday last, midway through a Divination lesson, your Daily Prophet reporter witnessed Potter storming from the class, claiming that his scar was hurting too badly to continue studying.

It is possible, say top experts at St. Mungo’s Hos-pital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, that Pot-ter’s brain was affected by the attack inflicted upon him by You-Know-Who, and that his insistence that the scar is still hurting is an expression of his deep-seated confusion.

“He might even be pretending,” said one spe-cialist. “This could be a plea for attention.”

The Daily Prophet, however, has unearthed worrying facts about Harry Potter that Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, has care-fully concealed from the wizarding public.

“Potter can speak Parseltongue,” reveals Draco Malfoy, a Hogwarts fourth year. “There were a lot of attacks on students a couple of years ago, and most people thought Potter was behind them after they saw him lose his temper at a dueling club and set a snake on another boy. It was all hushed up, though. But he’s made friends with werewolves and giants too. We think he’d do anything for a bit of power.”

Parseltongue, the ability to converse with snakes, has long been considered a Dark Art. Indeed, the most famous Parselmouth of our times is none other than You-Know-Who himself. A member of the Dark Force Defense League, who wished to remain unnamed, stated that he would regard any wizard who could speak Parseltongue “as worthy of investigation. Personally, I would be highly suspi-cious of anybody who could converse with snakes, as serpents are often used in the worst kinds of Dark Magic, and are historically associated with evildoers.” Similarly, “anyone who seeks out the company of such vicious creatures as werewolves and giants would appear to have a fondness for violence.”

Albus Dumbledore should surely consider whether a boy such as this should be allowed to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. Some fear that Potter might resort to the Dark Arts in his des-peration to win the tournament, the third task of which takes place this evening.

“Gone off me a bit, hasn’t she?” said Harry lightly, folding up the paper.

Over at the Slytherin table, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were laughing at him, tapping their heads with their fingers, pulling grotesquely mad faces, and waggling their tongues like snakes.

“How did she know your scar hurt in Divination?” Ron said. “There’s no way she was there, there’s no way she could’ve heard —”

“The window was open,” said Harry. “I opened it to breathe.”

“You were at the top of North Tower!” Hermione said. “Your voice couldn’t have carried all the way down to the grounds!”

“Well, you’re the one who’s supposed to be researching magical methods of bugging!” said Harry. “You tell me how she did it!”

“I’ve been trying!” said Hermione. “But I … but …”

An odd, dreamy expression suddenly came over Hermione’s face. She slowly raised a hand and ran her fingers through her hair.

“Are you all right?” said Ron, frowning at her.

“Yes,” said Hermione breathlessly. She ran her fingers through her hair again, and then held her hand up to her mouth, as though speaking into an invisible walkie-talkie. Harry and Ron stared at each other.

“I’ve had an idea,” Hermione said, gazing into space. “I think I know … because then no one would be able to see … even Moody … and she’d have been able to get onto the window ledge … but she’s not allowed … she’s definitely not allowed … I think we’ve got her! Just give me two seconds in the library — just to make sure!”

With that, Hermione seized her school bag and dashed out of the Great Hall.

“Oi!” Ron called after her. “We’ve got our History of Magic exam in ten minutes! Blimey,” he said, turning back to Harry, “she must really hate that Skeeter woman to risk missing the start of an exam. What’re you going to do in Binns’s class — read again?”

Exempt from the end-of-term tests as a Triwizard champion, Harry had been sitting in the back of every exam class so far, look-ing up fresh hexes for the third task.

“S’pose so,” Harry said to Ron; but just then, Professor McGo-nagall came walking alongside the Gryffindor table toward him.

“Potter, the champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast,” she said.

“But the task’s not till tonight!” said Harry, accidentally spilling scrambled eggs down his front, afraid he had mistaken the time.

“I’m aware of that, Potter,” she said. “The champions’ families are invited to watch the final task, you know. This is simply a chance for you to greet them.”

She moved away. Harry gaped after her.

“She doesn’t expect the Dursleys to turn up, does she?” he asked Ron blankly.

“Dunno,” said Ron. “Harry, I’d better hurry, I’m going to be late for Binns. See you later.”

Harry finished his breakfast in the emptying Great Hall. He saw Fleur Delacour get up from the Ravenclaw table and join Cedric as he crossed to the side chamber and entered. Krum slouched off to join them shortly afterward. Harry stayed where he was. He really didn’t want to go into the chamber. He had no family — no family who would turn up to see him risk his life, anyway. But just as he was getting up, thinking that he might as well go up to the library and do a spot more hex research, the door of the side chamber opened, and Cedric stuck his head out.

“Harry, come on, they’re waiting for you!”

Utterly perplexed, Harry got up. The Dursleys couldn’t possibly be here, could they? He walked across the Hall and opened the door into the chamber.

Cedric and his parents were just inside the door. Viktor Krum was over in a corner, conversing with his dark-haired mother and father in rapid Bulgarian. He had inherited his father's hooked nose. On the other side of the room, Fleur was jabbering away in French to her mother. Fleur's little sister, Gabrielle, was holding her mother's hand. She waved at Harry, who waved back, grinning. Then he saw Mrs. Weasley and Bill standing in front of the fire-place, beaming at him.

"Surprise!" Mrs. Weasley said excitedly as he smiled broadly and walked over to them. "Thought we'd come and watch you, Harry!" She bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

"You all right?" said Bill, grinning at Harry and shaking his hand. "Charlie wanted to come, but he couldn't get time off. He said you were incredible against the Horntail."

Fleur Delacour, Harry noticed, was eyeing Bill with great inter-est over her mother's shoulder. Harry could tell she had no objec-tion whatsoever to long hair or earrings with fangs on them.

"This is really nice of you," Harry muttered to Mrs. Weasley. "I thought for a moment — the Dursleys —"

"Hmm," said Mrs. Weasley, pursing her lips. She had always re-frained from criticizing the Dursleys in front of Harry, but her eyes flashed every time they were mentioned.

"It's great being back here," said Bill, looking around the cham-ber (Violet, the Fat Lady's friend, winked at him from her frame). "Haven't seen this place for five years. Is that picture of the mad knight still around? Sir Cadogan?"

"Oh yeah," said Harry, who had met Sir Cadogan the previous year.

"And the Fat Lady?" said Bill.

“She was here in my time,” said Mrs. Weasley. “She gave me such a telling off one night when I got back to the dormitory at four in the morning —”

“What were you doing out of your dormitory at four in the morning?” said Bill, surveying his mother with amazement.

Mrs. Weasley grinned, her eyes twinkling.

“Your father and I had been for a nighttime stroll,” she said. “He got caught by Apollyon Pringle — he was the caretaker in those days — your father’s still got the marks.”

“Fancy giving us a tour, Harry?” said Bill.

“Yeah, okay,” said Harry, and they made their way back toward the door into the Great Hall. As they passed Amos Diggory, he looked around.

“There you are, are you?” he said, looking Harry up and down. “Bet you’re not feeling quite as full of yourself now Cedric’s caught you up on points, are you?”

“What?” said Harry.

“Ignore him,” said Cedric in a low voice to Harry, frowning af-ter his father. “He’s been angry ever since Rita Skeeter’s article about the Triwizard Tournament — you know, when she made out you were the only Hogwarts champion.”

“Didn’t bother to correct her, though, did he?” said Amos Dig-gory, loudly enough for Harry to hear as he started to walk out of the door with Mrs. Weasley and Bill. “Still … you’ll show him, Ced. Beaten him once before, haven’t you?”

“Rita Skeeter goes out of her way to cause trouble, Amos!” Mrs. Weasley said angrily. “I would have thought you’d know that, working

at the Ministry!"

Mr. Diggory looked as though he was going to say something angry, but his wife laid a hand on his arm, and he merely shrugged and turned away.

Harry had a very enjoyable morning walking over the sunny grounds with Bill and Mrs. Weasley, showing them the Beaux-batons carriage and the Durmstrang ship. Mrs. Weasley was intrigued by the Whomping Willow, which had been planted after she had left school, and reminisced at length about the gamekeeper before Hagrid, a man called Ogg.

"How's Percy?" Harry asked as they walked around the green-houses.

"Not good," said Bill.

"He's very upset," said Mrs. Weasley, lowering her voice and glancing around. "The Ministry wants to keep Mr. Crouch's disap-pearance quiet, but Percy's been hauled in for questioning about the instructions Mr. Crouch has been sending in. They seem to think there's a chance they weren't genuinely written by him. Percy's been under a lot of strain. They're not letting him fill in for Mr. Crouch as the fifth judge tonight. Cornelius Fudge is going to be doing it."

They returned to the castle for lunch.

"Mum — Bill!" said Ron, looking stunned, as he joined the Gryffindor table. "What're you doing here?"

"Come to watch Harry in the last task!" said Mrs. Weasley brightly. "I must say, it makes a lovely change, not having to cook. How was your exam?"

"Oh … okay," said Ron. "Couldn't remember all the goblin rebels' names, so I invented a few. It's all right," he said, helping himself to a

Cornish pasty, while Mrs. Weasley looked stern, “they’re all called stuff like Bodrod the Bearded and Urg the Un-clean; it wasn’t hard.”

Fred, George, and Ginny came to sit next to them too, and Harry was having such a good time he felt almost as though he were back at the Burrow; he had forgotten to worry about that evening’s task, and not until Hermione turned up, halfway through lunch, did he remember that she had had a brainwave about Rita Skeeter.

“Are you going to tell us — ?”

Hermione shook her head warningly and glanced at Mrs. Weasley.

“Hello, Hermione,” said Mrs. Weasley, much more stiffly than usual.

“Hello,” said Hermione, her smile faltering at the cold expres-sion on Mrs. Weasley’s face.

Harry looked between them, then said, “Mrs. Weasley, you did-n’t believe that rubbish Rita Skeeter wrote in Witch Weekly, did you? Because Hermione’s not my girlfriend.”

“Oh!” said Mrs. Weasley. “No — of course I didn’t!”

But she became considerably warmer toward Hermione after that.

Harry, Bill, and Mrs. Weasley whiled away the afternoon with a long walk around the castle, and then returned to the Great Hall for the evening feast. Ludo Bagman and Cornelius Fudge had joined the staff table now. Bagman looked quite cheerful, but Cor-nelius Fudge, who was sitting next to Madame Maxime, looked stern and was not talking. Madame Maxime was concentrating on her plate, and Harry thought her eyes looked red. Hagrid kept glancing along the table at her.

There were more courses than usual, but Harry, who was start-ing to feel really nervous now, didn’t eat much. As the enchanted ceiling

overhead began to fade from blue to a dusky purple, Dum-bledore rose to his feet at the staff table, and silence fell.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes' time, I will be asking you to make your way down to the Quidditch field for the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament. Will the champions please follow Mr. Bagman down to the stadium now."

Harry got up. The Gryffindors all along the table were applaud-ing him; the Weasleys and Hermione all wished him good luck, and he headed off out of the Great Hall with Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor.

"Feeling all right, Harry?" Bagman asked as they went down the stone steps onto the grounds. "Confident?"

"I'm okay," said Harry. It was sort of true; he was nervous, but he kept running over all the hexes and spells he had been practic-ing in his mind as they walked, and the knowledge that he could remember them all made him feel better.

They walked onto the Quidditch field, which was now com-pletely unrecognizable. A twenty-foot-high hedge ran all the way around the edge of it. There was a gap right in front of them: the entrance to the vast maze. The passage beyond it looked dark and creepy.

Five minutes later, the stands had begun to fill; the air was full of excited voices and the rumbling of feet as the hundreds of students filed into their seats. The sky was a deep, clear blue now, and the first stars were starting to appear. Hagrid, Professor Moody, Profes-sor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick came walking into the sta-dium and approached Bagman and the champions. They were wearing large, red, luminous stars on their hats, all except Hagrid, who had his on the back of his moleskin vest.

"We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze," said Professor McGonagall to the champions. "If you get into difficulty, and

wish to be rescued, send red sparks into the air, and one of us will come and get you, do you understand?"

The champions nodded.

"Off you go, then!" said Bagman brightly to the four patrollers.

"Good luck, Harry," Hagrid whispered, and the four of them walked away in different directions, to station themselves around the maze. Bagman now pointed his wand at his throat, muttered, "Sonorus," and his magically magnified voice echoed into the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! Tied in first place, with eighty-five points each — Mr. Cedric Diggory and Mr. Harry Potter, both of Hogwarts School!" The cheers and applause sent birds from the Forbidden Forest fluttering into the darkening sky. "In second place, with eighty points — Mr. Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute!" More applause. "And in third place — Miss Fleur Delacour, of Beauxbatons Academy!"

Harry could just make out Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermi-one applauding Fleur politely, halfway up the stands. He waved up at them, and they waved back, beaming at him.

"So … on my whistle, Harry and Cedric!" said Bagman. "Three — two — one —"

He gave a short blast on his whistle, and Harry and Cedric hur-ried forward into the maze.

The towering hedges cast black shadows across the path, and, whether because they were so tall and thick or because they had been enchanted, the sound of the surrounding crowd was silenced the moment they entered the maze. Harry felt almost as though he were underwater again. He pulled out his wand, muttered, "Lumos," and heard Cedric do the same just behind him.

After about fifty yards, they reached a fork. They looked at each other.

“See you,” Harry said, and he took the left one, while Cedric took the right.

Harry heard Bagman’s whistle for the second time. Krum had entered the maze. Harry sped up. His chosen path seemed com-pletely deserted. He turned right, and hurried on, holding his wand high over his head, trying to see as far ahead as possible. Still, there was nothing in sight.

Bagman’s whistle blew in the distance for the third time. All of the champions were now inside.

Harry kept looking behind him. The old feeling that he was be-ing watched was upon him. The maze was growing darker with every passing minute as the sky overhead deepened to navy. He reached a second fork.

“Point Me,” he whispered to his wand, holding it flat in his palm.

The wand spun around once and pointed toward his right, into solid hedge. That way was north, and he knew that he needed to go northwest for the center of the maze. The best he could do was to take the left fork and go right again as soon as possible.

The path ahead was empty too, and when Harry reached a right turn and took it, he again found his way unblocked. Harry didn’t know why, but the lack of obstacles was unnerving him. Surely he should have met something by now? It felt as though the maze were luring him into a false sense of security. Then he heard movement right behind him. He held out his wand, ready to attack, but its beam fell only upon Cedric, who had just hurried out of a path on the right-hand side. Cedric looked severely shaken. The sleeve of his robe was smoking.

“Hagrid’s Blast-Ended Skrewts!” he hissed. “They’re enor-mous — I only just got away!”

He shook his head and dived out of sight, along another path. Keen to put plenty of distance between himself and the skrewts, Harry hurried off again. Then, as he turned a corner, he saw … a dementor gliding toward him. Twelve feet tall, its face hidden by its hood, its rotting, scabbed hands outstretched, it advanced, sensing its way blindly toward him. Harry could hear its rattling breath; he felt clammy coldness stealing over him, but knew what he had to do. …He summoned the happiest thought he could, concentrated with all his might on the thought of getting out of the maze and celebrating with Ron and Hermione, raised his wand, and cried, “Expecto Patronum!”

A silver stag erupted from the end of Harry’s wand and galloped toward the dementor, which fell back and tripped over the hem of its robes. … Harry had never seen a dementor stumble.

“Hang on!” he shouted, advancing in the wake of his silver Patronus. “You’re a boggart! Riddikulus!”

There was a loud crack, and the shape-shifter exploded in a wisp of smoke. The silver stag faded from sight. Harry wished it could have stayed, he could have used some company … but he moved on, quickly and quietly as possible, listening hard, his wand held high once more.

Left … right … left again … Twice he found himself facing dead ends. He did the Four-Point Spell again and found that he was going too far east. He turned back, took a right turn, and saw an odd golden mist floating ahead of him.

Harry approached it cautiously, pointing the wand’s beam at it. This looked like some kind of enchantment. He wondered whether he might be able to blast it out of the way.

“Reducto!” he said.

The spell shot straight through the mist, leaving it intact. He supposed he should have known better; the Reductor Curse was for solid objects. What would happen if he walked through the mist? Was it worth chancing it, or should he double back?

He was still hesitating when a scream shattered the silence.

“Fleur?” Harry yelled.

There was silence. He stared all around him. What had hap-pened to her? Her scream seemed to have come from somewhere ahead. He took a deep breath and ran through the enchanted mist.

The world turned upside down. Harry was hanging from the ground, with his hair on end, his glasses dangling off his nose, threatening to fall into the bottomless sky. He clutched them to the end of his nose and hung there, terrified. It felt as though his feet were glued to the grass, which had now become the ceiling. Below him the dark, star-spangled heavens stretched endlessly. He felt as though if he tried to move one of his feet, he would fall away from the earth completely.

Think, he told himself, as all the blood rushed to his head, think …But not one of the spells he had practiced had been designed to combat a sudden reversal of ground and sky. Did he dare move his foot? He could hear the blood pounding in his ears. He had two choices — try and move, or send up red sparks, and get rescued and disqualified from the task.

He shut his eyes, so he wouldn’t be able to see the view of end-less space below him, and pulled his right foot as hard as he could away from the grassy ceiling.

Immediately, the world righted itself. Harry fell forward onto his knees onto the wonderfully solid ground. He felt temporarily limp with shock. He took a deep, steadying breath, then got up again and hurried forward, looking back over his shoulder as he ran away from the golden mist, which twinkled innocently at him in the moonlight.

He paused at a junction of two paths and looked around for some sign of Fleur. He was sure it had been she who had screamed. What had she met? Was she all right? There was no sign of red sparks — did that mean she had got herself out of trouble, or was she in such trouble that she couldn't reach her wand? Harry took the right fork with a feeling of increasing unease … but at the same time, he couldn't help thinking, One champion down …The cup was somewhere close by, and it sounded as though Fleur was no longer in the running. He'd got this far, hadn't he? What if he actually managed to win? Fleetingly, and for the first time since he'd found himself champion, he saw again that image of himself, raising the Triwizard Cup in front of the rest of the school. …He met nothing for ten minutes, but kept running into dead ends. Twice he took the same wrong turning. Finally, he found a new route and started to jog along it, his wandlight waving, mak-ing his shadow flicker and distort on the hedge walls. Then he rounded another corner and found himself facing a Blast-Ended Skrewt.

Cedric was right — it was enormous. Ten feet long, it looked more like a giant scorpion than anything. Its long sting was curled over its back. Its thick armor glinted in the light from Harry's wand, which he pointed at it.

"Stupefy!"

The spell hit the skrewt's armor and rebounded; Harry ducked just in time, but could smell burning hair; it had singed the top of his head. The skrewt issued a blast of fire from its end and flew for-ward toward him.

"Impedimenta!" Harry yelled. The spell hit the skrewt's armor again and ricocheted off; Harry staggered back a few paces and fell over. "IMPEDIMENTA!"

The skrewt was inches from him when it froze — he had man-aged to hit it on its fleshy, shell-less underside. Panting, Harry pushed himself

away from it and ran, hard, in the opposite direc-tion — the Impediment Curse was not permanent; the skrewt would be regaining the use of its legs at any moment.

He took a left path and hit a dead end, a right, and hit another; forcing himself to stop, heart hammering, he performed the Four-Point Spell again, backtracked, and chose a path that would take him northwest.

He had been hurrying along the new path for a few minutes, when he heard something in the path running parallel to his own that made him stop dead.

“What are you doing?” yelled Cedric’s voice. “What the hell d’you think you’re doing?”

And then Harry heard Krum’s voice.

“Crucio!”

The air was suddenly full of Cedric’s yells. Horrified, Harry be-gan sprinting up his path, trying to find a way into Cedric’s. When none appeared, he tried the Reductor Curse again. It wasn’t very ef-fective, but it burned a small hole in the hedge through which Harry forced his leg, kicking at the thick brambles and branches until they broke and made an opening; he struggled through it, tearing his robes, and looking to his right, saw Cedric jerking and twitching on the ground, Krum standing over him.

Harry pulled himself up and pointed his wand at Krum just as Krum looked up. Krum turned and began to run.

“Stupefy!” Harry yelled.

The spell hit Krum in the back; he stopped dead in his tracks, fell forward, and lay motionless, facedown in the grass. Harry dashed over to Cedric, who had stopped twitching and was lying there panting, his hands over his face.

“Are you all right?” Harry said roughly, grabbing Cedric’s arm.

“Yeah,” panted Cedric. “Yeah … I don’t believe it … he crept up behind me. … I heard him, I turned around, and he had his wand on me. …”

Cedric got up. He was still shaking. He and Harry looked down at Krum.

“I can’t believe this … I thought he was all right,” Harry said, staring at Krum.

“So did I,” said Cedric.

“Did you hear Fleur scream earlier?” said Harry.

“Yeah,” said Cedric. “You don’t think Krum got her too?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry slowly.

“Should we leave him here?” Cedric muttered.

“No,” said Harry. “I reckon we should send up red sparks. Someone’ll come and collect him … otherwise he’ll probably be eaten by a skrewt.”

“He’d deserve it,” Cedric muttered, but all the same, he raised his wand and shot a shower of red sparks into the air, which hov-ered high above Krum, marking the spot where he lay.

Harry and Cedric stood there in the darkness for a moment, looking around them. Then Cedric said, “Well … I s’pose we’d better go on . …”

“What?” said Harry. “Oh … yeah … right …”

It was an odd moment. He and Cedric had been briefly united against Krum — now the fact that they were opponents came back to Harry.

The two of them proceeded up the dark path without speaking, then Harry turned left, and Cedric right. Cedric's foot-steps soon died away.

Harry moved on, continuing to use the Four-Point Spell, mak-ing sure he was moving in the right direction. It was between him and Cedric now. His desire to reach the cup first was now burning stronger than ever, but he could hardly believe what he'd just seen Krum do. The use of an Unforgivable Curse on a fellow human be-ing meant a life term in Azkaban, that was what Moody had told them. Krum surely couldn't have wanted the Triwizard Cup that badly. … Harry sped up.

Every so often he hit more dead ends, but the increasing dark-ness made him feel sure he was getting near the heart of the maze. Then, as he strode down a long, straight path, he saw movement once again, and his beam of wandlight hit an extraordinary crea-ture, one which he had only seen in picture form, in his Monster Book of Monsters.

It was a sphinx. It had the body of an over-large lion: great clawed paws and a long yellowish tail ending in a brown tuft. Its head, how-ever, was that of a woman. She turned her long, almond-shaped eyes upon Harry as he approached. He raised his wand, hesitating. She was not crouching as if to spring, but pacing from side to side of the path, blocking his progress. Then she spoke, in a deep, hoarse voice.

"You are very near your goal. The quickest way is past me."

"So … so will you move, please?" said Harry, knowing what the answer was going to be.

"No," she said, continuing to pace. "Not unless you can answer my riddle. Answer on your first guess — I let you pass. Answer wrongly — I attack. Remain silent — I will let you walk away from me unscathed."

Harry's stomach slipped several notches. It was Hermione who was good at this sort of thing, not him. He weighed his chances. If the riddle was too hard, he could keep silent, get away from the sphinx unharmed, and try and find an alternative route to the center.

"Okay," he said. "Can I hear the riddle?"

The sphinx sat down upon her hind legs, in the very middle of the path, and recited:"First think of the person who lives in disguise,Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.

Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,The middle of middle and end of the end?

And finally give me the sound often heardDuring the search for a hard-to-find word.

Now string them together, and answer me this,Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"

Harry gaped at her.

"Could I have it again … more slowly?" he asked tentatively.

She blinked at him, smiled, and repeated the poem.

"All the clues add up to a creature I wouldn't want to kiss?" Harry asked.

She merely smiled her mysterious smile. Harry took that for a "yes." Harry cast his mind around. There were plenty of animals he wouldn't want to kiss; his immediate thought was a Blast-Ended Skrewt, but something told him that wasn't the answer. He'd have to try and work out the clues. …"A person in disguise," Harry muttered, staring at her, "who lies … er … that'd be a — an imposter. No, that's not my guess! A — a spy? I'll come back to that … could you give me the next clue again, please?"

She repeated the next lines of the poem.

“ ‘The last thing to mend,’ ” Harry repeated. “Er … no idea … ‘middle of middle’ … could I have the last bit again?”

She gave him the last four lines.

“ ‘The sound often heard during the search for a hard-to-find word,’ ” said Harry. “Er … that’d be … er … hang on — ‘er’! Er’s a sound!”

The sphinx smiled at him.

“Spy … er … spy … er …” said Harry, pacing up and down. “A creature I wouldn’t want to kiss … a spider!”

The sphinx smiled more broadly. She got up, stretched her front legs, and then moved aside for him to pass.

“Thanks!” said Harry, and, amazed at his own brilliance, he dashed forward.

He had to be close now, he had to be. … His wand was telling him he was bang on course; as long as he didn’t meet anything too horrible, he might have a chance. …Harry broke into a run. He had a choice of paths up ahead. “Point Me!” he whispered again to his wand, and it spun around and pointed him to the right-hand one. He dashed up this one and saw light ahead.

The Triwizard Cup was gleaming on a plinth a hundred yards away. Suddenly a dark figure hurtled out onto the path in front of him.

Cedric was going to get there first. Cedric was sprinting as fast as he could toward the cup, and Harry knew he would never catch up, Cedric was much taller, had much longer legs —Then Harry saw something immense over a hedge to his left, moving quickly along a path that intersected with his own; it was moving so fast Cedric was

about to run into it, and Cedric, his eyes on the cup, had not seen it —"Cedric!" Harry bellowed. "On your left!"

Cedric looked around just in time to hurl himself past the thing and avoid colliding with it, but in his haste, he tripped. Harry saw Cedric's wand fly out of his hand as a gigantic spider stepped into the path and began to bear down upon Cedric.

"Stupefy!" Harry yelled; the spell hit the spider's gigantic, hairy black body, but for all the good it did, he might as well have thrown a stone at it; the spider jerked, scuttled around, and ran at Harry instead.

"Stupefy! Impedimenta! Stupefy!"

But it was no use — the spider was either so large, or so magical, that the spells were doing no more than aggravating it. Harry had one horrifying glimpse of eight shining black eyes and razor-sharp pincers before it was upon him.

He was lifted into the air in its front legs; struggling madly, he tried to kick it; his leg connected with the pincers and next moment he was in excruciating pain. He could hear Cedric yelling "Stupefy!" too, but his spell had no more effect than Harry's — Harry raised his wand as the spider opened its pincers once more and shouted "Expelliarmus!"

It worked — the Disarming Spell made the spider drop him, but that meant that Harry fell twelve feet onto his already injured leg, which crumpled beneath him. Without pausing to think, he aimed high at the spider's underbelly, as he had done with the skrewt, and shouted "Stupefy!" just as Cedric yelled the same thing.

The two spells combined did what one alone had not: The spi-der keeled over sideways, flattening a nearby hedge, and strewing the path with a tangle of hairy legs.

"Harry!" he heard Cedric shouting. "You all right? Did it fall on you?"

“No,” Harry called back, panting. He looked down at his leg. It was bleeding freely. He could see some sort of thick, gluey secre-tion from the spider’s pincers on his torn robes. He tried to get up, but his leg was shaking badly and did not want to support his weight. He leaned against the hedge, gasping for breath, and looked around.

Cedric was standing feet from the Triwizard Cup, which was gleaming behind him.

“Take it, then,” Harry panted to Cedric. “Go on, take it. You’re there.”

But Cedric didn’t move. He merely stood there, looking at Harry. Then he turned to stare at the cup. Harry saw the longing expression on his face in its golden light. Cedric looked around at Harry again, who was now holding onto the hedge to support him-self. Cedric took a deep breath.

“You take it. You should win. That’s twice you’ve saved my neck in here.”

“That’s not how it’s supposed to work,” Harry said. He felt an-gry; his leg was very painful, he was aching all over from trying to throw off the spider, and after all his efforts, Cedric had beaten him to it, just as he’d beaten Harry to ask Cho to the ball. “The one who reaches the cup first gets the points. That’s you. I’m telling you, I’m not going to win any races on this leg.”

Cedric took a few paces nearer to the Stunned spider, away from the cup, shaking his head.

“No,” he said.

“Stop being noble,” said Harry irritably. “Just take it, then we can get out of here.”

Cedric watched Harry steadying himself, holding tight to the hedge.

“You told me about the dragons,” Cedric said. “I would’ve gone down in the first task if you hadn’t told me what was coming.”

“I had help on that too,” Harry snapped, trying to mop up his bloody leg with his robes. “You helped me with the egg — we’re square.”

“I had help on the egg in the first place,” said Cedric.

“We’re still square,” said Harry, testing his leg gingerly; it shook violently as he put weight on it; he had sprained his ankle when the spider had dropped him.

“You should’ve got more points on the second task,” said Cedric mulishly. “You stayed behind to get all the hostages. I should’ve done that.”

“I was the only one who was thick enough to take that song seriously!” said Harry bitterly. “Just take the cup!”

“No,” said Cedric.

He stepped over the spider’s tangled legs to join Harry, who stared at him. Cedric was serious. He was walking away from the sort of glory Hufflepuff House hadn’t had in centuries.

“Go on,” Cedric said. He looked as though this was costing him every ounce of resolution he had, but his face was set, his arms were folded, he seemed decided.

Harry looked from Cedric to the cup. For one shining moment, he saw himself emerging from the maze, holding it. He saw himself holding the Triwizard Cup aloft, heard the roar of the crowd, saw Cho’s face shining with admiration, more clearly than he had ever seen it before … and then the picture faded, and he found himself staring at Cedric’s shadowy, stubborn face.

“Both of us,” Harry said.

"What?"

"We'll take it at the same time. It's still a Hogwarts victory. We'll tie for it."

Cedric stared at Harry. He unfolded his arms.

"You — you sure?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah … we've helped each other out, haven't we? We both got here. Let's just take it together."

For a moment, Cedric looked as though he couldn't believe his ears; then his face split in a grin.

"You're on," he said. "Come here."

He grabbed Harry's arm below the shoulder and helped Harry limp toward the plinth where the cup stood. When they had reached it, they both held a hand out over one of the cup's gleam-ing handles.

"On three, right?" said Harry. "One — two — three —"

He and Cedric both grasped a handle.

Instantly, Harry felt a jerk somewhere behind his navel. His feet had left the ground. He could not unclench the hand holding the Triwizard Cup; it was pulling him onward in a howl of wind and swirling color, Cedric at his side.

Chapter 32 Flesh, Blood, and Bone

Harry felt his feet slam into the ground; his injured leg gave way, and he fell forward; his hand let go of the Triwizard Cup at last. He raised his head.

“Where are we?” he said.

Cedric shook his head. He got up, pulled Harry to his feet, and they looked around.

They had left the Hogwarts grounds completely; they had obvi-ously traveled miles — perhaps hundreds of miles — for even the mountains surrounding the castle were gone. They were standing instead in a dark and overgrown graveyard; the black outline of a small church was visible beyond a large yew tree to their right. A hill rose above them to their left. Harry could just make out the outline of a fine old house on the hillside.

Cedric looked down at the Triwizard Cup and then up at Harry.

“Did anyone tell you the cup was a Portkey?” he asked.

“Nope,” said Harry. He was looking around the graveyard. It was completely silent and slightly eerie. “Is this supposed to be part of the task?”

“I dunno,” said Cedric. He sounded slightly nervous. “Wands out, d’you reckon?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, glad that Cedric had made the suggestion rather than him.

They pulled out their wands. Harry kept looking around him. He had, yet again, the strange feeling that they were being watched.

“Someone’s coming,” he said suddenly.

Squinting tensely through the darkness, they watched the figure drawing nearer, walking steadily toward them between the graves. Harry couldn’t make out a face, but from the way it was walking and holding its arms, he could tell that it was carrying something. Whoever it was, he was short, and wearing a hooded cloak pulled up over his head to obscure his face. And — several paces nearer, the gap between them closing all the time — Harry saw that the thing in the person’s arms looked like a baby … or was it merely a bundle of robes?

Harry lowered his wand slightly and glanced sideways at Cedric. Cedric shot him a quizzical look. They both turned back to watch the approaching figure.

It stopped beside a towering marble headstone, only six feet from them. For a second, Harry and Cedric and the short figure simply looked at one another.

And then, without warning, Harry’s scar exploded with pain. It was agony such as he had never felt in all his life; his wand slipped from his fingers as he put his hands over his face; his knees buck-led; he was on the ground and he could see nothing at all; his head was about to split open.

From far away, above his head, he heard a high, cold voice say, “Kill the spare.”

A swishing noise and a second voice, which screeched the words to the night: “Avada Kedavra!”

A blast of green light blazed through Harry’s eyelids, and he heard something heavy fall to the ground beside him; the pain in his scar reached such a pitch that he retched, and then it dimin-ished; terrified of what he was about to see, he opened his stinging eyes.

Cedric was lying spread-eagled on the ground beside him. He was dead.

For a second that contained an eternity, Harry stared into Cedric's face, at his open gray eyes, blank and expressionless as the windows of a deserted house, at his half-open mouth, which looked slightly surprised. And then, before Harry's mind had ac-cepted what he was seeing, before he could feel anything but numb disbelief, he felt himself being pulled to his feet.

The short man in the cloak had put down his bundle, lit his wand, and was dragging Harry toward the marble headstone. Harry saw the name upon it flickering in the wandlight before he was forced around and slammed against it.

TOM RIDDLE

The cloaked man was now conjuring tight cords around Harry, tying him from neck to ankles to the headstone. Harry could hear shallow, fast breathing from the depths of the hood; he struggled, and the man hit him — hit him with a hand that had a finger miss-ing. And Harry realized who was under the hood. It was Wormtail.

"You!" he gasped.

But Wormtail, who had finished conjuring the ropes, did not re-ply; he was busy checking the tightness of the cords, his fingers trembling uncontrollably, fumbling over the knots. Once sure that Harry was bound so tightly to the headstone that he couldn't move an inch, Wormtail drew a length of some black material from the inside of his cloak and stuffed it roughly into Harry's mouth; then, without a word, he turned from Harry and hurried away. Harry couldn't make a sound, nor could he see where Wormtail had gone; he couldn't turn his head to see beyond the headstone; he could see only what was right in front of him.

Cedric's body was lying some twenty feet away. Some way be-yond him, glinting in the starlight, lay the Triwizard Cup. Harry's wand was on the ground at Cedric's feet. The bundle of robes that Harry had thought was a baby was close by, at the foot of the grave. It seemed to be stirring fretfully. Harry watched it, and his scar seared with pain again … and he suddenly knew that he didn't want to see what was in those robes … he didn't want that bundle opened. …He could hear noises at his feet. He looked down and saw a gigantic snake slithering through the grass, circling the headstone where he was tied. Wormtail's fast, wheezy breathing was growing louder again. It sounded as though he was forcing something heavy across the ground. Then he came back within Harry's range of vision, and Harry saw him pushing a stone cauldron to the foot of the grave. It was full of what seemed to be water — Harry could hear it slopping around — and it was larger than any cauldron Harry had ever used; a great stone belly large enough for a full-grown man to sit in.

The thing inside the bundle of robes on the ground was stirring more persistently, as though it was trying to free itself. Now Worm-tail was busying himself at the bottom of the cauldron with a wand. Suddenly there were crackling flames beneath it. The large snake slithered away into the darkness.

The liquid in the cauldron seemed to heat very fast. The surface began not only to bubble, but to send out fiery sparks, as though it were on fire. Steam was thickening, blurring the outline of Worm-tail tending the fire. The movements beneath the robes became more agitated. And Harry heard the high, cold voice again.

"Hurry!"

The whole surface of the water was alight with sparks now. It might have been encrusted with diamonds.

"It is ready, Master."

"Now …" said the cold voice.

Wormtail pulled open the robes on the ground, revealing what was inside them, and Harry let out a yell that was strangled in the wad of material blocking his mouth.

It was as though Wormtail had flipped over a stone and revealed something ugly, slimy, and blind — but worse, a hundred times worse. The thing Wormtail had been carrying had the shape of a crouched human child, except that Harry had never seen anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly-looking, a dark, raw, reddish black. Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face — no child alive ever had a face like that — flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes.

The thing seemed almost helpless; it raised its thin arms, put them around Wormtail's neck, and Wormtail lifted it. As he did so, his hood fell back, and Harry saw the look of revulsion on Worm-tail's weak, pale face in the firelight as he carried the creature to the rim of the cauldron. For one moment, Harry saw the evil, flat face illuminated in the sparks dancing on the surface of the potion. And then Wormtail lowered the creature into the cauldron; there was a hiss, and it vanished below the surface; Harry heard its frail body hit the bottom with a soft thud.

Let it drown, Harry thought, his scar burning almost past en-durance, please … let it drown. …Wormtail was speaking. His voice shook; he seemed frightened beyond his wits. He raised his wand, closed his eyes, and spoke to the night.

"Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

The surface of the grave at Harry's feet cracked. Horrified, Harry watched as a fine trickle of dust rose into the air at Wormtail's command and fell softly into the cauldron. The diamond surface of the water broke and hissed; it sent sparks in all directions and turned a vivid, poisonous-looking blue.

And now Wormtail was whimpering. He pulled a long, thin, shining silver dagger from inside his cloak. His voice broke into petrified sobs.

“Flesh — of the servant — w-willingly given — you will — revive — your master.”

He stretched his right hand out in front of him — the hand with the missing finger. He gripped the dagger very tightly in his left hand and swung it upward.

Harry realized what Wormtail was about to do a second before it happened — he closed his eyes as tightly as he could, but he could not block the scream that pierced the night, that went through Harry as though he had been stabbed with the dagger too. He heard something fall to the ground, heard Wormtail’s anguished panting, then a sickening splash, as something was dropped into the cauldron. Harry couldn’t stand to look … but the potion had turned a burning red; the light of it shone through Harry’s closed eyelids. …Wormtail was gasping and moaning with agony. Not until Harry felt Wormtail’s anguished breath on his face did he realize that Wormtail was right in front of him.

“B-blood of the enemy … forcibly taken … you will … resurrect your foe.”

Harry could do nothing to prevent it, he was tied too tightly. … Squinting down, struggling hopelessly at the ropes binding him, he saw the shining silver dagger shaking in Wormtail’s remaining hand. He felt its point penetrate the crook of his right arm and blood seeping down the sleeve of his torn robes. Wormtail, still panting with pain, fumbled in his pocket for a glass vial and held it to Harry’s cut, so that a dribble of blood fell into it.

He staggered back to the cauldron with Harry’s blood. He poured it inside. The liquid within turned, instantly, a blinding white. Wormtail, his job done, dropped to his knees beside the cauldron, then slumped

sideways and lay on the ground, cradling the bleeding stump of his arm, gasping and sobbing.

The cauldron was simmering, sending its diamond sparks in all directions, so blindingly bright that it turned all else to velvety blackness. Nothing happened. …Let it have drowned, Harry thought, let it have gone wrong. …And then, suddenly, the sparks emanating from the cauldron were extinguished. A surge of white steam billowed thickly from the cauldron instead, obliterating everything in front of Harry, so that he couldn't see Wormtail or Cedric or anything but vapor hang-ing in the air. … It's gone wrong, he thought … it's drowned … please … please let it be dead. …But then, through the mist in front of him, he saw, with an icy surge of terror, the dark outline of a man, tall and skeletally thin, rising slowly from inside the cauldron.

"Robe me," said the high, cold voice from behind the steam, and Wormtail, sobbing and moaning, still cradling his mutilated arm, scrambled to pick up the black robes from the ground, got to his feet, reached up, and pulled them one-handed over his master's head.

The thin man stepped out of the cauldron, staring at Harry … and Harry stared back into the face that had haunted his night-mares for three years. Whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes and a nose that was flat as a snake's with slits for nostrils …Lord Voldemort had risen again.

Chapter 33 The Death Eaters

Voldemort looked away from Harry and began examining his own body. His hands were like large, pale spiders; his long white fingers caressed his own chest, his arms, his face; the red eyes, whose pupils were slits, like a cat's, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. He held up his hands and flexed the fingers, his expression rapt and exultant. He took not the slightest notice of Wormtail, who lay twitching and bleeding on the ground, nor of the great snake, which had slithered back into sight and was cir-cling Harry again, hissing. Voldemort slipped one of those unnat-urally long-fingered hands into a deep pocket and drew out a wand. He caressed it gently too; and then he raised it, and pointed it at Wormtail, who was lifted off the ground and thrown against the headstone where Harry was tied; he fell to the foot of it and lay there, crumpled up and crying. Voldemort turned his scarlet eyes upon Harry, laughing a high, cold, mirthless laugh.

Wormtail's robes were shining with blood now; he had wrapped the stump of his arm in them.

"My Lord …" he choked, "my Lord … you promised … you did promise …"

"Hold out your arm," said Voldemort lazily.

"Oh Master … thank you, Master …"

He extended the bleeding stump, but Voldemort laughed again.

"The other arm, Wormtail."

"Master, please … please …"

Voldemort bent down and pulled out Wormtail's left arm; he forced the sleeve of Wormtail's robes up past his elbow, and Harry saw

something upon the skin there, something like a vivid red tat-too — a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth — the im-age that had appeared in the sky at the Quidditch World Cup: the Dark Mark. Voldemort examined it carefully, ignoring Wormtail's uncontrollable weeping.

"It is back," he said softly, "they will all have noticed it … and now, we shall see … now we shall know …"

He pressed his long white forefinger to the brand on Wormtail's arm.

The scar on Harry's forehead seared with a sharp pain again, and Wormtail let out a fresh howl; Voldemort removed his fingers from Wormtail's mark, and Harry saw that it had turned jet black.

A look of cruel satisfaction on his face, Voldemort straightened up, threw back his head, and stared around at the dark graveyard.

"How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it?" he whispered, his gleaming red eyes fixed upon the stars. "And how many will be foolish enough to stay away?"

He began to pace up and down before Harry and Wormtail, eyes sweeping the graveyard all the while. After a minute or so, he looked down at Harry again, a cruel smile twisting his snakelike face.

"You stand, Harry Potter, upon the remains of my late father," he hissed softly. "A Muggle and a fool … very like your dear mother. But they both had their uses, did they not? Your mother died to defend you as a child … and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death. …"

Voldemort laughed again. Up and down he paced, looking all around him as he walked, and the snake continued to circle in the grass.

"You see that house upon the hillside, Potter? My father lived there. My mother, a witch who lived here in this village, fell in love with him.

But he abandoned her when she told him what she was. … He didn't like magic, my father …"He left her and returned to his Muggle parents before I was even born, Potter, and she died giving birth to me, leaving me to be raised in a Muggle orphanage … but I vowed to find him … I re-venged myself upon him, that fool who gave me his name … Tom Riddle. …"

Still he paced, his red eyes darting from grave to grave.

"Listen to me, reliving family history …" he said quietly, "why, I am growing quite sentimental. … But look, Harry! My true fam-ily returns. …"

The air was suddenly full of the swishing of cloaks. Between graves, behind the yew tree, in every shadowy space, wizards were Apparating. All of them were hooded and masked. And one by one they moved forward … slowly, cautiously, as though they could hardly believe their eyes. Voldemort stood in silence, waiting for them. Then one of the Death Eaters fell to his knees, crawled to-ward Voldemort, and kissed the hem of his black robes.

"Master … Master …" he murmured.

The Death Eaters behind him did the same; each of them ap-proaching Voldemort on his knees and kissing his robes, before backing away and standing up, forming a silent circle, which en-closed Tom Riddle's grave, Harry, Voldemort, and the sobbing and twitching heap that was Wormtail. Yet they left gaps in the circle, as though waiting for more people. Voldemort, however, did not seem to expect more. He looked around at the hooded faces, and though there was no wind, a rustling seemed to run around the cir-cle, as though it had shivered.

"Welcome, Death Eaters," said Voldemort quietly. "Thirteen years … thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday. … We are still united under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?"

He put back his terrible face and sniffed, his slit-like nostrils widening.

“I smell guilt,” he said. “There is a stench of guilt upon the air.”

A second shiver ran around the circle, as though each member of it longed, but did not dare, to step back from him.

“I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact — such prompt appearances! — and I ask myself … why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?”

No one spoke. No one moved except Wormtail, who was upon the ground, still sobbing over his bleeding arm.

“And I answer myself,” whispered Voldemort, “they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped back among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, and ignorance, and bewitchment. …“And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proofs of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?

“And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort … perhaps they now pay allegiance to another … perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?”

At the mention of Dumbledore’s name, the members of the cir-cle stirred, and some muttered and shook their heads. Voldemort ignored them.

“It is a disappointment to me … I confess myself disap-pointed. …”

One of the men suddenly flung himself forward, breaking the circle. Trembling from head to foot, he collapsed at Voldemort’s feet.

“Master!” he shrieked, “Master, forgive me! Forgive us all!”

Voldemort began to laugh. He raised his wand.

“Crucio!”

The Death Eater on the ground writhed and shrieked; Harry was sure the sound must carry to the houses around. … Let the police come, he thought desperately … anyone … anything …Voldemort raised his wand. The tortured Death Eater lay flat upon the ground, gasping.

“Get up, Avery,” said Voldemort softly. “Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years … I want thirteen years’ repayment before I forgive you. Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, have you not, Wormtail?”

He looked down at Wormtail, who continued to sob.

“You returned to me, not out of loyalty, but out of fear of your old friends. You deserve this pain, Wormtail. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Master,” moaned Wormtail, “please, Master … please …”

“Yet you helped return me to my body,” said Voldemort coolly, watching Wormtail sob on the ground. “Worthless and traitorous as you are, you helped me … and Lord Voldemort rewards his helpers. …”

Voldemort raised his wand again and whirled it through the air. A streak of what looked like molten silver hung shining in the wand’s wake. Momentarily shapeless, it writhed and then formed itself into a gleaming replica of a human hand, bright as moon-light, which soared downward and fixed itself upon Wormtail’s bleeding wrist.

Wormtail’s sobbing stopped abruptly. His breathing harsh and ragged, he raised his head and stared in disbelief at the silver hand, now attached seamlessly to his arm, as though he were wearing a

dazzling glove. He flexed the shining fingers, then, trembling, picked up a small twig on the ground and crushed it into powder.

“My Lord,” he whispered. “Master … it is beautiful … thank you … thank you. …”

He scrambled forward on his knees and kissed the hem of Voldemort’s robes.

“May your loyalty never waver again, Wormtail,” said Voldemort.

“No, my Lord … never, my Lord …”

Wormtail stood up and took his place in the circle, staring at his powerful new hand, his face still shining with tears. Voldemort now approached the man on Wormtail’s right.

“Lucius, my slippery friend,” he whispered, halting before him. “I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present a respectable face. You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius. … Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay … but might not your energies have been bet-ter directed toward finding and aiding your master?”

“My Lord, I was constantly on the alert,” came Lucius Malfoy’s voice swiftly from beneath the hood. “Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me —”

“And yet you ran from my Mark, when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer?” said Voldemort lazily, and Mr. Malfoy stopped talking abruptly. “Yes, I know all about that, Lu-cius. … You have disappointed me. … I expect more faithful ser-vice in the future.”

“Of course, my Lord, of course. … You are merciful, thank you. …”

Voldemort moved on, and stopped, staring at the space — large enough for two people — that separated Malfoy and the next man.

"The Lestranges should stand here," said Voldemort quietly. "But they are entombed in Azkaban. They were faithful. They went to Azkaban rather than renounce me. … When Azkaban is broken open, the Lestranges will be honored beyond their dreams. The dementors will join us … they are our natural allies … we will recall the banished giants … I shall have all my devoted ser-vants returned to me, and an army of creatures whom all fear. …"

He walked on. Some of the Death Eaters he passed in silence, but he paused before others and spoke to them.

"Macnair … destroying dangerous beasts for the Ministry of Magic now, Wormtail tells me? You shall have better victims than that soon, Macnair. Lord Voldemort will provide. …"

"Thank you, Master … thank you," murmured Macnair.

"And here" — Voldemort moved on to the two largest hooded figures — "we have Crabbe … you will do better this time, will you not, Crabbe? And you, Goyle?"

They bowed clumsily, muttering dully.

"Yes, Master …"

"We will, Master. …"

"The same goes for you, Nott," said Voldemort quietly as he walked past a stooped figure in Mr. Goyle's shadow.

"My Lord, I prostrate myself before you, I am your most faithful —"

"That will do," said Voldemort.

He had reached the largest gap of all, and he stood surveying it with his blank, red eyes, as though he could see people standing there.

"And here we have six missing Death Eaters … three dead in my service. One, too cowardly to return … he will pay. One, who I believe has left me forever … he will be killed, of course … and one, who remains my most faithful servant, and who has already reentered my service."

The Death Eaters stirred, and Harry saw their eyes dart sideways at one another through their masks.

"He is at Hogwarts, that faithful servant, and it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived here tonight. …"Yes," said Voldemort, a grin curling his lipless mouth as the eyes of the circle flashed in Harry's direction. "Harry Potter has kindly joined us for my rebirthing party. One might go so far as to call him my guest of honor."

There was a silence. Then the Death Eater to the right of Worm-tail stepped forward, and Lucius Malfoy's voice spoke from under the mask.

"Master, we crave to know … we beg you to tell us … how you have achieved this … this miracle … how you managed to return to us. …"

"Ah, what a story it is, Lucius," said Voldemort. "And it begins — and ends — with my young friend here."

He walked lazily over to stand next to Harry, so that the eyes of the whole circle were upon the two of them. The snake continued to circle.

"You know, of course, that they have called this boy my down-fall?" Voldemort said softly, his red eyes upon Harry, whose scar began to burn so fiercely that he almost screamed in agony. "You all know that on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill him. His mother died in the attempt to save him — and unwit-tingly provided

him with a protection I admit I had not fore-seen. … I could not touch the boy."

Voldemort raised one of his long white fingers and put it very close to Harry's cheek.

"His mother left upon him the traces of her sacrifice. … This is old magic, I should have remembered it, I was foolish to overlook it … but no matter. I can touch him now."

Harry felt the cold tip of the long white finger touch him, and thought his head would burst with the pain. Voldemort laughed softly in his ear, then took the finger away and continued address-ing the Death Eaters.

"I miscalculated, my friends, I admit it. My curse was deflected by the woman's foolish sacrifice, and it rebounded upon myself. Aaah … pain beyond pain, my friends; nothing could have pre-pared me for it. I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost … but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know … I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal — to conquer death. And now, I was tested, and it appeared that one or more of my experiments had worked … for I had not been killed, though the curse should have done it. Nevertheless, I was as pow-erless as the weakest creature alive, and without the means to help myself … for I had no body, and every spell that might have helped me required the use of a wand. …"I remember only forcing myself, sleeplessly, endlessly, second by second, to exist. … I settled in a faraway place, in a forest, and I waited. … Surely, one of my faithful Death Eaters would try and find me … one of them would come and perform the magic I could not, to restore me to a body … but I waited in vain. …"

The shiver ran once more around the circle of listening Death Eaters. Voldemort let the silence spiral horribly before continuing.

"Only one power remained to me. I could possess the bodies of others. But I dared not go where other humans were plentiful, for I knew that the Aurors were still abroad and searching for me. I sometimes inhabited animals — snakes, of course, being my preference — but I was little better off inside them than as pure spirit, for their bodies were ill adapted to perform magic … and my pos-session of them shortened their lives; none of them lasted long. …"Then … four years ago … the means for my return seemed assured. A wizard — young, foolish, and gullible — wandered across my path in the forest I had made my home. Oh, he seemed the very chance I had been dreaming of … for he was a teacher at Dumbledore's school … he was easy to bend to my will … he brought me back to this country, and after a while, I took posses-sion of his body, to supervise him closely as he carried out my or-ders. But my plan failed. I did not manage to steal the Sorcerer's Stone. I was not to be assured immortal life. I was thwarted … thwarted, once again, by Harry Potter. …"

Silence once more; nothing was stirring, not even the leaves on the yew tree. The Death Eaters were quite motionless, the glitter-ing eyes in their masks fixed upon Voldemort, and upon Harry.

"The servant died when I left his body, and I was left as weak as ever I had been," Voldemort continued. "I returned to my hiding place far away, and I will not pretend to you that I didn't then fear that I might never regain my powers. … Yes, that was perhaps my darkest hour … I could not hope that I would be sent another wizard to possess … and I had given up hope, now, that any of my Death Eaters cared what had become of me. …"

One or two of the masked wizards in the circle moved uncomfortably, but Voldemort took no notice.

"And then, not even a year ago, when I had almost abandoned hope, it happened at last … a servant returned to me. Wormtail here, who had faked his own death to escape justice, was driven out of hiding

by those he had once counted friends, and decided to re-turn to his master. He sought me in the country where it had long been rumored I was hiding … helped, of course, by the rats he met along the way. Wormtail has a curious affinity with rats, do you not, Wormtail? His filthy little friends told him there was a place, deep in an Albanian forest, that they avoided, where small animals like themselves had met their deaths by a dark shadow that possessed them. …“But his journey back to me was not smooth, was it, Wormtail? For, hungry one night, on the edge of the very forest where he had hoped to find me, he foolishly stopped at an inn for some food … and who should he meet there, but one Bertha Jorkins, a witch from the Ministry of Magic.

“Now see the way that fate favors Lord Voldemort. This might have been the end of Wormtail, and of my last hope for regenera-tion. But Wormtail — displaying a presence of mind I would never have expected from him — convinced Bertha Jorkins to accom-pany him on a nighttime stroll. He overpowered her … he brought her to me. And Bertha Jorkins, who might have ruined all, proved instead to be a gift beyond my wildest dreams … for — with a lit-tle persuasion — she became a veritable mine of information.

“She told me that the Triwizard Tournament would be played at Hogwarts this year. She told me that she knew of a faithful Death Eater who would be only too willing to help me, if I could only contact him. She told me many things … but the means I used to break the Memory Charm upon her were powerful, and when I had extracted all useful information from her, her mind and body were both damaged beyond repair. She had now served her pur-pose. I could not possess her. I disposed of her.”

Voldemort smiled his terrible smile, his red eyes blank and pitiless.

“Wormtail’s body, of course, was ill adapted for possession, as all assumed him dead, and would attract far too much attention if noticed. However, he was the able-bodied servant I needed, and,

poor wizard though he is, Wormtail was able to follow the instructions I gave him, which would return me to a rudimentary, weak body of my own, a body I would be able to inhabit while awaiting the essential ingredients for true rebirth … a spell or two of my own invention … a little help from my dear Nagini," Voldemort's red eyes fell upon the continually circling snake, "a potion con-cocted from unicorn blood, and the snake venom Nagini pro-vided … I was soon returned to an almost human form, and strong enough to travel.

"There was no hope of stealing the Sorcerer's Stone anymore, for I knew that Dumbledore would have seen to it that it was de-stroyed. But I was willing to embrace mortal life again, before chas-ing immortality. I set my sights lower … I would settle for my old body back again, and my old strength.

"I knew that to achieve this — it is an old piece of Dark Magic, the potion that revived me tonight — I would need three powerful ingredients. Well, one of them was already at hand, was it not, Wormtail? Flesh given by a servant. …"My father's bone, naturally, meant that we would have to come here, where he was buried. But the blood of a foe … Wormtail would have had me use any wizard, would you not, Wormtail? Any wizard who had hated me … as so many of them still do. But I knew the one I must use, if I was to rise again, more powerful than I had been when I had fallen. I wanted Harry Potter's blood. I wanted the blood of the one who had stripped me of power thir-teen years ago … for the lingering protection his mother once gave him would then reside in my veins too. …"But how to get at Harry Potter? For he has been better pro-tected than I think even he knows, protected in ways devised by Dumbledore long ago, when it fell to him to arrange the boy's fu-ture. Dumbledore invoked an ancient magic, to ensure the boy's protection as long as he is in his relations' care. Not even I can touch him there. … Then, of course, there was the Quidditch World Cup. … I thought his protection might be weaker there, away from his relations and Dumbledore, but I was not yet strong enough to attempt kidnap in the midst of a horde of Ministry wiz-ards. And then, the boy would return

to Hogwarts, where he is un-der the crooked nose of that Muggle-loving fool from morning until night. So how could I take him?

“Why … by using Bertha Jorkins’s information, of course. Use my one faithful Death Eater, stationed at Hogwarts, to ensure that the boy’s name was entered into the Goblet of Fire. Use my Death Eater to ensure that the boy won the tournament — that he touched the Triwizard Cup first — the cup which my Death Eater had turned into a Portkey, which would bring him here, beyond the reach of Dumbledore’s help and protection, and into my wait-ing arms. And here he is … the boy you all believed had been my downfall. …”

Voldemort moved slowly forward and turned to face Harry. He raised his wand.

“Crucio!”

It was pain beyond anything Harry had ever experienced; his very bones were on fire; his head was surely splitting along his scar; his eyes were rolling madly in his head; he wanted it to end … to black out … to die …And then it was gone. He was hanging limply in the ropes bind-ing him to the headstone of Voldemort’s father, looking up into those bright red eyes through a kind of mist. The night was ringing with the sound of the Death Eaters’ laughter.

“You see, I think, how foolish it was to suppose that this boy could ever have been stronger than me,” said Voldemort. “But I want there to be no mistake in anybody’s mind. Harry Potter es-caped me by a lucky chance. And I am now going to prove my power by killing him, here and now, in front of you all, when there is no Dumbledore to help him, and no mother to die for him. I will give him his chance. He will be allowed to fight, and you will be left in no doubt which of us is the stronger. Just a little longer, Nagini,” he whispered, and the snake glided away through the grass to where the Death Eaters stood watching.

“Now untie him, Wormtail, and give him back his wand.”

Chapter 34 Priori Incantatem

Wormtail approached Harry, who scrambled to find his feet, to support his own weight before the ropes were un-tied. Wormtail raised his new silver hand, pulled out the wad of material gagging Harry, and then, with one swipe, cut through the bonds tying Harry to the gravestone.

There was a split second, perhaps, when Harry might have considered running for it, but his injured leg shook under him as he stood on the overgrown grave, as the Death Eaters closed ranks, forming a tighter circle around him and Voldemort, so that the gaps where the missing Death Eaters should have stood were filled. Wormtail walked out of the circle to the place where Cedric's body lay and returned with Harry's wand, which he thrust roughly into Harry's hand without looking at him. Then Wormtail resumed his place in the circle of watching Death Eaters.

"You have been taught how to duel, Harry Potter?" said Volde-mort softly, his red eyes glinting through the darkness.

At these words Harry remembered, as though from a former life, the dueling club at Hogwarts he had attended briefly two years ago. … All he had learned there was the Disarming Spell, "Expel-liarmus" … and what use would it be to deprive Voldemort of his wand, even if he could, when he was surrounded by Death Eaters, outnumbered by at least thirty to one? He had never learned any-thing that could possibly fit him for this. He knew he was facing the thing against which Moody had always warned … the un-blockable Avada Kedavra curse — and Voldemort was right — his mother was not here to die for him this time. … He was quite unprotected. …"We bow to each other, Harry," said Voldemort, bending a little, but keeping his snakelike face upturned to Harry. "Come, the niceties must be observed. … Dumbledore would like you to show manners. … Bow to death, Harry. …"

The Death Eaters were laughing again. Voldemort's lipless mouth was smiling. Harry did not bow. He was not going to let Voldemort play with him before killing him … he was not going to give him that satisfaction. …"I said, bow," Voldemort said, raising his wand — and Harry felt his spine curve as though a huge, invisible hand were bending him ruthlessly forward, and the Death Eaters laughed harder than ever.

"Very good," said Voldemort softly, and as he raised his wand the pressure bearing down upon Harry lifted too. "And now you face me, like a man … straight-backed and proud, the way your father died. …"And now — we duel."

Voldemort raised his wand, and before Harry could do anything to defend himself, before he could even move, he had been hit again by the Cruciatus Curse. The pain was so intense, so all-consuming, that he no longer knew where he was. … White-hot knives were piercing every inch of his skin, his head was surely going to burst with pain, he was screaming more loudly than he'd ever screamed in his life —And then it stopped. Harry rolled over and scrambled to his feet; he was shaking as uncontrollably as Wormtail had done when his hand had been cut off; he staggered sideways into the wall of watching Death Eaters, and they pushed him away, back toward Voldemort.

"A little break," said Voldemort, the slit-like nostrils dilating with excitement, "a little pause … That hurt, didn't it, Harry? You don't want me to do that again, do you?"

Harry didn't answer. He was going to die like Cedric, those piti-less red eyes were telling him so … he was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it… but he wasn't going to play along. He wasn't going to obey Voldemort … he wasn't going to beg. …"I asked you whether you want me to do that again," said Volde-mort softly. "Answer me! Imperio!"

And Harry felt, for the third time in his life, the sensation that his mind had been wiped of all thought. … Ah, it was bliss, not to think, it was as though he were floating, dreaming … just answer no … say no … just answer no. …I will not, said a stronger voice, in the back of his head, I won't answer. …Just answer no. …

I won't do it, I won't say it. …Just answer no. …

"I WON'T!"

And these words burst from Harry's mouth; they echoed through the graveyard, and the dream state was lifted as suddenly as though cold water had been thrown over him — back rushed the aches that the Cruciatus Curse had left all over his body — back rushed the realization of where he was, and what he was facing. …"You won't?" said Voldemort quietly, and the Death Eaters were not laughing now. "You won't say no? Harry, obedience is a virtue I need to teach you before you die. … Perhaps another little dose of pain?"

Voldemort raised his wand, but this time Harry was ready; with the reflexes born of his Quidditch training, he flung himself side-ways onto the ground; he rolled behind the marble headstone of Voldemort's father, and he heard it crack as the curse missed him.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Harry," said Voldemort's soft, cold voice, drawing nearer, as the Death Eaters laughed. "You can-not hide from me. Does this mean you are tired of our duel? Does this mean that you would prefer me to finish it now, Harry? Come out, Harry … come out and play, then … it will be quick … it might even be painless … I would not know … I have never died. …"

Harry crouched behind the headstone and knew the end had come. There was no hope … no help to be had. And as he heard Voldemort draw nearer still, he knew one thing only, and it was be-yond fear or reason: He was not going to die crouching here like a child playing hide-and-seek; he was not going to die kneeling at Voldemort's feet … he was going to die upright like his father, and he was going to die

trying to defend himself, even if no defense was possible. …Before Voldemort could stick his snakelike face around the headstone, Harry stood up … he gripped his wand tightly in his hand, thrust it out in front of him, and threw himself around the headstone, facing Voldemort.

Voldemort was ready. As Harry shouted, “Expelliarmus!” Volde-mort cried, “Avada Kedavra!”

A jet of green light issued from Voldemort’s wand just as a jet of red light blasted from Harry’s — they met in midair — and sud-denly Harry’s wand was vibrating as though an electric charge were surging through it; his hand seized up around it; he couldn’t have released it if he’d wanted to — and a narrow beam of light con-nected the two wands, neither red nor green, but bright, deep gold. Harry, following the beam with his astonished gaze, saw that Voldemort’s long white fingers too were gripping a wand that was shaking and vibrating.

And then — nothing could have prepared Harry for this — he felt his feet lift from the ground. He and Voldemort were both being raised into the air, their wands still connected by that thread of shimmering golden light. They glided away from the tomb-stone of Voldemort’s father and then came to rest on a patch of ground that was clear and free of graves. … The Death Eaters were shouting; they were asking Voldemort for instructions; they were closing in, reforming the circle around Harry and Voldemort, the snake slithering at their heels, some of them drawing their wands —The golden thread connecting Harry and Voldemort splintered; though the wands remained connected, a thousand more beams arced high over Harry and Voldemort, crisscrossing all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a cage of light, beyond which the Death Eaters circled like jackals, their cries strangely muffled now. …“Do nothing!” Voldemort shrieked to the Death Eaters, and Harry saw his red eyes wide with astonishment at what was hap-pening, saw him fighting to break the thread of light still connect-ing his wand with Harry’s; Harry held onto his wand more tightly, with both hands, and the golden

thread remained unbroken. “Do nothing unless I command you!” Voldemort shouted to the Death Eaters.

And then an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air. … It was coming from every thread of the light-spun web vibrating around Harry and Voldemort. It was a sound Harry recognized, though he had heard it only once before in his life: phoenix song.

It was the sound of hope to Harry … the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life. … He felt as though the song were inside him instead of just around him. … It was the sound he connected with Dumbledore, and it was almost as though a friend were speaking in his ear. …Don’t break the connection.

I know, Harry told the music, I know I mustn’t … but no sooner had he thought it, than the thing became much harder to do. His wand began to vibrate more powerfully than ever … and now the beam between him and Voldemort changed too … it was as though large beads of light were sliding up and down the thread connecting the wands — Harry felt his wand give a shudder under his hand as the light beads began to slide slowly and steadily his way. … The direction of the beam’s movement was now toward him, from Voldemort, and he felt his wand shudder angrily. …As the closest bead of light moved nearer to Harry’s wand tip, the wood beneath his fingers grew so hot he feared it would burst into flame. The closer that bead moved, the harder Harry’s wand vibrated; he was sure his wand would not survive contact with it; it felt as though it was about to shatter under his fingers —He concentrated every last particle of his mind upon forcing the bead back toward Voldemort, his ears full of phoenix song, his eyes furious, fixed … and slowly, very slowly, the beads quivered to a halt, and then, just as slowly, they began to move the other way … and it was Voldemort’s wand that was vibrating extra-hard now … Voldemort who looked astonished, and almost fearful. …One of the beads of light was quivering, inches from the tip of Voldemort’s wand. Harry didn’t understand why he was doing it, didn’t know what it might achieve … but he now concentrated as he had never done in his life

on forcing that bead of light right back into Voldemort's wand … and slowly … very slowly … it moved along the golden thread … it trembled for a moment… and then it connected. …At once, Voldemort's wand began to emit echoing screams of pain … then — Voldemort's red eyes widened with shock — a dense, smoky hand flew out of the tip of it and vanished … the ghost of the hand he had made Wormtail … more shouts of pain … and then something much larger began to blossom from Voldemort's wand tip, a great, grayish something, that looked as though it were made of the solidest, densest smoke. … It was a head … now a chest and arms … the torso of Cedric Diggory.

If ever Harry might have released his wand from shock, it would have been then, but instinct kept him clutching his wand tightly, so that the thread of golden light remained unbroken, even though the thick gray ghost of Cedric Diggory (was it a ghost? it looked so solid) emerged in its entirety from the end of Voldemort's wand, as though it were squeezing itself out of a very narrow tunnel … and this shade of Cedric stood up, and looked up and down the golden thread of light, and spoke.

"Hold on, Harry," it said.

Its voice was distant and echoing. Harry looked at Volde-mort … his wide red eyes were still shocked … he had no more expected this than Harry had … and, very dimly, Harry heard the frightened yells of the Death Eaters, prowling around the edges of the golden dome. … More screams of pain from the wand … and then something else emerged from its tip … the dense shadow of a second head, quickly followed by arms and torso … an old man Harry had seen only in a dream was now pushing himself out of the end of the wand just as Cedric had done … and his ghost, or his shadow, or whatever it was, fell next to Cedric's, and surveyed Harry and Voldemort, and the golden web, and the connected wands, with mild surprise, leaning on his walking stick. …"He was a real wizard, then?" the old man said,

his eyes on Voldemort. “Killed me, that one did. … You fight him, boy. …”

But already, yet another head was emerging … and this head, gray as a smoky statue, was a woman’s. … Harry, both arms shak-ing now as he fought to keep his wand still, saw her drop to the ground and straighten up like the others, staring. …The shadow of Bertha Jorkins surveyed the battle before her with wide eyes.

“Don’t let go, now!” she cried, and her voice echoed like Cedric’s as though from very far away. “Don’t let him get you, Harry — don’t let go!”

She and the other two shadowy figures began to pace around the inner walls of the golden web, while the Death Eaters flitted around the outside of it … and Voldemort’s dead victims whispered as they circled the duelers, whispered words of encouragement to Harry, and hissed words Harry couldn’t hear to Voldemort.

And now another head was emerging from the tip of Volde-mort’s wand … and Harry knew when he saw it who it would be … he knew, as though he had expected it from the moment when Cedric had appeared from the wand … knew, because the woman was the one he’d thought of more than any other tonight. …The smoky shadow of a young woman with long hair fell to the ground as Bertha had done, straightened up, and looked at him … and Harry, his arms shaking madly now, looked back into the ghostly face of his mother.

“Your father’s coming …” she said quietly. “Hold on for your father … it will be all right … hold on. …”

And he came … first his head, then his body … tall and untidy-haired like Harry, the smoky, shadowy form of James Potter blossomed from the end of Voldemort’s wand, fell to the ground, and straightened like his wife. He walked close to Harry, looking down at him, and he spoke in the same distant, echoing voice as the others, but quietly, so that Voldemort, his face now livid with fear as his victims prowled around

him, could not hear. …“When the connection is broken, we will linger for only mo-ments … but we will give you time … you must get to the Portkey, it will return you to Hogwarts … do you understand, Harry?”

“Yes,” Harry gasped, fighting now to keep a hold on his wand, which was slipping and sliding beneath his fingers.

“Harry …” whispered the figure of Cedric, “take my body back, will you? Take my body back to my parents. …”

“I will,” said Harry, his face screwed up with the effort of hold-ing the wand.

“Do it now,” whispered his father’s voice, “be ready to run … do it now. …”

“NOW!” Harry yelled; he didn’t think he could have held on for another moment anyway — he pulled his wand upward with an almighty wrench, and the golden thread broke; the cage of light vanished, the phoenix song died — but the shadowy figures of Voldemort’s victims did not disappear — they were closing in upon Voldemort, shielding Harry from his gaze —And Harry ran as he had never run in his life, knocking two stunned Death Eaters aside as he passed; he zigzagged behind head-stones, feeling their curses following him, hearing them hit the headstones — he was dodging curses and graves, pelting toward Cedric’s body, no longer aware of the pain in his leg, his whole be-ing concentrated on what he had to do —“Stun him!” he heard Voldemort scream.

Ten feet from Cedric, Harry dived behind a marble angel to avoid the jets of red light and saw the tip of its wing shatter as the spells hit it. Gripping his wand more tightly, he dashed out from behind the angel —“Impedimenta!” he bellowed, pointing his wand wildly over his shoulder at the Death Eaters running at him.

From a muffled yell, he thought he had stopped at least one of them, but there was no time to stop and look; he jumped over the cup and

dived as he heard more wand blasts behind him; more jets of light flew over his head as he fell, stretching out his hand to grab Cedric's arm —"Stand aside! I will kill him! He is mine!" shrieked Voldemort.

Harry's hand had closed on Cedric's wrist; one tombstone stood between him and Voldemort, but Cedric was too heavy to carry, and the cup was out of reach —Voldemort's red eyes flamed in the darkness. Harry saw his mouth curl into a smile, saw him raise his wand.

"Accio!" Harry yelled, pointing his wand at the Triwizard Cup.

It flew into the air and soared toward him. Harry caught it by the handle —He heard Voldemort's scream of fury at the same moment that he felt the jerk behind his navel that meant the Portkey had worked — it was speeding him away in a whirl of wind and color, and Cedric along with him. … They were going back.

Chapter 35 Veritaserum

Harry felt himself slam flat into the ground; his face was pressed into grass; the smell of it filled his nostrils. He had closed his eyes while the Portkey transported him, and he kept them closed now. He did not move. All the breath seemed to have been knocked out of him; his head was swimming so badly he felt as though the ground beneath him were swaying like the deck of a ship. To hold himself steady, he tightened his hold on the two things he was still clutching: the smooth, cold handle of the Tri-wizard Cup and Cedric's body. He felt as though he would slide away into the blackness gathering at the edges of his brain if he let go of either of them. Shock and exhaustion kept him on the ground, breathing in the smell of the grass, waiting … waiting for someone to do something … something to happen … and all the while, his scar burned dully on his forehead. …A torrent of sound deafened and confused him; there were voices everywhere, footsteps, screams. … He remained where he was, his face screwed up against the noise, as though it were a nightmare that would pass. …Then a pair of hands seized him roughly and turned him over.

"Harry! Harry!"

He opened his eyes.

He was looking up at the starry sky, and Albus Dumbledore was crouched over him. The dark shadows of a crowd of people pressed in around them, pushing nearer; Harry felt the ground beneath his head reverberating with their footsteps.

He had come back to the edge of the maze. He could see the stands rising above him, the shapes of people moving in them, the stars above.

Harry let go of the cup, but he clutched Cedric to him even more tightly. He raised his free hand and seized Dumbledore's wrist, while

Dumbledore’s face swam in and out of focus.

“He’s back,” Harry whispered. “He’s back. Voldemort.”

“What’s going on? What’s happened?”

The face of Cornelius Fudge appeared upside down over Harry; it looked white, appalled.

“My God — Diggory!” it whispered. “Dumbledore — he’s dead!”

The words were repeated, the shadowy figures pressing in on them gasped it to those around them … and then others shouted it — screeched it — into the night — “He’s dead!” “He’s dead!” “Cedric Diggory! Dead!”

“Harry, let go of him,” he heard Fudge’s voice say, and he felt fingers trying to pry him from Cedric’s limp body, but Harry wouldn’t let him go. Then Dumbledore’s face, which was still blurred and misted, came closer.

“Harry, you can’t help him now. It’s over. Let go.”

“He wanted me to bring him back,” Harry muttered — it seemed important to explain this. “He wanted me to bring him back to his parents. …”

“That’s right, Harry … just let go now. …”

Dumbledore bent down, and with extraordinary strength for a man so old and thin, raised Harry from the ground and set him on his feet. Harry swayed. His head was pounding. His injured leg would no longer support his weight. The crowd around them jostled, fighting to get closer, pressing darkly in on him — “What’s hap-pened?” “What’s wrong with him?” “Diggory’s dead!”

"He'll need to go to the hospital wing!" Fudge was saying loudly. "He's ill, he's injured — Dumbledore, Diggory's parents, they're here, they're in the stands. …"

"I'll take Harry, Dumbledore, I'll take him —"

"No, I would prefer —"

"Dumbledore, Amos Diggory's running … he's coming over. … Don't you think you should tell him — before he sees — ?"

"Harry, stay here —"

Girls were screaming, sobbing hysterically. … The scene flick-ered oddly before Harry's eyes. …"It's all right, son, I've got you … come on … hospital wing …"

"Dumbledore said stay," said Harry thickly, the pounding in his scar making him feel as though he was about to throw up; his vi-sion was blurring worse than ever.

"You need to lie down. … Come on now. …"

Someone larger and stronger than he was was half pulling, half carrying him through the frightened crowd. Harry heard people gasping, screaming, and shouting as the man supporting him pushed a path through them, taking him back to the castle. Across the lawn, past the lake and the Durmstrang ship, Harry heard nothing but the heavy breathing of the man helping him walk.

"What happened, Harry?" the man asked at last as he lifted Harry up the stone steps. Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. It was Mad-Eye Moody.

"Cup was a Portkey," said Harry as they crossed the entrance hall. "Took me and Cedric to a graveyard … and Voldemort was there … Lord Voldemort …"

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Up the marble stairs …"The Dark Lord was there? What happened then?"

"Killed Cedric … they killed Cedric. …"

"And then?"

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Along the corridor …"Made a potion … got his body back. …"

"The Dark Lord got his body back? He's returned?"

"And the Death Eaters came … and then we dueled. …"

"You dueled with the Dark Lord?"

"Got away … my wand … did something funny. … I saw my mum and dad … they came out of his wand. …"

"In here, Harry … in here, and sit down. … You'll be all right now … drink this. …"

Harry heard a key scrape in a lock and felt a cup being pushed into his hands.

"Drink it … you'll feel better … come on, now, Harry, I need to know exactly what happened. …"

Moody helped tip the stuff down Harry's throat; he coughed, a peppery taste burning his throat. Moody's office came into sharper focus, and so did Moody himself. … He looked as white as Fudge had looked, and both eyes were fixed unblinkingly upon Harry's face.

"Voldemort's back, Harry? You're sure he's back? How did he do it?"

"He took stuff from his father's grave, and from Wormtail, and me," said Harry. His head felt clearer; his scar wasn't hurting so badly; he could now see Moody's face distinctly, even though the office was

dark. He could still hear screaming and shouting from the distant Quidditch field.

"What did the Dark Lord take from you?" said Moody.

"Blood," said Harry, raising his arm. His sleeve was ripped where Wormtail's dagger had torn it.

Moody let out his breath in a long, low hiss.

"And the Death Eaters? They returned?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Loads of them …"

"How did he treat them?" Moody asked quietly. "Did he forgive them?"

But Harry had suddenly remembered. He should have told Dumbledore, he should have said it straightaway —"There's a Death Eater at Hogwarts! There's a Death Eater here — they put my name in the Goblet of Fire, they made sure I got through to the end —"

Harry tried to get up, but Moody pushed him back down.

"I know who the Death Eater is," he said quietly.

"Karkaroff?" said Harry wildly. "Where is he? Have you got him? Is he locked up?"

"Karkaroff?" said Moody with an odd laugh. "Karkaroff fled tonight, when he felt the Dark Mark burn upon his arm. He betrayed too many faithful supporters of the Dark Lord to wish to meet them … but I doubt he will get far. The Dark Lord has ways of tracking his enemies."

"Karkaroff's gone? He ran away? But then — he didn't put my name in the goblet?"

"No," said Moody slowly. "No, he didn't. It was I who did that."

Harry heard, but didn't believe.

"No, you didn't," he said. "You didn't do that … you can't have done …"

"I assure you I did," said Moody, and his magical eye swung around and fixed upon the door, and Harry knew he was making sure that there was no one outside it. At the same time, Moody drew out his wand and pointed it at Harry.

"He forgave them, then?" he said. "The Death Eaters who went free? The ones who escaped Azkaban?"

"What?" said Harry.

He was looking at the wand Moody was pointing at him. This was a bad joke, it had to be.

"I asked you," said Moody quietly, "whether he forgave the scum who never even went to look for him. Those treacherous cowards who wouldn't even brave Azkaban for him. The faithless, worthless bits of filth who were brave enough to cavort in masks at the Quid-ditch World Cup, but fled at the sight of the Dark Mark when I fired it into the sky."

"You fired … What are you talking about … ?"

"I told you, Harry … I told you. If there's one thing I hate more than any other, it's a Death Eater who walked free. They turned their backs on my master when he needed them most. I expected him to punish them. I expected him to torture them. Tell me he hurt them, Harry. …" Moody's face was suddenly lit with an in-sane smile. "Tell me he told them that I, I alone remained faith-ful … prepared to risk everything to deliver to him the one thing he wanted above all … you."

"You didn't … it — it can't be you. …"

“Who put your name in the Goblet of Fire, under the name of a different school? I did. Who frightened off every person I thought might try to hurt you or prevent you from winning the tourna-ment? I did. Who nudged Hagrid into showing you the dragons? I did. Who helped you see the only way you could beat the dragon? I did.”

Moody’s magical eye had now left the door. It was fixed upon Harry. His lopsided mouth leered more widely than ever.

“It hasn’t been easy, Harry, guiding you through these tasks without arousing suspicion. I have had to use every ounce of cun-ning I possess, so that my hand would not be detectable in your success. Dumbledore would have been very suspicious if you had managed everything too easily. As long as you got into that maze, preferably with a decent head start — then, I knew, I would have a chance of getting rid of the other champions and leaving your way clear. But I also had to contend with your stupidity. The second task … that was when I was most afraid we would fail. I was keep-ing watch on you, Potter. I knew you hadn’t worked out the egg’s clue, so I had to give you another hint —”

“You didn’t,” Harry said hoarsely. “Cedric gave me the clue —”

“Who told Cedric to open it underwater? I did. I trusted that he would pass the information on to you. Decent people are so easy to manipulate, Potter. I was sure Cedric would want to repay you for telling him about the dragons, and so he did. But even then, Potter, even then you seemed likely to fail. I was watching all the time … all those hours in the library. Didn’t you realize that the book you needed was in your dormitory all along? I planted it there early on, I gave it to the Longbottom boy, don’t you remember? Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean. It would have told you all you needed to know about gillyweed. I expected you to ask everyone and anyone you could for help. Longbottom would have told you in an instant. But you did not … you did not. … You have a streak of pride and independence that might have ruined all.

“So what could I do? Feed you information from another inno-cent source. You told me at the Yule Ball a house-elf called Dobby had given you a Christmas present. I called the elf to the staffroom to collect some robes for cleaning. I staged a loud conversation with Professor McGonagall about the hostages who had been taken, and whether Potter would think to use gillyweed. And your little elf friend ran straight to Snape’s office and then hurried to find you. …”

Moody’s wand was still pointing directly at Harry’s heart. Over his shoulder, foggy shapes were moving in the Foe-Glass on the wall.

“You were so long in that lake, Potter, I thought you had drowned. But luckily, Dumbledore took your idiocy for nobility, and marked you high for it. I breathed again.

“You had an easier time of it than you should have in that maze tonight, of course,” said Moody. “I was patrolling around it, able to see through the outer hedges, able to curse many obstacles out of your way. I Stunned Fleur Delacour as she passed. I put the Im-perius Curse on Krum, so that he would finish Diggory and leave your path to the cup clear.”

Harry stared at Moody. He just didn’t see how this could be. … Dumbledore’s friend, the famous Auror … the one who had caught so many Death Eaters … It made no sense … no sense at all. …The foggy shapes in the Foe-Glass were sharpening, had become more distinct. Harry could see the outlines of three people over Moody’s shoulder, moving closer and closer. But Moody wasn’t watching them. His magical eye was upon Harry.

“The Dark Lord didn’t manage to kill you, Potter, and he so wanted to,” whispered Moody. “Imagine how he will reward me when he finds I have done it for him. I gave you to him — the thing he needed above all to regenerate — and then I killed you for him. I will be honored beyond all other Death Eaters. I will be his dearest, his closest supporter … closer than a son. …”

Moody's normal eye was bulging, the magical eye fixed upon Harry. The door was barred, and Harry knew he would never reach his own wand in time. …"The Dark Lord and I," said Moody, and he looked completely insane now, towering over Harry, leering down at him, "have much in common. Both of us, for instance, had very disappointing fathers … very disappointing indeed. Both of us suffered the in-dignity, Harry, of being named after those fathers. And both of us had the pleasure … the very great pleasure … of killing our fathers to ensure the continued rise of the Dark Order!"

"You're mad," Harry said — he couldn't stop himself — "you're mad!"

"Mad, am I?" said Moody, his voice rising uncontrollably. "We'll see! We'll see who's mad, now that the Dark Lord has returned, with me at his side! He is back, Harry Potter, you did not conquer him — and now — I conquer you!"

Moody raised his wand, he opened his mouth; Harry plunged his own hand into his robes —"Stupefy!" There was a blinding flash of red light, and with a great splintering and crashing, the door of Moody's office was blasted apart —Moody was thrown backward onto the office floor. Harry, still staring at the place where Moody's face had been, saw Albus Dum-bledore, Professor Snape, and Professor McGonagall looking back at him out of the Foe-Glass. He looked around and saw the three of them standing in the doorway, Dumbledore in front, his wand outstretched.

At that moment, Harry fully understood for the first time why people said Dumbledore was the only wizard Voldemort had ever feared. The look upon Dumbledore's face as he stared down at the unconscious form of Mad-Eye Moody was more terrible than Harry could have ever imagined. There was no benign smile upon Dumbledore's face, no twinkle in the eyes behind the spectacles. There was cold fury in every line of the ancient face; a sense of power radiated from Dumbledore as though he were giving off burning heat.

He stepped into the office, placed a foot underneath Moody's unconscious body, and kicked him over onto his back, so that his face was visible. Snape followed him, looking into the Foe-Glass, where his own face was still visible, glaring into the room. Profes-sor McGonagall went straight to Harry.

"Come along, Potter," she whispered. The thin line of her mouth was twitching as though she was about to cry. "Come along … hospital wing …"

"No," said Dumbledore sharply.

"Dumbledore, he ought to — look at him — he's been through enough tonight —"

"He will stay, Minerva, because he needs to understand," said Dumbledore curtly. "Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery. He needs to know who has put him through the ordeal he has suffered tonight, and why."

"Moody," Harry said. He was still in a state of complete disbe-lief. "How can it have been Moody?"

"This is not Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore quietly. "You have never known Alastor Moody. The real Moody would not have removed you from my sight after what happened tonight. The moment he took you, I knew — and I followed."

Dumbledore bent down over Moody's limp form and put a hand inside his robes. He pulled out Moody's hip flask and a set of keys on a ring. Then he turned to Professors McGonagall and Snape.

"Severus, please fetch me the strongest Truth Potion you possess, and then go down to the kitchens and bring up the house-elf called Winky. Minerva, kindly go down to Hagrid's house, where you will find

a large black dog sitting in the pumpkin patch. Take the dog up to my office, tell him I will be with him shortly, then come back here."

If either Snape or McGonagall found these instructions peculiar, they hid their confusion. Both turned at once and left the office. Dumbledore walked over to the trunk with seven locks, fitted the first key in the lock, and opened it. It contained a mass of spell-books. Dumbledore closed the trunk, placed a second key in the second lock, and opened the trunk again. The spellbooks had van-ished; this time it contained an assortment of broken Sneako-scopes, some parchment and quills, and what looked like a silvery Invisibility Cloak. Harry watched, astounded, as Dumbledore placed the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth keys in their respective locks, reopening the trunk, and each time revealing different con-tents. Then he placed the seventh key in the lock, threw open the lid, and Harry let out a cry of amazement.

He was looking down into a kind of pit, an underground room, and lying on the floor some ten feet below, apparently fast asleep, thin and starved in appearance, was the real Mad-Eye Moody. His wooden leg was gone, the socket that should have held the magical eye looked empty beneath its lid, and chunks of his grizzled hair were missing. Harry stared, thunderstruck, between the sleeping Moody in the trunk and the unconscious Moody lying on the floor of the office.

Dumbledore climbed into the trunk, lowered himself, and fell lightly onto the floor beside the sleeping Moody. He bent over him.

"Stunned — controlled by the Imperius Curse — very weak," he said. "Of course, they would have needed to keep him alive. Harry, throw down the imposter's cloak — he's freezing. Madam Pomfrey will need to see him, but he seems in no immediate danger."

Harry did as he was told; Dumbledore covered Moody in the cloak, tucked it around him, and clambered out of the trunk again. Then he

picked up the hip flask that stood upon the desk, unscrewed it, and turned it over. A thick glutinous liquid splattered onto the office floor.

"Polyjuice Potion, Harry," said Dumbledore. "You see the sim-plicity of it, and the brilliance. For Moody never does drink except from his hip flask, he's well known for it. The imposter needed, of course, to keep the real Moody close by, so that he could continue making the potion. You see his hair …" Dumbledore looked down on the Moody in the trunk. "The imposter has been cutting it off all year, see where it is uneven? But I think, in the excitement of tonight, our fake Moody might have forgotten to take it as frequently as he should have done … on the hour … every hour. … We shall see."

Dumbledore pulled out the chair at the desk and sat down upon it, his eyes fixed upon the unconscious Moody on the floor. Harry stared at him too. Minutes passed in silence. …Then, before Harry's very eyes, the face of the man on the floor began to change. The scars were disappearing, the skin was becom-ing smooth; the mangled nose became whole and started to shrink. The long mane of grizzled gray hair was withdrawing into the scalp and turning the color of straw. Suddenly, with a loud clunk, the wooden leg fell away as a normal leg regrew in its place; next mo-ment, the magical eyeball had popped out of the man's face as a real eye replaced it; it rolled away across the floor and continued to swivel in every direction.

Harry saw a man lying before him, pale-skinned, slightly freck-led, with a mop of fair hair. He knew who he was. He had seen him in Dumbledore's Pensieve, had watched him being led away from court by the dementors, trying to convince Mr. Crouch that he was innocent … but he was lined around the eyes now and looked much older. … There were hurried footsteps outside in the corridor. Snape had returned with Winky at his heels. Professor McGonagall was right behind them.

"Crouch!" Snape said, stopping dead in the doorway. "Barty Crouch!"

“Good heavens,” said Professor McGonagall, stopping dead and staring down at the man on the floor.

Filthy, disheveled, Winky peered around Snape’s legs. Her mouth opened wide and she let out a piercing shriek.

“Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you doing here?”

She flung herself forward onto the young man’s chest.

“You is killed him! You is killed him! You is killed Master’s son!”

“He is simply Stunned, Winky,” said Dumbledore. “Step aside, please. Severus, you have the potion?”

Snape handed Dumbledore a small glass bottle of completely clear liquid: the Veritaserum with which he had threatened Harry in class. Dumbledore got up, bent over the man on the floor, and pulled him into a sitting position against the wall beneath the Foe-Glass, in which the reflections of Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall were still glaring down upon them all. Winky re-mained on her knees, trembling, her hands over her face. Dum-bledore forced the man’s mouth open and poured three drops inside it. Then he pointed his wand at the man’s chest and said, “Rennervate.”

Crouch’s son opened his eyes. His face was slack, his gaze unfocused. Dumbledore knelt before him, so that their faces were level.

“Can you hear me?” Dumbledore asked quietly.

The man’s eyelids flickered.

“Yes,” he muttered.

“I would like you to tell us,” said Dumbledore softly, “how you came to be here. How did you escape from Azkaban?”

Crouch took a deep, shuddering breath, then began to speak in a flat, expressionless voice.

“My mother saved me. She knew she was dying. She persuaded my father to rescue me as a last favor to her. He loved her as he had never loved me. He agreed. They came to visit me. They gave me a draft of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my mother’s hairs. She took a draft of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my hairs. We took on each other’s appearance.”

Winky was shaking her head, trembling.

“Say no more, Master Barty, say no more, you is getting your father into trouble!”

But Crouch took another deep breath and continued in the same flat voice.

“The dementors are blind. They sensed one healthy, one dying person entering Azkaban. They sensed one healthy, one dying person leaving it. My father smuggled me out, disguised as my mother, in case any prisoners were watching through their doors.

“My mother died a short while afterward in Azkaban. She was careful to drink Polyjuice Potion until the end. She was buried un-der my name and bearing my appearance. Everyone believed her to be me.”

The man’s eyelids flickered.

“And what did your father do with you, when he had got you home?” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Staged my mother’s death. A quiet, private funeral. That grave is empty. The house-elf nursed me back to health. Then I had to be concealed. I had to be controlled. My father had to use a number of spells to subdue me. When I had recovered my strength, I thought only of finding my master … of returning to his service.”

“How did your father subdue you?” said Dumbledore.

“The Imperius Curse,” Crouch said. “I was under my father’s control. I was forced to wear an Invisibility Cloak day and night. I was always with the house-elf. She was my keeper and caretaker. She pitied me. She persuaded my father to give me occasional treats. Rewards for my good behavior.”

“Master Barty, Master Barty,” sobbed Winky through her hands. “You isn’t ought to tell them, we is getting in trouble. …”

“Did anybody ever discover that you were still alive?” said Dumbledore softly. “Did anyone know except your father and the house-elf?”

“Yes,” said Crouch, his eyelids flickering again. “A witch in my father’s office. Bertha Jorkins. She came to the house with papers for my father’s signature. He was not at home. Winky showed her inside and returned to the kitchen, to me. But Bertha Jorkins heard Winky talking to me. She came to investigate. She heard enough to guess who was hiding under the Invisibility Cloak. My father ar-rived home. She confronted him. He put a very powerful Memory Charm on her to make her forget what she’d found out. Too pow-erful. He said it damaged her memory permanently.”

“Why is she coming to nose into my master’s private business?” sobbed Winky. “Why isn’t she leaving us be?”

“Tell me about the Quidditch World Cup,” said Dumbledore.

“Winky talked my father into it,” said Crouch, still in the same monotonous voice. “She spent months persuading him. I had not left the house for years. I had loved Quidditch. Let him go, she said. He will be in his Invisibility Cloak. He can watch. Let him smell fresh air for once. She said my mother would have wanted it. She told my father that my mother had died to give me freedom. She had not saved me for a life of imprisonment. He agreed in the end.

"It was carefully planned. My father led me and Winky up to the Top Box early in the day. Winky was to say that she was saving a seat for my father. I was to sit there, invisible. When everyone had left the box, we would emerge. Winky would appear to be alone. Nobody would ever know.

"But Winky didn't know that I was growing stronger. I was start-ing to fight my father's Imperius Curse. There were times when I was almost myself again. There were brief periods when I seemed outside his control. It happened, there, in the Top Box. It was like waking from a deep sleep. I found myself out in public, in the mid-dle of the match, and I saw, in front of me, a wand sticking out of a boy's pocket. I had not been allowed a wand since before Azka-ban. I stole it. Winky didn't know. Winky is frightened of heights. She had her face hidden."

"Master Barty, you bad boy!" whispered Winky, tears trickling between her fingers.

"So you took the wand," said Dumbledore, "and what did you do with it?"

"We went back to the tent," said Crouch. "Then we heard them. We heard the Death Eaters. The ones who had never been to Azka-ban. The ones who had never suffered for my master. They had turned their backs on him. They were not enslaved, as I was. They were free to seek him, but they did not. They were merely making sport of Muggles. The sound of their voices awoke me. My mind was clearer than it had been in years. I was angry. I had the wand. I wanted to attack them for their disloyalty to my master. My father had left the tent; he had gone to free the Muggles. Winky was afraid to see me so angry. She used her own brand of magic to bind me to her. She pulled me from the tent, pulled me into the forest, away from the Death Eaters. I tried to hold her back. I wanted to return to the campsite. I wanted to show those Death Eaters what loyalty to the Dark Lord meant, and to punish them for their lack of it. I used the stolen wand to cast the Dark Mark into the sky.

“Ministry wizards arrived. They shot Stunning Spells every-where. One of the spells came through the trees where Winky and I stood. The bond connecting us was broken. We were both Stunned.

“When Winky was discovered, my father knew I must be nearby. He searched the bushes where she had been found and felt me lying there. He waited until the other Ministry members had left the forest. He put me back under the Imperius Curse and took me home. He dismissed Winky. She had failed him. She had let me acquire a wand. She had almost let me escape.”

Winky let out a wail of despair.

“Now it was just Father and I, alone in the house. And then … and then …” Crouch’s head rolled on his neck, and an insane grin spread across his face. “My master came for me.

“He arrived at our house late one night in the arms of his servant Wormtail. My master had found out that I was still alive. He had captured Bertha Jorkins in Albania. He had tortured her. She told him a great deal. She told him about the Triwizard Tournament. She told him the old Auror, Moody, was going to teach at Hog-warts. He tortured her until he broke through the Memory Charm my father had placed upon her. She told him I had escaped from Azkaban. She told him my father kept me imprisoned to prevent me from seeking my master. And so my master knew that I was still his faithful servant — perhaps the most faithful of all. My master conceived a plan, based upon the information Bertha had given him. He needed me. He arrived at our house near midnight. My father answered the door.”

The smile spread wider over Crouch’s face, as though recalling the sweetest memory of his life. Winky’s petrified brown eyes were visible through her fingers. She seemed too appalled to speak.

“It was very quick. My father was placed under the Imperius Curse by my master. Now my father was the one imprisoned, con-trolled. My master forced him to go about his business as usual, to act as though

nothing was wrong. And I was released. I awoke. I was myself again, alive as I hadn't been in years.

"And what did Lord Voldemort ask you to do?" said Dumble-dore.

"He asked me whether I was ready to risk everything for him. I was ready. It was my dream, my greatest ambition, to serve him, to prove myself to him. He told me he needed to place a faithful ser-vant at Hogwarts. A servant who would guide Harry Potter through the Triwizard Tournament without appearing to do so. A servant who would watch over Harry Potter. Ensure he reached the Triwizard Cup. Turn the cup into a Portkey, which would take the first person to touch it to my master. But first —"

"You needed Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore. His blue eyes were blazing, though his voice remained calm.

"Wormtail and I did it. We had prepared the Polyjuice Potion beforehand. We journeyed to his house. Moody put up a struggle. There was a commotion. We managed to subdue him just in time. Forced him into a compartment of his own magical trunk. Took some of his hair and added it to the potion. I drank it; I became Moody's double. I took his leg and his eye. I was ready to face Arthur Weasley when he arrived to sort out the Muggles who had heard a disturbance. I made the dustbins move around the yard. I told Arthur Weasley I had heard intruders in my yard, who had set off the dustbins. Then I packed up Moody's clothes and Dark detectors, put them in the trunk with Moody, and set off for Hog-warts. I kept him alive, under the Imperius Curse. I wanted to be able to question him. To find out about his past, learn his habits, so that I could fool even Dumbledore. I also needed his hair to make the Polyjuice Potion. The other ingredients were easy. I stole boom-slang skin from the dungeons. When the Potions master found me in his office, I said I was under orders to search it."

“And what became of Wormtail after you attacked Moody?” said Dumbledore.

“Wormtail returned to care for my master, in my father’s house, and to keep watch over my father.”

“But your father escaped,” said Dumbledore.

“Yes. After a while he began to fight the Imperius Curse just as I had done. There were periods when he knew what was happening. My master decided it was no longer safe for my father to leave the house. He forced him to send letters to the Ministry instead. He made him write and say he was ill. But Wormtail neglected his duty. He was not watchful enough. My father escaped. My master guessed that he was heading for Hogwarts. My father was going to tell Dumbledore everything, to confess. He was going to admit that he had smuggled me from Azkaban.

“My master sent me word of my father’s escape. He told me to stop him at all costs. So I waited and watched. I used the map I had taken from Harry Potter. The map that had almost ruined everything.”

“Map?” said Dumbledore quickly. “What map is this?”

“Potter’s map of Hogwarts. Potter saw me on it. Potter saw me stealing more ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion from Snape’s office one night. He thought I was my father. We have the same first name. I took the map from Potter that night. I told him my father hated Dark wizards. Potter believed my father was after Snape.

“For a week I waited for my father to arrive at Hogwarts. At last, one evening, the map showed my father entering the grounds. I pulled on my Invisibility Cloak and went down to meet him. He was walking around the edge of the forest. Then Potter came, and Krum. I waited. I could not hurt Potter; my master needed him. Potter ran to get Dumbledore. I Stunned Krum. I killed my father.”

“Noooo!” wailed Winky. “Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you saying?”

“You killed your father,” Dumbledore said, in the same soft voice. “What did you do with the body?”

“Carried it into the forest. Covered it with the Invisibility Cloak. I had the map with me. I watched Potter run into the castle. He met Snape. Dumbledore joined them. I watched Potter bringing Dumbledore out of the castle. I walked back out of the forest, dou-bled around behind them, went to meet them. I told Dumbledore Snape had told me where to come.

“Dumbledore told me to go and look for my father. I went back to my father’s body. Watched the map. When everyone was gone, I Transfigured my father’s body. He became a bone … I buried it, while wearing the Invisibility Cloak, in the freshly dug earth in front of Hagrid’s cabin.”

There was complete silence now, except for Winky’s continued sobs. Then Dumbledore said, “And tonight …”

“I offered to carry the Triwizard Cup into the maze before din-ner,” whispered Barty Crouch. “Turned it into a Portkey. My mas-ter’s plan worked. He is returned to power and I will be honored by him beyond the dreams of wizards.”

The insane smile lit his features once more, and his head drooped onto his shoulder as Winky wailed and sobbed at his side.

Chapter 36 The Parting of the Ways

Dumbledore stood up. He stared down at Barty Crouch for a moment with disgust on his face. Then he raised his wand once more and ropes flew out of it, ropes that twisted themselves around Barty Crouch, binding him tightly. He turned to Professor McGonagall.

"Minerva, could I ask you to stand guard here while I take Harry upstairs?"

"Of course," said Professor McGonagall. She looked slightly nauseous, as though she had just watched someone being sick. However, when she drew out her wand and pointed it at Barty Crouch, her hand was quite steady.

"Severus" — Dumbledore turned to Snape — "please tell Madam Pomfrey to come down here; we need to get Alastor Moody into the hospital wing. Then go down into the grounds, find Cornelius Fudge, and bring him up to this office. He will undoubtedly want to question Crouch himself. Tell him I will be in the hospital wing in half an hour's time if he needs me."

Snape nodded silently and swept out of the room.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said gently.

Harry got up and swayed again; the pain in his leg, which he had not noticed all the time he had been listening to Crouch, now re-turned in full measure. He also realized that he was shaking. Dum-bledore gripped his arm and helped him out into the dark corridor.

"I want you to come up to my office first, Harry," he said quietly as they headed up the passageway. "Sirius is waiting for us there."

Harry nodded. A kind of numbness and a sense of complete un-reality were upon him, but he did not care; he was even glad of it. He

didn’t want to have to think about anything that had happened since he had first touched the Triwizard Cup. He didn’t want to have to examine the memories, fresh and sharp as photographs, which kept flashing across his mind. Mad-Eye Moody, inside the trunk. Wormtail, slumped on the ground, cradling his stump of an arm. Voldemort, rising from the steaming cauldron. Cedric … dead … Cedric, asking to be returned to his parents. …“Professor,” Harry mumbled, “where are Mr. and Mrs. Diggory?”

“They are with Professor Sprout,” said Dumbledore. His voice, which had been so calm throughout the interrogation of Barty Crouch, shook very slightly for the first time. “She was Head of Cedric’s house, and knew him best.”

They had reached the stone gargoyle. Dumbledore gave the password, it sprang aside, and he and Harry went up the moving spiral staircase to the oak door. Dumbledore pushed it open. Sirius was standing there. His face was white and gaunt as it had been when he had escaped Azkaban. In one swift moment, he had crossed the room.

“Harry, are you all right? I knew it — I knew something like this — what happened?”

His hands shook as he helped Harry into a chair in front of the desk.

“What happened?” he asked more urgentlyDumbledore began to tell Sirius everything Barty Crouch had said. Harry was only half listening. So tired every bone in his body was aching, he wanted nothing more than to sit here, undisturbed, for hours and hours, until he fell asleep and didn’t have to think or feel anymore.

There was a soft rush of wings. Fawkes the phoenix had left his perch, flown across the office, and landed on Harry’s knee.

“ ’Lo, Fawkes,” said Harry quietly. He stroked the phoenix’s beautiful scarlet-and-gold plumage. Fawkes blinked peacefully up at him.

There was something comforting about his warm weight.

Dumbledore stopped talking. He sat down opposite Harry, be-hind his desk. He was looking at Harry, who avoided his eyes. Dumbledore was going to question him. He was going to make Harry relive everything.

“I need to know what happened after you touched the Portkey in the maze, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

“We can leave that till morning, can’t we, Dumbledore?” said Sirius harshly. He had put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Let him have a sleep. Let him rest.”

Harry felt a rush of gratitude toward Sirius, but Dumbledore took no notice of Sirius’s words. He leaned forward toward Harry. Very unwillingly, Harry raised his head and looked into those blue eyes.

“If I thought I could help you,” Dumbledore said gently, “by putting you into an enchanted sleep and allowing you to postpone the moment when you would have to think about what has hap-pened tonight, I would do it. But I know better. Numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you finally feel it. You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you. I ask you to demonstrate your courage one more time. I ask you to tell us what happened.”

The phoenix let out one soft, quavering note. It shivered in the air, and Harry felt as though a drop of hot liquid had slipped down his throat into his stomach, warming him, and strengthening him.

He took a deep breath and began to tell them. As he spoke, vi-sions of everything that had passed that night seemed to rise before his eyes; he saw the sparkling surface of the potion that had revived Voldemort; he saw the Death Eaters Apparating between the graves around them; he saw Cedric’s body, lying on the ground beside the cup.

Once or twice, Sirius made a noise as though about to say something, his hand still tight on Harry's shoulder, but Dumbledore raised his hand to stop him, and Harry was glad of this, because it was easier to keep going now he had started. It was even a relief; he felt almost as though something poisonous were being extracted from him. It was costing him every bit of determination he had to keep talking, yet he sensed that once he had finished, he would feel better.

When Harry told of Wormtail piercing his arm with the dagger, however, Sirius let out a vehement exclamation and Dumbledore stood up so quickly that Harry started. Dumbledore walked around the desk and told Harry to stretch out his arm. Harry showed them both the place where his robes were torn and the cut beneath them.

"He said my blood would make him stronger than if he'd used someone else's," Harry told Dumbledore. "He said the protection my — my mother left in me — he'd have it too. And he was right — he could touch me without hurting himself, he touched my face."

For a fleeting instant, Harry thought he saw a gleam of some-thing like triumph in Dumbledore's eyes. But next second, Harry was sure he had imagined it, for when Dumbledore had returned to his seat behind the desk, he looked as old and weary as Harry had ever seen him.

"Very well," he said, sitting down again. "Voldemort has over-come that particular barrier. Harry, continue, please."

Harry went on; he explained how Voldemort had emerged from the cauldron, and told them all he could remember of Voldemort's speech to the Death Eaters. Then he told how Voldemort had un-tied him, returned his wand to him, and prepared to duel.

But when he reached the part where the golden beam of light had connected his and Voldemort's wands, he found his throat obstructed. He tried to keep talking, but the memories of what had come out of Voldemort's wand were flooding into his mind. He could see

Cedric emerging, see the old man, Bertha Jorkins … his father … his mother …He was glad when Sirius broke the silence.

“The wands connected?” he said, looking from Harry to Dum-bledore. “Why?”

Harry looked up at Dumbledore again, on whose face there was an arrested look.

“Priori Incantatem,” he muttered.

His eyes gazed into Harry’s and it was almost as though an in-visible beam of understanding shot between them.

“The Reverse Spell effect?” said Sirius sharply.

“Exactly,” said Dumbledore. “Harry’s wand and Voldemort’s wand share cores. Each of them contains a feather from the tail of the same phoenix. This phoenix, in fact,” he added, and he pointed at the scarlet-and-gold bird, perching peacefully on Harry’s knee.

“My wand’s feather came from Fawkes?” Harry said, amazed.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. “Mr. Ollivander wrote to tell me you had bought the second wand, the moment you left his shop four years ago.”

“So what happens when a wand meets its brother?” said Sirius.

“They will not work properly against each other,” said Dum-bledore. “If, however, the owners of the wands force the wands to do battle … a very rare effect will take place. One of the wands will force the other to regurgitate spells it has performed — in re-verse. The most recent first … and then those which preceded it. …”

He looked interrogatively at Harry, and Harry nodded.

“Which means,” said Dumbledore slowly, his eyes upon Harry’s face, “that some form of Cedric must have reappeared.”

Harry nodded again.

“Diggory came back to life?” said Sirius sharply.

“No spell can reawaken the dead,” said Dumbledore heavily. “All that would have happened is a kind of reverse echo. A shadow of the living Cedric would have emerged from the wand … am I cor-rect, Harry?”

“He spoke to me,” Harry said. He was suddenly shaking again. “The … the ghost Cedric, or whatever he was, spoke.”

“An echo,” said Dumbledore, “which retained Cedric’s appear-ance and character. I am guessing other such forms appeared … less recent victims of Voldemort’s wand. …”

“An old man,” Harry said, his throat still constricted. “Bertha Jorkins. And …”

“Your parents?” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Yes,” said Harry.

Sirius’s grip on Harry’s shoulder was now so tight it was painful.

“The last murders the wand performed,” said Dumbledore, nodding. “In reverse order. More would have appeared, of course, had you maintained the connection. Very well, Harry, these echoes, these shadows … what did they do?”

Harry described how the figures that had emerged from the wand had prowled the edges of the golden web, how Voldemort had seemed to fear them, how the shadow of Harry’s father had told him what to do, how Cedric’s had made its final request.

At this point, Harry found he could not continue. He looked around at Sirius and saw that he had his face in his hands.

Harry suddenly became aware that Fawkes had left his knee. The phoenix had fluttered to the floor. It was resting its beautiful head against Harry's injured leg, and thick, pearly tears were falling from its eyes onto the wound left by the spider. The pain vanished. The skin mended. His leg was repaired.

"I will say it again," said Dumbledore as the phoenix rose into the air and resettled itself upon the perch beside the door. "You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you tonight, Harry. You have shown bravery equal to those who died fighting Voldemort at the height of his powers. You have shoul-dered a grown wizard's burden and found yourself equal to it — and you have now given us all that we have a right to expect. You will come with me to the hospital wing. I do not want you returning to the dormitory tonight. A Sleeping Potion, and some peace … Sir-ius, would you like to stay with him?"

Sirius nodded and stood up. He transformed back into the great black dog and walked with Harry and Dumbledore out of the of-fice, accompanying them down a flight of stairs to the hospital wing.

When Dumbledore pushed open the door, Harry saw Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermione grouped around a harassed-looking Madam Pomfrey. They appeared to be demanding to know where Harry was and what had happened to him. All of them whipped around as Harry, Dumbledore, and the black dog en-tered, and Mrs. Weasley let out a kind of muffled scream.

"Harry! Oh Harry!"

She started to hurry toward him, but Dumbledore moved be-tween them.

“Molly,” he said, holding up a hand, “please listen to me for a moment. Harry has been through a terrible ordeal tonight. He has just had to relive it for me. What he needs now is sleep, and peace, and quiet. If he would like you all to stay with him,” he added, looking around at Ron, Hermione, and Bill too, “you may do so. But I do not want you questioning him until he is ready to answer, and certainly not this evening.”

Mrs. Weasley nodded. She was very white. She rounded on Ron, Hermione, and Bill as though they were being noisy, and hissed, “Did you hear? He needs quiet!”

“Headmaster,” said Madam Pomfrey, staring at the great black dog that was Sirius, “may I ask what — ?”

“This dog will be remaining with Harry for a while,” said Dum-bledore simply. “I assure you, he is extremely well trained. Harry — I will wait while you get into bed.”

Harry felt an inexpressible sense of gratitude to Dumbledore for asking the others not to question him. It wasn’t as though he didn’t want them there; but the thought of explaining it all over again, the idea of reliving it one more time, was more than he could stand.

“I will be back to see you as soon as I have met with Fudge, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “I would like you to remain here to-morrow until I have spoken to the school.” He left.

As Madam Pomfrey led Harry to a nearby bed, he caught sight of the real Moody lying motionless in a bed at the far end of the room. His wooden leg and magical eye were lying on the bedside table.

“Is he okay?” Harry asked.

“He’ll be fine,” said Madam Pomfrey, giving Harry some paja-mas and pulling screens around him. He took off his robes, pulled on the pajamas, and got into bed. Ron, Hermione, Bill, Mrs. Weasley, and

the black dog came around the screen and settled themselves in chairs on either side of him. Ron and Hermione were looking at him almost cautiously, as though scared of him.

"I'm all right," he told them. "Just tired."

Mrs. Weasley's eyes filled with tears as she smoothed his bed-covers unnecessarily.

Madam Pomfrey, who had bustled off to her office, returned holding a small bottle of some purple potion and a goblet.

"You'll need to drink all of this, Harry," she said. "It's a potion for dreamless sleep."

Harry took the goblet and drank a few mouthfuls. He felt him-self becoming drowsy at once. Everything around him became hazy; the lamps around the hospital wing seemed to be winking at him in a friendly way through the screen around his bed; his body felt as though it was sinking deeper into the warmth of the feather matress. Before he could finish the potion, before he could say an-other word, his exhaustion had carried him off to sleep.

Harry woke up, so warm, so very sleepy, that he didn't open his eyes, wanting to drop off again. The room was still dimly lit; he was sure it was still nighttime and had a feeling that he couldn't have been asleep very long.

Then he heard whispering around him.

"They'll wake him if they don't shut up!"

"What are they shouting about? Nothing else can have hap-pened, can it?"

Harry opened his eyes blearily Someone had removed his glasses. He could see the fuzzy outlines of Mrs. Weasley and Bill close by.

Mrs. Weasley was on her feet.

“That’s Fudge’s voice,” she whispered. “And that’s Minerva McGonagall’s, isn’t it? But what are they arguing about?”

Now Harry could hear them too: people shouting and running toward the hospital wing.

“Regrettable, but all the same, Minerva —” Cornelius Fudge was saying loudly.

“You should never have brought it inside the castle!” yelled Pro-fessor McGonagall. “When Dumbledore finds out —”

Harry heard the hospital doors burst open. Unnoticed by any of the people around his bed, all of whom were staring at the door as Bill pulled back the screens, Harry sat up and put his glasses back on.

Fudge came striding up the ward. Professors McGonagall and Snape were at his heels.

“Where’s Dumbledore?” Fudge demanded of Mrs. Weasley.

“He’s not here,” said Mrs. Weasley angrily. “This is a hospital wing, Minister, don’t you think you’d do better to —”

But the door opened, and Dumbledore came sweeping up the ward.

“What has happened?” said Dumbledore sharply, looking from Fudge to Professor McGonagall. “Why are you disturbing these people? Minerva, I’m surprised at you — I asked you to stand guard over Barty Crouch —”

“There is no need to stand guard over him anymore, Dumble-dore!” she shrieked. “The Minister has seen to that!”

Harry had never seen Professor McGonagall lose control like this. There were angry blotches of color in her cheeks, and her hands

were balled into fists; she was trembling with fury.

“When we told Mr. Fudge that we had caught the Death Eater responsible for tonight’s events,” said Snape, in a low voice, “he seemed to feel his personal safety was in question. He insisted on summoning a dementor to accompany him into the castle. He brought it up to the office where Barty Crouch —”

“I told him you would not agree, Dumbledore!” Professor McGonagall fumed. “I told him you would never allow dementors to set foot inside the castle, but —”

“My dear woman!” roared Fudge, who likewise looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him, “as Minister of Magic, it is my deci-sion whether I wish to bring protection with me when interview-ing a possibly dangerous —”

But Professor McGonagall’s voice drowned Fudge’s.

“The moment that — that thing entered the room,” she screamed, pointing at Fudge, trembling all over, “it swooped down on Crouch and — and —”

Harry felt a chill in his stomach as Professor McGonagall strug-gled to find words to describe what had happened. He did not need her to finish her sentence. He knew what the dementor must have done. It had administered its fatal kiss to Barty Crouch. It had sucked his soul out through his mouth. He was worse than dead.

“By all accounts, he is no loss!” blustered Fudge. “It seems he has been responsible for several deaths!”

“But he cannot now give testimony, Cornelius,” said Dumble-dore. He was staring hard at Fudge, as though seeing him plainly for the first time. “He cannot give evidence about why he killed those people.”

“Why he killed them? Well, that’s no mystery, is it?” blustered Fudge. “He was a raving lunatic! From what Minerva and Severus have told me, he seems to have thought he was doing it all on You-Know-Who’s instructions!”

“Lord Voldemort was giving him instructions, Cornelius,” Dumbledore said. “Those people’s deaths were mere by-products of a plan to restore Voldemort to full strength again. The plan suc-ceeded. Voldemort has been restored to his body.”

Fudge looked as though someone had just swung a heavy weight into his face. Dazed and blinking, he stared back at Dumbledore as if he couldn’t quite believe what he had just heard. He began to sputter, still goggling at Dumbledore.

“You-Know-Who … returned? Preposterous. Come now, Dum-bledore …”

“As Minerva and Severus have doubtless told you,” said Dumb-ledore, “we heard Barry Crouch confess. Under the influence of Veritaserum, he told us how he was smuggled out of Azkaban, and how Voldemort — learning of his continued existence from Bertha Jorkins — went to free him from his father and used him to cap-ture Harry. The plan worked, I tell you. Crouch has helped Volde-mort to return.”

“See here, Dumbledore,” said Fudge, and Harry was astonished to see a slight smile dawning on his face, “you — you can’t seri-ously believe that. You-Know-Who — back? Come now, come now … certainly, Crouch may have believed himself to be acting upon You-Know-Who’s orders — but to take the word of a lunatic like that, Dumbledore …”

“When Harry touched the Triwizard Cup tonight, he was trans-ported straight to Voldemort,” said Dumbledore steadily. “He wit-nessed Lord Voldemort’s rebirth. I will explain it all to you if you will step up to my office.”

Dumbledore glanced around at Harry and saw that he was awake, but shook his head and said, "I am afraid I cannot permit you to question Harry tonight."

Fudge's curious smile lingered. He too glanced at Harry, then looked back at Dumbledore, and said, "You are — er — prepared to take Harry's word on this, are you, Dumbledore?"

There was a moment's silence, which was broken by Sirius growling. His hackles were raised, and he was baring his teeth at Fudge.

"Certainly, I believe Harry," said Dumbledore. His eyes were blazing now. "I heard Crouch's confession, and I heard Harry's ac-count of what happened after he touched the Triwizard Cup; the two stories make sense, they explain everything that has happened since Bertha Jorkins disappeared last summer."

Fudge still had that strange smile on his face. Once again, he glanced at Harry before answering.

"You are prepared to believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, on the word of a lunatic murderer, and a boy who … well …"

Fudge shot Harry another look, and Harry suddenly under-stood.

"You've been reading Rita Skeeter, Mr. Fudge," he said quietly.

Ron, Hermione, Mrs. Weasley, and Bill all jumped. None of them had realized that Harry was awake.

Fudge reddened slightly, but a defiant and obstinate look came over his face.

"And if I have?" he said, looking at Dumbledore. "If I have dis-covered that you've been keeping certain facts about the boy very quiet? A Parselmouth, eh? And having funny turns all over the place —"

"I assume that you are referring to the pains Harry has been experiencing in his scar?" said Dumbledore coolly.

"You admit that he has been having these pains, then?" said Fudge quickly. "Headaches? Nightmares? Possibly — hallucinations?"

"Listen to me, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, taking a step to-ward Fudge, and once again, he seemed to radiate that indefinable sense of power that Harry had felt after Dumbledore had Stunned young Crouch. "Harry is as sane as you or I. That scar upon his forehead has not addled his brains. I believe it hurts him when Lord Voldemort is close by, or feeling particularly murderous."

Fudge had taken half a step back from Dumbledore, but he looked no less stubborn.

"You'll forgive me, Dumbledore, but I've never heard of a curse scar acting as an alarm bell before. …"

"Look, I saw Voldemort come back!" Harry shouted. He tried to get out of bed again, but Mrs. Weasley forced him back. "I saw the Death Eaters! I can give you their names! Lucius Malfoy —"

Snape made a sudden movement, but as Harry looked at him, Snape's eyes flew back to Fudge.

"Malfoy was cleared!" said Fudge, visibly affronted. "A very old family — donations to excellent causes —"

"Macnair!" Harry continued.

"Also cleared! Now working for the Ministry!"

"Avery — Nott — Crabbe — Goyle —"

"You are merely repeating the names of those who were acquit-ted of being Death Eaters thirteen years ago!" said Fudge angrily. "You

could have found those names in old reports of the trials! For heaven's sake, Dumbledore — the boy was full of some crackpot story at the end of last year too — his tales are getting taller, and you're still swallowing them — the boy can talk to snakes, Dumbledore, and you still think he's trustworthy?"

"You fool!" Professor McGonagall cried. "Cedric Diggory! Mr. Crouch! These deaths were not the random work of a lunatic!"

"I see no evidence to the contrary!" shouted Fudge, now matching her anger, his face purpling. "It seems to me that you are all determined to start a panic that will destabilize everything we have worked for these last thirteen years!"

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had always thought of Fudge as a kindly figure, a little blustering, a little pompous, but essentially good-natured. But now a short, angry wizard stood before him, refusing, point-blank, to accept the prospect of disruption in his comfortable and ordered world — to believe that Voldemort could have risen.

"Voldemort has returned," Dumbledore repeated. "If you accept that fact straightaway, Fudge, and take the necessary measures, we may still be able to save the situation. The first and most essential step is to remove Azkaban from the control of the dementors —"

"Preposterous!" shouted Fudge again. "Remove the dementors? I'd be kicked out of office for suggesting it! Half of us only feel safe in our beds at night because we know the dementors are standing guard at Azkaban!"

"The rest of us sleep less soundly in our beds, Cornelius, know-ing that you have put Lord Voldemort's most dangerous support-ers in the care of creatures who will join him the instant he asks them!" said Dumbledore. "They will not remain loyal to you, Fudge! Voldemort can offer them much more scope for their pow-ers and their pleasures than you can! With the dementors behind him, and his old

supporters returned to him, you will be hard-pressed to stop him regaining the sort of power he had thirteen years ago!"

Fudge was opening and closing his mouth as though no words could express his outrage.

"The second step you must take — and at once," Dumbledore pressed on, "is to send envoys to the giants."

"Envoys to the giants?" Fudge shrieked, finding his tongue again. "What madness is this?"

"Extend them the hand of friendship, now, before it is too late," said Dumbledore, "or Voldemort will persuade them, as he did be-fore, that he alone among wizards will give them their rights and their freedom!"

"You — you cannot be serious!" Fudge gasped, shaking his head and retreating further from Dumbledore. "If the magical commu-nity got wind that I had approached the giants — people hate them, Dumbledore — end of my career —"

"You are blinded," said Dumbledore, his voice rising now, the aura of power around him palpable, his eyes blazing once more, "by the love of the office you hold, Cornelius! You place too much importance, and you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood! You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be! Your dementor has just destroyed the last remaining member of a pure-blood family as old as any — and see what that man chose to make of his life! I tell you now — take the steps I have suggested, and you will be remembered, in office or out, as one of the bravest and greatest Ministers of Magic we have ever known. Fail to act — and history will remember you as the man who stepped aside and allowed Voldemort a second chance to destroy the world we have tried to rebuild!"

"Insane," whispered Fudge, still backing away. "Mad …"

And then there was silence. Madam Pomfrey was standing frozen at the foot of Harry's bed, her hands over her mouth. Mrs. Weasley was still standing over Harry, her hand on his shoulder to prevent him from rising. Bill, Ron, and Hermione were staring at Fudge.

"If your determination to shut your eyes will carry you as far as this, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, "we have reached a parting of the ways. You must act as you see fit. And I — I shall act as I see fit."

Dumbledore's voice carried no hint of a threat; it sounded like a mere statement, but Fudge bristled as though Dumbledore were advancing upon him with a wand.

"Now, see here, Dumbledore," he said, waving a threatening fin-ger. "I've given you free rein, always. I've had a lot of respect for you. I might not have agreed with some of your decisions, but I've kept quiet. There aren't many who'd have let you hire werewolves, or keep Hagrid, or decide what to teach your students without ref-erence to the Ministry. But if you're going to work against me —"

"The only one against whom I intend to work," said Dumble-dore, "is Lord Voldemort. If you are against him, then we remain, Cornelius, on the same side."

It seemed Fudge could think of no answer to this. He rocked backward and forward on his small feet for a moment and spun his bowler hat in his hands. Finally, he said, with a hint of a plea in his voice, "He can't be back, Dumbledore, he just can't be …"

Snape strode forward, past Dumbledore, pulling up the left sleeve of his robes as he went. He stuck out his forearm and showed it to Fudge, who recoiled.

"There," said Snape harshly. "There. The Dark Mark. It is not as clear as it was an hour or so ago, when it burned black, but you can still see it. Every Death Eater had the sign burned into him by the Dark Lord. It was a means of distinguishing one another, and his means of

summoning us to him. When he touched the Mark of any Death Eater, we were to Disapparate, and Apparate, instantly, at his side. This Mark has been growing clearer all year. Karkaroff's too. Why do you think Karkaroff fled tonight? We both felt the Mark burn. We both knew he had returned. Karkaroff fears the Dark Lord's vengeance. He betrayed too many of his fellow Death Eaters to be sure of a welcome back into the fold."

Fudge stepped back from Snape too. He was shaking his head. He did not seem to have taken in a word Snape had said. He stared, apparently repelled by the ugly mark on Snape's arm, then looked up at Dumbledore and whispered, "I don't know what you and your staff are playing at, Dumbledore, but I have heard enough. I have no more to add. I will be in touch with you tomorrow, Dum-bledore, to discuss the running of this school. I must return to the Ministry."

He had almost reached the door when he paused. He turned around, strode back down the dormitory, and stopped at Harry's bed.

"Your winnings," he said shortly, taking a large bag of gold out of his pocket and dropping it onto Harry's bedside table. "One thousand Galleons. There should have been a presentation cere-mony, but under the circumstances …"

He crammed his bowler hat onto his head and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The moment he had disap-peared, Dumbledore turned to look at the group around Harry's bed.

"There is work to be done," he said. "Molly … am I right in thinking that I can count on you and Arthur?"

"Of course you can," said Mrs. Weasley. She was white to the lips, but she looked resolute. "We know what Fudge is. It's Arthur's fondness for Muggles that has held him back at the Ministry all these years. Fudge thinks he lacks proper wizarding pride."

“Then I need to send a message to Arthur,” said Dumbledore. “All those that we can persuade of the truth must be notified immediately, and he is well placed to contact those at the Ministry who are not as shortsighted as Cornelius.”

“I’ll go to Dad,” said Bill, standing up. “I’ll go now.”

“Excellent,” said Dumbledore. “Tell him what has happened. Tell him I will be in direct contact with him shortly. He will need to be dis-creet, however. If Fudge thinks I am interfering at the Ministry —”

“Leave it to me,” said Bill.

He clapped a hand on Harry’s shoulder, kissed his mother on the cheek, pulled on his cloak, and strode quickly from the room.

“Minerva,” said Dumbledore, turning to Professor McGonagall, “I want to see Hagrid in my office as soon as possible. Also — if she will consent to come — Madame Maxime.”

Professor McGonagall nodded and left without a word.

“Poppy,” Dumbledore said to Madam Pomfrey, “would you be very kind and go down to Professor Moody’s office, where I think you will find a house-elf called Winky in considerable distress? Do what you can for her, and take her back to the kitchens. I think Dobby will look after her for us.”

“Very — very well,” said Madam Pomfrey, looking startled, and she too left.

Dumbledore made sure that the door was closed, and that Madam Pomfrey’s footsteps had died away, before he spoke again.

“And now,” he said, “it is time for two of our number to recog-nize each other for what they are. Sirius … if you could resume your usual form.”

The great black dog looked up at Dumbledore, then, in an in-stant, turned back into a man.

Mrs. Weasley screamed and leapt back from the bed.

"Sirius Black!" she shrieked, pointing at him.

"Mum, shut up!" Ron yelled. "It's okay!"

Snape had not yelled or jumped backward, but the look on his face was one of mingled fury and horror.

"Him!" he snarled, staring at Sirius, whose face showed equal dislike. "What is he doing here?"

"He is here at my invitation," said Dumbledore, looking be-tween them, "as are you, Severus. I trust you both. It is time for you to lay aside your old differences and trust each other."

Harry thought Dumbledore was asking for a near miracle. Sirius and Snape were eyeing each other with the utmost loathing.

"I will settle, in the short term," said Dumbledore, with a bite of impatience in his voice, "for a lack of open hostility. You will shake hands. You are on the same side now. Time is short, and unless the few of us who know the truth do not stand united, there is no hope for any of us."

Very slowly — but still glaring at each other as though each wished the other nothing but ill — Sirius and Snape moved toward each other and shook hands. They let go extremely quickly.

"That will do to be going on with," said Dumbledore, stepping between them once more. "Now I have work for each of you. Fudge's attitude, though not unexpected, changes everything. Sir-ius, I need you to set off at once. You are to alert Remus Lupin, Arabella Figg,

Mundungus Fletcher — the old crowd. Lie low at Lupins for a while; I will contact you there."

"But —" said Harry.

He wanted Sirius to stay. He did not want to have to say good-bye again so quickly.

"You'll see me very soon, Harry," said Sirius, turning to him. "I promise you. But I must do what I can, you understand, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah … of course I do."

Sirius grasped his hand briefly, nodded to Dumbledore, trans-formed again into the black dog, and ran the length of the room to the door, whose handle he turned with a paw. Then he was gone.

"Severus," said Dumbledore, turning to Snape, "you know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready … if you are prepared …"

"I am," said Snape.

He looked slightly paler than usual, and his cold, black eyes glit-tered strangely.

"Then good luck," said Dumbledore, and he watched, with a trace of apprehension on his face, as Snape swept wordlessly after Sirius.

It was several minutes before Dumbledore spoke again.

"I must go downstairs," he said finally. "I must see the Diggorys. Harry — take the rest of your potion. I will see all of you later."

Harry slumped back against his pillows as Dumbledore disappeared. Hermione, Ron, and Mrs. Weasley were all looking at him. None of them spoke for a very long time.

“You’ve got to take the rest of your potion, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said at last. Her hand nudged the sack of gold on his bedside cabi-net as she reached for the bottle and the goblet. “You have a good long sleep. Try and think about something else for a while … think about what you’re going to buy with your winnings!”

“I don’t want that gold,” said Harry in an expressionless voice. “You have it. Anyone can have it. I shouldn’t have won it. It should’ve been Cedric’s.”

The thing against which he had been fighting on and off ever since he had come out of the maze was threatening to overpower him. He could feel a burning, prickling feeling in the inner corners of his eyes. He blinked and stared up at the ceiling.

“It wasn’t your fault, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley whispered.

“I told him to take the cup with me,” said Harry.

Now the burning feeling was in his throat too. He wished Ron would look away.

Mrs. Weasley set the potion down on the bedside cabinet, bent down, and put her arms around Harry. He had no memory of ever being hugged like this, as though by a mother. The full weight of everything he had seen that night seemed to fall in upon him as Mrs. Weasley held him to her. His mother’s face, his father’s voice, the sight of Cedric, dead on the ground all started spinning in his head until he could hardly bear it, until he was screwing up his face against the howl of misery fighting to get out of him.

There was a loud slamming noise, and Mrs. Weasley and Harry broke apart. Hermione was standing by the window. She was hold-ing something tight in her hand.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“Your potion, Harry,” said Mrs. Weasley quickly, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand.

Harry drank it in one gulp. The effect was instantaneous. Heavy, irresistible waves of dreamless sleep broke over him; he fell back onto his pillows and thought no more.

Chapter 37 The Beginning

When he looked back, even a month later, Harry found he had only scattered memories of the next few days. It was as though he had been through too much to take in any more. The recollections he did have were very painful. The worst, perhaps, was the meeting with the Diggorys that took place the following morning.

They did not blame him for what had happened; on the con-trary, both thanked him for returning Cedric's body to them. Mr. Diggory sobbed through most of the interview. Mrs. Diggory's grief seemed to be beyond tears.

"He suffered very little then," she said, when Harry had told her how Cedric had died. "And after all, Amos … he died just when he'd won the tournament. He must have been happy."

When they got to their feet, she looked down at Harry and said, "You look after yourself, now."

Harry seized the sack of gold on the bedside table.

"You take this," he muttered to her. "It should've been Cedric's, he got there first, you take it —"

But she backed away from him.

"Oh no, it's yours, dear, I couldn't … you keep it."

Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower the following evening. From what Hermione and Ron told him, Dumbledore had spoken to the school that morning at breakfast. He had merely requested that they leave Harry alone, that nobody ask him questions or badger him to tell the story of what had happened in the maze. Most peo-ple, he noticed, were skirting him in the corridors, avoiding his eyes. Some whispered behind their hands as he passed. He guessed that many of them had

believed Rita Skeeter's article about how disturbed and possibly dangerous he was. Perhaps they were for-mulating their own theories about how Cedric had died. He found he didn't care very much. He liked it best when he was with Ron and Hermione and they were talking about other things, or else let-ting him sit in silence while they played chess. He felt as though all three of them had reached an understanding they didn't need to put into words; that each was waiting for some sign, some word, of what was going on outside Hogwarts — and that it was useless to speculate about what might be coming until they knew anything for certain. The only time they touched upon the subject was when Ron told Harry about a meeting Mrs. Weasley had had with Dum-bledore before going home.

"She went to ask him if you could come straight to us this sum-mer," he said. "But he wants you to go back to the Dursleys, at least at first."

"Why?" said Harry.

"She said Dumbledore's got his reasons," said Ron, shaking his head darkly. "I suppose we've got to trust him, haven't we?"

The only person apart from Ron and Hermione that Harry felt able to talk to was Hagrid. As there was no longer a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, they had those lessons free. They used the one on Thursday afternoon to go down and visit Hagrid in his cabin. It was a bright and sunny day; Fang bounded out of the open door as they approached, barking and wagging his tail madly.

"Who's that?" called Hagrid, coming to the door. "Harry!"

He strode out to meet them, pulled Harry into a one-armed hug, ruffled his hair, and said, "Good ter see yeh, mate. Good ter see yeh."

They saw two bucket-size cups and saucers on the wooden table in front of the fireplace when they entered Hagrid's cabin.

"Bin havin' a cuppa with Olympe," Hagrid said. "She's jus' left."

"Who?" said Ron curiously.

"Madame Maxime, o' course!" said Hagrid.

"You two made up, have you?" said Ron.

"Dunno what yeh're talkin' about," said Hagrid airily, fetching more cups from the dresser. When he had made tea and offered around a plate of doughy cookies, he leaned back in his chair and surveyed Harry closely through his beetle-black eyes.

"You all righ'?" he said gruffly.

"Yeah," said Harry.

"No, yeh're not," said Hagrid. " 'Course yeh're not. But yeh will be."

Harry said nothing.

"Knew he was goin' ter come back," said Hagrid, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up at him, shocked. "Known it fer years, Harry. Knew he was out there, bidin' his time. It had ter hap-pen. Well, now it has, an' we'll jus' have ter get on with it. We'll fight. Migh' be able ter stop him before he gets a good hold. That's Dumbledore's plan, anyway. Great man, Dumbledore. 'S long as we've got him, I'm not too worried."

Hagrid raised his bushy eyebrows at the disbelieving expressions on their faces.

"No good sittin' worryin' abou' it," he said. "What's comin' will come, an' we'll meet it when it does. Dumbledore told me wha' you did, Harry."

Hagrid's chest swelled as he looked at Harry.

"Yeh did as much as yer father would've done, an' I can' give yeh no higher praise than that."

Harry smiled back at him. It was the first time he'd smiled in days. "What's Dumbledore asked you to do, Hagrid?" he asked. "He sent Professor McGonagall to ask you and Madame Maxime to meet him — that night."

"Got a little job fer me over the summer," said Hagrid. "Secret, though. I'm not s'pposed ter talk abou' it, no, not even ter you lot. Olympe — Madame Maxime ter you — might be comin' with me. I think she will. Think I got her persuaded."

"Is it to do with Voldemort?"

Hagrid flinched at the sound of the name.

"Migh' be," he said evasively. "Now … who'd like ter come an' visit the las' skrewt with me? I was jokin' — jokin'!" he added hastily, seeing the looks on their faces.

* * *

It was with a heavy heart that Harry packed his trunk up in the dormitory on the night before his return to Privet Drive. He was dreading the Leaving Feast, which was usually a cause for celebration, when the winner of the Inter-House Championship would be announced. He had avoided being in the Great Hall when it was full ever since he had left the hospital wing, preferring to eat when it was nearly empty to avoid the stares of his fellow students.

When he, Ron, and Hermione entered the Hall, they saw at once that the usual decorations were missing. The Great Hall was normally decorated with the winning House's colors for the Leav-ing Feast. Tonight, however, there were black drapes on the wall behind the teachers' table. Harry knew instantly that they were there as a mark of respect to Cedric.

The real Mad-Eye Moody was at the staff table now, his wooden leg and his magical eye back in place. He was extremely twitchy, jumping

every time someone spoke to him. Harry couldn't blame him; Moody's fear of attack was bound to have been increased by his ten-month imprisonment in his own trunk. Professor Karkar-off's chair was empty. Harry wondered, as he sat down with the other Gryffindors, where Karkaroff was now, and whether Volde-mort had caught up with him.

Madame Maxime was still there. She was sitting next to Hagrid. They were talking quietly together. Further along the table, sitting next to Professor McGonagall, was Snape. His eyes lingered on Harry for a moment as Harry looked at him. His expression was difficult to read. He looked as sour and unpleasant as ever. Harry continued to watch him, long after Snape had looked away.

What was it that Snape had done on Dumbledore's orders, the night that Voldemort had returned? And why … why … was Dumbledore so convinced that Snape was truly on their side? He had been their spy, Dumbledore had said so in the Pensieve. Snape had turned spy against Voldemort, "at great personal risk." Was that the job he had taken up again? Had he made contact with the Death Eaters, perhaps? Pretended that he had never really gone over to Dumbledore, that he had been, like Voldemort himself, biding his time?

Harry's musings were ended by Professor Dumbledore, who stood up at the staff table. The Great Hall, which in any case had been less noisy than it usually was at the Leaving Feast, became very quiet.

"The end," said Dumbledore, looking around at them all, "of another year."

He paused, and his eyes fell upon the Hufflepuff table. Theirs had been the most subdued table before he had gotten to his feet, and theirs were still the saddest and palest faces in the Hall.

"There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight," said Dumbledore, "but I must first acknowledge the loss of a very fine

person, who should be sitting here," he gestured toward the Hufflepuffs, "enjoying our feast with us. I would like you all, please, to stand, and raise your glasses, to Cedric Diggory."

They did it, all of them; the benches scraped as everyone in the Hall stood, and raised their goblets, and echoed, in one loud, low, rumbling voice, "Cedric Diggory."

Harry caught a glimpse of Cho through the crowd. There were tears pouring silently down her face. He looked down at the table as they all sat down again.

"Cedric was a person who exemplified many of the qualities that distinguish Hufflepuff house," Dumbledore continued. "He was a good and loyal friend, a hard worker, he valued fair play. His death has affected you all, whether you knew him well or not. I think that you have the right, therefore, to know exactly how it came about."

Harry raised his head and stared at Dumbledore.

"Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort."

A panicked whisper swept the Great Hall. People were staring at Dumbledore in disbelief, in horror. He looked perfectly calm as he watched them mutter themselves into silence.

"The Ministry of Magic," Dumbledore continued, "does not wish me to tell you this. It is possible that some of your parents will be horrified that I have done so — either because they will not be-lieve that Lord Voldemort has returned, or because they think I should not tell you so, young as you are. It is my belief, however, that the truth is generally preferable to lies, and that any attempt to pretend that Cedric died as the result of an accident, or some sort of blunder of his own, is an insult to his memory."

Stunned and frightened, every face in the Hall was turned toward Dumbledore now … or almost every face. Over at the Slytherin table,

Harry saw Draco Malfoy muttering something to Crabbe and Goyle. Harry felt a hot, sick swoop of anger in his stomach. He forced himself to look back at Dumbledore.

"There is somebody else who must be mentioned in connection with Cedric's death," Dumbledore went on. "I am talking, of course, about Harry Potter."

A kind of ripple crossed the Great Hall as a few heads turned in Harry's direction before flicking back to face Dumbledore.

"Harry Potter managed to escape Lord Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "He risked his own life to return Cedric's body to Hog-warts. He showed, in every respect, the sort of bravery that few wizards have ever shown in facing Lord Voldemort, and for this, I honor him."

Dumbledore turned gravely to Harry and raised his goblet once more. Nearly everyone in the Great Hall followed suit. They mur-mured his name, as they had murmured Cedric's, and drank to him. But through a gap in the standing figures, Harry saw that Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and many of the other Slytherins had remained defiantly in their seats, their goblets untouched. Dumb-ledore, who after all possessed no magical eye, did not see them.

When everyone had once again resumed their seats, Dumble-dore continued, "The Triwizard Tournament's aim was to further and promote magical understanding. In the light of what has hap-pened — of Lord Voldemort's return — such ties are more impor-tant than ever before."

Dumbledore looked from Madame Maxime and Hagrid, to Fleur Delacour and her fellow Beauxbatons students, to Viktor Krum and the Durmstrangs at the Slytherin table. Krum, Harry saw, looked wary, almost frightened, as though he expected Dum-bledore to say something harsh.

“Every guest in this Hall,” said Dumbledore, and his eyes lin-gered upon the Durmstrang students, “will be welcomed back here at any time, should they wish to come. I say to you all, once again — in the light of Lord Voldemort’s return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Volde-mort’s gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.

“It is my belief — and never have I so hoped that I am mis-taken — that we are all facing dark and difficult times. Some of you in this Hall have already suffered directly at the hands of Lord Voldemort. Many of your families have been torn asunder. A week ago, a student was taken from our midst.

“Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Re-member Cedric Diggory.”

Harry’s trunk was packed; Hedwig was back in her cage on top of it. He, Ron, and Hermione were waiting in the crowded entrance hall with the rest of the fourth years for the carriages that would take them back to Hogsmeade station. It was another beautiful summer’s day. He supposed that Privet Drive would be hot and leafy, its flower beds a riot of color, when he arrived there that evening. The thought gave him no pleasure at all.

“ ’Arry!”

He looked around. Fleur Delacour was hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Beyond her, far across the grounds, Harry could see Hagrid helping Madame Maxime to back two of the gi-ant horses into their harness. The Beauxbatons carriage was about to take off.

“We will see each uzzer again, I ’ope,” said Fleur as she reached him, holding out her hand. “I am ’oping to get a job ’ere, to im-prove my Eenglish.”

“It’s very good already,” said Ron in a strangled sort of voice. Fleur smiled at him; Hermione scowled.

“Good-bye, ’Arry,” said Fleur, turning to go. “It ’az been a plea-sure meeting you!”

Harry’s spirits couldn’t help but lift slightly as he watched Fleur hurry back across the lawns to Madame Maxime, her silvery hair rippling in the sunlight.

“Wonder how the Durmstrang students are getting back,” said Ron. “D’you reckon they can steer that ship without Karkaroff?”

“Karkaroff did not steer,” said a gruff voice. “He stayed in his cabin and let us do the vork.”

Krum had come to say good-bye to Hermione.

“Could I have a vord?” he asked her.

“Oh … yes … all right,” said Hermione, looking slightly flus-tered, and following Krum through the crowd and out of sight.

“You’d better hurry up!” Ron called loudly after her. “The car-riages’ll be here in a minute!”

He let Harry keep a watch for the carriages, however, and spent the next few minutes craning his neck over the crowd to try and see what Krum and Hermione might be up to. They returned quite soon. Ron stared at Hermione, but her face was quite impassive.

“I liked Diggory,” said Krum abruptly to Harry. “He vos alvays polite to me. Alvays. Even though I vos from Durmstrang — with Karkaroff,” he

added, scowling.

“Have you got a new headmaster yet?” said Harry.

Krum shrugged. He held out his hand as Fleur had done, shook Harry’s hand, and then Ron’s. Ron looked as though he was suffer-ing some sort of painful internal struggle. Krum had already started walking away when Ron burst out, “Can I have your autograph?”

Hermione turned away, smiling at the horseless carriages that were now trundling toward them up the drive, as Krum, looking surprised but gratified, signed a fragment of parchment for Ron.

The weather could not have been more different on the journey back to King’s Cross than it had been on their way to Hogwarts the previous September. There wasn’t a single cloud in the sky. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had managed to get a compartment to them-selves. Pigwidgeon was once again hidden under Ron’s dress robes to stop him from hooting continually; Hedwig was dozing, her head under her wing, and Crookshanks was curled up in a spare seat like a large, furry ginger cushion. Harry, Ron, and Hermione talked more fully and freely than they had all week as the train sped them southward. Harry felt as though Dumbledore’s speech at the Leaving Feast had unblocked him, somehow. It was less painful to discuss what had happened now. They broke off their conversation about what action Dumbledore might be taking, even now, to stop Voldemort only when the lunch trolley arrived.

When Hermione returned from the trolley and put her money back into her schoolbag, she dislodged a copy of the Daily Prophet that she had been carrying in there. Harry looked at it, unsure whether he really wanted to know what it might say, but Hermi-one, seeing him looking at it, said calmly, “There’s nothing in there. You can look for yourself, but there’s nothing at all. I’ve been checking every day. Just a small piece the day after the third task saying you won the

tournament. They didn't even mention Cedric. Nothing about any of it. If you ask me, Fudge is forcing them to keep quiet."

"He'll never keep Rita quiet," said Harry. "Not on a story like this."

"Oh, Rita hasn't written anything at all since the third task," said Hermione in an oddly constrained voice. "As a matter of fact," she added, her voice now trembling slightly, "Rita Skeeter isn't going to be writing anything at all for a while. Not unless she wants me to spill the beans on her."

"What are you talking about?" said Ron.

"I found out how she was listening in on private conversations when she wasn't supposed to be coming onto the grounds," said Hermione in a rush.

Harry had the impression that Hermione had been dying to tell them this for days, but that she had restrained herself in light of everything else that had happened.

"How was she doing it?" said Harry at once.

"How did you find out?" said Ron, staring at her.

"Well, it was you, really, who gave me the idea, Harry," she said.

"Did I?" said Harry, perplexed. "How?"

"Bugging," said Hermione happily.

"But you said they didn't work —"

"Oh not electronic bugs," said Hermione. "No, you see … Rita Skeeter" — Hermione's voice trembled with quiet triumph — "is an unregistered Animagus. She can turn —"

Hermione pulled a small sealed glass jar out of her bag.

“— into a beetle.”

“You’re kidding,” said Ron. “You haven’t … she’s not …”

“Oh yes she is,” said Hermione happily, brandishing the jar at them.

Inside were a few twigs and leaves and one large, fat beetle.

“That’s never — you’re kidding —” Ron whispered, lifting the jar to his eyes.

“No, I’m not,” said Hermione, beaming. “I caught her on the windowsill in the hospital wing. Look very closely, and you’ll no-tice the markings around her antennae are exactly like those foul glasses she wears.”

Harry looked and saw that she was quite right. He also remem-bered something.

“There was a beetle on the statue the night we heard Hagrid telling Madame Maxime about his mum!”

“Exactly,” said Hermione. “And Viktor pulled a beetle out of my hair after we’d had our conversation by the lake. And unless I’m very much mistaken, Rita was perched on the windowsill of the Divination class the day your scar hurt. She’s been buzzing around for stories all year.”

“When we saw Malfoy under that tree …” said Ron slowly.

“He was talking to her, in his hand,” said Hermione. “He knew, of course. That’s how she’s been getting all those nice little inter-views with the Slytherins. They wouldn’t care that she was doing something illegal, as long as they were giving her horrible stuff about us and Hagrid.”

Hermione took the glass jar back from Ron and smiled at the beetle, which buzzed angrily against the glass.

"I've told her I'll let her out when we get back to London," said Hermione. "I've put an Unbreakable Charm on the jar, you see, so she can't transform. And I've told her she's to keep her quill to herself for a whole year. See if she can't break the habit of writing horrible lies about people."

Smiling serenely, Hermione placed the beetle back inside her schoolbag.

The door of the compartment slid open.

"Very clever, Granger," said Draco Malfoy.

Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him. All three of them looked more pleased with themselves, more arrogant and more menacing, than Harry had ever seen them.

"So," said Malfoy slowly, advancing slightly into the compart-ment and looking slowly around at them, a smirk quivering on his lips. "You caught some pathetic reporter, and Potter's Dumble-dore's favorite boy again. Big deal."

His smirk widened. Crabbe and Goyle leered.

"Trying not to think about it, are we?" said Malfoy softly, look-ing around at all three of them. "Trying to pretend it hasn't happened?"

"Get out," said Harry.

He had not been this close to Malfoy since he had watched him muttering to Crabbe and Goyle during Dumbledore's speech about Cedric. He could feel a kind of ringing in his ears. His hand gripped his wand under his robes.

"You've picked the losing side, Potter! I warned you! I told you you ought to choose your company more carefully, remember? When we met on the train, first day at Hogwarts? I told you not to hang around

with riffraff like this!” He jerked his head at Ron and Hermione. “Too late now, Potter! They’ll be the first to go, now the Dark Lord’s back! Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers first! Well — sec-ond — Diggory was the f —”

It was as though someone had exploded a box of fireworks within the compartment. Blinded by the blaze of the spells that had blasted from every direction, deafened by a series of bangs, Harry blinked and looked down at the floor.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were all lying unconscious in the doorway. He, Ron, and Hermione were on their feet, all three of them having used a different hex. Nor were they the only ones to have done so.

“Thought we’d see what those three were up to,” said Fred matter-of-factly, stepping onto Goyle and into the compartment. He had his wand out, and so did George, who was careful to tread on Mal-foy as he followed Fred inside.

“Interesting effect,” said George, looking down at Crabbe. “Who used the Furnunculus Curse?”

“Me,” said Harry.

“Odd,” said George lightly. “I used Jelly-Legs. Looks as though those two shouldn’t be mixed. He seems to have sprouted little ten-tacles all over his face. Well, let’s not leave them here, they don’t add much to the decor.”

Ron, Harry, and George kicked, rolled, and pushed the uncon-scious Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle — each of whom looked dis-tinctly the worse for the jumble of jinxes with which they had been hit — out into the corridor, then came back into the compartment and rolled the door shut.

“Exploding Snap, anyone?” said Fred, pulling out a pack of cards.

They were halfway through their fifth game when Harry de-cided to ask them.

“You going to tell us, then?” he said to George. “Who you were blackmailing?”

“Oh,” said George darkly. “That.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Fred, shaking his head impatiently. “It wasn’t anything important. Not now, anyway.”

“We’ve given up,” said George, shrugging.

But Harry, Ron, and Hermione kept on asking, and finally, Fred said, “All right, all right, if you really want to know … it was Ludo Bagman.”

“Bagman?” said Harry sharply. “Are you saying he was involved in —”

“Nah,” said George gloomily. “Nothing like that. Stupid git. He wouldn’t have the brains.”

“Well, what, then?” said Ron.

Fred hesitated, then said, “You remember that bet we had with him at the Quidditch World Cup? About how Ireland would win, but Krum would get the Snitch?”

“Yeah,” said Harry and Ron slowly.

“Well, the git paid us in leprechaun gold he’d caught from the Irish mascots.”

“So?”

“So,” said Fred impatiently, “it vanished, didn’t it? By next morning, it had gone!”

“But — it must’ve been an accident, mustn’t it?” said Hermione.

George laughed very bitterly.

“Yeah, that’s what we thought, at first. We thought if we just wrote to him, and told him he’d made a mistake, he’d cough up. But nothing doing. Ignored our letter. We kept trying to talk to him about it at Hogwarts, but he was always making some excuse to get away from us.”

“In the end, he turned pretty nasty,” said Fred. “Told us we were too young to gamble, and he wasn’t giving us anything.”

“So we asked for our money back,” said George glowering.

“He didn’t refuse!” gasped Hermione.

“Right in one,” said Fred.

“But that was all your savings!” said Ron.

“Tell me about it,” said George. “ ’Course, we found out what was going on in the end. Lee Jordan’s dad had had a bit of trouble getting money off Bagman as well. Turns out he’s in big trouble with the goblins. Borrowed loads of gold off them. A gang of them cornered him in the woods after the World Cup and took all the gold he had, and it still wasn’t enough to cover all his debts. They followed him all the way to Hogwarts to keep an eye on him. He’s lost everything gambling. Hasn’t got two Galleons to rub together. And you know how the idiot tried to pay the goblins back?”

“How?” said Harry.

“He put a bet on you, mate,” said Fred. “Put a big bet on you to win the tournament. Bet against the goblins.”

“So that’s why he kept trying to help me win!” said Harry. “Well — I did win, didn’t I? So he can pay you your gold!”

“Nope,” said George, shaking his head. “The goblins play as dirty as him. They say you drew with Diggory, and Bagman was betting you’d win outright. So Bagman had to run for it. He did run for it right after the third task.”

George sighed deeply and started dealing out the cards again.

The rest of the journey passed pleasantly enough; Harry wished it could have gone on all summer, in fact, and that he would never arrive at King’s Cross … but as he had learned the hard way that year, time will not slow down when something unpleasant lies ahead, and all too soon, the Hogwarts Express was pulling in at platform nine and three-quarters. The usual confusion and noise filled the corridors as the students began to disembark. Ron and Hermione struggled out past Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, carrying their trunks. Harry, however, stayed put.

“Fred — George — wait a moment.”

The twins turned. Harry pulled open his trunk and drew out his Triwizard winnings.

“Take it,” he said, and he thrust the sack into George’s hands.

“What?” said Fred, looking flabbergasted.

“Take it,” Harry repeated firmly. “I don’t want it.”

“You’re mental,” said George, trying to push it back at Harry.

“No, I’m not,” said Harry. “You take it, and get inventing. It’s for the joke shop.”

“He is mental,” Fred said in an almost awed voice.

“Listen,” said Harry firmly. “If you don’t take it, I’m throwing it down the drain. I don’t want it and I don’t need it. But I could do with a few

laughs. We could all do with a few laughs. I've got a feel-ing we're going to need them more than usual before long."

"Harry," said George weakly, weighing the money bag in his hands, "there's got to be a thousand Galleons in here."

"Yeah," said Harry, grinning. "Think how many Canary Creams that is."

The twins stared at him.

"Just don't tell your mum where you got it … although she might not be so keen for you to join the Ministry anymore, come to think of it. …"

"Harry," Fred began, but Harry pulled out his wand.

"Look," he said flatly, "take it, or I'll hex you. I know some good ones now. Just do me one favor, okay? Buy Ron some different dress robes and say they're from you."

He left the compartment before they could say another word, stepping over Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were still lying on the floor, covered in hex marks.

Uncle Vernon was waiting beyond the barrier. Mrs. Weasley was close by him. She hugged Harry very tightly when she saw him and whispered in his ear, "I think Dumbledore will let you come to us later in the summer. Keep in touch, Harry."

"See you, Harry," said Ron, clapping him on the back.

" 'Bye, Harry!" said Hermione, and she did something she had never done before, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Harry — thanks," George muttered, while Fred nodded fer-vently at his side.

Harry winked at them, turned to Uncle Vernon, and followed him silently from the station. There was no point worrying yet, he told himself, as he got into the back of the Dursleys' car.

As Hagrid had said, what would come, would come … and he would have to meet it when it did.

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Chapter 1 Dudley Demented

Chapter 2 A Peck of Owls

Chapter 3 The Advanced Guard

Chapter 4 Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place

Chapter 5 The Order of the Phoenix

Chapter 6 The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black

Chapter 7 The Ministry of Magic

Chapter 8 The Hearing

Chapter 9 The Woes of Mrs. Weasley

Chapter 10 Luna Lovegood

Chapter 11 The Sorting Hat's New Song

Chapter 12 Professor Umbridge

Chapter 13 Detention with Dolores

Chapter 14 Percy and Padfoot

Chapter 15 The Hogwarts High Inquisitor

Chapter 16 In the Hog's Head

Chapter 17 Educational Decree Number Twenty-four

Chapter 18 Dumbledore's Army

Chapter 19 The Lion and The Serpent

Chapter 20 Hagrid's Tale

Chapter 21 The Eye of the Snake

Chapter 22 St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries

Chapter 23 Christmas on the Closed Ward

Chapter 24 Occlumency

Chapter 25 The Beetle at Bay

Chapter 26 Seen and Unforeseen

Chapter 27 The Centaur and The Sneak

Chapter 28 Snape's Worst Memory

Chapter 29 Career Advice

Chapter 30 Grawp

Chapter 31 O.W.L.S

Chapter 32 Out of the Fire

Chapter 33 Fight and Flight

Chapter 34 The Department of Mysteries

Chapter 35 Beyond the Veil

Chapter 36 The Only One He Ever Feared

Chapter 37 The Lost Prophecy

Chapter 38 The Second War Begins

Return to the Main Contents

Chapter 1 Dudley Demented

The hottest day of the summer so far was drawing to a close and a drowsy silence lay over the large, square houses of Privet Drive. Cars that were usually gleaming stood dusty in their drives and lawns that were once emerald green lay parched and yellowing; the use of hosepipes had been banned due to drought. Deprived of their usual car-washing and lawn-mowing pursuits, the inhabitants of Privet Drive had retreated into the shade of their cool houses, windows thrown wide in the hope of tempting in a nonexistent breeze. The only person left outdoors was a teenage boy who was lying flat on his back in a flower bed outside number four.

He was a skinny, black-haired, bespectacled boy who had the pinched, slightly unhealthy look of someone who has grown a lot in a short space of time. His jeans were torn and dirty, his T-shirt baggy and faded, and the soles of his trainers were peeling away from the up-pers. Harry Potter's appearance did not endear him to the neighbors, who were the sort of people who thought scruffiness ought to be pun-ishable by law, but as he had hidden himself behind a large hydrangea bush this evening he was quite invisible to passersby. In fact, the only way he would be spotted was if his Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia stuck their heads out of the living room window and looked straight down into the flower bed below.

On the whole, Harry thought he was to be congratulated on his idea of hiding here. He was not, perhaps, very comfortable lying on the hot, hard earth, but on the other hand, nobody was glaring at him, grinding their teeth so loudly that he could not hear the news, or shooting nasty questions at him, as had happened every time he had tried sitting down in the living room and watching television with his aunt and uncle.

Almost as though this thought had fluttered through the open window, Vernon Dursley, Harry's uncle, suddenly spoke. "Glad to see the

boy's stopped trying to butt in. Where is he anyway?"

"I don't know," said Aunt Petunia unconcernedly. "Not in the house."

Uncle Vernon grunted.

"Watching the news …" he said scathingly. "I'd like to know what he's really up to. As if a normal boy cares what's on the news — Dud-ley hasn't got a clue what's going on, doubt he knows who the Prime Minister is! Anyway, it's not as if there'd be anything about his lot on our news —"

"Vernon, shh!" said Aunt Petunia. "The window's open!"

"Oh — yes — sorry, dear …"

The Dursleys fell silent. Harry listened to a jingle about Fruit 'N Bran breakfast cereal while he watched Mrs. Figg, a batty, cat-loving old lady from nearby Wisteria Walk, amble slowly past. She was frowning and muttering to herself. Harry was very pleased that he was concealed behind the bush; Mrs. Figg had recently taken to asking him around for tea whenever she met him in the street. She had rounded the corner and vanished from view before Uncle Vernon's voice floated out of the window again.

"Dudders out for tea?"

"At the Polkisses'," said Aunt Petunia fondly. "He's got so many lit-tle friends, he's so popular …"

Harry repressed a snort with difficulty. The Dursleys really were as-tonishingly stupid about their son, Dudley; they had swallowed all his dim-witted lies about having tea with a different member of his gang every night of the summer holidays. Harry knew perfectly well that Dudley had not been to tea anywhere; he and his gang spent every evening vandalizing the play park, smoking on street corners, and throwing stones at passing cars and children. Harry had seen them at

it during his evening walks around Little Whinging; he had spent most of the holidays wandering the streets, scavenging newspapers from bins along the way.

The opening notes of the music that heralded the seven o'clock news reached Harry's ears and his stomach turned over. Perhaps tonight — after a month of waiting — would be the night —"Record numbers of stranded holidaymakers fill airports as the Spanish baggage-handlers' strike reaches its second week —"

"Give 'em a lifelong siesta, I would," snarled Uncle Vernon over the end of the newsreader's sentence, but no matter: Outside in the flower bed, Harry's stomach seemed to unclench. If anything had happened, it would surely have been the first item on the news; death and de-struction were more important than stranded holidaymakers. …He let out a long, slow breath and stared up at the brilliant blue sky. Every day this summer had been the same: the tension, the expectation, the temporary relief, and then mounting tension again … and always, growing more insistent all the time, the question of why nothing had happened yet. …He kept listening, just in case there was some small clue, not rec-ognized for what it really was by the Muggles — an unexplained disappearance, perhaps, or some strange accident … but the baggage-handlers' strike was followed by news on the drought in the Southeast ("I hope he's listening next door!" bellowed Uncle Vernon, "with his sprinklers on at three in the morning!"); then a helicopter that had almost crashed in a field in Surrey, then a famous actress's di-vorce from her famous husband ("as if we're interested in their sordid affairs," sniffed Aunt Petunia, who had followed the case obsessively in every magazine she could lay her bony hands on).

Harry closed his eyes against the now blazing evening sky as the newsreader said, "And finally, Bungy the budgie has found a novel way of keeping cool this summer. Bungy, who lives at the Five Feathers in Barnsley, has learned to water-ski! Mary Dorkins went to find out more. …"

Harry opened his eyes again. If they had reached water-skiing budgerigars, there was nothing else worth hearing. He rolled cautiously onto his front and raised himself onto his knees and elbows, preparing to crawl out from under the window.

He had moved about two inches when several things happened in very quick succession.

A loud, echoing crack broke the sleepy silence like a gunshot; a cat streaked out from under a parked car and flew out of sight; a shriek, a bellowed oath, and the sound of breaking china came from the Dursleys' living room, and as though Harry had been waiting for this signal, he jumped to his feet, at the same time pulling from the waistband of his jeans a thin wooden wand as if he were unsheathing a sword. But before he could draw himself up to full height, the top of his head collided with the Dursleys' open window, and the resultant crash made Aunt Petunia scream even louder.

Harry felt as if his head had been split in two; eyes streaming, he swayed, trying to focus on the street and spot the source of the noise, but he had barely staggered upright again when two large purple hands reached through the open window and closed tightly around his throat.

"Put — it — away!" Uncle Vernon snarled into Harry's ear. "Now! Before — anyone — sees!"

"Get — off — me!" Harry gasped; for a few seconds they strug-gled, Harry pulling at his uncle's sausage-like fingers with his left hand, his right maintaining a firm grip on his raised wand. Then, as the pain in the top of Harry's head gave a particularly nasty throb, Un-cle Vernon yelped and released Harry as though he had received an electric shock — some invisible force seemed to have surged through his nephew, making him impossible to hold.

Panting, Harry fell forward over the hydrangea bush, straightened up, and stared around. There was no sign of what had caused the loud

cracking noise, but there were several faces peering through various nearby windows. Harry stuffed his wand hastily back into his jeans and tried to look innocent.

"Lovely evening!" shouted Uncle Vernon, waving at Mrs. Number Seven, who was glaring from behind her net curtains. "Did you hear that car backfire just now? Gave Petunia and me quite a turn!"

He continued to grin in a horrible, manic way until all the curious neighbors had disappeared from their various windows, then the grin became a grimace of rage as he beckoned Harry back toward him.

Harry moved a few steps closer, taking care to stop just short of the point at which Uncle Vernon's outstretched hands could resume their strangling.

"What the devil do you mean by it, boy?" asked Uncle Vernon in a croaky voice that trembled with fury.

"What do I mean by what?" said Harry coldly. He kept looking left and right up the street, still hoping to see the person who had made the cracking noise.

"Making a racket like a starting pistol right outside our —"

"I didn't make that noise," said Harry firmly.

Aunt Petunia's thin, horsey face now appeared beside Uncle Vernon's wide, purple one. She looked livid.

"Why were you lurking under our window?"

"Yes — yes, good point, Petunia! What were you doing under our window, boy?"

"Listening to the news," said Harry in a resigned voice.

His aunt and uncle exchanged looks of outrage.

“Listening to the news! Again?”

“Well, it changes every day, you see,” said Harry.

“Don’t you be clever with me, boy! I want to know what you’re re-ally up to — and don’t give me any more of this listening to the news tosh! You know perfectly well that your lot …”

“Careful, Vernon!” breathed Aunt Petunia, and Uncle Vernon low-ered his voice so that Harry could barely hear him, “… that your lot don’t get on our news!”

“That’s all you know,” said Harry.

The Dursleys goggled at him for a few seconds, then Aunt Petunia said, “You’re a nasty little liar. What are all those —” she too lowered her voice so that Harry had to lip-read the next word, “— owls — doing if they’re not bringing you news?”

“Aha!” said Uncle Vernon in a triumphant whisper. “Get out of that one, boy! As if we didn’t know you get all your news from those pesti-lential birds!”

Harry hesitated for a moment. It cost him something to tell the truth this time, even though his aunt and uncle could not possibly know how bad Harry felt at admitting it.

“The owls … aren’t bringing me news,” said Harry tonelessly.

“I don’t believe it,” said Aunt Petunia at once.

“No more do I,” said Uncle Vernon forcefully.

“We know you’re up to something funny,” said Aunt Petunia.

“We’re not stupid, you know,” said Uncle Vernon.

“Well, that’s news to me,” said Harry, his temper rising, and before the Dursleys could call him back, he had wheeled about, crossed the front lawn, stepped over the low garden wall, and was striding off up the street.

He was in trouble now and he knew it. He would have to face his aunt and uncle later and pay the price for his rudeness, but he did not care very much just at the moment; he had much more pressing mat-ters on his mind.

Harry was sure that the cracking noise had been made by someone Apparating or Disapparating. It was exactly the sound Dobby the house-elf made when he vanished into thin air. Was it possible that Dobby was here in Privet Drive? Could Dobby be following him right at this very moment? As this thought occurred he wheeled around and stared back down Privet Drive, but it appeared to be completely de-serted again and Harry was sure that Dobby did not know how to become invisible. …He walked on, hardly aware of the route he was taking, for he had pounded these streets so often lately that his feet carried him to his fa-vorite haunts automatically. Every few steps he glanced back over his shoulder. Someone magical had been near him as he lay among Aunt Petunias dying begonias, he was sure of it. Why hadn’t they spoken to him, why hadn’t they made contact, why were they hiding now?

And then, as his feeling of frustration peaked, his certainty leaked away.

Perhaps it hadn’t been a magical sound after all. Perhaps he was so desperate for the tiniest sign of contact from the world to which he belonged that he was simply overreacting to perfectly ordinary noises. Could he be sure it hadn’t been the sound of something breaking in-side a neighbor’s house?

Harry felt a dull, sinking sensation in his stomach and, before he knew it, the feeling of hopelessness that had plagued him all summer

rolled over him once again. …Tomorrow morning he would be awoken by the alarm at five o'clock so that he could pay the owl that delivered the Daily Prophet — but was there any point in continuing to take it? Harry merely glanced at the front page before throwing it aside these days; when the idiots who ran the paper finally realized that Voldemort was back it would be headline news, and that was the only kind Harry cared about.

If he was lucky, there would also be owls carrying letters from his best friends, Ron and Hermione, though any expectation he had had that their letters would bring him news had long since been dashed.

"We can't say much about you-know-what, obviously. …" "We've been told not to say anything important in case our letters go astray. …""We're quite busy but I can't give you details here. …" "There's a fair amount going on, we'll tell you everything when we see you. …"

But when were they going to see him? Nobody seemed too both-ered with a precise date. Hermione had scribbled, "I expect we'll be see-ing you quite soon" inside his birthday card, but how soon was soon? As far as Harry could tell from the vague hints in their letters, Hermione and Ron were in the same place, presumably at Ron's parents' house. He could hardly bear to think of the pair of them having fun at the Burrow when he was stuck in Privet Drive. In fact, he was so angry at them that he had thrown both their birthday presents of Honeydukes chocolates away unopened, though he had regretted this after eating the wilting salad Aunt Petunia had provided for dinner that night.

And what were Ron and Hermione busy with? Why wasn't he, Harry, busy? Hadn't he proved himself capable of handling much more than they? Had they all forgotten what he had done? Hadn't it been he who had entered that graveyard and watched Cedric being murdered and been tied to that tombstone and nearly killed … ?

Don't think about that, Harry told himself sternly for the hundredth time that summer. It was bad enough that he kept revisiting the grave-yard in his nightmares, without dwelling on it in his waking moments too.

He turned a corner into Magnolia Crescent; halfway along he passed the narrow alleyway down the side of a garage where he had first clapped eyes on his godfather. Sirius, at least, seemed to understand how Harry was feeling; admittedly his letters were just as empty of proper news as Ron and Hermione's, but at least they contained words of caution and consolation instead of tantalizing hints:"I know this must be frustrating for you. …" "Keep your nose clean and everything will be okay. …" "Be careful and don't do anything rash. …"

Well, thought Harry, as he crossed Magnolia Crescent, turned into Magnolia Road, and headed toward the darkening play park, he had (by and large) done as Sirius advised; he had at least resisted the temptation to tie his trunk to his broomstick and set off for the Burrow by himself. In fact Harry thought his behavior had been very good considering how frustrated and angry he felt at being stuck in Privet Drive this long, reduced to hiding in flower beds in the hope of hearing something that might point to what Lord Voldemort was doing. Nevertheless, it was quite galling to be told not to be rash by a man who had served twelve years in the wizard prison, Azkaban, escaped, attempted to commit the murder he had been convicted for in the first place, then gone on the run with a stolen hippogriff. …Harry vaulted over the locked park gate and set off across the parched grass. The park was as empty as the surrounding streets. When he reached the swings he sank onto the only one that Dudley and his friends had not yet managed to break, coiled one arm around the chain, and stared moodily at the ground. He would not be able to hide in the Dursleys' flower bed again. Tomorrow he would have to think of some fresh way of listening to the news. In the meantime, he had nothing to look forward to but another restless, disturbed night, because even when he escaped nightmares about Cedric he had unset-tling dreams

about long dark corridors, all finishing in dead ends and locked doors, which he supposed had something to do with the trapped feeling he had when he was awake. Often the old scar on his forehead prickled uncomfortably, but he did not fool himself that Ron or Hermione or Sirius would find that very interesting any-more. … In the past his scar hurting had warned that Voldemort was getting stronger again, but now that Voldemort was back they would probably remind him that its regular irritation was only to be ex-pected. … Nothing to worry about … old news …The injustice of it all welled up inside him so that he wanted to yell with fury. If it hadn't been for him, nobody would even have known Voldemort was back! And his reward was to be stuck in Little Whing-ing for four solid weeks, completely cut off from the magical world, reduced to squatting among dying begonias so that he could hear about water-skiing budgerigars! How could Dumbledore have forgot-ten him so easily? Why had Ron and Hermione got together without inviting him along too? How much longer was he supposed to endure Sirius telling him to sit tight and be a good boy; or resist the tempta-tion to write to the stupid Daily Prophet and point out that Volde-mort had returned? These furious thoughts whirled around in Harry's head, and his insides writhed with anger as a sultry, velvety night fell around him, the air full of the smell of warm, dry grass and the only sound that of the low grumble of traffic on the road beyond the park railings.

He did not know how long he had sat on the swing before the sound of voices interrupted his musings and he looked up. The street-lamps from the surrounding roads were casting a misty glow strong enough to silhouette a group of people making their way across the park. One of them was singing a loud, crude song. The others were laughing. A soft ticking noise came from several expensive racing bikes that they were wheeling along.

Harry knew who those people were. The figure in front was unmistakably his cousin, Dudley Dursley, wending his way home, accompanied by his faithful gang.

Dudley was as vast as ever, but a year's hard dieting and the discovery of a new talent had wrought quite a change in his physique. As Uncle Vernon delightedly told anyone who would listen, Dudley had recently become the Junior Heavyweight Inter-School Boxing Champion of the Southeast. "The noble sport," as Uncle Vernon called it, had made Dudley even more formidable than he had seemed to Harry in the primary school days when he had served as Dudley's first punching bag. Harry was not remotely afraid of his cousin anymore but he still didn't think that Dudley learning to punch harder and more accurately was cause for celebration. Neighborhood children all around were terrified of him — even more terrified than they were of "that Potter boy," who, they had been warned, was a hardened hooli-gan who attended St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys.

Harry watched the dark figures crossing the grass and wondered whom they had been beating up tonight. Look round, Harry found himself thinking as he watched them. Come on … look round … I'm sitting here all alone. … Come and have ago. …If Dudley's friends saw him sitting here, they would be sure to make a beeline for him, and what would Dudley do then? He wouldn't want to lose face in front of the gang, but he'd be terrified of provoking Harry. … It would be really fun to watch Dudley's dilemma; to taunt him, watch him, with him powerless to respond … and if any of the others tried hitting Harry, Harry was ready — he had his wand … let them try … He'd love to vent some of his frus-tration on the boys who had once made his life hell —But they did not turn around, they did not see him, they were al-most at the railings. Harry mastered the impulse to call after them. … Seeking a fight was not a smart move. … He must not use magic. … He would be risking expulsion again. …Dudley's gang's voices died; they were out of sight, heading along Magnolia Road.

There you go, Sirius, Harry thought dully. Nothing rash. Kept my nose clean. Exactly the opposite of what you'd have done …He got to his feet and stretched. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon seemed to feel that whenever Dudley turned up was the right time to be home, and

anytime after that was much too late. Uncle Vernon had threatened to lock Harry in the shed if he came home after Dudley again, so, stifling a yawn, still scowling, Harry set off toward the park gate.

Magnolia Road, like Privet Drive, was full of large, square houses with perfectly manicured lawns, all owned by large, square owners who drove very clean cars similar to Uncle Vernon's. Harry preferred Little Whinging by night, when the curtained windows made patches of jewel-bright colors in the darkness and he ran no danger of hearing disapproving mutters about his "delinquent" appearance when he passed the householders. He walked quickly, so that halfway along Magnolia Road Dudley's gang came into view again; they were saying their farewells at the entrance to Magnolia Crescent. Harry stepped into the shadow of a large lilac tree and waited.

"… squealed like a pig, didn't he?" Malcolm was saying, to guffaws from the others.

"Nice right hook, Big D," said Piers.

"Same time tomorrow?" said Dudley.

"Round at my place, my parents are out," said Gordon.

"See you then," said Dudley.

"Bye Dud!"

"See ya, Big D!"

Harry waited for the rest of the gang to move on before setting off again. When their voices had faded once more he headed around the corner into Magnolia Crescent and by walking very quickly he soon came within hailing distance of Dudley, who was strolling along at his ease, humming tunelessly.

"Hey, Big D!"

Dudley turned.

“Oh,” he grunted. “It’s you.”

“How long have you been ‘Big D’ then?” said Harry.

“Shut it,” snarled Dudley, turning away again.

“Cool name,” said Harry, grinning and falling into step beside his cousin. “But you’ll always be Ickle Diddykins to me.”

“I said, SHUT IT!” said Dudley, whose ham-like hands had curled into fists.

“Don’t the boys know that’s what your mum calls you?”

“Shut your face.”

“You don’t tell her to shut her face. What about ‘popkin’ and ‘Dinky Diddydums,’ can I use them then?”

Dudley said nothing. The effort of keeping himself from hitting Harry seemed to be demanding all his self-control.

“So who’ve you been beating up tonight?” Harry asked, his grin fading. “Another ten-year-old? I know you did Mark Evans two nights ago —”

“He was asking for it,” snarled Dudley.

“Oh yeah?”

“He cheeked me.”

“Yeah? Did he say you look like a pig that’s been taught to walk on its hind legs? ’Cause that’s not cheek, Dud, that’s true …”

A muscle was twitching in Dudley's jaw. It gave Harry enormous satisfaction to know how furious he was making Dudley; he felt as though he was siphoning off his own frustration into his cousin, the only outlet he had.

They turned right down the narrow alleyway where Harry had first seen Sirius and which formed a shortcut between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk. It was empty and much darker than the streets it linked because there were no streetlamps. Their footsteps were muffled between garage walls on one side and a high fence on the other.

"Think you're a big man carrying that thing, don't you?" Dudley said after a few seconds.

"What thing?"

"That — that thing you're hiding."

Harry grinned again.

"Not as stupid as you look, are you, Dud? But I s'pose if you were, you wouldn't be able to walk and talk at the same time. …"

Harry pulled out his wand. He saw Dudley look sideways at it.

"You're not allowed," Dudley said at once. "I know you're not. You'd get expelled from that freak school you go to."

"How d'you know they haven't changed the rules, Big D?"

"They haven't," said Dudley, though he didn't sound completely convinced. Harry laughed softly.

"You haven't got the guts to take me on without that thing, have you?" Dudley snarled.

“Whereas you just need four mates behind you before you can beat up a ten-year-old. You know that boxing title you keep banging on about? How old was your opponent? Seven? Eight?”

“He was sixteen for your information,” snarled Dudley, “and he was out cold for twenty minutes after I’d finished with him and he was twice as heavy as you. You just wait till I tell Dad you had that thing out —”

“Running to Daddy now, are you? Is his ickle boxing champ frightened of nasty Harry’s wand?”

“Not this brave at night, are you?” sneered Dudley.

“This is night, Diddykins. That’s what we call it when it goes all dark like this.”

“I mean when you’re in bed!” Dudley snarled.

He had stopped walking. Harry stopped too, staring at his cousin. From the little he could see of Dudley’s large face, he was wearing a strangely triumphant look.

“What d’you mean, I’m not brave in bed?” said Harry, completely nonplussed. “What — am I supposed to be frightened of pillows or something?”

“I heard you last night,” said Dudley breathlessly. “Talking in your sleep. Moaning.”

“What d’you mean?” Harry said again, but there was a cold, plung-ing sensation in his stomach. He had revisited the graveyard last night in his dreams.

Dudley gave a harsh bark of laughter then adopted a high-pitched, whimpering voice. “ ‘Don’t kill Cedric! Don’t kill Cedric!’ Who’s Cedric — your boyfriend?”

“I — you’re lying —” said Harry automatically. But his mouth had gone dry. He knew Dudley wasn’t lying — how else would he know about Cedric?

“ ‘Dad! Help me, Dad! He’s going to kill me, Dad! Boo-hoo!’ ”

“Shut up,” said Harry quietly. “Shut up, Dudley, I’m warning you!”

“ ‘Come and help me, Dad! Mum, come and help me! He’s killed Cedric! Dad, help me! He’s going to —’ Don’t you point that thing at me!”

Dudley backed into the alley wall. Harry was pointing the wand directly at Dudley’s heart. Harry could feel fourteen years’ hatred of Dudley pounding in his veins — what wouldn’t he give to strike now, to jinx Dudley so thoroughly he’d have to crawl home like an insect, struck dumb, sprouting feelers —“Don’t ever talk about that again,” Harry snarled. “D’you under-stand me?”

“Point that thing somewhere else!”

“I said, do you understand me?”

“Point it somewhere else!”

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?”

“GET THAT THING AWAY FROM —”

Dudley gave an odd, shuddering gasp, as though he had been doused in icy water.

Something had happened to the night. The star-strewn indigo sky was suddenly pitch-black and lightless — the stars, the moon, the misty streetlamps at either end of the alley had vanished. The distant grumble of cars and the whisper of trees had gone. The balmy evening was suddenly piercingly, bitingly cold. They were surrounded

by total, impenetrable, silent darkness, as though some giant hand had dropped a thick, icy mantle over the entire alleyway, blinding them.

For a split second Harry thought he had done magic without meaning to, despite the fact that he'd been resisting as hard as he could — then his reason caught up with his senses — he didn't have the power to turn off the stars. He turned his head this way and that, trying to see something, but the darkness pressed on his eyes like a weightless veil.

Dudley's terrified voice broke in Harry's ear.

"W-what are you d-doing? St-stop it!"

"I'm not doing anything! Shut up and don't move!"

"I c-can't see! I've g-gone blind! I —"

"I said shut up!"

Harry stood stock-still, turning his sightless eyes left and right. The cold was so intense that he was shivering all over; goose bumps had erupted up his arms, and the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up — he opened his eyes to their fullest extent, staring blankly around, unseeing …It was impossible. … They couldn't be here. … Not in Little Whinging … He strained his ears. … He would hear them before he saw them. …"I'll t-tell Dad!" Dudley whimpered. "W-where are you? What are you d-do — ?"

"Will you shut up?" Harry hissed, "I'm trying to lis —"

But he fell silent. He had heard just the thing he had been dreading.

There was something in the alleyway apart from themselves, something that was drawing long, hoarse, rattling breaths. Harry felt a horrible jolt of dread as he stood trembling in the freezing air.

"C-cut it out! Stop doing it! I'll h-hit you, I swear I will!"

"Dudley, shut —"

WHAM!

A fist made contact with the side of Harry's head, lifting Harry off his feet. Small white lights popped in front of Harry's eyes; for the second time in an hour he felt as though his head had been cleaved in two; next moment he had landed hard on the ground, and his wand had flown out of his hand.

"You moron, Dudley!" Harry yelled, his eyes watering with pain, as he scrambled to his hands and knees, now feeling around frantically in the blackness. He heard Dudley blundering away, hitting the alley fence, stumbling.

"DUDLEY, COME BACK! YOU'RE RUNNING RIGHT AT IT!"

There was a horrible squealing yell, and Dudley's footsteps stopped. At the same moment, Harry felt a creeping chill behind him that could mean only one thing. There was more than one.

"DUDLEY, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT! WHATEVER YOU DO, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT! Wand!" Harry muttered franti-cally, his hands flying over the ground like spiders. "Where's — wand — come on — Lumos!"

He said the spell automatically, desperate for light to help him in his search — and to his disbelieving relief, light flared inches from his right hand — the wand tip had ignited. Harry snatched it up, scrambled to his feet, and turned around.

His stomach turned over.

A towering, hooded figure was gliding smoothly toward him, hovering over the ground, no feet or face visible beneath its robes, sucking on

the night as it came.

Stumbling backward, Harry raised his wand.

“Expecto Patronum!”

A silvery wisp of vapor shot from the tip of the wand and the dementor slowed, but the spell hadn’t worked properly; tripping over his feet, Harry retreated farther as the dementor bore down upon him, panic fogging his brain — concentrate —A pair of gray, slimy, scabbed hands slid from inside the dementor’s robes, reaching for him. A rushing noise filled Harry’s ears.

“Expecto Patronum!”

His voice sounded dim and distant. … Another wisp of silver smoke, feebler than the last, drifted from the wand — he couldn’t do it anymore, he couldn’t work the spell —There was laughter inside his own head, shrill, high-pitched laugh-ter. … He could smell the dementor’s putrid, death-cold breath, fill-ing his own lungs, drowning him — Think … something happy. …But there was no happiness in him. … The dementor’s icy fingers were closing on his throat — the high-pitched laughter was growing louder and louder, and a voice spoke inside his head — “Bow to death, Harry. … It might even be painless. … I would not know. … I have never died. …”

He was never going to see Ron and Hermione again —And their faces burst clearly into his mind as he fought for breath —“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

An enormous silver stag erupted from the tip of Harry’s wand; its antlers caught the dementor in the place where the heart should have been; it was thrown backward, weightless as darkness, and as the stag charged, the dementor swooped away, batlike and defeated.

“THIS WAY!” Harry shouted at the stag. Wheeling around, he sprinted down the alleyway, holding the lit wand aloft. “DUDLEY? DUDLEY!”

He had run barely a dozen steps when he reached them: Dudley was curled on the ground, his arms clamped over his face; a second de-mentor was crouching low over him, gripping his wrists in its slimy hands, prizing them slowly, almost lovingly apart, lowering its hooded head toward Dudley's face as though about to kiss him. …"GET IT!" Harry bellowed, and with a rushing, roaring sound, the silver stag he had conjured came galloping back past him. The de-mentor's eyeless face was barely an inch from Dudley's when the silver antlers caught it; the thing was thrown up into the air and, like its fellow, it soared away and was absorbed into the darkness. The stag cantered to the end of the alleyway and dissolved into silver mist.

Moon, stars, and streetlamps burst back into life. A warm breeze swept the alleyway. Trees rustled in neighboring gardens and the mun-dane rumble of cars in Magnolia Crescent filled the air again. Harry stood quite still, all his senses vibrating, taking in the abrupt return to normality. After a moment he became aware that his T-shirt was stick-ing to him; he was drenched in sweat.

He could not believe what had just happened. Dementors here, in Little Whinging …Dudley lay curled up on the ground, whimpering and shaking. Harry bent down to see whether he was in a fit state to stand up, but then heard loud, running footsteps behind him; instinctively raising his wand again, he spun on his heel to face the newcomer.

Mrs. Figg, their batty old neighbor, came panting into sight. Her grizzled gray hair was escaping from its hairnet, a clanking string shopping bag was swinging from her wrist, and her feet were halfway out of her tartan carpet slippers. Harry made to stow his wand hur-riedly out of sight, but —"Don't put it away, idiot boy!" she shrieked. "What if there are more of them around? Oh, I'm going to kill Mundungus Fletcher!"

Chapter 2 A Peck of Owls

“What?” said Harry blankly.

“He left!” said Mrs. Figg, wringing her hands. “Left to see someone about a batch of cauldrons that fell off the back of a broom! I told him I’d flay him alive if he went, and now look! Dementors! It’s just lucky I put Mr. Tibbies on the case! But we haven’t got time to stand around! Hurry, now, we’ve got to get you back! Oh, the trouble this is going to cause! I will kill him!”

“But —”

The revelation that his batty old cat-obsessed neighbor knew what dementors were was almost as big a shock to Harry as meeting two of them down the alleyway. “You’re — you’re a witch?”

“I’m a Squib, as Mundungus knows full well, so how on earth was I supposed to help you fight off dementors? He left you completely without cover when I warned him —”

“This bloke Mundungus has been following me? Hang on — it was him! He Disapparated from the front of my house!”

“Yes, yes, yes, but luckily I’d stationed Mr. Tibbies under a car just in case, and Mr. Tibbies came and warned me, but by the time I got to your house you’d gone — and now — oh, what’s Dumbledore go-ing to say? You!” she shrieked at Dudley, still supine on the alley floor. “Get your fat bottom off the ground, quick!”

“You know Dumbledore?” said Harry, staring at her.

“Of course I know Dumbledore, who doesn’t know Dumbledore? But come on — I’ll be no help if they come back, I’ve never so much as Transfigured a teabag —”

She stooped down, seized one of Dudley's massive arms in her wizened hands, and tugged.

"Get up, you useless lump, get up!"

But Dudley either could not or would not move. He was still on the ground, trembling and ashen-faced, his mouth shut very tight.

"I'll do it." Harry took hold of Dudley's arm and heaved: With an enormous effort he managed to hoist Dudley to his feet. Dudley seemed to be on the point of fainting: His small eyes were rolling in their sockets and sweat was beading his face; the moment Harry let go of him he swayed dangerously.

"Hurry up!" said Mrs. Figg hysterically.

Harry pulled one of Dudley's massive arms around his own shoulders and dragged him toward the road, sagging slightly under his weight. Mrs. Figg tottered along in front of them, peering anxiously around the corner.

"Keep your wand out," she told Harry, as they entered Wisteria Walk. "Never mind the Statute of Secrecy now, there's going to be hell to pay anyway, we might as well be hanged for a dragon as an egg. Talk about the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery … This was exactly what Dumbledore was afraid of — what's that at the end of the street? Oh, it's just Mr. Prentice. … Don't put your wand away, boy, don't I keep telling you I'm no use?"

It was not easy to hold a wand steady and carry Dudley along at the same time. Harry gave his cousin an impatient dig in the ribs, but Dudley seemed to have lost all desire for independent movement. He was slumped on Harry's shoulder, his large feet dragging along the ground.

"Why didn't you tell me you're a Squib?" Harry asked Mrs. Figg, panting with the effort to keep walking. "All those times I came round

your house — why didn't you say anything?"

"Dumbledore's orders. I was to keep an eye on you but not say anything, you were too young. I'm sorry I gave you such a miserable time, but the Dursleys would never have let you come if they'd thought you enjoyed it. It wasn't easy, you know. … But oh my word," she said tragically, wringing her hands once more, "when Dumbledore hears about this — how could Mundungus have left, he was supposed to be on duty until midnight — where is he? How am I going to tell Dum-bledore what's happened, I can't Apparate —"

"I've got an owl, you can borrow her," Harry groaned, wondering whether his spine was going to snap under Dudley's weight.

"Harry, you don't understand! Dumbledore will need to act as quickly as possible, the Ministry have their own ways of detecting un-derage magic, they'll know already, you mark my words —"

"But I was getting rid of dementors, I had to use magic — they're going to be more worried what dementors were doing floating around Wisteria Walk, surely?"

"Oh my dear, I wish it were so but I'm afraid — MUNDUNGUS FLETCHER, I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!"

There was a loud crack and a strong smell of mingled drink and stale tobacco filled the air as a squat, unshaven man in a tattered overcoat materialized right in front of them. He had short bandy legs, long straggly ginger hair, and bloodshot baggy eyes that gave him the dole-ful look of a basset hound; he was also clutching a silvery bundle that Harry recognized at once as an Invisibility Cloak.

" 'S' up, Figgy?" he said, staring from Mrs. Figg to Harry and Dud-ley. "What 'appened to staying undercover?"

"I'll give you undercover!" cried Mrs. Figg. "Dementors, you useless, skiving sneak thief!"

“Dementors?” repeated Mundungus, aghast. “Dementors here?”

“Yes, here, you worthless pile of bat droppings, here!” shrieked Mrs. Figg. “Dementors attacking the boy on your watch!”

“Blimey,” said Mundungus weakly, looking from Mrs. Figg to Harry and back again. “Blimey, I …”

“And you off buying stolen cauldrons! Didn’t I tell you not to go? Didn’t I?”

“I — well, I —” Mundungus looked deeply uncomfortable. “It … it was a very good business opportunity, see …”

Mrs. Figg raised the arm from which her string bag dangled and whacked Mundungus around the face and neck with it; judging by the clanking noise it made it was full of cat food.

“Ouch — gerroff — gerroff, you mad old bat! Someone’s gotta tell Dumbledore!”

“Yes — they — have!” yelled Mrs. Figg, still swinging the bag of cat food at every bit of Mundungus she could reach. “And — it — had — better — be — you — and — you — can — tell — him — why — you — weren’t — there — to — help!”

“Keep your ’airnet on!” said Mundungus, his arms over his head, cowering. “I’m going, I’m going!”

And with another loud crack, he vanished.

“I hope Dumbledore murders him!” said Mrs. Figg furiously. “Now come on, Harry, what are you waiting for?”

Harry decided not to waste his remaining breath on pointing out that he could barely walk under Dudley’s bulk. He gave the semiconscious Dudley a heave and staggered onward.

"I'll take you to the door," said Mrs. Figg, as they turned into Privet Drive. "Just in case there are more of them around. … Oh my word, what a catastrophe … and you had to fight them off yourself … and Dumbledore said we were to keep you from doing magic at all costs. … Well, it's no good crying over spilled potion, I suppose … but the cat's among the pixies now …"

"So," Harry panted, "Dumbledore's … been having … me followed?"

"Of course he has," said Mrs. Figg impatiently. "Did you expect him to let you wander around on your own after what happened in June? Good Lord, boy, they told me you were intelligent. … Right … get inside and stay there," she said as they reached number four. "I expect someone will be in touch with you soon enough."

"What are you going to do?" asked Harry quickly.

"I'm going straight home," said Mrs. Figg, staring around the dark street and shuddering. "I'll need to wait for more instructions. Just stay in the house. Good night."

"Hang on, don't go yet! I want to know —"

But Mrs. Figg had already set off at a trot, carpet slippers flopping, string bag clanking.

"Wait!" Harry shouted after her; he had a million questions to ask anyone who was in contact with Dumbledore; but within seconds Mrs. Figg was swallowed by the darkness. Scowling, Harry readjusted Dudley on his shoulder and made his slow, painful way up number four's garden path.

The hall light was on. Harry stuck his wand back inside the waist-band of his jeans, rang the bell, and watched Aunt Petunia's outline grow larger and larger, oddly distorted by the rippling glass in the front door.

“Diddy! About time too, I was getting quite — quite — Diddy, what’s the matter?”

Harry looked sideways at Dudley and ducked out from under his arm just in time. Dudley swayed for a moment on the spot, his face pale green, then he opened his mouth at last and vomited all over the doormat.

“DIDDY! Diddy, what’s the matter with you? Vernon? VERNON!”

Harry’s uncle came galumphing out of the living room, walrus mustache blowing hither and thither as it always did when he was agitated. He hurried forward to help Aunt Petunia negotiate a weak-kneed Dudley over the threshold while avoiding stepping in the pool of sick.

“He’s ill, Vernon!”

“What is it, son? What’s happened? Did Mrs. Polkiss give you something foreign for tea?”

“Why are you all covered in dirt, darling? Have you been lying on the ground?”

“Hang on — you haven’t been mugged, have you, son?”

Aunt Petunia screamed.

“Phone the police, Vernon! Phone the police! Diddy, darling, speak to Mummy! What did they do to you?”

In all the kerfuffle, nobody seemed to have noticed Harry, which suited him perfectly. He managed to slip inside just before Uncle Vernon slammed the door and while the Dursleys made their noisy progress down the hall toward the kitchen, Harry moved carefully and quietly toward the stairs.

“Who did it, son? Give us names. We’ll get them, don’t worry.”

“Shh! He’s trying to say something, Vernon! What is it, Diddy? Tell Mummy!”

Harry’s foot was on the bottommost stair when Dudley found his voice.

“Him.”

Harry froze, foot on the stair, face screwed up, braced for the explosion.

“BOY! COME HERE!”

With a feeling of mingled dread and anger, Harry removed his foot slowly from the stair and turned to follow the Dursleys.

The scrupulously clean kitchen had an oddly unreal glitter after the darkness outside. Aunt Petunia was ushering Dudley into a chair; he was still very green and clammy looking. Uncle Vernon was standing in front of the draining board, glaring at Harry through tiny, nar-rowed eyes.

“What have you done to my son?” he said in a menacing growl.

“Nothing,” said Harry, knowing perfectly well that Uncle Vernon wouldn’t believe him.

“What did he do to you, Diddy?” Aunt Petunia said in a quavering voice, now sponging sick from the front of Dudley’s leather jacket. “Was it — was it you-know-what, darling? Did he use — his thing?”

Slowly, tremulously, Dudley nodded.

“I didn’t!” Harry said sharply, as Aunt Petunia let out a wail and Uncle Vernon raised his fists. “I didn’t do anything to him, it wasn’t me, it was —”

But at that precise moment a screech owl swooped in through the kitchen window. Narrowly missing the top of Uncle Vernon's head, it soared across the kitchen, dropped the large parchment envelope it was carrying in its beak at Harry's feet, and turned gracefully, the tips of its wings just brushing the top of the fridge, then zoomed outside again and off across the garden.

"OWLS!" bellowed Uncle Vernon, the well-worn vein in his tem-ple pulsing angrily as he slammed the kitchen window shut. "OWLS AGAIN! I WILL NOT HAVE ANY MORE OWLS IN MY HOUSE!"

But Harry was already ripping open the envelope and pulling out the letter inside, his heart pounding somewhere in the region of his Adam's apple.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that you performed the Pa-tronus Charm at twenty-three minutes past nine this evening in a Muggle-inhabited area and in the presence of a Muggle.

The severity of this breach of the Decree for the Reason-able Restriction of Underage Sorcery has resulted in your ex-pulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of resi-dence shortly to destroy your wand.

As you have already received an official warning for a previous offense under section 13 of the International Con-federation of Wizards' Statute of Secrecy, we regret to inform you that your presence is required at a disciplinary hearing at the Ministry of Magic at 9 a.m. on August 12th.

Hoping you are well,

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

IMPROPER USE OF MAGIC OFFICE

Ministry of Magic

Harry read the letter through twice. He was only vaguely aware of Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia talking in the vicinity. Inside his head, all was icy and numb. One fact had penetrated his conscious-ness like a paralyzing dart. He was expelled from Hogwarts. It was all over. He was never going back.

He looked up at the Dursleys. Uncle Vernon was purple-faced, shouting, his fists still raised; Aunt Petunia had her arms around Dudley, who was retching again.

Harry's temporarily stupefied brain seemed to reawaken. Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand. There was only one thing for it. He would have to run — now. Where he was going to go, Harry didn't know, but he was certain of one thing: At Hogwarts or outside it, he needed his wand. In an almost dreamlike state, he pulled his wand out and turned to leave the kitchen.

"Where d'you think you're going?" yelled Uncle Vernon. When Harry didn't reply, he pounded across the kitchen to block the door-way into the hall. "I haven't finished with you, boy!"

"Get out of the way," said Harry quietly.

"You're going to stay here and explain how my son —"

"If you don't get out of the way I'm going to jinx you," said Harry, raising the wand.

"You can't pull that one on me!" snarled Uncle Vernon. "I know you're not allowed to use it outside that madhouse you call a school!"

“The madhouse has chucked me out,” said Harry. “So I can do whatever I like. You’ve got three seconds. One — two —”

A resounding CRACK filled the kitchen; Aunt Petunia screamed, Uncle Vernon yelled and ducked, but for the third time that night Harry was staring for the source of a disturbance he had not made. He spotted it at once: A dazed and ruffled-looking barn owl was sitting outside on the kitchen sill, having just collided with the closed window.

Ignoring Uncle Vernon’s anguished yell of “OWLS!” Harry crossed the room at a run and wrenched the window open again. The owl stuck out its leg, to which a small roll of parchment was tied, shook its feathers, and took off the moment Harry had pulled off the letter. Hands shaking, Harry unfurled the second message, which was written very hastily and blotchily in black ink.

Harry —

Dumbledore’s just arrived at the Ministry, and he’s trying to sort it all out. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR AUNT AND UNCLE’S HOUSE. DO NOT DO ANY MORE MAGIC. DO NOT SURRENDER YOUR WAND.

Arthur Weasley

Dumbledore was trying to sort it all out. … What did that mean? How much power did Dumbledore have to override the Ministry of Magic? Was there a chance that he might be allowed back to Hog-warts, then? A small shoot of hope burgeoned in Harry’s chest, almost immediately strangled by panic — how was he supposed to refuse to surrender his wand without doing magic? He’d have to duel with the Ministry representatives, and if he did that, he’d be lucky to escape Azkaban, let alone expulsion.

His mind was racing. … He could run for it and risk being cap-tured by the Ministry, or stay put and wait for them to find him here. He was much more tempted by the former course, but he knew that Mr.

Weasley had his best interests at heart … and, after all, Dumble-dore had sorted out much worse than this before. …"Right," Harry said, "I've changed my mind, I'm staying."

He flung himself down at the kitchen table and faced Dudley and Aunt Petunia. The Dursleys appeared taken aback at his abrupt change of mind. Aunt Petunia glanced despairingly at Uncle Vernon. The vein in Uncle Vernon's purple temple was throbbing worse than ever.

"Who are all these ruddy owls from?" he growled.

"The first one was from the Ministry of Magic, expelling me," said Harry calmly; he was straining his ears to catch noises outside in case the Ministry representatives were approaching, and it was easier and quieter to answer Uncle Vernon's questions than to have him start rag-ing and bellowing. "The second one was from my friend Ron's dad, he works at the Ministry."

"Ministry of Magic?" bellowed Uncle Vernon. "People like you in government? Oh this explains everything, everything, no wonder the country's going to the dogs. …"

When Harry did not respond, Uncle Vernon glared at him, then spat, "And why have you been expelled?"

"Because I did magic."

"AHA!" roared Uncle Vernon, slamming his fist down on the top of the fridge, which sprang open; several of Dudley's low-fat snacks top-pled out and burst on the floor. "So you admit it! What did you do to Dudley?"

"Nothing," said Harry, slightly less calmly. "That wasn't me —"

"Was," muttered Dudley unexpectedly, and Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia instantly made flapping gestures at Harry to quiet him while they both bent low over Dudley.

“Go on, son,” said Uncle Vernon, “what did he do?”

“Tell us, darling,” whispered Aunt Petunia.

“Pointed his wand at me,” Dudley mumbled.

“Yeah, I did, but I didn’t use —” Harry began angrily, but …“SHUT UP!” roared Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia in unison. “Go on, son,” repeated Uncle Vernon, mustache blowing about furiously.

“All dark,” Dudley said hoarsely, shuddering. “Everything dark. And then I h-heard … things. Inside m-my head …”

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia exchanged looks of utter horror. If their least favorite thing in the world was magic, closely followed by neighbors who cheated more than they did on the hosepipe ban, people who heard voices were definitely in the bottom ten. They obviously thought Dudley was losing his mind.

“What sort of things did you hear, popkin?” breathed Aunt Petu-nia, very white-faced and with tears in her eyes.

But Dudley seemed incapable of saying. He shuddered again and shook his large blond head, and despite the sense of numb dread that had settled on Harry since the arrival of the first owl, he felt a certain curiosity. Dementors caused a person to relive the worst moments of their life. … What would spoiled, pampered, bullying Dudley have been forced to hear?

“How come you fell over, son?” said Uncle Vernon in an unnatu-rally quiet voice, the kind of voice he would adopt at the bedside of a very ill person.

“T-tripped,” said Dudley shakily. “And then —”

He gestured at his massive chest. Harry understood: Dudley was re-membering the clammy cold that filled the lungs as hope and happi-

ness were sucked out of you.

“Horrible,” croaked Dudley. “Cold. Really cold.”

“Okay,” said Uncle Vernon in a voice of forced calm, while Aunt Petunia laid an anxious hand on Dudley’s forehead to feel his temperature. “What happened then, Dudders?”

“Felt … felt … felt … as if… as if …”

“As if you’d never be happy again,” Harry supplied tonelessly.

“Yes,” Dudley whispered, still trembling.

“So,” said Uncle Vernon, voice restored to full and considerable volume as he straightened up. “So you put some crackpot spell on my son so he’d hear voices and believe he was — was doomed to misery, or something, did you?”

“How many times do I have to tell you?” said Harry, temper and voice rising together. “It wasn’t me! It was a couple of dementors!”

“A couple of— what’s this codswallop?”

“De — men — tors,” said Harry slowly and clearly. “Two of them.”

“And what the ruddy hell are dementors?”

“They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban,” said Aunt Petunia.

Two seconds’ ringing silence followed these words and then Aunt Petunia clapped her hand over her mouth as though she had let slip a disgusting swear word. Uncle Vernon was goggling at her. Harry’s brain reeled. Mrs. Figg was one thing — but Aunt Petunia?

“How d’you know that?” he asked her, astonished.

Aunt Petunia looked quite appalled with herself. She glanced at Uncle Vernon in fearful apology, then lowered her hand slightly to reveal her horsey teeth.

“I heard — that awful boy — telling her about them — years ago,” she said jerkily.

“If you mean my mum and dad, why don’t you use their names?” said Harry loudly, but Aunt Petunia ignored him. She seemed horri-bly flustered.

Harry was stunned. Except for one outburst years ago, in the course of which Aunt Petunia had screamed that Harry’s mother had been a freak, he had never heard her mention her sister. He was astounded that she had remembered this scrap of information about the magical world for so long, when she usually put all her energies into pretending it didn’t exist.

Uncle Vernon opened his mouth, closed it again, opened it once more, shut it, then, apparently struggling to remember how to talk, opened it for a third time and croaked, “So — so — they — er — they — er — they actually exist, do they — er — dementy-whatsits?”

Aunt Petunia nodded.

Uncle Vernon looked from Aunt Petunia to Dudley to Harry as if hoping somebody was going to shout “April Fool!” When nobody did, he opened his mouth yet again, but was spared the struggle to find more words by the arrival of the third owl of the evening, which zoomed through the still-open window like a feathery cannonball and landed with a clatter on the kitchen table, causing all three of the Dursleys to jump with fright. Harry tore a second official-looking envelope from the owl’s beak and ripped it open as the owl swooped back out into the night.

“Enough — effing — owls …” muttered Uncle Vernon distract-edly, stomping over to the window and slamming it shut again.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Further to our letter of approximately twenty-two minutes ago, the Ministry of Magic has revised its decision to destroy your wand forthwith. You may retain your wand until your disciplinary hearing on 12th August, at which time an official decision will be taken.

Following discussions with the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Ministry has agreed that the question of your expulsion will also be decided at that time. You should therefore consider yourself suspended from school pending further inquiries.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

IMPROPER USE OF MAGIC OFFICE

Ministry of Magic

Harry read this letter through three times in quick succession. The miserable knot in his chest loosened slightly at the thought that he was not definitely expelled, though his fears were by no means banished. Everything seemed to hang on this hearing on the twelfth of August.

“Well?” said Uncle Vernon, recalling Harry to his surroundings. “What now? Have they sentenced you to anything? Do your lot have the death penalty?” he added as a hopeful afterthought.

“I’ve got to go to a hearing,” said Harry.

“And they’ll sentence you there?”

“I suppose so.”

“I won’t give up hope, then,” said Uncle Vernon nastily.

“Well, if that’s all,” said Harry, getting to his feet. He was desperate to be alone, to think, perhaps to send a letter to Ron, Hermione, or Sirius.

“NO, IT RUDDY WELL IS NOT ALL!” bellowed Uncle Vernon. “SIT BACK DOWN!”

“What now?” said Harry impatiently.

“DUDLEY!” roared Uncle Vernon. “I want to know exactly what happened to my son!”

“FINE!” yelled Harry, and in his temper, red and gold sparks shot out of the end of his wand, still clutched in his hand. All three Durs-leys flinched, looking terrified.

“Dudley and I were in the alleyway between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk,” said Harry, speaking fast, fighting to control his temper. “Dudley thought he’d be smart with me, I pulled out my wand but didn’t use it. Then two dementors turned up —”

“But what ARE dementoids?” asked Uncle Vernon furiously. “What do they DO?”

“I told you — they suck all the happiness out of you,” said Harry, “and if they get the chance, they kiss you —”

“Kiss you?” said Uncle Vernon, his eyes popping slightly. “Kiss you?”

“It’s what they call it when they suck the soul out of your mouth.”

Aunt Petunia uttered a soft scream.

“His soul? They didn’t take — he’s still got his —”

She seized Dudley by the shoulders and shook him, as though testing to see whether she could hear his soul rattling around inside him.

“Of course they didn’t get his soul, you’d know if they had,” said Harry, exasperated.

“Fought ’em off, did you, son?” said Uncle Vernon loudly, with the appearance of a man struggling to bring the conversation back onto a plane he understood. “Gave ’em the old one-two, did you?”

“You can’t give a dementor the old one-two,” said Harry through clenched teeth.

“Why’s he all right, then?” blustered Uncle Vernon. “Why isn’t he all empty, then?”

“Because I used the Patronus —”

WHOOSH. With a clattering, a whirring of wings, and a soft fall of dust, a fourth owl came shooting out of the kitchen fireplace.

“FOR GOD’S SAKE!” roared Uncle Vernon, pulling great clumps of hair out of his mustache, something he hadn’t been driven to in a long time. “I WILL NOT HAVE OWLS HERE, I WILL NOT TOLERATE THIS, I TELL YOU!”

But Harry was already pulling a roll of parchment from the owl’s leg. He was so convinced that this letter had to be from Dumbledore, explaining everything — the dementors, Mrs. Figg, what the Min-istry was up to, how he, Dumbledore, intended to sort everything out — that for the first time in his life he was disappointed to see Sir-ius’s handwriting. Ignoring Uncle Vernon’s ongoing rant about owls and narrowing his eyes against a second cloud of dust as the most recent owl took off back up the chimney, Harry read Sirius’s message.

Arthur’s just told us what’s happened.

Don’t leave the house again, whatever you do.

Harry found this such an inadequate response to everything that had happened tonight that he turned the piece of parchment over, looking for the rest of the letter, but there was nothing there.

And now his temper was rising again. Wasn’t anybody going to say “well done” for fighting off two dementors single-handedly? Both Mr. Weasley and Sirius were acting as though he’d misbehaved and they were saving their tellings-off until they could ascertain how much damage had been done.

“— a peck, I mean, pack of owls shooting in and out of my house and I won’t have it, boy, I won’t —”

“I can’t stop the owls coming,” Harry snapped, crushing Sirius’s let-ter in his fist.

“I want the truth about what happened tonight!” barked Uncle Vernon. “If it was demenders who hurt Dudley, how come you’ve been expelled? You did you-know-what, you’ve admitted it!”

Harry took a deep, steadying breath. His head was beginning to ache again. He wanted more than anything to get out of the kitchen, away from the Dursleys.

“I did the Patronus Charm to get rid of the dementors,” he said, forcing himself to remain calm. “It’s the only thing that works against them.”

“But what were dementoids doing in Little Whinging?” said Uncle Vernon in tones of outrage.

“Couldn’t tell you,” said Harry wearily. “No idea.”

His head was pounding in the glare of the strip lighting now. His anger was ebbing away. He felt drained, exhausted. The Dursleys

were all staring at him.

"It's you," said Uncle Vernon forcefully. "It's got something to do with you, boy, I know it. Why else would they turn up here? Why else would they be down that alleyway? You've got to be the only — the only —" Evidently he couldn't bring himself to say the word "wizard." "The only you-know-what for miles."

"I don't know why they were here. …"

But at these words of Uncle Vernon's, Harry's exhausted brain ground back into action. Why had the dementors come to Little Whinging? How could it be coincidence that they had arrived in the alleyway where Harry was? Had they been sent? Had the Ministry of Magic lost control of the dementors, had they deserted Azkaban and joined Voldemort, as Dumbledore had predicted they would?

"These demembers guard some weirdos' prison?" said Uncle Vernon, lumbering in the wake of Harry's train of thought.

"Yes," said Harry.

If only his head would stop hurting, if only he could just leave the kitchen and get to his dark bedroom and think. …"Oho! They were coming to arrest you!" said Uncle Vernon, with the triumphant air of a man reaching an unassailable conclusion. "That's it, isn't it, boy? You're on the run from the law!"

"Of course I'm not," said Harry, shaking his head as though to scare off a fly, his mind racing now.

"Then why — ?"

"He must have sent them," said Harry quietly, more to himself than to Uncle Vernon.

"What's that? Who must have sent them?"

“Lord Voldemort,” said Harry.

He registered dimly how strange it was that the Dursleys, who flinched, winced, and squawked if they heard words like “wizard,” “magic,” or “wand,” could hear the name of the most evil wizard of all time without the slightest tremor.

“Lord — hang on,” said Uncle Vernon, his face screwed up, a look of dawning comprehension in his piggy eyes. “I’ve heard that name … that was the one who …”

“Murdered my parents, yes,” Harry said.

“But he’s gone,” said Uncle Vernon impatiently, without the slight-est sign that the murder of Harry’s parents might be a painful topic to anybody. “That giant bloke said so. He’s gone.”

“He’s back,” said Harry heavily.

It felt very strange to be standing here in Aunt Petunia’s surgically clean kitchen, beside the top-of-the-range fridge and the wide-screen television, and talking calmly of Lord Voldemort to Uncle Vernon. The arrival of the dementors in Little Whinging seemed to have caused a breach in the great, invisible wall that divided the relentlessly non-magical world of Privet Drive and the world beyond. Harry’s two lives had somehow become fused and everything had been turned up-side down: The Dursleys were asking for details about the magical world and Mrs. Figg knew Albus Dumbledore; dementors were soar-ing around Little Whinging and he might never go back to Hogwarts. Harry’s head throbbed more painfully.

“Back?” whispered Aunt Petunia.

She was looking at Harry as she had never looked at him before. And all of a sudden, for the very first time in his life, Harry fully ap-preciated that Aunt Petunia was his mother’s sister. He could not have said why this hit him so very powerfully at this moment. All he

knew was that he was not the only person in the room who had an inkling of what Lord Voldemort being back might mean. Aunt Petunia had never in her life looked at him like that before. Her large, pale eyes (so unlike her sister's) were not narrowed in dislike or anger: They were wide and fearful. The furious pretense that Aunt Petunia had main-tained all Harry's life — that there was no magic and no world other than the world she inhabited with Uncle Vernon — seemed to have fallen away.

"Yes," Harry said, talking directly to Aunt Petunia now. "He came back a month ago. I saw him."

Her hands found Dudley's massive leather-clad shoulders and clutched them.

"Hang on," said Uncle Vernon, looking from his wife to Harry and back again, apparently dazed and confused by the unprecedented un-derstanding that seemed to have sprung up between them. "Hang on. This Lord Voldything's back, you say."

"Yes."

"The one who murdered your parents."

"Yes."

"And now he's sending dismembers after you?"

"Looks like it," said Harry.

"I see," said Uncle Vernon, looking from his white-faced wife to Harry and hitching up his trousers. He seemed to be swelling, his great purple face stretching before Harry's eyes. "Well, that settles it," he said, his shirt front straining as he inflated himself, "you can get out of this house, boy!"

"What?" said Harry.

"You heard me — OUT!" Uncle Vernon bellowed, and even Aunt Petunia and Dudley jumped. "OUT! OUT! I should've done it years ago! Owls treating the place like a rest home, puddings exploding, half the lounge destroyed, Dudley's tail, Marge bobbing around on the ceiling, and that flying Ford Anglia — OUT! OUT! You've had it! You're history! You're not staying here if some loony's after you, you're not endangering my wife and son, you're not bringing trouble down on us, if you're going the same way as your useless parents, I've had it! OUT!"

Harry stood rooted to the spot. The letters from the Ministry, Mr. Weasley, and Sirius were crushed in his left hand. Don't leave the house again, whatever you do. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR AUNT AND UNCLE'S HOUSE.

"You heard me!" said Uncle Vernon, bending forward now, so that his massive purple face came closer to Harry's, so that Harry actually felt flecks of spit hit his face. "Get going! You were all keen to leave half an hour ago! I'm right behind you! Get out and never darken our doorstep again! Why we ever kept you in the first place I don't know. Marge was right, it should have been the orphanage, we were too damn soft for our own good, thought we could squash it out of you, thought we could turn you normal, but you've been rotten from the beginning, and I've had enough — OWLS!"

The fifth owl zoomed down the chimney so fast it actually hit the floor before zooming into the air again with a loud screech. Harry raised his hand to seize the letter, which was in a scarlet envelope, but it soared straight over his head, flying directly at Aunt Petunia, who let out a scream and ducked, her arms over her face. The owl dropped the red envelope on her head, turned, and flew straight up the chimney again.

Harry darted forward to pick up the letter, but Aunt Petunia beat him to it.

“You can open it if you like,” said Harry, “but I’ll hear what it says anyway. That’s a Howler.”

“Let go of it, Petunia!” roared Uncle Vernon. “Don’t touch it, it could be dangerous!”

“It’s addressed to me,” said Aunt Petunia in a shaking voice. “It’s addressed to me, Vernon, look! Mrs. Petunia Dursley, The Kitchen, Number Four, Privet Drive —”

She caught her breath, horrified. The red envelope had begun to smoke.

“Open it!” Harry urged her. “Get it over with! It’ll happen anyway —”

“No —”

Aunt Petunia’s hand was trembling. She looked wildly around the kitchen as though looking for an escape route, but too late — the envelope burst into flames. Aunt Petunia screamed and dropped it.

An awful voice filled the kitchen, echoing in the confined space, issuing from the burning letter on the table.

“REMEMBER MY LAST, PETUNIA.”

Aunt Petunia looked as though she might faint. She sank into the chair beside Dudley, her face in her hands. The remains of the envelope smoldered into ash in the silence.

“What is this?” Uncle Vernon said hoarsely. “What — I don’t — Petunia?”

Aunt Petunia said nothing. Dudley was staring stupidly at his mother, his mouth hanging open. The silence spiraled horribly. Harry was watching his aunt, utterly bewildered, his head throbbing fit to burst.

“Petunia, dear?” said Uncle Vernon timidly. “P-Petunia?”

She raised her head. She was still trembling. She swallowed.

“The boy — the boy will have to stay, Vernon,” she said weakly.

“W-what?”

“He stays,” she said. She was not looking at Harry. She got to her feet again.

“He … but Petunia …”

“If we throw him out, the neighbors will talk,” she said. She was regaining her usual brisk, snappish manner rapidly, though she was still very pale. “They’ll ask awkward questions, they’ll want to know where he’s gone. We’ll have to keep him.”

Uncle Vernon was deflating like an old tire.

“But Petunia, dear —”

Aunt Petunia ignored him. She turned to Harry.

“You’re to stay in your room,” she said. “You’re not to leave the house. Now get to bed.”

Harry didn’t move.

“Who was that Howler from?”

“Don’t ask questions,” Aunt Petunia snapped.

“Are you in touch with wizards?”

“I told you to get to bed!”

“What did it mean? Remember the last what?”

“Go to bed!”

“How come — ?”

“YOU HEARD YOUR AUNT, NOW GET TO BED!”

Chapter 3 The Advanced Guard

"I've just been attacked by dementors and I might be expelled from Hogwarts. I want to know what's going on and when I'm going to get out of here.

Harry copied these words onto three separate pieces of parchment the moment he reached the desk in his dark bedroom. He addressed the first to Sirius, the second to Ron, and the third to Hermione. His owl, Hedwig, was off hunting; her cage stood empty on the desk. Harry paced the bedroom waiting for her to come back, his head pounding, his brain too busy for sleep even though his eyes stung and itched with tiredness. His back ached from carrying Dudley home, and the two lumps on his head where the window and Dudley had hit him were throbbing painfully.

Up and down he paced, consumed with anger and frustration, grinding his teeth and clenching his fists, casting angry looks out at the empty, star-strewn sky every time he passed the window. Dementors sent to get him, Mrs. Figg and Mundungus Fletcher tailing him in secret, then suspension from Hogwarts and a hearing at the Min-istry of Magic — and still no one was telling him what was going on.

And what, what, had that Howler been about? Whose voice had echoed so horribly, so menacingly, through the kitchen?

Why was he still trapped here without information? Why was everyone treating him like some naughty kid? Don't do any more magic, stay in the house. …He kicked his school trunk as he passed it, but far from relieving his anger he felt worse, as he now had a sharp pain in his toe to deal with in addition to the pain in the rest of his body.

Just as he limped past the window, Hedwig soared through it with a soft rustle of wings like a small ghost.

“About time!” Harry snarled, as she landed lightly on top of her cage. “You can put that down, I’ve got work for you!”

Hedwig’s large round amber eyes gazed reproachfully at him over the dead frog clamped in her beak.

“Come here,” said Harry, picking up the three small rolls of parchment and a leather thong and tying the scrolls to her scaly leg. “Take these straight to Sirius, Ron, and Hermione and don’t come back here without good long replies. Keep pecking them till they’ve written decent-length answers if you’ve got to. Understand?”

Hedwig gave a muffled hooting noise, beak still full of frog.

“Get going, then,” said Harry.

She took off immediately. The moment she’d gone, Harry threw himself down onto his bed without undressing and stared at the dark ceiling. In addition to every other miserable feeling, he now felt guilty that he’d been irritable with Hedwig; she was the only friend he had at number four, Privet Drive. But he’d make it up to her when she came back with Sirius’s, Ron’s, and Hermione’s answers.

They were bound to write back quickly; they couldn’t possibly ig-nore a dementor attack. He’d probably wake up tomorrow to three fat letters full of sympathy and plans for his immediate removal to the Burrow. And with that comforting idea, sleep rolled over him, stifling all further thought.

* * *

But Hedwig didn’t return next morning. Harry spent the day in his bedroom, leaving it only to go to the bathroom. Three times that day Aunt Petunia shoved food into his room through the cat flap Uncle Vernon had installed three summers ago. Every time Harry heard her approaching he tried to question her about the Howler, but he might as well have interrogated the doorknob for all the answers he got.

Otherwise the Dursleys kept well clear of his bedroom. Harry couldn't see the point of forcing his company on them; another row would achieve nothing except perhaps making him so angry he'd perform more illegal magic.

So it went on for three whole days. Harry was filled alternately with restless energy that made him unable to settle to anything, during which he paced his bedroom again, furious at the whole lot of them for leaving him to stew in this mess, and with a lethargy so complete that he could lie on his bed for an hour at a time, staring dazedly into space, aching with dread at the thought of the Ministry hearing.

What if they ruled against him? What if he was expelled and his wand was snapped in half? What would he do, where would he go? He could not return to living full-time with the Dursleys, not now that he knew the other world, the one to which he really belonged. … Was it possible that he might be able to move into Sirius's house, as Sirius had suggested a year ago, before he had been forced to flee from the Ministry himself? Would he be allowed to live there alone, given that he was still underage? Or would the matter of where he went next be decided for him; had his breach of the International Statute of Secrecy been severe enough to land him in a cell in Azka-ban? Whenever this thought occurred, Harry invariably slid off his bed and began pacing again.

On the fourth night after Hedwig's departure Harry was lying in one of his apathetic phases, staring at the ceiling, his exhausted mind quite blank, when his uncle entered his bedroom. Harry looked slowly around at him. Uncle Vernon was wearing his best suit and an expression of enormous smugness.

"We're going out," he said.

"Sorry?"

"We — that is to say, your aunt, Dudley, and I — are going out."

“Fine,” said Harry dully, looking back at the ceiling.

“You are not to leave your bedroom while we are away.”

“Okay.”

“You are not to touch the television, the stereo, or any of our possessions.”

“Right.”

“You are not to steal food from the fridge.”

“Okay.”

“I am going to lock your door.”

“You do that.”

Uncle Vernon glared at Harry, clearly suspicious of this lack of argument, then stomped out of the room and closed the door behind him. Harry heard the key turn in the lock and Uncle Vernon’s footsteps walking heavily down the stairs. A few minutes later he heard the slamming of car doors, the rumble of an engine, and the unmistakable sound of the car sweeping out of the drive.

Harry had no particular feeling about the Dursleys leaving. It made no difference to him whether they were in the house or not. He could not even summon the energy to get up and turn on his bedroom light. The room grew steadily darker around him as he lay listening to the night sounds through the window he kept open all the time, waiting for the blessed moment when Hedwig returned.

The empty house creaked around him. The pipes gurgled. Harry lay there in a kind of stupor, thinking of nothing, suspended in misery.

And then, quite distinctly, he heard a crash in the kitchen below.

He sat bolt upright, listening intently. The Dursleys couldn't be back, it was much too soon, and in any case he hadn't heard their car.

There was silence for a few seconds, and then he heard voices.

Burglars, he thought, sliding off the bed onto his feet — but a split second later it occurred to him that burglars would keep their voices down, and whoever was moving around in the kitchen was certainly not troubling to do so.

He snatched up his wand from his bedside table and stood facing his bedroom door, listening with all his might. Next moment he jumped as the lock gave a loud click and his door swung open.

Harry stood motionless, staring through the open door at the dark upstairs landing, straining his ears for further sounds, but none came. He hesitated for a moment and then moved swiftly and silently out of his room to the head of the stairs.

His heart shot upward into his throat. There were people standing in the shadowy hall below, silhouetted against the streetlight glowing through the glass door; eight or nine of them, all, as far as he could see, looking up at him.

"Lower your wand, boy, before you take someone's eye out," said a low, growling voice.

Harry's heart was thumping uncontrollably. He knew that voice, but he did not lower his wand.

"Professor Moody?" he said uncertainly.

"I don't know so much about 'Professor,' " growled the voice, "never got round to much teaching, did I? Get down here, we want to see you properly."

Harry lowered his wand slightly but did not relax his grip on it, nor did he move. He had very good reason to be suspicious. He had recently spent nine months in what he had thought was Mad-Eye Moody's company only to find out that it wasn't Moody at all, but an impostor; an impostor, moreover, who had tried to kill Harry before being unmasked. But before he could make a decision about what to do next, a second, slightly hoarse voice floated upstairs.

"It's all right, Harry. We've come to take you away."

Harry's heart leapt. He knew that voice too, though he hadn't heard it for more than a year.

"P-Professor Lupin?" he said disbelievingly. "Is that you?"

"Why are we all standing in the dark?" said a third voice, this one completely unfamiliar, a woman's. "Lumos."

A wand tip flared, illuminating the hall with magical light. Harry blinked. The people below were crowded around the foot of the stairs, gazing intently up at him, some craning their heads for a better look.

Remus Lupin stood nearest to him. Though still quite young, Lupin looked tired and rather ill; he had more gray hair than when Harry had said good-bye to him, and his robes were more patched and shabbier than ever. Nevertheless, he was smiling broadly at Harry, who tried to smile back through his shock.

"Oooh, he looks just like I thought he would," said the witch who was holding her lit wand aloft. She looked the youngest there; she had a pale heart-shaped face, dark twinkling eyes, and short spiky hair that was a violent shade of violet. "Wotcher, Harry!"

"Yeah, I see what you mean, Remus," said a bald black wizard standing farthest back; he had a deep, slow voice and wore a single gold hoop in his ear. "He looks exactly like James."

"Except the eyes," said a wheezy-voiced, silver-haired wizard at the back. "Lily's eyes."

Mad-Eye Moody, who had long grizzled gray hair and a large chunk missing from his nose, was squinting suspiciously at Harry through his mismatched eyes. One of the eyes was small, dark, and beady, the other large, round, and electric blue — the magical eye that could see through walls, doors, and the back of Moody's own head.

"Are you quite sure it's him, Lupin?" he growled. "It'd be a nice lookout if we bring back some Death Eater impersonating him. We ought to ask him something only the real Potter would know. Unless anyone brought any Veritaserum?"

"Harry, what form does your Patronus take?" said Lupin.

"A stag," said Harry nervously.

"That's him, Mad-Eye," said Lupin.

Harry descended the stairs, very conscious of everybody still staring at him, stowing his wand into the back pocket of his jeans as he came.

"Don't put your wand there, boy!" roared Moody. "What if it ig-nited? Better wizards than you have lost buttocks, you know!"

"Who d'you know who's lost a buttock?" the violet-haired woman asked Mad-Eye interestedly.

"Never you mind, you just keep your wand out of your back pocket!" growled Mad-Eye. "Elementary wand safety, nobody bothers about it anymore. …" He stumped off toward the kitchen. "And I saw that," he added irritably, as the woman rolled her eyes at the ceiling.

Lupin held out his hand and shook Harry's.

“How are you?” he asked, looking at Harry closely.

“F-fine …”

Harry could hardly believe this was real. Four weeks with nothing, not the tiniest hint of a plan to remove him from Privet Drive, and suddenly a whole bunch of wizards was standing matter-of-factly in the house as though this were a long-standing arrangement. He glanced at the people surrounding Lupin; they were still gazing avidly at him. He felt very conscious of the fact that he had not combed his hair for four days.

“I’m — you’re really lucky the Dursleys are out …” he mumbled.

“Lucky, ha!” said the violet-haired woman. “It was me that lured them out of the way. Sent a letter by Muggle post telling them they’d been short-listed for the All-England Best-Kept Suburban Lawn Competition. They’re heading off to the prize-giving right now. … Or they think they are.”

Harry had a fleeting vision of Uncle Vernon’s face when he realized there was no All-England Best-Kept Suburban Lawn Competition.

“We are leaving, aren’t we?” he asked. “Soon?”

“Almost at once,” said Lupin, “we’re just waiting for the all-clear.”

“Where are we going? The Burrow?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Not the Burrow, no,” said Lupin, motioning Harry toward the kitchen; the little knot of wizards followed, all still eyeing Harry curi-ously. “Too risky. We’ve set up headquarters somewhere undetectable. It’s taken a while. …”

Mad-Eye Moody was now sitting at the kitchen table swigging from a hip flask, his magical eye spinning in all directions, taking in the Dursleys’ many labor-saving appliances.

“This is Alastor Moody, Harry,” Lupin continued, pointing toward Moody.

“Yeah, I know,” said Harry uncomfortably; it felt odd to be intro-duced to somebody he’d thought he’d known for a year.

“And this is Nymphadora —”

“Don’t call me Nymphadora, Remus,” said the young witch with a shudder. “It’s Tonks.”

“— Nymphadora Tonks, who prefers to be known by her surname only,” finished Lupin.

“So would you if your fool of a mother had called you ‘Nympha-dora,’ ” muttered Tonks.

“And this is Kingsley Shacklebolt” — he indicated the tall black wizard, who bowed — “Elphias Doge” — the wheezy-voiced wizard nodded — “Dedalus Diggle —”

“We’ve met before,” squeaked the excitable Diggle, dropping his top hat.

“— Emmeline Vance” — a stately looking witch in an emerald-green shawl inclined her head — “Sturgis Podmore” — a square-jawed wizard with thick, straw-colored hair winked — “and Hestia Jones.” A pink-cheeked, black-haired witch waved from next to the toaster.

Harry inclined his head awkwardly at each of them as they were in-troduced. He wished they would look at something other than him; it was as though he had suddenly been ushered onstage. He also won-dered why so many of them were there.

“A surprising number of people volunteered to come and get you,” said Lupin, as though he had read Harry’s mind; the corners of his mouth twitched slightly.

“Yeah, well, the more the better,” said Moody darkly. “We’re your guard, Potter.”

“We’re just waiting for the signal to tell us it’s safe to set off,” said Lupin, glancing out of the kitchen window. “We’ve got about fifteen minutes.”

“Very clean, aren’t they, these Muggles?” said the witch called Tonks, who was looking around the kitchen with great interest. “My dad’s Muggle-born and he’s a right old slob. I suppose it varies, just like with wizards?”

“Er — yeah,” said Harry. “Look” — he turned back to Lupin — “what’s going on, I haven’t heard anything from anyone, what’s Vol — ?”

Several of the witches and wizards made odd hissing noises; Dedalus Diggle dropped his hat again, and Moody growled, “Shut up!”

“What?” said Harry.

“We’re not discussing anything here, it’s too risky,” said Moody, turning his normal eye on Harry; his magical eye remained pointing up at the ceiling. “Damn it,” he added angrily, putting a hand up to the magical eye, “it keeps sticking — ever since that scum wore it —”

And with a nasty squelching sound much like a plunger being pulled from a sink, he popped out his eye.

“Mad-Eye, you do know that’s disgusting, don’t you?” said Tonks conversationally.

“Get me a glass of water, would you, Harry?” asked Moody.

Harry crossed to the dishwasher, took out a clean glass, and filled it with water at the sink, still watched eagerly by the band of wizards. Their relentless staring was starting to annoy him.

“Cheers,” said Moody, when Harry handed him the glass. He dropped the magical eyeball into the water and prodded it up and down; the eye whizzed around, staring at them all in turn. “I want three-hundred-and-sixty degrees visibility on the return journey.”

“How’re we getting — wherever we’re going?” Harry asked.

“Brooms,” said Lupin. “Only way. You’re too young to Apparate, they’ll be watching the Floo Network, and it’s more than our life’s worth to set up an unauthorized Portkey.”

“Remus says you’re a good flier,” said Kingsley Shacklebolt in his deep voice.

“He’s excellent,” said Lupin, who was checking his watch. “Any-way, you’d better go and get packed, Harry, we want to be ready to go when the signal comes.”

“I’ll come and help you,” said Tonks brightly.

She followed Harry back into the hall and up the stairs, looking around with much curiosity and interest.

“Funny place,” she said, “it’s a bit too clean, d’you know what I mean? Bit unnatural. Oh, this is better,” she added, as they entered Harry’s bedroom and he turned on the light.

His room was certainly much messier than the rest of the house. Confined to it for four days in a very bad mood, Harry had not bothered tidying up after himself. Most of the books he owned were strewn over the floor where he’d tried to distract himself with each in turn and thrown it aside. Hedwig’s cage needed cleaning out and was starting to smell, and his trunk lay open, revealing a jumbled mixture of Muggle clothes and wizard’s robes that had spilled onto the floor around it.

Harry started picking up books and throwing them hastily into his trunk. Tonks paused at his open wardrobe to look critically at her reflection in the mirror on the inside of the door.

“You know, I don’t think purple’s really my color,” she said pen-sively, tugging at a lock of spiky hair. “D’you think it makes me look a bit peaky?”

“Er —” said Harry, looking up at her over the top of Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland.

“Yeah, it does,” said Tonks decisively. She screwed up her eyes in a strained expression as though she were struggling to remember some-thing. A second later, her hair had turned bubble-gum pink.

“How did you do that?” said Harry, gaping at her as she opened her eyes again.

“I’m a Metamorphmagus,” she said, looking back at her reflection and turning her head so that she could see her hair from all directions. “It means I can change my appearance at will,” she added, spotting Harry’s puzzled expression in the mirror behind her. “I was born one. I got top marks in Concealment and Disguise during Auror training without any study at all, it was great.”

“You’re an Auror?” said Harry, impressed. Being a Dark wizard catcher was the only career he’d ever considered after Hogwarts.

“Yeah,” said Tonks, looking proud. “Kingsley is as well; he’s a bit higher up than I am, though. I only qualified a year ago. Nearly failed on Stealth and Tracking, I’m dead clumsy, did you hear me break that plate when we arrived downstairs?”

“Can you learn how to be a Metamorphmagus?” Harry asked her, straightening up, completely forgetting about packing.

Tonks chuckled.

“Bet you wouldn’t mind hiding that scar sometimes, eh?”

Her eyes found the lightning-shaped scar on Harry’s forehead.

“No, I wouldn’t mind,” Harry mumbled, turning away. He did not like people staring at his scar.

“Well, you’ll have to learn the hard way, I’m afraid,” said Tonks. “Metamorphmagi are really rare, they’re born, not made. Most wizards need to use a wand or potions to change their appearance. … But we’ve got to get going, Harry, we’re supposed to be packing,” she added guiltily, looking around at all the mess on the floor.

“Oh — yeah,” said Harry, grabbing up a few more books.

“Don’t be stupid, it’ll be much quicker if I — pack!” cried Tonks, waving her wand in a long, sweeping movement over the floor.

Books, clothes, telescope, and scales all soared into the air and flew pell-mell into the trunk.

“It’s not very neat,” said Tonks, walking over to the trunk and look-ing down at the jumble inside. “My mum’s got this knack of getting stuff to fit itself in neatly — she even gets the socks to fold them-selves — but I’ve never mastered how she does it — it’s a kind of flick —”

She flicked her wand hopefully; one of Harry’s socks gave a feeble sort of wiggle and flopped back on top of the mess within.

“Ah, well,” said Tonks, slamming the trunk’s lid shut, “at least it’s all in. That could do with a bit of cleaning, too — Scourgify —” She pointed her wand at Hedwig’s cage; a few feathers and droppings vanished. “Well, that’s a bit better — I’ve never quite got the hang of these sort of householdy spells. Right — got everything? Cauldron? Broom? Wow! A Firebolt?”

Her eyes widened as they fell on the broomstick in Harry's right hand. It was his pride and joy, a gift from Sirius, an international stan-dard broomstick.

"And I'm still riding a Comet Two Sixty," said Tonks enviously. "Ah well … wand still in your jeans? Both buttocks still on? Okay, let's go. Locomotor Trunk."

Harry's trunk rose a few inches into the air. Holding her wand like a conductor's baton, Tonks made it hover across the room and out of the door ahead of them, Hedwig's cage in her left hand. Harry followed her down the stairs carrying his broomstick.

Back in the kitchen, Moody had replaced his eye, which was spinning so fast after its cleaning it made Harry feel sick. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Sturgis Podmore were examining the microwave and Hestia Jones was laughing at a potato peeler she had come across while rummaging in the drawers. Lupin was sealing a letter addressed to the Dursleys.

"Excellent," said Lupin, looking up as Tonks and Harry entered. "We've got about a minute, I think. We should probably get out into the garden so we're ready. Harry, I've left a letter telling your aunt and uncle not to worry —"

"They won't," said Harry.

"That you're safe —"

"That'll just depress them."

"— and you'll see them next summer."

"Do I have to?"

Lupin smiled but made no answer.

“Come here, boy,” said Moody gruffly, beckoning Harry toward him with his wand. “I need to Disillusion you.”

“You need to what?” said Harry nervously.

“Disillusionment Charm,” said Moody, raising his wand. “Lupin says you’ve got an Invisibility Cloak, but it won’t stay on while we’re flying; this’ll disguise you better. Here you go —”

He rapped Harry hard on the top of the head and Harry felt a cu-rious sensation as though Moody had just smashed an egg there; cold trickles seemed to be running down his body from the point the wand had struck.

“Nice one, Mad-Eye,” said Tonks appreciatively, staring at Harry’s midriff.

Harry looked down at his body, or rather, what had been his body, for it didn’t look anything like his anymore. It was not invisible; it had simply taken on the exact color and texture of the kitchen unit behind him. He seemed to have become a human chameleon.

“Come on,” said Moody, unlocking the back door with his wand.

They all stepped outside onto Uncle Vernon’s beautifully kept lawn.

“Clear night,” grunted Moody, his magical eye scanning the heav-ens. “Could’ve done with a bit more cloud cover. Right, you,” he barked at Harry, “we’re going to be flying in close formation. Tonks’ll be right in front of you, keep close on her tail. Lupin’ll be covering you from below. I’m going to be behind you. The rest’ll be circling us. We don’t break ranks for anything, got me? If one of us is killed —”

“Is that likely?” Harry asked apprehensively, but Moody ignored him.

“— the others keep flying, don’t stop, don’t break ranks. If they take out all of us and you survive, Harry, the rear guard are standing by to

take over; keep flying east and they'll join you."

"Stop being so cheerful, Mad-Eye, he'll think we're not taking this seriously," said Tonks, as she strapped Harry's trunk and Hedwig's cage into a harness hanging from her broom.

"I'm just telling the boy the plan," growled Moody. "Our job's to deliver him safely to headquarters and if we die in the attempt —"

"No one's going to die," said Kingsley Shacklebolt in his deep, calming voice.

"Mount your brooms, that's the first signal!" said Lupin sharply, pointing into the sky.

Far, far above them, a shower of bright red sparks had flared among the stars. Harry recognized them at once as wand sparks. He swung his right leg over his Firebolt, gripped its handle tightly, and felt it vibrating very slightly, as though it was as keen as he was to be up in the air once more.

"Second signal, let's go!" said Lupin loudly, as more sparks, green this time, exploded high above them.

Harry kicked off hard from the ground. The cool night air rushed through his hair as the neat square gardens of Privet Drive fell away, shrinking rapidly into a patchwork of dark greens and blacks, and every thought of the Ministry hearing was swept from his mind as though the rush of air had blown it out of his head. He felt as though his heart was going to explode with pleasure; he was flying again, flying away from Privet Drive as he'd been fantasizing about all summer, he was going home. … For a few glorious moments, all his problems seemed to recede into nothing, insignificant in the vast, starry sky.

"Hard left, hard left, there's a Muggle looking up!" shouted Moody from behind him. Tonks swerved and Harry followed her, watching his

trunk swinging wildly beneath her broom. “We need more height. … Give it another quarter of a mile!”

Harry’s eyes watered in the chill as they soared upward; he could see nothing below now but tiny pinpricks of light that were car headlights and streetlamps. Two of those tiny lights might belong to Uncle Vernon’s car. … The Dursleys would be heading back to their empty house right now, full of rage about the nonexistent lawn competition … and Harry laughed aloud at the thought, though his voice was drowned by the flapping of the others’ robes, the creaking of the harness holding his trunk and the cage, the whoosh of the wind in their ears as they sped through the air. He had not felt this alive in a month, or this happy. …“Bearing south!” shouted Mad-Eye. “Town ahead!”

They soared right, so that they did not pass directly over the glittering spiderweb of lights below.

“Bear southeast and keep climbing, there’s some low cloud ahead we can lose ourselves in!” called Moody.

“We’re not going through clouds!” shouted Tonks angrily. “We’ll get soaked, Mad-Eye!”

Harry was relieved to hear her say this; his hands were growing numb on the Firebolt’s handle. He wished he had thought to put on a coat; he was starting to shiver.

They altered their course every now and then according to Mad-Eye’s instructions. Harry’s eyes were screwed up against the rush of icy wind that was starting to make his ears ache. He could remember being this cold on a broom only once before, during the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff in his third year, which had taken place in a storm. The guard around him was circling continuously like giant birds of prey. Harry lost track of time. He wondered how long they had been flying; it felt like an hour at least.

“Turning southwest!” yelled Moody. “We want to avoid the motorway!”

Harry was now so chilled that he thought longingly for a moment of the snug, dry interiors of the cars streaming along below, then, even more longingly, of traveling by Floo powder; it might be uncomfortable to spin around in fireplaces but it was at least warm in the flames. … Kingsley Shacklebolt swooped around him, bald pate and earring gleaming slightly in the moonlight. … Now Emmeline Vance was on his right, her wand out, her head turning left and right … then she too swooped over him, to be replaced by Sturgis Podmore. …“We ought to double back for a bit, just to make sure we’re not being followed!” Moody shouted.

“ARE YOU MAD, MAD-EYE?” Tonks screamed from the front. “We’re all frozen to our brooms! If we keep going off course we’re not going to get there until next week! We’re nearly there now!”

“Time to start the descent!” came Lupin’s voice. “Follow Tonks, Harry!”

Harry followed Tonks into a dive. They were heading for the largest collection of lights he had yet seen, a huge, sprawling, crisscrossing mass, glittering in lines and grids, interspersed with patches of deepest black. Lower and lower they flew, until Harry could see individual headlights and streetlamps, chimneys, and television aerials. He wanted to reach the ground very much, though he felt sure that some-one would have to unfreeze him from his broom.

“Here we go!” called Tonks, and a few seconds later she had landed.

Harry touched down right behind her and dismounted on a patch of unkempt grass in the middle of a small square. Tonks was already unbuckling Harry’s trunk. Shivering, Harry looked around. The grimy fronts of the surrounding houses were not welcoming; some of them had broken windows, glimmering dully in the light from the streetlamps, paint was peeling from many of the doors, and heaps of rubbish lay outside several sets of front steps.

“Where are we?” Harry asked, but Lupin said quietly, “In a minute.”

Moody was rummaging in his cloak, his gnarled hands clumsy with cold.

“Got it,” he muttered, raising what looked like a silver cigarette lighter into the air and clicking it.

The nearest streetlamp went out with a pop. He clicked the un-lighter again; the next lamp went out. He kept clicking until every lamp in the square was extinguished and the only light in the square came from curtained windows and the sickle moon overhead.

“Borrowed it from Dumbledore,” growled Moody, pocketing the Put-Outer. “That’ll take care of any Muggles looking out of the win-dow, see? Now, come on, quick.”

He took Harry by the arm and led him from the patch of grass, across the road, and onto the pavement. Lupin and Tonks followed, carrying Harry’s trunk between them, the rest of the guard, all with their wands out, flanking them.

The muffled pounding of a stereo was coming from an upper win-dow in the nearest house. A pungent smell of rotting rubbish came from the pile of bulging bin-bags just inside the broken gate.

“Here,” Moody muttered, thrusting a piece of parchment toward Harry’s Disillusioned hand and holding his lit wand close to it, so as to illuminate the writing. “Read quickly and memorize.”

Harry looked down at the piece of paper. The narrow handwriting was vaguely familiar. It said:The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.

Chapter 4 Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place

“What’s the Order of the — ?” Harry began.

“Not here, boy!” snarled Moody. “Wait till we’re inside!”

He pulled the piece of parchment out of Harry’s hand and set fire to it with his wand tip. As the message curled into flames and floated to the ground, Harry looked around at the houses again. They were standing outside number eleven; he looked to the left and saw number ten; to the right, however, was number thirteen.

“But where’s — ?”

“Think about what you’ve just memorized,” said Lupin quietly.

Harry thought, and no sooner had he reached the part about num-ber twelve, Grimmauld Place, than a battered door emerged out of nowhere between numbers eleven and thirteen, followed swiftly by dirty walls and grimy windows. It was as though an extra house had inflated, pushing those on either side out of its way. Harry gaped at it. The stereo in number eleven thudded on. Apparently the Muggles inside hadn’t even felt anything.

“Come on, hurry,” growled Moody, prodding Harry in the back.

Harry walked up the worn stone steps, staring at the newly materialized door. Its black paint was shabby and scratched. The silver door knocker was in the form of a twisted serpent. There was no keyhole or letterbox.

Lupin pulled out his wand and tapped the door once. Harry heard many loud, metallic clicks and what sounded like the clatter of a chain. The door creaked open.

“Get in quick, Harry,” Lupin whispered. “But don’t go far inside and don’t touch anything.”

Harry stepped over the threshold into the almost total darkness of the hall. He could smell damp, dust, and a sweetish, rotting smell; the place had the feeling of a derelict building. He looked over his shoulder and saw the others filing in behind him, Lupin and Tonks carrying his trunk and Hedwig’s cage. Moody was standing on the top step and releasing the balls of light the Put-Outer had stolen from the street-lamps; they flew back to their bulbs and the square beyond glowed momentarily with orange light before Moody limped inside and closed the front door, so that the darkness in the hall became complete.

“Here —”

He rapped Harry hard over the head with his wand; Harry felt as though something hot was trickling down his back this time and knew that the Disillusionment Charm must have lifted.

“Now stay still, everyone, while I give us a bit of light in here,” Moody whispered.

The others’ hushed voices were giving Harry an odd feeling of foreboding; it was as though they had just entered the house of a dying person. He heard a soft hissing noise and then old-fashioned gas lamps sputtered into life all along the walls, casting a flickering insubstantial light over the peeling wallpaper and threadbare carpet of a long, gloomy hallway, where a cobwebby chandelier glimmered overhead and age-blackened portraits hung crooked on the walls. Harry heard something scuttling behind the baseboard. Both the chandelier and the candelabra on a rickety table nearby were shaped like serpents.

There were hurried footsteps and Ron’s mother, Mrs. Weasley, emerged from a door at the far end of the hall. She was beaming in welcome as she hurried toward them, though Harry noticed that she

was rather thinner and paler than she had been last time he had seen her.

“Oh, Harry, it’s lovely to see you!” she whispered, pulling him into a rib-cracking hug before holding him at arm’s length and examining him critically. “You’re looking peaky; you need feeding up, but you’ll have to wait a bit for dinner, I’m afraid. …”

She turned to the gang of wizards behind him and whispered urgently, “He’s just arrived, the meeting’s started. …”

The wizards behind Harry all made noises of interest and excite-ment and began filing past Harry toward the door through which Mrs. Weasley had just come; Harry made to follow Lupin, but Mrs. Weasley held him back.

“No, Harry, the meeting’s only for members of the Order. Ron and Hermione are upstairs, you can wait with them until the meeting’s over and then we’ll have dinner. And keep your voice down in the hall,” she added in an urgent whisper.

“Why?”

“I don’t want to wake anything up.”

“What d’you — ?”

“I’ll explain later, I’ve got to hurry, I’m supposed to be at the meet-ing — I’ll just show you where you’re sleeping.”

Pressing her finger to her lips, she led him on tiptoes past a pair of long, moth-eaten curtains, behind which Harry supposed there must be another door, and after skirting a large umbrella stand that looked as though it had been made from a severed troll’s leg, they started up the dark staircase, passing a row of shrunken heads mounted on plaques on the wall. A closer look showed Harry that the heads be-

longed to house-elves. All of them had the same rather snoutlike nose.

Harry's bewilderment deepened with every step he took. What on earth were they doing in a house that looked as though it belonged to the Darkest of wizards?

"Mrs. Weasley, why — ?"

"Ron and Hermione will explain everything, dear, I've really got to dash," Mrs. Weasley whispered distractedly. "There" — they had reached the second landing — "you're the door on the right. I'll call you when it's over."

And she hurried off downstairs again.

Harry crossed the dingy landing, turned the bedroom doorknob, which was shaped like a serpent's head, and opened the door.

He caught a brief glimpse of a gloomy high-ceilinged, twin-bedded room, then there was a loud twittering noise, followed by an even louder shriek, and his vision was completely obscured by a large quantity of very bushy hair — Hermione had thrown herself onto him in a hug that nearly knocked him flat, while Ron's tiny owl, Pigwidgeon, zoomed excitedly round and round their heads.

"HARRY! Ron, he's here, Harry's here! We didn't hear you arrive! Oh, how are you? Are you all right? Have you been furious with us? I bet you have, I know our letters were useless — but we couldn't tell you anything, Dumbledore made us swear we wouldn't, oh, we've got so much to tell you, and you've got to tell us — the dementors! When we heard — and that Ministry hearing — it's just outrageous, I've looked it all up, they can't expel you, they just can't, there's provision in the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Sorcery for the use of magic in life-threatening situations —"

“Let him breathe, Hermione,” said Ron, grinning, closing the door behind Harry. He seemed to have grown several more inches during their month apart, making him taller and more gangly looking than ever, though the long nose, bright red hair, and freckles were the same.

Hermione, still beaming, let go of Harry, but before she could say another word there was a soft whooshing sound and something white soared from the top of a dark wardrobe and landed gently on Harry’s shoulder.

“Hedwig!”

The snowy owl clicked her beak and nibbled his ear affectionately as Harry stroked her feathers.

“She’s been in a right state,” said Ron. “Pecked us half to death when she brought your last letters, look at this —”

He showed Harry the index finger of his right hand, which sported a half-healed but clearly deep cut.

“Oh yeah,” Harry said. “Sorry about that, but I wanted answers, you know. …”

“We wanted to give them to you, mate,” said Ron. “Hermione was going spare, she kept saying you’d do something stupid if you were stuck all on your own without news, but Dumbledore made us —”

“— swear not to tell me,” said Harry. “Yeah, Hermione’s already said.”

The warm glow that had flared inside him at the sight of his two best friends was extinguished as something icy flooded the pit of his stomach. All of a sudden — after yearning to see them for a solid month — he felt he would rather Ron and Hermione left him alone.

There was a strained silence in which Harry stroked Hedwig automatically, not looking at either of the others.

“He seemed to think it was best,” said Hermione rather breath-lessly. “Dumbledore, I mean.”

“Right,” said Harry. He noticed that her hands too bore the marks of Hedwig’s beak and found that he was not at all sorry.

“I think he thought you were safest with the Muggles —” Ron began.

“Yeah?” said Harry, raising his eyebrows. “Have either of you been attacked by dementors this summer?”

“Well, no — but that’s why he’s had people from the Order of the Phoenix tailing you all the time —”

Harry felt a great jolt in his guts as though he had just missed a step going downstairs. So everyone had known he was being followed except him.

“Didn’t work that well, though, did it?” said Harry, doing his utmost to keep his voice even. “Had to look after myself after all, didn’t I?”

“He was so angry,” said Hermione in an almost awestruck voice. “Dumbledore. We saw him. When he found out Mundungus had left before his shift had ended. He was scary.”

“Well, I’m glad he left,” Harry said coldly. “If he hadn’t, I wouldn’t have done magic and Dumbledore would probably have left me at Privet Drive all summer.”

“Aren’t you … aren’t you worried about the Ministry of Magic hearing?” said Hermione quietly.

“No,” Harry lied defiantly. He walked away from them, looking around, with Hedwig nestled contentedly on his shoulder, but this room was

not likely to raise his spirits. It was dank and dark. A blank stretch of canvas in an ornate picture frame was all that relieved the bareness of the peeling walls and as Harry passed it he thought he heard someone lurking out of sight snigger.

“So why’s Dumbledore been so keen to keep me in the dark?” Harry asked, still trying hard to keep his voice casual. “Did you — er — bother to ask him at all?”

He glanced up just in time to see them exchanging a look that told him he was behaving just as they had feared he would. It did nothing to improve his temper.

“We told Dumbledore we wanted to tell you what was going on,” said Ron. “We did, mate. But he’s really busy now, we’ve only seen him twice since we came here and he didn’t have much time, he just made us swear not to tell you important stuff when we wrote, he said the owls might be intercepted —”

“He could still’ve kept me informed if he’d wanted to,” Harry said shortly. “You’re not telling me he doesn’t know ways to send messages without owls.”

Hermione glanced at Ron and then said, “I thought that too. But he didn’t want you to know anything.”

“Maybe he thinks I can’t be trusted,” said Harry, watching their expressions.

“Don’t be thick,” said Ron, looking highly disconcerted.

“Or that I can’t take care of myself —”

“Of course he doesn’t think that!” said Hermione anxiously.

“So how come I have to stay at the Dursleys’ while you two get to join in everything that’s going on here?” said Harry, the words tum-bling

over one another in a rush, his voice growing louder with every word. "How come you two are allowed to know everything that's go-ing on — ?"

"We're not!" Ron interrupted. "Mum won't let us near the meet-ings, she says we're too young —"

But before he knew it, Harry was shouting.

"SO YOU HAVEN'T BEEN IN THE MEETINGS, BIG DEAL! YOU'VE STILL BEEN HERE, HAVEN'T YOU? YOU'VE STILL BEEN TOGETHER! ME, I'VE BEEN STUCK AT THE DURSLEYS' FOR A MONTH! AND I'VE HANDLED MORE THAN YOU TWO'VE EVER MANAGED AND DUMBLEDORE KNOWS IT — WHO SAVED THE SORCERER'S STONE? WHO GOT RID OF RIDDLE? WHO SAVED BOTH YOUR SKINS FROM THE DEMENTORS?"

Every bitter and resentful thought that Harry had had in the past month was pouring out of him; his frustration at the lack of news, the hurt that they had all been together without him, his fury at being followed and not told about it: All the feelings he was half-ashamed of finally burst their boundaries. Hedwig took fright at the noise and soared off on top of the wardrobe again; Pigwidgeon twittered in alarm and zoomed even faster around their heads.

"WHO HAD TO GET PAST DRAGONS AND SPHINXES AND EVERY OTHER FOUL THING LAST YEAR? WHO SAW HIM COME BACK? WHO HAD TO ESCAPE FROM HIM? ME!"

Ron was standing there with his mouth half-open, clearly stunned and at a loss for anything to say, while Hermione looked on the verge of tears.

"BUT WHY SHOULD I KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON? WHY SHOULD ANYONE BOTHER TO TELL ME WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING?"

"Harry, we wanted to tell you, we really did —" Hermione began.

“CAN’T’VE WANTED TO THAT MUCH, CAN YOU, OR YOU’D HAVE SENT ME AN OWL, BUT DUMBLEDORE MADE YOU SWEAR —”

“Well, he did —”

“FOUR WEEKS I’VE BEEN STUCK IN PRIVET DRIVE, NICKING PAPERS OUT OF BINS TO TRY AND FIND OUT WHAT’S BEEN GOING ON —”

“We wanted to —”

“I SUPPOSE YOU’VE BEEN HAVING A REAL LAUGH, HAVEN’T YOU, ALL HOLED UP HERE TOGETHER —”

“No, honest —”

“Harry, we’re really sorry!” said Hermione desperately, her eyes now sparkling with tears. “You’re absolutely right, Harry — I’d be furious if it was me!”

Harry glared at her, still breathing deeply, then turned away from them again, pacing up and down. Hedwig hooted glumly from the top of the wardrobe. There was a long pause, broken only by the mournful creak of the floorboards below Harry’s feet.

“What is this place anyway?” he shot at Ron and Hermione.

“Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix,” said Ron at once.

“Is anyone going to bother telling me what the Order of the Phoenix — ?”

“It’s a secret society,” said Hermione quickly. “Dumbledore’s in charge, he founded it. It’s the people who fought against You-Know-Who last time.”

“Who’s in it?” said Harry, coming to a halt with his hands in his pockets.

"Quite a few people —"

"— we've met about twenty of them," said Ron, "but we think there are more. …"

Harry glared at them.

"Well?" he demanded, looking from one to the other.

"Er," said Ron. "Well what?"

"Voldemort!" said Harry furiously, and both Ron and Hermione winced. "What's happening? What's he up to? Where is he? What are we doing to stop him?"

"We've told you, the Order don't let us in on their meetings," said Hermione nervously. "So we don't know the details — but we've got a general idea —" she added hastily, seeing the look on Harry's face.

"Fred and George have invented Extendable Ears, see," said Ron. "They're really useful."

"Extendable — ?"

"Ears, yeah. Only we've had to stop using them lately because Mum found out and went berserk. Fred and George had to hide them all to stop Mum binning them. But we got a good bit of use out of them before Mum realized what was going on. We know some of the Order are following known Death Eaters, keeping tabs on them, you know —"

"— some of them are working on recruiting more people to the Order —" said Hermione.

"— and some of them are standing guard over something," said Ron. "They're always talking about guard duty."

"Couldn't have been me, could it?" said Harry sarcastically.

“Oh yeah,” said Ron, with a look of dawning comprehension.

Harry snorted. He walked around the room again, looking any-where but at Ron and Hermione. “So what have you two been doing, if you’re not allowed in meetings?” he demanded. “You said you’d been busy.”

“We have,” said Hermione quickly. “We’ve been decontaminating this house, it’s been empty for ages and stuff’s been breeding in here. We’ve managed to clean out the kitchen, most of the bedrooms, and I think we’re doing the drawing room tomo — AARGH!”

With two loud cracks, Fred and George, Ron’s elder twin brothers, had materialized out of thin air in the middle of the room. Pigwidg-eon twittered more wildly than ever and zoomed off to join Hedwig on top of the wardrobe.

“Stop doing that!” Hermione said weakly to the twins, who were as vividly red-haired as Ron, though stockier and slightly shorter.

“Hello, Harry,” said George, beaming at him. “We thought we heard your dulcet tones.”

“You don’t want to bottle up your anger like that, Harry, let it all out,” said Fred, also beaming. “There might be a couple of people fifty miles away who didn’t hear you.”

“You two passed your Apparation tests, then?” asked Harry grumpily.

“With distinction,” said Fred, who was holding what looked like a piece of very long, flesh-colored string.

“It would have taken you about thirty seconds longer to walk down the stairs,” said Ron.

“Time is Galleons, little brother,” said Fred. “Anyway, Harry, you’re interfering with reception. Extendable Ears,” he added in response to

Harry's raised eyebrows, holding up the string, which Harry now saw was trailing out onto the landing. "We're trying to hear what's going on downstairs."

"You want to be careful," said Ron, staring at the ear. "If Mum sees one of them again …"

"It's worth the risk, that's a major meeting they're having," said Fred.

The door opened and a long mane of red hair appeared.

"Oh hello, Harry!" said Ron's younger sister, Ginny, brightly. "I thought I heard your voice."

Turning to Fred and George she said, "It's no go with the Extend-able Ears, she's gone and put an Imperturbable Charm on the kitchen door."

"How d'you know?" said George, looking crestfallen.

"Tonks told me how to find out," said Ginny. "You just chuck stuff at the door and if it can't make contact the door's been Imperturbed. I've been flicking Dungbombs at it from the top of the stairs and they just soar away from it, so there's no way the Extendable Ears will be able to get under the gap."

Fred heaved a deep sigh. "Shame. I really fancied finding out what old Snape's been up to."

"Snape?" said Harry quickly. "Is he here?"

"Yeah," said George, carefully closing the door and sitting down on one of the beds; Fred and Ginny followed. "Giving a report. Top secret."

"Git," said Fred idly.

"He's on our side now," said Hermione reprovingly.

Ron snorted. “Doesn’t stop him being a git. The way he looks at us when he sees us. …”

“Bill doesn’t like him either,” said Ginny, as though that settled the matter.

Harry was not sure his anger had abated yet; but his thirst for information was now overcoming his urge to keep shouting. He sank onto the bed opposite the others.

“Is Bill here?” he asked. “I thought he was working in Egypt.”

“He applied for a desk job so he could come home and work for the Order,” said Fred. “He says he misses the tombs, but,” he smirked, “there are compensations. …”

“What d’you mean?”

“Remember old Fleur Delacour?” said George. “She’s got a job at Gringotts to eemprove ’er Eeenglish —”

“— and Bill’s been giving her a lot of private lessons,” sniggered Fred.

“Charlie’s in the Order too,” said George, “but he’s still in Romania, Dumbledore wants as many foreign wizards brought in as possible, so Charlie’s trying to make contacts on his days off.”

“Couldn’t Percy do that?” Harry asked. The last he had heard, the third Weasley brother was working in the Department of Interna-tional Magical Cooperation at the Ministry of Magic.

At these words all the Weasleys and Hermione exchanged darkly significant looks.

“Whatever you do, don’t mention Percy in front of Mum and Dad,” Ron told Harry in a tense voice.

“Why not?”

“Because every time Percy’s name’s mentioned, Dad breaks whatever he’s holding and Mum starts crying,” Fred said.

“It’s been awful,” said Ginny sadly.

“I think we’re well shut of him,” said George with an uncharacteristically ugly look on his face.

“What’s happened?” Harry said.

“Percy and Dad had a row,” said Fred. “I’ve never seen Dad row with anyone like that. It’s normally Mum who shouts. …”

“It was the first week back after term ended,” said Ron. “We were about to come and join the Order. Percy came home and told us he’d been promoted.”

“You’re kidding?” said Harry.

Though he knew perfectly well that Percy was highly ambitious, Harry’s impression was that Percy had not made a great success of his first job at the Ministry of Magic. Percy had committed the fairly large oversight of failing to notice that his boss was being controlled by Lord Voldemort (not that the Ministry had believed that — they all thought that Mr. Crouch had gone mad).

“Yeah, we were all surprised,” said George, “because Percy got into a load of trouble about Crouch, there was an inquiry and everything. They said Percy ought to have realized Crouch was off his rocker and informed a superior. But you know Percy, Crouch left him in charge, he wasn’t going to complain. …”

“So how come they promoted him?”

“That’s exactly what we wondered,” said Ron, who seemed very keen to keep normal conversation going now that Harry had stopped yelling. “He came home really pleased with himself — even more

pleased than usual if you can imagine that — and told Dad he'd been offered a position in Fudge's own office. A really good one for someone only a year out of Hogwarts — Junior Assistant to the Minister. He expected Dad to be all impressed, I think."

"Only Dad wasn't," said Fred grimly.

"Why not?" said Harry.

"Well, apparently Fudge has been storming round the Ministry checking that nobody's having any contact with Dumbledore," said George.

"Dumbledore's name's mud with the Ministry these days, see," said Fred. "They all think he's just making trouble saying You-Know-Who's back."

"Dad says Fudge has made it clear that anyone who's in league with Dumbledore can clear out their desks," said George.

"Trouble is, Fudge suspects Dad, he knows he's friendly with Dumbledore, and he's always thought Dad's a bit of a weirdo because of his Muggle obsession —"

"But what's this got to do with Percy?" asked Harry, confused.

"I'm coming to that. Dad reckons Fudge only wants Percy in his office because he wants to use him to spy on the family — and Dumbledore."

Harry let out a low whistle.

"Bet Percy loved that."

Ron laughed in a hollow sort of way.

"He went completely berserk. He said — well, he said loads of terrible stuff. He said he's been having to struggle against Dad's lousy

reputation ever since he joined the Ministry and that Dad's got no ambition and that's why we've always been — you know — not had a lot of money, I mean —"

"What?" said Harry in disbelief, as Ginny made a noise like an an-gry cat.

"I know," said Ron in a low voice. "And it got worse. He said Dad was an idiot to run around with Dumbledore, that Dumbledore was heading for big trouble and Dad was going to go down with him, and that he — Percy — knew where his loyalty lay and it was with the Ministry. And if Mum and Dad were going to become traitors to the Ministry he was going to make sure everyone knew he didn't belong to our family anymore. And he packed his bags the same night and left. He's living here in London now."

Harry swore under his breath. He had always liked Percy least of Ron's brothers, but he had never imagined he would say such things to Mr. Weasley.

"Mum's been in a right state," said Ron. "You know — crying and stuff. She came up to London to try and talk to Percy but he slammed the door in her face. I dunno what he does if he meets Dad at work — ignores him, I s'pose."

"But Percy must know Voldemort's back," said Harry slowly. "He's not stupid, he must know your mum and dad wouldn't risk every-thing without proof —"

"Yeah, well, your name got dragged into the row," said Ron, shoot-ing Harry a furtive look. "Percy said the only evidence was your word and … I dunno … he didn't think it was good enough."

"Percy takes the Daily Prophet seriously," said Hermione tartly, and the others all nodded.

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked, looking around at them all. They were all regarding him warily.

“Haven’t — haven’t you been getting the Daily Prophet?” Hermi-one asked nervously.

“Yeah, I have!” said Harry.

“Have you — er — been reading it thoroughly?” Hermione asked still more anxiously.

“Not cover to cover,” said Harry defensively. “If they were going to report anything about Voldemort it would be headline news, wouldn’t it!”

The others flinched at the sound of the name. Hermione hurried on, “Well, you’d need to read it cover to cover to pick it up, but they — um — they mention you a couple of times a week.”

“But I’d have seen —”

“Not if you’ve only been reading the front page, you wouldn’t,” said Hermione, shaking her head. “I’m not talking about big articles. They just slip you in, like you’re a standing joke.”

“What d’you — ?”

“It’s quite nasty, actually,” said Hermione in a voice of forced calm. “They’re just building on Rita’s stuff.”

“But she’s not writing for them anymore, is she?”

“Oh no, she’s kept her promise — not that she’s got any choice,” Hermione added with satisfaction. “But she laid the foundation for what they’re trying to do now.”

“Which is what?” said Harry impatiently.

"Okay, you know she wrote that you were collapsing all over the place and saying your scar was hurting and all that?"

"Yeah," said Harry, who was not likely to forget Rita Skeeter's sto-ries about him in a hurry.

"Well, they're writing about you as though you're this deluded, attention-seeking person who thinks he's a great tragic hero or some-thing," said Hermione, very fast, as though it would be less unpleasant for Harry to hear these facts quickly. "They keep slipping in snide comments about you. If some far-fetched story appears they say some-thing like 'a tale worthy of Harry Potter' and if anyone has a funny accident or anything it's 'let's hope he hasn't got a scar on his forehead or we'll be asked to worship him next —' "

"I don't want anyone to worship —" Harry began hotly.

"I know you don't," said Hermione quickly, looking frightened. "I know, Harry. But you see what they're doing? They want to turn you into someone nobody will believe. Fudge is behind it, I'll bet anything. They want wizards on the street to think you're just some stupid boy who's a bit of a joke, who tells ridiculous tall stories because he loves being famous and wants to keep it going."

"I didn't ask — I didn't want — Voldemort killed my parents!" Harry spluttered. "I got famous because he murdered my family but couldn't kill me! Who wants to be famous for that? Don't they think I'd rather it'd never —"

"We know, Harry," said Ginny earnestly.

"And of course, they didn't report a word about the dementors at-tacking you," said Hermione. "Someone's told them to keep that quiet. That should've been a really big story, out-of-control demen-tors. They haven't even reported that you broke the International Statute of Secrecy — we thought they would, it would tie in so well with this image of you as some stupid show-off — we think they're biding their

time until you're expelled, then they're really going to go to town — I mean, if you're expelled, obviously," she went on hastily, "you really shouldn't be, not if they abide by their own laws, there's no case against you."

They were back on the hearing and Harry did not want to think about it. He cast around for another change of subject, but was saved the necessity of finding one by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs.

"Uh-oh."

Fred gave the Extendable Ear a hearty tug; there was another loud crack and he and George vanished. Seconds later, Mrs. Weasley appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"The meeting's over, you can come down and have dinner now, everyone's dying to see you, Harry. And who's left all those Dungbombs outside the kitchen door?"

"Crookshanks," said Ginny unblushingly. "He loves playing with them."

"Oh," said Mrs. Weasley, "I thought it might have been Kreacher, he keeps doing odd things like that. Now don't forget to keep your voices down in the hall. Ginny, your hands are filthy, what have you been doing? Go and wash them before dinner, please. …"

Ginny grimaced at the others and followed her mother out of the room, leaving Harry alone with Ron and Hermione again. Both of them were watching him apprehensively, as though they feared that he would start shouting again now that everyone else had gone. The sight of them looking so nervous made him feel slightly ashamed.

"Look …" he muttered, but Ron shook his head, and Hermione said quietly, "We knew you'd be angry, Harry, we really don't blame you,

but you've got to understand, we did try and persuade Dumble-dore —"

"Yeah, I know," said Harry grudgingly.

He cast around for a topic to change the subject from Dumble-dore — the very thought of him made Harry's insides burn with anger again.

"Who's Kreacher?" he asked.

"The house-elf who lives here," said Ron. "Nutter. Never met one like him."

Hermione frowned at Ron.

"He's not a nutter, Ron —"

"His life's ambition is to have his head cut off and stuck up on a plaque just like his mother," said Ron irritably. "Is that normal, Hermione?"

"Well — well, if he is a bit strange, it's not his fault —"

Ron rolled his eyes at Harry.

"Hermione still hasn't given up on spew —"

"It's not 'spew'!" said Hermione heatedly. "It's the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, and it's not just me, Dumbledore says we should be kind to Kreacher too —"

"Yeah, yeah," said Ron. "C'mon, I'm starving."

He led the way out of the door and onto the landing, but before they could descend the stairs — "Hold it!" Ron breathed, flinging out an arm to stop Harry and Hermione walking any farther. "They're still in the hall, we might be able to hear something —"

The three of them looked cautiously over the banisters. The gloomy hallway below was packed with witches and wizards, including all of Harry's guard. They were whispering excitedly together. In the very center of the group Harry saw the dark, greasy-haired head and promi-nent nose of his least favorite teacher at Hogwarts, Professor Snape. Harry leaned farther over the banisters. He was very interested in what Snape was doing for the Order of the Phoenix. …A thin piece of flesh-colored string descended in front of Harry's eyes. Looking up he saw Fred and George on the landing above, cau-tiously lowering the Extendable Ear toward the dark knot of people below. A moment later, however, they began to move toward the front door and out of sight.

"Dammit," Harry heard Fred whisper, as he hoisted the Extendable Ear back up again.

They heard the front door open and then close.

"Snape never eats here," Ron told Harry quietly. "Thank God. C'mon."

"And don't forget to keep your voice down in the hall, Harry," Hermione whispered.

As they passed the row of house-elf heads on the wall they saw Lupin, Mrs. Weasley, and Tonks at the front door, magically sealing its many locks and bolts behind those who had just left.

"We're eating down in the kitchen," Mrs. Weasley whispered, meeting them at the bottom of the stairs. "Harry, dear, if you'll just tiptoe across the hall, it's through this door here —"

CRASH.

"Tonks!" cried Mrs. Weasley exasperatedly, turning to look behind her.

“I’m sorry!” wailed Tonks, who was lying flat on the floor. “It’s that stupid umbrella stand, that’s the second time I’ve tripped over —”

But the rest of her words were drowned by a horrible, earsplitting, bloodcurdling screech.

The moth-eaten velvet curtains Harry had passed earlier had flown apart, but there was no door behind them. For a split second, Harry thought he was looking through a window, a window behind which an old woman in a black cap was screaming and screaming as though she was being tortured — then he realized it was simply a life-size por-trait, but the most realistic, and the most unpleasant, he had ever seen in his life.

The old woman was drooling, her eyes were rolling, the yellowing skin of her face stretched taut as she screamed, and all along the hall behind them, the other portraits awoke and began to yell too, so that Harry actually screwed up his eyes at the noise and clapped his hands over his ears.

Lupin and Mrs. Weasley darted forward and tried to tug the cur-tains shut over the old woman, but they would not close and she screeched louder than ever, brandishing clawed hands as though try-ing to tear at their faces.

“Filth! Scum! By-products of dirt and vileness! Half-breeds, mutants, freaks, begone from this place! How dare you befoul the house of my fathers —”

Tonks apologized over and over again, at the same time dragging the huge, heavy troll’s leg back off the floor. Mrs. Weasley abandoned the attempt to close the curtains and hurried up and down the hall, Stunning all the other portraits with her wand. Then a man with long black hair came charging out of a door facing Harry.

“Shut up, you horrible old hag, shut UP!” he roared, seizing the curtain Mrs. Weasley had abandoned.

The old woman's face blanched.

"Yoooou!" she howled, her eyes popping at the sight of the man. "Blood traitor, abomination, shame of my flesh!"

"I said — shut — UP!" roared the man, and with a stupendous ef-fort he and Lupin managed to force the curtains closed again.

The old woman's screeches died and an echoing silence fell.

Panting slightly and sweeping his long dark hair out of his eyes, Harry's godfather, Sirius, turned to face him.

"Hello, Harry," he said grimly, "I see you've met my mother."

Chapter 5 The Order of the Phoenix

“Your — ?”

“My dear old mum, yeah,” said Sirius. “We’ve been trying to get her down for a month but we think she put a Permanent Stick-ing Charm on the back of the canvas. Let’s get downstairs, quick, before they all wake up again.”

“But what’s a portrait of your mother doing here?” Harry asked, bewildered, as they went through the door from the hall and led the way down a flight of narrow stone steps, the others just behind them.

“Hasn’t anyone told you? This was my parents’ house,” said Sirius. “But I’m the last Black left, so it’s mine now. I offered it to Dumbledore for headquarters — about the only useful thing I’ve been able to do.”

Harry, who had expected a better welcome, noted how hard and bitter Sirius’s voice sounded. He followed his godfather to the bottom of the stairs and through a door leading into the basement kitchen.

It was scarcely less gloomy than the hall above, a cavernous room with rough stone walls. Most of the light was coming from a large fire at the far end of the room. A haze of pipe smoke hung in the air like battle fumes, through which loomed the menacing shapes of heavy iron pots and pans hanging from the dark ceiling. Many chairs had been crammed into the room for the meeting and a long wooden table stood in the middle of the room, littered with rolls of parchment, gob-lets, empty wine bottles, and a heap of what appeared to be rags. Mr. Weasley and his eldest son, Bill, were talking quietly with their heads together at the end of the table.

Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat. Her husband, a thin, balding, red-haired man, who wore horn-rimmed glasses, looked around and jumped to his feet.

“Harry!” Mr. Weasley said, hurrying forward to greet him and shaking his hand vigorously. “Good to see you!”

Over his shoulder Harry saw Bill, who still wore his long hair in a ponytail, hastily rolling up the lengths of parchment left on the table.

“Journey all right, Harry?” Bill called, trying to gather up twelve scrolls at once. “Mad-Eye didn’t make you come via Greenland, then?”

“He tried,” said Tonks, striding over to help Bill and immediately sending a candle toppling onto the last piece of parchment. “Oh no — sorry —”

“Here, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley, sounding exasperated, and she repaired the parchment with a wave of her wand: In the flash of light caused by Mrs. Weasley’s charm, Harry caught a glimpse of what looked like the plan of a building.

Mrs. Weasley had seen him looking. She snatched the plan off the table and stuffed it into Bill’s heavily laden arms.

“This sort of thing ought to be cleared away promptly at the end of meetings,” she snapped before sweeping off toward an ancient dresser from which she started unloading dinner plates.

Bill took out his wand, muttered “Evanesco!” and the scrolls vanished.

“Sit down, Harry,” said Sirius. “You’ve met Mundungus, haven’t you?”

The thing Harry had taken to be a pile of rags gave a prolonged, grunting snore and then jerked awake.

“Some’n say m’ name?” Mundungus mumbled sleepily. “I ’gree with Sirius. …”

He raised a very grubby hand in the air as though voting, his droopy, bloodshot eyes unfocused. Ginny giggled.

“The meeting’s over, Dung,” said Sirius, as they all sat down around him at the table. “Harry’s arrived.”

“Eh?” said Mundungus, peering balefully at Harry through his matted ginger hair. “Blimey, so ’e ’as. Yeah … you all right, ’arry?”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

Mundungus fumbled nervously in his pockets, still staring at Harry, and pulled out a grimy black pipe. He stuck it in his mouth, ignited the end of it with his wand, and took a deep pull on it. Great billowing clouds of greenish smoke obscured him in seconds.

“Owe you a ’pology,” grunted a voice from the middle of the smelly cloud.

“For the last time, Mundungus,” called Mrs. Weasley, “will you please not smoke that thing in the kitchen, especially not when we’re about to eat!”

“Ah,” said Mundungus. “Right. Sorry, Molly.”

The cloud of smoke vanished as Mundungus stowed his pipe back in his pocket, but an acrid smell of burning socks lingered.

“And if you want dinner before midnight I’ll need a hand,” Mrs. Weasley said to the room at large. “No, you can stay where you are, Harry dear, you’ve had a long journey —”

“What can I do, Molly?” said Tonks enthusiastically, bounding forward.

Mrs. Weasley hesitated, looking apprehensive.

“Er — no, it’s all right, Tonks, you have a rest too, you’ve done enough today —”

“No, no, I want to help!” said Tonks brightly, knocking over a chair as she hurried toward the dresser from which Ginny was collecting cutlery.

Soon a series of heavy knives were chopping meat and vegetables of their own accord, supervised by Mr. Weasley, while Mrs. Weasley stirred a cauldron dangling over the fire and the others took out plates, more goblets, and food from the pantry. Harry was left at the table with Sirius and Mundungus, who was still blinking mournfully at him.

“Seen old Figgy since?” he asked.

“No,” said Harry, “I haven’t seen anyone.”

“See, I wouldn’t ’ave left,” said Mundungus, leaning forward, a pleading note in his voice, “but I ’ad a business opportunity —”

Harry felt something brush against his knees and started, but it was only Crookshanks, Hermione’s bandy-legged ginger cat, who wound himself once around Harry’s legs, purring, then jumped onto Sirius’s lap and curled up. Sirius scratched him absentmindedly behind the ears as he turned, still grim-faced, to Harry.

“Had a good summer so far?”

“No, it’s been lousy,” said Harry.

For the first time, something like a grin flitted across Sirius’s face.

“Don’t know what you’re complaining about, myself.”

“What?” said Harry incredulously.

“Personally, I’d have welcomed a dementor attack. A deadly strug-gle for my soul would have broken the monotony nicely. You think you’ve

had it bad, at least you've been able to get out and about, stretch your legs, get into a few fights. … I've been stuck inside for a month."

"How come?" asked Harry, frowning.

"Because the Ministry of Magic's still after me, and Voldemort will know all about me being an Animagus by now, Wormtail will have told him, so my big disguise is useless. There's not much I can do for the Order of the Phoenix … or so Dumbledore feels."

There was something about the slightly flattened tone of voice in which Sirius uttered Dumbledore's name that told Harry that Sirius was not very happy with the headmaster either. Harry felt a sudden upsurge of affection for his godfather.

"At least you've known what's been going on," he said bracingly.

"Oh yeah," said Sirius sarcastically. "Listening to Snape's reports, having to take all his snide hints that he's out there risking his life while I'm sat on my backside here having a nice comfortable time … asking me how the cleaning's going —"

"What cleaning?" asked Harry.

"Trying to make this place fit for human habitation," said Sirius, waving a hand around the dismal kitchen. "No one's lived here for ten years, not since my dear mother died, unless you count her old house-elf, and he's gone round the twist, hasn't cleaned anything in ages —"

"Sirius?" said Mundungus, who did not appear to have paid any attention to this conversation, but had been minutely examining an empty goblet. "This solid silver, mate?"

"Yes," said Sirius, surveying it with distaste. "Finest fifteenth-century goblin-wrought silver, embossed with the Black family crest."

“That’d come off, though,” muttered Mundungus, polishing it with his cuff.

“Fred — George — NO, JUST CARRY THEM!” Mrs. Weasley shrieked.

Harry, Sirius, and Mundungus looked around and, a split second later, dived away from the table. Fred and George had bewitched a large cauldron of stew, an iron flagon of butterbeer, and a heavy wooden breadboard, complete with knife, to hurtle through the air toward them. The stew skidded the length of the table and came to a halt just before the end, leaving a long black burn on the wooden surface, the flagon of butterbeer fell with a crash, spilling its contents everywhere, and the bread knife slipped off the board and landed, point down and quivering ominously, exactly where Sirius’s right hand had been seconds before.

“FOR HEAVEN’S SAKE!” screamed Mrs. Weasley. “THERE WAS NO NEED — I’VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS — JUST BE-CAUSE YOU’RE ALLOWED TO USE MAGIC NOW YOU DON’T HAVE TO WHIP YOUR WANDS OUT FOR EVERY TINY LITTLE THING!”

“We were just trying to save a bit of time!” said Fred, hurrying forward and wrenching the bread knife out of the table. “Sorry Sirius, mate — didn’t mean to —”

Harry and Sirius were both laughing. Mundungus, who had top-pled backward off his chair, was swearing as he got to his feet. Crookshanks had given an angry hiss and shot off under the dresser, from whence his large yellow eyes glowed in the darkness.

“Boys,” Mr. Weasley said, lifting the stew back into the middle of the table, “your mother’s right, you’re supposed to show a sense of responsibility now you’ve come of age —”

“— none of your brothers caused this sort of trouble!” Mrs. Weasley raged at the twins, slamming a fresh flagon of butterbeer onto the

table and spilling almost as much again. "Bill didn't feel the need to Apparate every few feet! Charlie didn't Charm everything he met! Percy —"

She stopped dead, catching her breath with a frightened look at her husband, whose expression was suddenly wooden.

"Let's eat," said Bill quickly.

"It looks wonderful, Molly," said Lupin, ladling stew onto a plate for her and handing it across the table.

For a few minutes there was silence but for the chink of plates and cutlery and the scraping of chairs as everyone settled down to their food. Then Mrs. Weasley turned to Sirius and said, "I've been meaning to tell you, there's something trapped in that writing desk in the drawing room, it keeps rattling and shaking. Of course, it could just be a boggart, but I thought we ought to ask Alastor to have a look at it before we let it out."

"Whatever you like," said Sirius indifferently.

"The curtains in there are full of doxies too," Mrs. Weasley went on. "I thought we might try and tackle them tomorrow."

"I look forward to it," said Sirius. Harry heard the sarcasm in his voice, but he was not sure that anyone else did.

Opposite Harry, Tonks was entertaining Hermione and Ginny by transforming her nose between mouthfuls. Screwing up her eyes each time with the same pained expression she had worn back in Harry's bedroom, her nose swelled to a beaklike protuberance like Snape's, shrank to something resembling a button mushroom, and then sprouted a great deal of hair from each nostril. Apparently this was a regular mealtime entertainment, because after a while Hermione and Ginny started requesting their favorite noses.

“Do that one like a pig snout, Tonks …”

Tonks obliged, and Harry, looking up, had the fleeting impression that a female Dudley was grinning at him from across the table.

Mr. Weasley, Bill, and Lupin were having an intense discussion about goblins.

“They’re not giving anything away yet,” said Bill. “I still can’t work out whether they believe he’s back or not. ’Course, they might prefer not to take sides at all. Keep out of it.”

“I’m sure they’d never go over to You-Know-Who,” said Mr. Weasley, shaking his head. “They’ve suffered losses too. Remember that goblin family he murdered last time, somewhere near Nottingham?”

“I think it depends what they’re offered,” said Lupin. “And I’m not talking about gold; if they’re offered freedoms we’ve been denying them for centuries they’re going to be tempted. Have you still not had any luck with Ragnok, Bill?”

“He’s feeling pretty anti-wizard at the moment,” said Bill. “He hasn’t stopped raging about the Bagman business, he reckons the Ministry did a cover-up, those goblins never got their gold from him, you know —”

A gale of laughter from the middle of the table drowned the rest of Bill’s words. Fred, George, Ron, and Mundungus were rolling around in their seats.

“… and then,” choked Mundungus, tears running down his face, “and then, if you’ll believe it, ’e says to me, ’e says, ‘’ere, Dung, where didja get all them toads from? ’Cos some son of a Bludger’s gone and nicked all mine!’ And I says, ‘Nicked all your toads, Will, what next? So you’ll be wanting some more, then?’ And if you’ll believe me, lads, the gormless gargoyle buys all ’is own toads back orf me for twice what ’e paid in the first place —”

“I don’t think we need to hear any more of your business dealings, thank you very much, Mundungus,” said Mrs. Weasley sharply, as Ron slumped forward onto the table, howling with laughter.

“Beg pardon, Molly,” said Mundungus at once, wiping his eyes and winking at Harry. “But, you know, Will nicked ’em orf Warty Harris in the first place so I wasn’t really doing nothing wrong —”

“I don’t know where you learned about right and wrong, Mundun-gus, but you seem to have missed a few crucial lessons,” said Mrs. Weasley coldly.

Fred and George buried their faces in their goblets of butterbeer; George was hiccuping. For some reason, Mrs. Weasley threw a very nasty look at Sirius before getting to her feet and going to fetch a large rhubarb crumble for pudding. Harry looked round at his godfather.

“Molly doesn’t approve of Mundungus,” said Sirius in an undertone.

“How come he’s in the Order?” Harry said very quietly.

“He’s useful,” Sirius muttered. “Knows all the crooks — well, he would, seeing as he’s one himself. But he’s also very loyal to Dumbledore, who helped him out of a tight spot once. It pays to have some-one like Dung around, he hears things we don’t. But Molly thinks inviting him to stay for dinner is going too far. She hasn’t forgiven him for slipping off duty when he was supposed to be tailing you.”

Three helpings of rhubarb crumble and custard later and the waist-band on Harry’s jeans was feeling uncomfortably tight (which was saying something, as the jeans had once been Dudley’s). He lay down his spoon in a lull in the general conversation. Mr. Weasley was lean-ing back in his chair, looking replete and relaxed, Tonks was yawning widely, her nose now back to normal, and Ginny, who had

lured Crookshanks out from under the dresser, was sitting cross-legged on the floor, rolling butterbeer corks for him to chase.

“Nearly time for bed, I think,” said Mrs. Weasley on a yawn.

“Not just yet, Molly,” said Sirius, pushing away his empty plate and turning to look at Harry. “You know, I’m surprised at you. I thought the first thing you’d do when you got here would be to start asking questions about Voldemort.”

The atmosphere in the room changed with the rapidity Harry associated with the arrival of dementors. Where seconds before it had been sleepily relaxed, it was now alert, even tense. A frisson had gone around the table at the mention of Voldemort’s name. Lupin, who had been about to take a sip of wine, lowered his goblet slowly, look-ing wary.

“I did!” said Harry indignantly. “I asked Ron and Hermione but they said we’re not allowed in the Order, so —”

“And they’re quite right,” said Mrs. Weasley. “You’re too young.”

She was sitting bolt upright in her chair, her fists clenched upon its arms, every trace of drowsiness gone.

“Since when did someone have to be in the Order of the Phoenix to ask questions?” asked Sirius. “Harry’s been trapped in that Muggle house for a month. He’s got the right to know what’s been happen —”

“Hang on!” interrupted George loudly.

“How come Harry gets his questions answered?” said Fred angrily.

“We’ve been trying to get stuff out of you for a month and you haven’t told us a single stinking thing!” said George.

“ ‘You’re too young, you’re not in the Order,’ ” said Fred, in a high-pitched voice that sounded uncannily like his mother’s. “Harry’s not even of age!”

“It’s not my fault you haven’t been told what the Order’s doing,” said Sirius calmly. “That’s your parents’ decision. Harry, on the other hand —”

“It’s not down to you to decide what’s good for Harry!” said Mrs. Weasley sharply. Her normally kindly face looked dangerous. “You haven’t forgotten what Dumbledore said, I suppose?”

“Which bit?” Sirius asked politely, but with an air as though ready-ing himself for a fight.

“The bit about not telling Harry more than he needs to know,” said Mrs. Weasley, placing a heavy emphasis on the last three words.

Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George’s heads turned from Sirius to Mrs. Weasley as though following a tennis rally. Ginny was kneeling amid a pile of abandoned butterbeer corks, watching the conversation with her mouth slightly open. Lupin’s eyes were fixed on Sirius.

“I don’t intend to tell him more than he needs to know, Molly,” said Sirius. “But as he was the one who saw Voldemort come back” (again, there was a collective shudder around the table at the name), “he has more right than most to —”

“He’s not a member of the Order of the Phoenix!” said Mrs. Weasley. “He’s only fifteen and —”

“— and he’s dealt with as much as most in the Order,” said Sirius, “and more than some —”

“No one’s denying what he’s done!” said Mrs. Weasley, her voice rising, her fists trembling on the arms of her chair. “But he’s still —”

“He’s not a child!” said Sirius impatiently.

“He’s not an adult either!” said Mrs. Weasley, the color rising in her cheeks. “He’s not James, Sirius!”

“I’m perfectly clear who he is, thanks, Molly,” said Sirius coldly.

“I’m not sure you are!” said Mrs. Weasley. “Sometimes, the way you talk about him, it’s as though you think you’ve got your best friend back!”

“What’s wrong with that?” said Harry.

“What’s wrong, Harry, is that you are not your father, however much you might look like him!” said Mrs. Weasley, her eyes still bor-ing into Sirius. “You are still at school and adults responsible for you should not forget it!”

“Meaning I’m an irresponsible godfather?” demanded Sirius, his voice rising.

“Meaning you’ve been known to act rashly, Sirius, which is why Dumbledore keeps reminding you to stay at home and —”

“We’ll leave my instructions from Dumbledore out of this, if you please!” said Sirius loudly.

“Arthur!” said Mrs. Weasley, rounding on her husband. “Arthur, back me up!”

Mr. Weasley did not speak at once. He took off his glasses and cleaned them slowly on his robes, not looking at his wife. Only when he had replaced them carefully on his nose did he say, “Dumbledore knows the position has changed, Molly. He accepts that Harry will have to be filled in to a certain extent now that he is staying at head-quarters —”

"Yes, but there's a difference between that and inviting him to ask whatever he likes!"

"Personally," said Lupin quietly, looking away from Sirius at last, as Mrs. Weasley turned quickly to him, hopeful that finally she was about to get an ally, "I think it better that Harry gets the facts — not all the facts, Molly, but the general picture — from us, rather than a garbled version from … others."

His expression was mild, but Harry felt sure that Lupin, at least, knew that some Extendable Ears had survived Mrs. Weasley's purge.

"Well," said Mrs. Weasley, breathing deeply and looking around the table for support that did not come, "well … I can see I'm going to be overruled. I'll just say this: Dumbledore must have had his rea-sons for not wanting Harry to know too much, and speaking as some-one who has got Harry's best interests at heart —"

"He's not your son," said Sirius quietly.

"He's as good as," said Mrs. Weasley fiercely. "Who else has he got?"

"He's got me!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Weasley, her lip curling. "The thing is, it's been rather difficult for you to look after him while you've been locked up in Azkaban, hasn't it?"

Sirius started to rise from his chair.

"Molly, you're not the only person at this table who cares about Harry," said Lupin sharply. "Sirius, sit down."

Mrs. Weasley's lower lip was trembling. Sirius sank slowly back into his chair, his face white.

"I think Harry ought to be allowed a say in this," Lupin continued. "He's old enough to decide for himself."

"I want to know what's been going on," Harry said at once.

He did not look at Mrs. Weasley. He had been touched by what she had said about his being as good as a son, but he was also impatient at her mollycoddling. … Sirius was right, he was not a child.

"Very well," said Mrs. Weasley, her voice cracking. "Ginny — Ron — Hermione — Fred — George — I want you out of this kitchen, now."

There was instant uproar.

"We're of age!" Fred and George bellowed together.

"If Harry's allowed, why can't I?" shouted Ron.

"Mum, I want to!" wailed Ginny.

"NO!" shouted Mrs. Weasley, standing up, her eyes overbright. "I absolutely forbid —"

"Molly, you can't stop Fred and George," said Mr. Weasley wearily. "They are of age —"

"They're still at school —"

"But they're legally adults now," said Mr. Weasley in the same tired voice.

Mrs. Weasley was now scarlet in the face.

"I — oh, all right then, Fred and George can stay, but Ron —"

"Harry'll tell me and Hermione everything you say anyway!" said Ron hotly. "Won't — won't you?" he added uncertainly, meeting Harry's eyes.

For a split second, Harry considered telling Ron that he wouldn't tell him a single word, that he could try a taste of being kept in the dark and see how he liked it. But the nasty impulse vanished as they looked at each other.

" 'Course I will," Harry said. Ron and Hermione beamed.

"Fine!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "Fine! Ginny — BED!"

Ginny did not go quietly. They could hear her raging and storming at her mother all the way up the stairs, and when she reached the hall Mrs. Black's earsplitting shrieks were added to the din. Lupin hurried off to the portrait to restore calm. It was only after he had returned, closing the kitchen door behind him and taking his seat at the table again, that Sirius spoke.

"Okay, Harry … what do you want to know?"

Harry took a deep breath and asked the question that had been obsessing him for a month.

"Where's Voldemort? What's he doing? I've been trying to watch the Muggle news," he said, ignoring the renewed shudders and winces at the name, "and there hasn't been anything that looks like him yet, no funny deaths or anything —"

"That's because there haven't been any suspicious deaths yet," said Sirius, "not as far as we know, anyway. … And we know quite a lot."

"More than he thinks we do anyway," said Lupin.

"How come he's stopped killing people?" Harry asked. He knew that Voldemort had murdered more than once in the last year alone.

"Because he doesn't want to draw attention to himself at the moment," said Sirius. "It would be dangerous for him. His comeback

didn't come off quite the way he wanted it to, you see. He messed it up."

"Or rather, you messed it up for him," said Lupin with a satisfied smile.

"How?" Harry asked perplexedly.

"You weren't supposed to survive!" said Sirius. "Nobody apart from his Death Eaters was supposed to know he'd come back. But you sur-vived to bear witness."

"And the very last person he wanted alerted to his return the mo-ment he got back was Dumbledore," said Lupin. "And you made sure Dumbledore knew at once."

"How has that helped?" Harry asked.

"Are you kidding?" said Bill incredulously. "Dumbledore was the only one You-Know-Who was ever scared of!"

"Thanks to you, Dumbledore was able to recall the Order of the Phoenix about an hour after Voldemort returned," said Sirius.

"So what's the Order been doing?" said Harry, looking around at them all.

"Working as hard as we can to make sure Voldemort can't carry out his plans," said Sirius.

"How d'you know what his plans are?" Harry asked quickly.

"Dumbledore's got a shrewd idea," said Lupin, "and Dumbledore's shrewd ideas normally turn out to be accurate."

"So what does Dumbledore reckon he's planning?"

"Well, firstly, he wants to build up his army again," said Sirius. "In the old days he had huge numbers at his command; witches and wiz-

ards he'd bullied or bewitched into following him, his faithful Death Eaters, a great variety of Dark creatures. You heard him planning to recruit the giants; well, they'll be just one group he's after. He's certainly not going to try and take on the Ministry of Magic with only a dozen Death Eaters."

"So you're trying to stop him getting more followers?"

"We're doing our best," said Lupin.

"How?"

"Well, the main thing is to try and convince as many people as possible that You-Know-Who really has returned, to put them on their guard," said Bill. "It's proving tricky, though."

"Why?"

"Because of the Ministry's attitude," said Tonks. "You saw Cor-nelius Fudge after You-Know-Who came back, Harry. Well, he hasn't shifted his position at all. He's absolutely refusing to believe it's happened."

"But why?" said Harry desperately. "Why's he being so stupid? If Dumbledore —"

"Ah, well, you've put your finger on the problem," said Mr. Weasley with a wry smile. "Dumbledore."

"Fudge is frightened of him, you see," said Tonks sadly.

"Frightened of Dumbledore?" said Harry incredulously.

"Frightened of what he's up to," said Mr. Weasley. "You see, Fudge thinks Dumbledore's plotting to overthrow him. He thinks Dumbledore wants to be Minister of Magic."

"But Dumbledore doesn't want —"

“Of course he doesn’t,” said Mr. Weasley. “He’s never wanted the Minister’s job, even though a lot of people wanted him to take it when Millicent Bagnold retired. Fudge came to power instead, but he’s never quite forgotten how much popular support Dumbledore had, even though Dumbledore never applied for the job.”

“Deep down, Fudge knows Dumbledore’s much cleverer than he is, a much more powerful wizard, and in the early days of his Ministry he was forever asking Dumbledore for help and advice,” said Lupin. “But it seems that he’s become fond of power now, and much more confident. He loves being Minister of Magic, and he’s managed to convince himself that he’s the clever one and Dumbledore’s simply stirring up trouble for the sake of it.”

“How can he think that?” said Harry angrily. “How can he think Dumbledore would just make it all up — that I’d make it all up?”

“Because accepting that Voldemort’s back would mean trouble like the Ministry hasn’t had to cope with for nearly fourteen years,” said Sirius bitterly. “Fudge just can’t bring himself to face it. It’s so much more comfortable to convince himself Dumbledore’s lying to destabilize him.”

“You see the problem,” said Lupin. “While the Ministry insists there is nothing to fear from Voldemort, it’s hard to convince people he’s back, especially as they really don’t want to believe it in the first place. What’s more, the Ministry’s leaning heavily on the Daily Prophet not to report any of what they’re calling Dumbledore’s rumor-mongering, so most of the Wizarding community are completely un-aware anything’s happened, and that makes them easy targets for the Death Eaters if they’re using the Imperius Curse.”

“But you’re telling people, aren’t you?” said Harry, looking around at Mr. Weasley, Sirius, Bill, Mundungus, Lupin, and Tonks. “You’re letting people know he’s back?”

They all smiled humorlessly.

“Well, as everyone thinks I’m a mad mass murderer and the Ministry’s put a ten-thousand-Galleon price on my head, I can hardly stroll up the street and start handing out leaflets, can I?” said Sirius restlessly.

“And I’m not a very popular dinner guest with most of the community,” said Lupin. “It’s an occupational hazard of being a werewolf.”

“Tonks and Arthur would lose their jobs at the Ministry if they started shooting their mouths off,” said Sirius, “and it’s very important for us to have spies inside the Ministry, because you can bet Volde-mort will have them.”

“We’ve managed to convince a couple of people, though,” said Mr. Weasley. “Tonks here, for one — she’s too young to have been in the Order of the Phoenix last time, and having Aurors on our side is a huge advantage — Kingsley Shacklebolt’s been a real asset too. He’s in charge of the hunt for Sirius, so he’s been feeding the Ministry infor-mation that Sirius is in Tibet.”

“But if none of you’s putting the news out that Voldemort’s back —” Harry began.

“Who said none of us was putting the news out?” said Sirius. “Why d’you think Dumbledore’s in such trouble?”

“What d’you mean?” Harry asked.

“They’re trying to discredit him,” said Lupin. “Didn’t you see the Daily Prophet last week? They reported that he’d been voted out of the Chairmanship of the International Confederation of Wizards because he’s getting old and losing his grip, but it’s not true, he was voted out by Ministry wizards after he made a speech announcing Voldemort’s return. They’ve demoted him from Chief Warlock on the Wizengamot — that’s the Wizard High Court — and they’re talking about taking away his Order of Merlin, First Class, too.”

“But Dumbledore says he doesn’t care what they do as long as they don’t take him off the Chocolate Frog cards,” said Bill, grinning.

“It’s no laughing matter,” said Mr. Weasley shortly. “If he carries on defying the Ministry like this, he could end up in Azkaban and the last thing we want is Dumbledore locked up. While You-Know-Who knows Dumbledore’s out there and wise to what he’s up to, he’s going to go cautiously for a while. If Dumbledore’s out of the way — well, You-Know-Who will have a clear field.”

“But if Voldemort’s trying to recruit more Death Eaters, it’s bound to get out that he’s come back, isn’t it?” asked Harry desperately.

“Voldemort doesn’t march up to people’s houses and bang on their front doors, Harry,” said Sirius. “He tricks, jinxes, and blackmails them. He’s well-practiced at operating in secrecy. In any case, gathering followers is only one thing he’s interested in, he’s got other plans too, plans he can put into operation very quietly indeed, and he’s concentrating on them at the moment.”

“What’s he after apart from followers?” Harry asked swiftly.

He thought he saw Sirius and Lupin exchange the most fleeting of looks before Sirius said, “Stuff he can only get by stealth.”

When Harry continued to look puzzled, Sirius said, “Like a weapon. Something he didn’t have last time.”

“When he was powerful before?”

“Yes.”

“Like what kind of weapon?” said Harry. “Something worse than the Avada Kedavra — ?”

“That’s enough.”

Mrs. Weasley spoke from the shadows beside the door. Harry had not noticed her return from taking Ginny upstairs. Her arms were crossed and she looked furious.

“I want you in bed, now. All of you,” she added, looking around at Fred, George, Ron, and Hermione.

“You can’t boss us —” Fred began.

“Watch me,” snarled Mrs. Weasley. She was trembling slightly as she looked at Sirius. “You’ve given Harry plenty of information. Any more and you might just as well induct him into the Order straightaway.”

“Why not?” said Harry quickly. “I’ll join, I want to join, I want to fight —”

“No.”

It was not Mrs. Weasley who spoke this time, but Lupin.

“The Order is comprised only of overage wizards,” he said. “Wiz-ards who have left school,” he added, as Fred and George opened their mouths. “There are dangers involved of which you can have no idea, any of you … I think Molly’s right, Sirius. We’ve said enough.”

Sirius half-shrugged but did not argue. Mrs. Weasley beckoned im-periously to her sons and Hermione. One by one they stood up and Harry, recognizing defeat, followed suit.

Chapter 6 The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black

Mrs. Weasley followed them upstairs looking grim.

“I want you all to go straight to bed, no talking,” she said as they reached the first landing. “We’ve got a busy day tomorrow. I expect Ginny’s asleep,” she added to Hermione, “so try not to wake her up.”

“Asleep, yeah, right,” said Fred in an undertone, after Hermione bade them good night and they were climbing to the next floor. “If Ginny’s not lying awake waiting for Hermione to tell her everything they said downstairs, then I’m a flobberworm. …”

“All right, Ron, Harry,” said Mrs. Weasley on the second landing, pointing them into their bedroom. “Off to bed with you.”

“ ’Night,” Harry and Ron said to the twins.

“Sleep tight,” said Fred, winking.

Mrs. Weasley closed the door behind Harry with a sharp snap. The bedroom looked, if anything, even danker and gloomier than it had on first sight. The blank picture on the wall was now breathing very slowly and deeply, as though its invisible occupant was asleep. Harry put on his pajamas, took off his glasses, and climbed into his chilly bed while Ron threw Owl Treats up on top of the wardrobe to pacify Hedwig and Pigwidgeon, who were clattering around and rustling their wings restlessly.

“We can’t let them out to hunt every night,” Ron explained as he pulled on his maroon pajamas. “Dumbledore doesn’t want too many owls swooping around the square, thinks it’ll look suspicious. Oh yeah … I forgot. …”

He crossed to the door and bolted it.

“What’re you doing that for?”

“Kreacher,” said Ron as he turned off the light. “First night I was here he came wandering in at three in the morning. Trust me, you don’t want to wake up and find him prowling around your room. Anyway …” He got into his bed, settled down under the covers, then turned to look at Harry in the darkness. Harry could see his outline by the moonlight filtering in through the grimy window. “What d’you reckon?”

Harry didn’t need to ask what Ron meant.

“Well, they didn’t tell us much we couldn’t have guessed, did they?” he said, thinking of all that had been said downstairs. “I mean, all they’ve really said is that the Order’s trying to stop people joining Vol —”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Ron.

“— demort,” said Harry firmly. “When are you going to start using his name? Sirius and Lupin do.”

Ron ignored this last comment. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said. “We already knew nearly everything they told us, from using the Extendable Ears. The only new bit was —”

Crack.

“OUCH!”

“Keep your voice down, Ron, or Mum’ll be back up here.”

“You two just Apparated on my knees!”

“Yeah, well, it’s harder in the dark —”

Harry saw the blurred outlines of Fred and George leaping down from Ron’s bed. There was a groan of bedsprings and Harry’s mattress descended a few inches as George sat down near his feet.

“So, got there yet?” said George eagerly.

“The weapon Sirius mentioned?” said Harry.

“Let slip, more like,” said Fred with relish, now sitting next to Ron. “We didn’t hear about that on the old Extendables, did we?”

“What d’you reckon it is?” said Harry.

“Could be anything,” said Fred.

“But there can’t be anything worse than the Avada Kedavra curse, can there?” said Ron. “What’s worse than death?”

“Maybe it’s something that can kill loads of people at once,” suggested George.

“Maybe it’s some particularly painful way of killing people,” said Ron fearfully.

“He’s got the Cruciatus Curse for causing pain,” said Harry. “He doesn’t need anything more efficient than that.”

There was a pause and Harry knew that the others, like him, were wondering what horrors this weapon could perpetrate.

“So who d’you thinks got it now?” asked George.

“I hope it’s our side,” said Ron, sounding slightly nervous.

“If it is, Dumbledore’s probably keeping it,” said Fred.

“Where?” said Ron quickly. “Hogwarts?”

“Bet it is!” said George. “That’s where he hid the Sorcerer’s Stone!”

“A weapon’s going to be a lot bigger than the Stone, though!” said Ron.

“Not necessarily,” said Fred.

“Yeah, size is no guarantee of power,” said George. “Look at Ginny.”

“What d’you mean?” said Harry.

“You’ve never been on the receiving end of one of her Bat-Bogey Hexes, have you?”

“Shhh!” said Fred, half-rising from the bed. “Listen!”

They fell silent. Footsteps were coming up the stairs again.

“Mum,” said George, and without further ado there was a loud crack and Harry felt the weight vanish from the end of his bed. A few seconds later and they heard the floorboard creak outside their door; Mrs. Weasley was plainly listening to see whether they were talking or not.

Hedwig and Pigwidgeon hooted dolefully. The floorboard creaked again and they heard her heading upstairs to check on Fred and George.

“She doesn’t trust us at all, you know,” said Ron regretfully.

Harry was sure he would not be able to fall asleep; the evening had been so packed with things to think about that he fully expected to lie awake for hours mulling it all over. He wanted to continue talking to Ron, but Mrs. Weasley was now creaking back downstairs again, and once she had gone he distinctly heard others making their way upstairs. … In fact, many-legged creatures were cantering softly up and down outside the bedroom door, and Hagrid, the Care of Magical Creatures teacher, was saying, “Beauties, aren’ they, eh, Harry? We’ll be studyin’ weapons this term. …” And Harry saw that the creatures had cannons for heads and were wheeling to face him. … He ducked. …The next thing he knew, he was curled in a warm ball under his bedclothes, and George’s loud voice was filling the room.

“Mum says get up, your breakfast is in the kitchen and then she needs you in the drawing room, there are loads more doxies than she thought and she’s found a nest of dead puffskeins under the sofa.”

Half an hour later, Harry and Ron, who had dressed and break-fasted quickly, entered the drawing room, a long, high-ceilinged room on the first floor with olive-green walls covered in dirty tapestries. The carpet exhaled little clouds of dust every time someone put their foot on it and the long, moss-green velvet curtains were buzzing as though swarming with invisible bees. It was around these that Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, Ginny, Fred, and George were grouped, all looking rather peculiar, as they had tied cloths over their noses and mouths. Each of them was also holding a large bottle of black liquid with a nozzle at the end.

“Cover your faces and take a spray,” Mrs. Weasley said to Harry and Ron the moment she saw them, pointing to two more bottles of black liquid standing on a spindle-legged table. “It’s Doxycide. I’ve never seen an infestation this bad — what that house-elf’s been doing for the last ten years —”

Hermione’s face was half concealed by a tea towel but Harry distinctly saw her throw a reproachful look at Mrs. Weasley at these words.

“Kreacher’s really old, he probably couldn’t manage —”

“You’d be surprised what Kreacher can manage when he wants to, Hermione,” said Sirius, who had just entered the room carrying a bloodstained bag of what appeared to be dead rats. “I’ve just been feed-ing Buckbeak,” he added, in reply to Harry’s inquiring look. “I keep him upstairs in my mother’s bedroom. Anyway … this writing desk …”

He dropped the bag of rats onto an armchair, then bent over to examine the locked cabinet which, Harry now noticed for the first time, was shaking slightly.

"Well, Molly, I'm pretty sure this is a boggart," said Sirius, peering through the keyhole, "but perhaps we ought to let Mad-Eye have a shifty at it before we let it out — knowing my mother it could be something much worse."

"Right you are, Sirius," said Mrs. Weasley.

They were both speaking in carefully light, polite voices that told Harry quite plainly that neither had forgotten their disagreement of the night before.

A loud, clanging bell sounded from downstairs, followed at once by the cacophony of screams and wails that had been triggered the previ-ous night by Tonks knocking over the umbrella stand.

"I keep telling them not to ring the doorbell!" said Sirius exasperat-edly, hurrying back out of the room. They heard him thundering down the stairs as Mrs. Black's screeches echoed up through the house once more: "Stains of dishonor, filthy half-breeds, blood traitors, children of filth …"

"Close the door, please, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley.

Harry took as much time as he dared to close the drawing room door; he wanted to listen to what was going on downstairs. Sirius had obviously managed to shut the curtains over his mother's portrait be-cause she had stopped screaming. He heard Sirius walking down the hall, then the clattering of the chain on the front door, and then a deep voice he recognized as Kingsley Shacklebolt's saying, "Hestia's just relieved me, so she's got Moody's cloak now, thought I'd leave a re-port for Dumbledore. …"

Feeling Mrs. Weasley's eyes on the back of his head, Harry regret-fully closed the drawing room door and rejoined the doxy party.

Mrs. Weasley was bending over to check the page on doxies in Gilderoy Lockhart's Guide to Household Pests, which was lying open

on the sofa.

“Right, you lot, you need to be careful, because doxies bite and their teeth are poisonous. I’ve got a bottle of antidote here, but I’d rather nobody needed it.”

She straightened up, positioned herself squarely in front of the curtains, and beckoned them all forward.

“When I say the word, start spraying immediately,” she said. “They’ll come flying out at us, I expect, but it says on the sprays one good squirt will paralyze them. When they’re immobilized, just throw them in this bucket.”

She stepped carefully out of their line of fire and raised her own spray. “All right — squirt!”

Harry had been spraying only a few seconds when a fully grown doxy came soaring out of a fold in the material, shiny beetlelike wings whirring, tiny needle-sharp teeth bared, its fairylike body covered with thick black hair and its four tiny fists clenched with fury. Harry caught it full in the face with a blast of Doxycide; it froze in midair and fell, with a surprisingly loud thunk, onto the worn carpet below. Harry picked it up and threw it in the bucket.

“Fred, what are you doing?” said Mrs. Weasley sharply. “Spray that at once and throw it away!”

Harry looked around. Fred was holding a struggling doxy between his forefinger and thumb.

“Right-o,” Fred said brightly, spraying the doxy quickly in the face so that it fainted, but the moment Mrs. Weasley’s back was turned he pocketed it with a wink.

“We want to experiment with doxy venom for our Skiving Snackboxes,” George told Harry under his breath.

Deftly spraying two doxies at once as they soared straight for his nose, Harry moved closer to George and muttered out of the corner of his mouth, “What are Skiving Snackboxes?”

“Range of sweets to make you ill,” George whispered, keeping a wary eye on Mrs. Weasley’s back. “Not seriously ill, mind, just ill enough to get you out of a class when you feel like it. Fred and I have been developing them this summer. They’re double-ended, color-coded chews. If you eat the orange half of the Puking Pastilles, you throw up. Moment you’ve been rushed out of the lesson for the hos-pital wing, you swallow the purple half —”

“ ‘— which restores you to full fitness, enabling you to pursue the leisure activity of your own choice during an hour that would other-wise have been devoted to unprofitable boredom.’ That’s what we’re putting in the adverts, anyway,” whispered Fred, who had edged over out of Mrs. Weasley’s line of vision and was now sweeping a few stray doxies from the floor and adding them to his pocket. “But they still need a bit of work. At the moment our testers are having a bit of trou-ble stopping puking long enough to swallow the purple end.”

“Testers?”

“Us,” said Fred. “We take it in turns. George did the Fainting Fan-cies — we both tried the Nosebleed Nougat —”

“Mum thought we’d been dueling,” said George.

“Joke shop still on, then?” Harry muttered, pretending to be ad-justing the nozzle on his spray.

“Well, we haven’t had a chance to get premises yet,” said Fred, dropping his voice even lower as Mrs. Weasley mopped her brow with her scarf before returning to the attack, “so we’re running it as a mail-order service at the moment. We put advertisements in the Daily Prophet last week.”

“All thanks to you, mate,” said George. “But don’t worry … Mum hasn’t got a clue. She won’t read the Daily Prophet anymore, ’cause of it telling lies about you and Dumbledore.”

Harry grinned. He had forced the Weasley twins to take the thousand-Galleon prize money he had won in the Triwizard Tournament to help them realize their ambition to open a joke shop, but he was still glad to know that his part in furthering their plans was unknown to Mrs. Weasley, who did not think that running a joke shop was a suitable career for two of her sons.

The de-doxying of the curtains took most of the morning. It was past midday when Mrs. Weasley finally removed her protective scarf, sank into a sagging armchair, and sprang up again with a cry of dis-gust, having sat on the bag of dead rats. The curtains were no longer buzzing; they hung limp and damp from the intensive spraying; unconscious doxies lay crammed in the bucket at the foot of them beside a bowl of their black eggs, at which Crookshanks was now sniffing and Fred and George were shooting covetous looks.

“I think we’ll tackle those after lunch.”

Mrs. Weasley pointed at the dusty glass-fronted cabinets standing on either side of the mantelpiece. They were crammed with an odd assortment of objects: a selection of rusty daggers, claws, a coiled snakeskin, a number of tarnished silver boxes inscribed with languages Harry could not understand and, least pleasant of all, an ornate crys-tal bottle with a large opal set into the stopper, full of what Harry was quite sure was blood.

The clanging doorbell rang again. Everyone looked at Mrs. Weasley.

“Stay here,” she said firmly, snatching up the bag of rats as Mrs. Blacks screeches started up again from down below. “I’ll bring up some sandwiches.”

She left the room, closing the door carefully behind her. At once, everyone dashed over to the window to look down onto the doorstep. They could see the top of an unkempt gingery head and a stack of precariously balanced cauldrons.

“Mundungus!” said Hermione. “What’s he brought all those cauldrons for?”

“Probably looking for a safe place to keep them,” said Harry. “Isn’t that what he was doing the night he was supposed to be tailing me? Picking up dodgy cauldrons?”

“Yeah, you’re right!” said Fred, as the front door opened; Mundun-gus heaved his cauldrons through it and disappeared from view. “Blimey, Mum won’t like that. …”

He and George crossed to the door and stood beside it, listening intently. Mrs. Black’s screaming had stopped again.

“Mundungus is talking to Sirius and Kingsley,” Fred muttered, frowning with concentration. “Can’t hear properly … d’you reckon we can risk the Extendable Ears?”

“Might be worth it,” said George. “I could sneak upstairs and get a pair —”

But at that precise moment there was an explosion of sound from downstairs that rendered Extendable Ears quite unnecessary. All of them could hear exactly what Mrs. Weasley was shouting at the top of her voice.

“WE ARE NOT RUNNING A HIDEOUT FOR STOLEN GOODS!”

“I love hearing Mum shouting at someone else,” said Fred, with a satisfied smile on his face as he opened the door an inch or so to allow Mrs. Weasley’s voice to permeate the room better. “It makes such a nice change.”

"— COMPLETELY IRRESPONSIBLE, AS IF WE HAVEN'T GOT ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT WITHOUT YOU DRAG-GING STOLEN CAULDRONS INTO THE HOUSE —"

"The idiots are letting her get into her stride," said George, shaking his head. "You've got to head her off early, otherwise she builds up a head of steam and goes on for hours. And she's been dying to have a go at Mundungus ever since he sneaked off when he was supposed to be following you, Harry — and there goes Sirius's mum again —"

Mrs. Weasley's voice was lost amid fresh shrieks and screams from the portraits in the hall. George made to shut the door to drown the noise, but before he could do so, a house-elf edged into the room.

Except for the filthy rag tied like a loincloth around its middle, it was completely naked. It looked very old. Its skin seemed to be several times too big for it and though it was bald like all house-elves, there was a quantity of white hair growing out of its large, batlike ears. Its eyes were a bloodshot and watery gray, and its fleshy nose was large and rather snoutlike.

The elf took absolutely no notice of Harry and the rest. Acting as though it could not see them, it shuffled hunchbacked, slowly and doggedly, toward the far end of the room, muttering under its breath all the while in a hoarse, deep voice like a bullfrog's, "… Smells like a drain and a criminal to boot, but she's no better, nasty old blood traitor with her brats messing up my Mistress's house, oh my poor Mistress, if she knew, if she knew the scum they've let in her house, what would she say to old Kreacher, oh the shame of it, Mudbloods and werewolves and traitors and thieves, poor old Kreacher, what can he do. …"

"Hello, Kreacher," said Fred very loudly, closing the door with a snap.

The house-elf froze in his tracks, stopped muttering, and then gave a very pronounced and very unconvincing start of surprise.

"Kreacher did not see Young Master," he said, turning around and bowing to Fred. Still facing the carpet, he added, perfectly audibly, "Nasty little brat of a blood traitor it is."

"Sorry?" said George. "Didn't catch that last bit."

"Kreacher said nothing," said the elf, with a second bow to George, adding in a clear undertone, "and there's its twin, unnatural little beasts they are."

Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not. The elf straightened up, eyeing them all very malevolently, and apparently convinced that they could not hear him as he continued to mutter.

"… and there's the Mudblood, standing there bold as brass, oh if my Mistress knew, oh how she'd cry, and there's a new boy, Kreacher doesn't know his name, what is he doing here, Kreacher doesn't know …"

"This is Harry, Kreacher," said Hermione tentatively. "Harry Potter."

Kreacher's pale eyes widened and he muttered faster and more furiously than ever.

"The Mudblood is talking to Kreacher as though she is my friend, if Kreacher's Mistress saw him in such company, oh what would she say —"

"Don't call her a Mudblood!" said Ron and Ginny together, very angrily.

"It doesn't matter," Hermione whispered, "he's not in his right mind, he doesn't know what he's —"

"Don't kid yourself, Hermione, he knows exactly what he's saying," said Fred, eyeing Kreacher with great dislike.

Kreacher was still muttering, his eyes on Harry.

“Is it true? Is it Harry Potter? Kreacher can see the scar, it must be true, that’s that boy who stopped the Dark Lord, Kreacher wonders how he did it —”

“Don’t we all, Kreacher?” said Fred.

“What do you want anyway?” George asked.

Kreacher’s huge eyes darted onto George.

“Kreacher is cleaning,” he said evasively.

“A likely story,” said a voice behind Harry.

Sirius had come back; he was glowering at the elf from the door-way. The noise in the hall had abated; perhaps Mrs. Weasley and Mundungus had moved their argument down into the kitchen. At the sight of Sirius, Kreacher flung himself into a ridiculously low bow that flattened his snoutlike nose on the floor.

“Stand up straight,” said Sirius impatiently. “Now, what are you up to?”

“Kreacher is cleaning,” the elf repeated. “Kreacher lives to serve the noble house of Black —”

“— and it’s getting blacker every day, it’s filthy,” said Sirius.

“Master always liked his little joke,” said Kreacher, bowing again, and continuing in an undertone, “Master was a nasty ungrateful swine who broke his mother’s heart —”

“My mother didn’t have a heart, Kreacher,” Sirius snapped. “She kept herself alive out of pure spite.”

Kreacher bowed again and said, “Whatever Master says,” then muttered furiously, “Master is not fit to wipe slime from his mother’s

boots, oh my poor Mistress, what would she say if she saw Kreacher serving him, how she hated him, what a disappointment he was —"

"I asked you what you were up to," said Sirius coldly. "Every time you show up pretending to be cleaning, you sneak something off to your room so we can't throw it out."

"Kreacher would never move anything from its proper place in Master's house," said the elf, then muttered very fast, "Mistress would never forgive Kreacher if the tapestry was thrown out, seven centuries it's been in the family, Kreacher must save it, Kreacher will not let Master and the blood traitors and the brats destroy it —"

"I thought it might be that," said Sirius, casting a disdainful look at the opposite wall. "She'll have put another Permanent Sticking Charm on the back of it, I don't doubt, but if I can get rid of it I certainly will. Now go away, Kreacher."

It seemed that Kreacher did not dare disobey a direct order; nevertheless, the look he gave Sirius as he shuffled out past him was redolent of deepest loathing and he muttered all the way out of the room.

"— comes back from Azkaban ordering Kreacher around, oh my poor Mistress, what would she say if she saw the house now, scum liv-ing in it, her treasures thrown out, she swore he was no son of hers and he's back, they say he's a murderer too —"

"Keep muttering and I will be a murderer!" said Sirius irritably, and he slammed the door shut on the elf.

"Sirius, he's not right in the head," said Hermione pleadingly, "I don't think he realizes we can hear him."

"He's been alone too long," said Sirius, "taking mad orders from my mother's portrait and talking to himself, but he was always a foul little —"

“If you just set him free,” said Hermione hopefully, “maybe —”

“We can’t set him free, he knows too much about the Order,” said Sirius curtly. “And anyway, the shock would kill him. You suggest to him that he leaves this house, see how he takes it.”

Sirius walked across the room, where the tapestry Kreacher had been trying to protect hung the length of the wall. Harry and the others followed.

The tapestry looked immensely old; it was faded and looked as though doxies had gnawed it in places; nevertheless, the golden thread with which it was embroidered still glinted brightly enough to show them a sprawling family tree dating back (as far as Harry could tell) to the Middle Ages. Large words at the very top of the tapestry read:THE NOBLE AND MOST ANCIENT HOUSE OF BLACK“TOUJOURS PUR”

“You’re not on here!” said Harry, after scanning the bottom of the tree.

“I used to be there,” said Sirius, pointing at a small, round, charred hole in the tapestry, rather like a cigarette burn. “My sweet old mother blasted me off after I ran away from home — Kreacher’s quite fond of muttering the story under his breath.”

“You ran away from home?”

“When I was about sixteen,” said Sirius. “I’d had enough.”

“Where did you go?” asked Harry, staring at him.

“Your dad’s place,” said Sirius. “Your grandparents were really good about it; they sort of adopted me as a second son. Yeah, I camped out at your dad’s during the school holidays, and then when I was seventeen I got a place of my own, my Uncle Alphard had left me a decent bit of gold — he’s been wiped off here too, that’s probably why

— anyway, after that I looked after myself. I was always welcome at Mr. and Mrs. Potter's for Sunday lunch, though."

"But … why did you … ?"

"Leave?" Sirius smiled bitterly and ran a hand through his long, unkempt hair. "Because I hated the whole lot of them: my parents, with their pure-blood mania, convinced that to be a Black made you practically royal … my idiot brother, soft enough to believe them … that's him."

Sirius jabbed a finger at the very bottom of the tree, at the name REGULUS BLACK. A date of death (some fifteen years previously) fol-lowed the date of birth.

"He was younger than me," said Sirius, "and a much better son, as I was constantly reminded."

"But he died," said Harry.

"Yeah," said Sirius. "Stupid idiot … he joined the Death Eaters."

"You're kidding!"

"Come on, Harry, haven't you seen enough of this house to tell what kind of wizards my family were?" said Sirius testily.

"Were — were your parents Death Eaters as well?"

"No, no, but believe me, they thought Voldemort had the right idea, they were all for the purification of the Wizarding race, getting rid of Muggle-borns and having purebloods in charge. They weren't alone either, there were quite a few people, before Voldemort showed his true colors, who thought he had the right idea about things. … They got cold feet when they saw what he was prepared to do to get power, though. But I bet my parents thought Regulus was a right lit-tle hero for joining up at first."

“Was he killed by an Auror?” Harry asked tentatively.

“Oh no,” said Sirius. “No, he was murdered by Voldemort. Or on Voldemort’s orders, more likely, I doubt Regulus was ever important enough to be killed by Voldemort in person. From what I found out after he died, he got in so far, then panicked about what he was being asked to do and tried to back out. Well, you don’t just hand in your resignation to Voldemort. It’s a lifetime of service or death.”

“Lunch,” said Mrs. Weasley’s voice.

She was holding her wand high in front of her, balancing a huge tray loaded with sandwiches and cake on its tip. She was very red in the face and still looked angry. The others moved over to her, eager for some food, but Harry remained with Sirius, who had bent closer to the tapestry.

“I haven’t looked at this for years. There’s Phineas Nigellus … my great-great-grandfather, see? Least popular headmaster Hogwarts ever had … and Araminta Meliflua … cousin of my mother’s … tried to force through a Ministry Bill to make Muggle-hunting legal … and dear Aunt Elladora … she started the family tradition of beheading house-elves when they got too old to carry tea trays … of course, anytime the family produced someone halfway decent they were disowned. I see Tonks isn’t on here. Maybe that’s why Kreacher won’t take orders from her — he’s supposed to do whatever anyone in the family asks him. …”

“You and Tonks are related?” Harry asked, surprised.

“Oh yeah, her mother, Andromeda, was my favorite cousin,” said Sirius, examining the tapestry carefully. “No, Andromeda’s not on here either, look —”

He pointed to another small round burn mark between two names, Bellatrix and Narcissa.

“Andromeda’s sisters are still here because they made lovely, respectable pure-blood marriages, but Andromeda married a Muggle-born, Ted Tonks, so —”

Sirius mimed blasting the tapestry with a wand and laughed sourly. Harry, however, did not laugh; he was too busy staring at the names to the right of Andromeda’s burn mark. A double line of gold embroidery linked Narcissa Black with Lucius Malfoy, and a single vertical gold line from their names led to the name Draco.

“You’re related to the Malfoys!”

“The pure-blood families are all interrelated,” said Sirius. “If you’re only going to let your sons and daughters marry purebloods your choice is very limited, there are hardly any of us left. Molly and I are cousins by marriage and Arthur’s something like my second cousin once removed. But there’s no point looking for them on here — if ever a family was a bunch of blood traitors it’s the Weasleys.”

But Harry was now looking at the name to the left of Andromeda’s burn: Bellatrix Black, which was connected by a double line to Rodolphus Lestrange.

“Lestrange …” Harry said aloud. The name had stirred something in his memory; he knew it from somewhere, but for a moment he couldn’t think where, though it gave him an odd, creeping sensation in the pit of his stomach.

“They’re in Azkaban,” said Sirius shortly.

Harry looked at him curiously.

“Bellatrix and her husband Rodolphus came in with Barty Crouch, Junior,” said Sirius in the same brusque voice. “Rodolphus’s brother, Rabastan, was with them too.”

And Harry remembered: He had seen Bellatrix Lestrange inside Dumbledore's Pensieve, the strange device in which thoughts and memories could be stored: a tall dark woman with heavy-lidded eyes, who had stood at her trial and proclaimed her continuing allegiance to Lord Voldemort, her pride that she had tried to find him after his downfall and her conviction that she would one day be rewarded for her loyalty.

"You never said she was your —"

"Does it matter if she's my cousin?" snapped Sirius. "As far as I'm concerned, they're not my family. She's certainly not my family. I haven't seen her since I was your age, unless you count a glimpse of her coming in to Azkaban. D'you think I'm proud of having relatives like her?"

"Sorry," said Harry quickly, "I didn't mean — I was just surprised, that's all —"

"It doesn't matter, don't apologize," Sirius mumbled at once. He turned away from the tapestry, his hands deep in his pockets. "I don't like being back here," he said, staring across the drawing room. "I never thought I'd be stuck in this house again."

Harry understood completely. He knew how he would feel if forced, when he was grown up and thought he was free of the place forever, to return and live at number four, Privet Drive.

"It's ideal for headquarters, of course," Sirius said. "My father put every security measure known to Wizard-kind on it when he lived here. It's Unplottable, so Muggles could never come and call — as if they'd have wanted to — and now Dumbledore's added his protection, you'd be hard put to find a safer house anywhere. Dumbledore's Secret-Keeper for the Order, you know — nobody can find headquarters unless he tells them personally where it is — that note Moody showed you last night, that was from Dumbledore. …" Sirius gave a short, barklike laugh. "If my parents could see the use it was being

put to now … well, my mother's portrait should give you some idea. …"

He scowled for a moment, then sighed.

"I wouldn't mind if I could just get out occasionally and do some-thing useful. I've asked Dumbledore whether I can escort you to your hearing — as Snuffles, obviously — so I can give you a bit of moral support, what d'you think?"

Harry felt as though his stomach had sunk through the dusty carpet. He had not thought about the hearing once since dinner the previous evening; in the excitement of being back with the people he liked best, of hearing everything that was going on, it had completely flown his mind. At Sirius's words, however, the crushing sense of dread returned to him. He stared at Hermione and the Weasleys, all tucking into their sandwiches, and thought how he would feel if they went back to Hogwarts without him.

"Don't worry," Sirius said. Harry looked up and realized that Sirius had been watching him. "I'm sure they're going to clear you, there's definitely something in the International Statute of Secrecy about be-ing allowed to use magic to save your own life."

"But if they do expel me," said Harry, quietly, "can I come back here and live with you?"

Sirius smiled sadly.

"We'll see."

"I'd feel a lot better about the hearing if I knew I didn't have to go back to the Dursleys," Harry pressed him.

"They must be bad if you prefer this place," said Sirius gloomily.

“Hurry up, you two, or there won’t be any food left,” Mrs. Weasley called.

Sirius heaved another great sigh, cast a dark look at the tapestry, and he and Harry went to join the others.

Harry tried his best not to think about the hearing while they emp-tied the glass cabinets that afternoon. Fortunately for him, it was a job that required a lot of concentration, as many of the objects in there seemed very reluctant to leave their dusty shelves. Sirius sustained a bad bite from a silver snuffbox; within seconds, his bitten hand had developed an unpleasant crusty covering like a tough brown glove.

“It’s okay,” he said, examining the hand with interest before tap-ping it lightly with his wand and restoring its skin to normal, “must be Wartcap powder in there.”

He threw the box aside into the sack where they were depositing the debris from the cabinets; Harry saw George wrap his own hand carefully in a cloth moments later and sneak the box into his already doxy-filled pocket.

They found an unpleasant-looking silver instrument, something like a many-legged pair of tweezers, which scuttled up Harry’s arm like a spider when he picked it up, and attempted to puncture his skin; Sirius seized it and smashed it with a heavy book entitled Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy. There was a musical box that emitted a faintly sinister, tinkling tune when wound, and they all found themselves becoming curiously weak and sleepy until Ginny had the sense to slam the lid shut; also a heavy locket that none of them could open, a number of ancient seals and, in a dusty box, an Order of Merlin, First Class, that had been awarded to Sirius’s grand-father for “Services to the Ministry.”

“It means he gave them a load of gold,” said Sirius contemptuously, throwing the medal into the rubbish sack.

Several times, Kreacher sidled into the room and attempted to smuggle things away under his loincloth, muttering horrible curses every time they caught him at it. When Sirius wrested a large golden ring bearing the Black crest from his grip Kreacher actually burst into furious tears and left the room sobbing under his breath and calling Sirius names Harry had never heard before.

"It was my father's," said Sirius, throwing the ring into the sack. "Kreacher wasn't quite as devoted to him as to my mother, but I still caught him snogging a pair of my father's old trousers last week."

Mrs. Weasley kept them all working very hard over the next few days. The drawing room took three days to decontaminate; finally the only undesirable things left in it were the tapestry of the Black family tree, which resisted all their attempts to remove it from the wall, and the rattling writing desk; Moody had not dropped by headquarters yet, so they could not be sure what was inside it.

They moved from the drawing room to a dining room on the ground floor where they found spiders large as saucers lurking in the dresser (Ron left the room hurriedly to make a cup of tea and did not return for an hour and a half). The china, which bore the Black crest and motto, was all thrown unceremoniously into a sack by Sirius, and the same fate met a set of old photographs in tarnished silver frames, all of whose occupants squealed shrilly as the glass covering them smashed.

Snape might refer to their work as "cleaning," but in Harry's opin-ion they were really waging war on the house, which was putting up a very good fight, aided and abetted by Kreacher. The house-elf kept appearing wherever they were congregated, his muttering becoming more and more offensive as he attempted to remove anything he could from the rubbish sacks. Sirius went as far as to threaten him with clothes, but Kreacher fixed him with a watery stare and said, "Master must do as Master wishes," before turning away and muttering very loudly, "but Master will not turn Kreacher away, no, because

Kreacher knows what they are up to, oh yes, he is plotting against the Dark Lord, yes, with these Mudbloods and traitors and scum. …”

At which Sirius, ignoring Hermione’s protests, seized Kreacher by the back of his loincloth and threw him bodily from the room.

The doorbell rang several times a day, which was the cue for Sirius’s mother to start shrieking again, and for Harry and the others to attempt to eavesdrop on the visitor, though they gleaned very little from the brief glimpses and snatches of conversation they were able to sneak before Mrs. Weasley recalled them to their tasks. Snape flitted in and out of the house several times more, though to Harry’s relief they never came face-to-face; he also caught sight of his Transfiguration teacher, Professor McGonagall, looking very odd in a Muggle dress and coat, though she also seemed too busy to linger.

Sometimes, however, the visitors stayed to help; Tonks joined them for a memorable afternoon in which they found a murderous old ghoul lurking in an upstairs toilet, and Lupin, who was staying in the house with Sirius but who left it for long periods to do mysterious work for the Order, helped them repair a grandfather clock that had developed the unpleasant habit of shooting heavy bolts at passersby. Mundungus redeemed himself slightly in Mrs. Weasley’s eyes by rescuing Ron from an ancient set of purple robes that had tried to strangle him when he removed them from their wardrobe.

Despite the fact that he was still sleeping badly, still having dreams about corridors and locked doors that made his scar prickle, Harry was managing to have fun for the first time all summer. As long as he was busy he was happy; when the action abated, however, whenever he dropped his guard, or lay exhausted in bed watching blurred shadows move across the ceiling, the thought of the looming Ministry hearing returned to him. Fear jabbed at his insides like needles as he wondered what was going to happen to him if he was expelled. The idea was so terrible that he did not dare voice it aloud, not even to Ron and Hermione, who, though he often saw them whispering to-

gether and casting anxious looks in his direction, followed his lead in not mentioning it. Sometimes he could not prevent his imagination showing him a faceless Ministry official who was snapping his wand in two and ordering him back to the Dursleys' … but he would not go. He was determined on that. He would come back here to Grim-mauld Place and live with Sirius.

He felt as though a brick had dropped into his stomach when Mrs. Weasley turned to him during dinner on Wednesday evening and said quietly, "I've ironed your best clothes for tomorrow morning, Harry, and I want you to wash your hair tonight too. A good first impression can work wonders."

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Ginny all stopped talking and looked over at him. Harry nodded and tried to keep eating his chops, but his mouth had become so dry he could not chew.

"How am I getting there?" he asked Mrs. Weasley, trying to sound unconcerned.

"Arthur's taking you to work with him," said Mrs. Weasley gently.

Mr. Weasley smiled encouragingly at Harry across the table.

"You can wait in my office until it's time for the hearing," he said.

Harry looked over at Sirius, but before he could ask the question, Mrs. Weasley had answered it.

"Professor Dumbledore doesn't think it's a good idea for Sirius to go with you, and I must say I —"

"— think he's quite right," said Sirius through clenched teeth.

Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips.

"When did Dumbledore tell you that?" Harry said, staring at Sirius.

“He came last night, when you were in bed,” said Mr. Weasley.

Sirius stabbed moodily at a potato with his fork. Harry dropped his own eyes to his plate. The thought that Dumbledore had been in the house on the eve of his hearing and not asked to see him made him feel, if that were possible, even worse.

Chapter 7 The Ministry of Magic

Harry awoke at half-past five the next morning as abruptly and completely as if somebody had yelled in his ear. For a few moments he lay immobile as the prospect of the hearing filled every tiny particle of his brain, then, unable to bear it, he leapt out of bed and put on his glasses. Mrs. Weasley had laid out his freshly laundered jeans and T-shirt at the foot of his bed. Harry scrambled into them. The blank picture on the wall sniggered again.

Ron was lying sprawled on his back with his mouth wide open, fast asleep. He did not stir as Harry crossed the room, stepped out onto the landing, and closed the door softly behind him. Trying not to think of the next time he would see Ron, when they might no longer be fellow students at Hogwarts, Harry walked quietly down the stairs, past the heads of Kreacher's ancestors, and into the kitchen.

He had expected it to be empty, but it was not. When he reached the door he heard the soft rumble of voices on the other side and when he pushed it open he saw Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Sirius, Lupin, and Tonks sitting there almost as though they were waiting for him. All were fully dressed except Mrs. Weasley, who was wearing a quilted, purple dressing gown. She leapt to her feet the moment he entered.

"Breakfast," she said as she pulled out her wand and hurried over to the fire.

"M-m-morning, Harry," yawned Tonks. Her hair was blonde and curly this morning. "Sleep all right?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"I've b-b-been up all night," she said, with another shuddering yawn. "Come and sit down. …"

She drew out a chair, knocking over the one beside it in the process.

“What do you want, Harry?” Mrs. Weasley called. “Porridge? Muffins? Kippers? Bacon and eggs? Toast?”

“Just — just toast, thanks,” said Harry.

Lupin glanced at Harry, then said to Tonks, “What were you saying about Scrimgeour?”

“Oh … yeah … well, we need to be a bit more careful, he’s been asking Kingsley and me funny questions. …”

Harry felt vaguely grateful that he was not required to join in the conversation. His insides were squirming. Mrs. Weasley placed a cou-ple of pieces of toast and marmalade in front of him; he tried to eat, but it was like chewing carpet. Mrs. Weasley sat down on his other side and started fussing with his T-shirt, tucking in the label and smoothing out creases across the shoulders. He wished she wouldn’t.

“… and I’ll have to tell Dumbledore I can’t do night duty tomor-row, I’m just t-t-too tired,” Tonks finished, yawning hugely again.

“I’ll cover for you,” said Mr. Weasley. “I’m okay, I’ve got a report to finish anyway. …”

Mr. Weasley was not wearing wizard’s robes but a pair of pin-striped trousers and an old bomber jacket. He turned from Tonks to Harry.

“How are you feeling?”

Harry shrugged.

“It’ll all be over soon,” Mr. Weasley said bracingly. “In a few hours’ time you’ll be cleared.”

Harry said nothing.

“The hearing’s on my floor, in Amelia Bones’s office. She’s Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and she’s the one who’ll be questioning you.”

“Amelia Bones is okay, Harry,” said Tonks earnestly. “She’s fair, she’ll hear you out.”

Harry nodded, still unable to think of anything to say.

“Don’t lose your temper,” said Sirius abruptly. “Be polite and stick to the facts.”

Harry nodded again.

“The law’s on your side,” said Lupin quietly. “Even underage wiz-ards are allowed to use magic in life-threatening situations.”

Something very cold trickled down the back of Harry’s neck; for a moment he thought someone was putting a Disillusionment Charm on him again, then he realized that Mrs. Weasley was attacking his hair with a wet comb. She pressed hard on the top of his head.

“Doesn’t it ever lie flat?” she said desperately.

Harry shook his head.

Mr. Weasley checked his watch and looked up at Harry.

“I think we’ll go now,” he said. “We’re a bit early, but I think you’ll be better off there than hanging around here.”

“Okay,” said Harry automatically, dropping his toast and getting to his feet.

“You’ll be all right, Harry,” said Tonks, patting him on the arm.

“Good luck,” said Lupin. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

“And if it’s not,” said Sirius grimly, “I’ll see to Amelia Bones for you. …”

Harry smiled weakly. Mrs. Weasley hugged him.

“We’ve all got our fingers crossed,” she said.

“Right,” said Harry. “Well … see you later then.”

He followed Mr. Weasley upstairs and along the hall. He could hear Sirius’s mother grunting in her sleep behind her curtains. Mr. Weasley unbolted the door and they stepped out into the cold, gray dawn.

“You don’t normally walk to work, do you?” Harry asked him, as they set off briskly around the square.

“No, I usually Apparate,” said Mr. Weasley, “but obviously you can’t, and I think it’s best we arrive in a thoroughly non-magical fashion … makes a better impression, given what you’re being disciplined for. …”

Mr. Weasley kept his hand inside his jacket as they walked. Harry knew it was clenched around his wand. The run-down streets were almost deserted, but when they arrived at the miserable little Underground station they found it already full of early morning commuters. As ever when he found himself in close proximity to Muggles going about their daily business, Mr. Weasley was hard put to contain his enthusiasm.

“Simply fabulous,” he whispered, indicating the automatic ticket machines. “Wonderfully ingenious.”

“They’re out of order,” said Harry, pointing at the sign.

“Yes, but even so …” said Mr. Weasley, beaming fondly at them.

They bought their tickets instead from a sleepy-looking guard (Harry handled the transaction, as Mr. Weasley was not very good with

Muggle money) and five minutes later they were boarding an Underground train that rattled them off toward the center of London. Mr. Weasley kept anxiously checking and rechecking the Underground map above the windows.

“Four stops, Harry … three stops left now … two stops to go, Harry …”

They got off at a station in the very heart of London, swept from the train in a tide of besuited men and women carrying briefcases. Up the escalator they went, through the ticket barrier (Mr. Weasley delighted with the way the stile swallowed his ticket), and emerged onto a broad street lined with imposing-looking buildings, already full of traffic.

“Where are we?” said Mr. Weasley blankly, and for one heart-stopping moment Harry thought they had gotten off at the wrong station despite Mr. Weasley’s continual references to the map; but a second later he said, “Ah yes … this way, Harry,” and led him down a side road.

“Sorry,” he said, “but I never come by train and it all looks rather different from a Muggle perspective. As a matter of fact I’ve never even used the visitor’s entrance before.”

The farther they walked, the smaller and less imposing the build-ings became, until finally they reached a street that contained several rather shabby-looking offices, a pub, and an overflowing dumpster. Harry had expected a rather more impressive location for the Ministry of Magic.

“Here we are,” said Mr. Weasley brightly, pointing at an old red telephone box, which was missing several panes of glass and stood be-fore a heavily graffittied wall. “After you, Harry.”

He opened the telephone box door.

Harry stepped inside, wondering what on earth this was about. Mr. Weasley folded himself in beside Harry and closed the door. It was a tight fit; Harry was jammed against the telephone apparatus, which was hanging crookedly from the wall as though a vandal had tried to rip it off. Mr. Weasley reached past Harry for the receiver.

“Mr. Weasley, I think this might be out of order too,” Harry said.

“No, no, I’m sure it’s fine,” said Mr. Weasley, holding the receiver above his head and peering at the dial. “Let’s see … six …” he dialed the number, “two … four … and another four … and another two …”

As the dial whirred smoothly back into place, a cool female voice sounded inside the telephone box, not from the receiver in Mr. Weasley’s hand, but as loudly and plainly as though an invisible woman were standing right beside them.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business.”

“Er …” said Mr. Weasley, clearly uncertain whether he should talk into the receiver or not; he compromised by holding the mouthpiece to his ear, “Arthur Weasley, Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, here to escort Harry Potter, who has been asked to attend a disciplinary hearing. …”

“Thank you,” said the cool female voice. “Visitor, please take the badge and attach it to the front of your robes.”

There was a click and a rattle, and Harry saw something slide out of the metal chute where returned coins usually appeared. He picked it up: It was a square silver badge with Harry Potter, Disciplinary Hearing on it. He pinned it to the front of his T-shirt as the female voice spoke again.

“Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is lo-

cated at the far end of the Atrium."

The floor of the telephone box shuddered. They were sinking slowly into the ground. Harry watched apprehensively as the pave-ment rose up past the glass windows of the telephone box until dark-ness closed over their heads. Then he could see nothing at all; he could only hear a dull grinding noise as the telephone box made its way down through the earth. After about a minute, though it felt much longer to Harry, a chink of golden light illuminated his feet and, widening, rose up his body, until it hit him in the face and he had to blink to stop his eyes from watering.

"The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day," said the woman's voice.

The door of the telephone box sprang open and Mr. Weasley stepped out of it, followed by Harry, whose mouth had fallen open.

They were standing at one end of a very long and splendid hall with a highly polished, dark wood floor. The peacock-blue ceiling was inlaid with gleaming golden symbols that were continually moving and changing like some enormous heavenly notice board. The walls on each side were paneled in shiny dark wood and had many gilded fireplaces set into them. Every few seconds a witch or wizard would emerge from one of the left-hand fireplaces with a soft whoosh; on the right-hand side, short queues of wizards were forming before each fireplace, waiting to depart.

Halfway down the hall was a fountain. A group of golden statues, larger than life-size, stood in the middle of a circular pool. Tallest of them all was a noble-looking wizard with his wand pointing straight up in the air. Grouped around him were a beautiful witch, a centaur, a goblin, and a house-elf. The last three were all looking adoringly up at the witch and wizard. Glittering jets of water were flying from the ends of the two wands, the point of the centaur's arrow, the tip of the goblin's hat, and each of the house-elf's ears, so that the tinkling hiss

of falling water was added to the pops and cracks of Apparators and the clatter of footsteps as hundreds of witches and wizards, most of whom were wearing glum, early-morning looks, strode toward a set of golden gates at the far end of the hall.

“This way,” said Mr. Weasley.

They joined the throng, wending their way between the Ministry workers, some of whom were carrying tottering piles of parchment, others battered briefcases, still others reading the Daily Prophet as they walked. As they passed the fountain Harry saw silver Sickles and bronze Knuts glinting up at him from the bottom of the pool. A small, smudged sign beside it read:All proceeds from the Fountain of Magical Brethren will be given toSt. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and InjuriesIf I’m not expelled from Hogwarts, I’ll put in ten Galleons, Harry found himself thinking desperately.

“Over here, Harry,” said Mr. Weasley, and they stepped out of the stream of Ministry employees heading for the golden gates, toward a desk on the left, over which hung a sign saying SECURITY. A badly shaven wizard in peacock-blue robes looked up as they approached and put down his Daily Prophet.

“I’m escorting a visitor,” said Mr. Weasley, gesturing toward Harry.

“Step over here,” said the wizard in a bored voice.

Harry walked closer to him and the wizard held up a long golden rod, thin and flexible as a car aerial, and passed it up and down Harry’s front and back.

“Wand,” grunted the security wizard at Harry, putting down the golden instrument and holding out his hand.

Harry produced his wand. The wizard dropped it onto a strange brass instrument, which looked something like a set of scales with only one dish. It began to vibrate. A narrow strip of parchment came speeding

out of a slit in the base. The wizard tore this off and read the writing upon it.

“Eleven inches, phoenix-feather core, been in use four years. That correct?”

“Yes,” said Harry nervously.

“I keep this,” said the wizard, impaling the slip of parchment on a small brass spike. “You get this back,” he added, thrusting the wand at Harry.

“Thank you.”

“Hang on. …” said the wizard slowly.

His eyes had darted from the silver visitor’s badge on Harry’s chest to his forehead.

“Thank you, Eric,” said Mr. Weasley firmly, and grasping Harry by the shoulder, he steered him away from the desk and back into the stream of wizards and witches walking through the golden gates.

Jostled slightly by the crowd, Harry followed Mr. Weasley through the gates into the smaller hall beyond, where at least twenty lifts stood behind wrought golden grilles. Harry and Mr. Weasley joined the crowd around one of them. A big, bearded wizard holding a large cardboard box stood nearby. The box was emitting rasping noises.

“All right, Arthur?” said the wizard, nodding at Mr. Weasley.

“What’ve you got there, Bob?” asked Mr. Weasley, looking at the box.

“We’re not sure,” said the wizard seriously. “We thought it was a bog-standard chicken until it started breathing fire. Looks like a seri-ous breach of the Ban on Experimental Breeding to me.”

With a great jangling and clattering a lift descended in front of them; the golden grille slid back and Harry and Mr. Weasley moved in-side it with the rest of the crowd. Harry found himself jammed against the back wall of the lift. Several witches and wizards were looking at him curiously; he stared at his feet to avoid catching anyone's eye, flattening his fringe as he did so. The grilles slid shut with a crash and the lift ascended slowly, chains rattling all the while, while the same cool female voice Harry had heard in the telephone box rang out again.

"Level seven, Department of Magical Games and Sports, incorporating the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters, Official Gobstones Club, and Ludicrous Patents Office."

The lift doors opened; Harry glimpsed an untidy-looking corridor, with various posters of Quidditch teams tacked lopsidedly on the walls; one of the wizards in the lift, who was carrying an armful of broomsticks, extricated himself with difficulty and disappeared down the corridor. The doors closed, the lift juddered upward again, and the woman's voice said, "Level six, Department of Magical Transport, incorporating the Floo Network Authority, Broom Regulatory Control, Portkey Office, and Apparation Test Center."

Once again the lift doors opened and four or five witches and wizards got out; at the same time, several paper airplanes swooped into the lift. Harry stared up at them as they flapped idly around above his head; they were a pale violet color and he could see MINISTRY OF MAGIC stamped along the edges of their wings.

"Just Interdepartmental memos," Mr. Weasley muttered to him. "We used to use owls, but the mess was unbelievable … droppings all over the desks …"

As they clattered upward again, the memos flapped around the swaying lamp in the lift's ceiling.

“Level five, Department of International Magical Cooperation, incorporating the International Magical Trading Standards Body, the International Magical Office of Law, and the International Confederation of Wizards, British Seats.”

When the doors opened, two of the memos zoomed out with a few more witches and wizards, but several more memos zoomed in, so that the light from the lamp in the ceiling flickered and flashed as they darted around it.

“Level four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being, and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office, and Pest Advisory Bureau.”

“ ’S’cuse,” said the wizard carrying the fire-breathing chicken and he left the lift pursued by a little flock of memos. The doors clanged shut yet again.

“Level three, Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, including the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, Obliviator Headquarters, and Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee.”

Everybody left the lift on this floor except Mr. Weasley, Harry, and a witch who was reading an extremely long piece of parchment that was trailing on the ground. The remaining memos continued to soar around the lamp as the lift juddered upward again, and then the doors opened and the voice said, “Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services.”

“This is us, Harry,” said Mr. Weasley, and they followed the witch out of the lift into a corridor lined with doors. “My office is on the other side of the floor.”

“Mr. Weasley,” said Harry, as they passed a window through which sunlight was streaming, “aren’t we underground?”

“Yes, we are,” said Mr. Weasley, “those are enchanted windows; Magical Maintenance decide what weather we’re getting every day. We had two months of hurricanes last time they were angling for a pay raise. … Just round here, Harry.”

They turned a corner, walked through a pair of heavy oak doors, and emerged in a cluttered, open area divided into cubicles, which were buzzing with talk and laughter. Memos were zooming in and out of cubicles like miniature rockets. A lopsided sign on the nearest cubicle read AUROR HEADQUARTERS.

Harry looked surreptitiously through the doorways as they passed. The Aurors had covered their cubicle walls with everything from pictures of wanted wizards and photographs of their families, to posters of their favorite Quidditch teams and articles from the Daily Prophet. A scarlet-robed man with a ponytail longer than Bill’s was sitting with his boots up on his desk, dictating a report to his quill. A little farther along, a witch with a patch over her eye was talking over the top of her cubicle wall to Kingsley Shacklebolt.

“Morning, Weasley,” said Kingsley carelessly, as they drew nearer. “I’ve been wanting a word with you, have you got a second?”

“Yes, if it really is a second,” said Mr. Weasley, “I’m in rather a hurry.”

They were talking to each other as though they hardly knew each other, and when Harry opened his mouth to say hello to Kingsley, Mr. Weasley stood on his foot. They followed Kingsley along the row and into the very last cubicle.

Harry received a slight shock; Sirius’s face was blinking down at him from every direction. Newspaper cuttings and old photographs — even the one of Sirius being best man at the Potters’ wedding — papered the walls. The only Sirius-free space was a map of the world in which little red pins were glowing like jewels.

“Here,” said Kingsley brusquely to Mr. Weasley, shoving a sheaf of parchment into his hand, “I need as much information as possible on flying Muggle vehicles sighted in the last twelve months. We’ve received information that Black might still be using his old motorcycle.”

Kingsley tipped Harry an enormous wink and added, in a whisper, “Give him the magazine, he might find it interesting.” Then he said in normal tones, “And don’t take too long, Weasley, the delay on that firelegs report held our investigation up for a month.”

“If you had read my report you would know that the term is ‘firearms,’ ” said Mr. Weasley coolly. “And I’m afraid you’ll have to wait for information on motorcycles, we’re extremely busy at the mo-ment.” He dropped his voice and said, “If you can get away before seven, Molly’s making meatballs.”

He beckoned to Harry and led him out of Kingsley’s cubicle, through a second set of oak doors, into another passage, turned left, marched along another corridor, turned right into a dimly lit and dis-tinctly shabby corridor, and finally reached a dead end, where a door on the left stood ajar, revealing a broom cupboard, and a door on the right bore a tarnished brass plaque reading MISUSE OF MUGGLE ARTIFACTS.

Mr. Weasley’s dingy office seemed to be slightly smaller than the broom cupboard. Two desks had been crammed inside it and there was barely room to move around them because of all the overflowing filing cabinets lining the walls, on top of which were tottering piles of files. The little wall space available bore witness to Mr. Weasley’s obsessions; there were several posters of cars, including one of a dismantled engine, two illustrations of postboxes he seemed to have cut out of Muggle children’s books, and a diagram showing how to wire a plug.

Sitting on top of Mr. Weasley’s overflowing in-tray was an old toaster that was hiccuping in a disconsolate way and a pair of empty leather

gloves that were twiddling their thumbs. A photograph of the Weasley family stood beside the in-tray. Harry noticed that Percy ap-peared to have walked out of it.

“We haven’t got a window,” said Mr. Weasley apologetically, taking off his bomber jacket and placing it on the back of his chair. “We’ve asked, but they don’t seem to think we need one. Have a seat, Harry, doesn’t look as if Perkins is in yet.”

Harry squeezed himself into the chair behind Perkins’s desk while Mr. Weasley rifled through the sheaf of parchment Kingsley Shackle-bolt had given him.

“Ah,” he said, grinning, as he extracted a copy of a magazine enti-tled The Quibbler from its midst, “yes …” He flicked through it. “Yes, he’s right, I’m sure Sirius will find that very amusing — oh dear, what’s this now?”

A memo had just zoomed in through the open door and fluttered to rest on top of the hiccuping toaster. Mr. Weasley unfolded it and read aloud, “ ‘Third regurgitating public toilet reported in Bethnal Green, kindly investigate immediately.’ This is getting ridiculous. …”

“A regurgitating toilet?”

“Anti-Muggle pranksters,” said Mr. Weasley, frowning. “We had two last week, one in Wimbledon, one in Elephant and Castle. Mug-gles are pulling the flush and instead of everything disappearing — well, you can imagine. The poor things keep calling in those — those pumbles, I think they’re called — you know, the ones who mend pipes and things —”

“Plumbers?”

“— exactly, yes, but of course they’re flummoxed. I only hope we can catch whoever’s doing it.”

“Will it be Aurors who catch them?”

“Oh no, this is too trivial for Aurors, it’ll be the ordinary Magical Law Enforcement Patrol — ah, Harry, this is Perkins.”

A stooped, timid-looking old wizard with fluffy white hair had just entered the room, panting.

“Oh Arthur!” he said desperately, without looking at Harry. “Thank goodness, I didn’t know what to do for the best, whether to wait here for you or not, I’ve just sent an owl to your home but you’ve obviously missed it — an urgent message came ten minutes ago —”

“I know about the regurgitating toilet,” said Mr. Weasley.

“No, no, it’s not the toilet, it’s the Potter boy’s hearing — they’ve changed the time and venue — it starts at eight o’clock now and it’s down in old Courtroom Ten —”

“Down in old — but they told me — Merlin’s beard —”

Mr. Weasley looked at his watch, let out a yelp, and leapt from his chair.

“Quick, Harry, we should have been there five minutes ago!”

Perkins flattened himself against the filing cabinets as Mr. Weasley left the office at a run, Harry on his heels.

“Why have they changed the time?” Harry said breathlessly as they hurtled past the Auror cubicles; people poked out their heads and stared as they streaked past. Harry felt as though he had left all his in-sides back at Perkins’s desk.

“I’ve no idea, but thank goodness we got here so early, if you’d missed it it would have been catastrophic!”

Mr. Weasley skidded to a halt beside the lifts and jabbed impa-tiently at the down button.

“Come ON!”

The lift clattered into view and they hurried inside. Every time it stopped Mr. Weasley cursed furiously and pummelled the number nine button.

“Those courtrooms haven’t been used in years,” said Mr. Weasley angrily. “I can’t think why they’re doing it down there — unless — but no …”

A plump witch carrying a smoking goblet entered the lift at that moment, and Mr. Weasley did not elaborate.

“The Atrium,” said the cool female voice and the golden grilles slid open, showing Harry a distant glimpse of the golden statues in the fountain. The plump witch got out and a sallow-skinned wizard with a very mournful face got in.

“Morning, Arthur,” he said in a sepulchral voice as the lift began to descend. “Don’t often see you down here. …”

“Urgent business, Bode,” said Mr. Weasley, who was bouncing on the balls of his feet and throwing anxious looks over at Harry.

“Ah, yes,” said Bode, surveying Harry unblinkingly. “Of course.”

Harry barely had emotion to spare for Bode, but his unfaltering gaze did not make him feel any more comfortable.

“Department of Mysteries,” said the cool female voice, and left it at that.

“Quick, Harry,” said Mr. Weasley as the lift doors rattled open, and they sped up a corridor that was quite different from those above. The

walls were bare; there were no windows and no doors apart from a plain black one set at the very end of the corridor. Harry expected them to go through it, but instead Mr. Weasley seized him by the arm and dragged him to the left, where there was an opening leading to a flight of steps.

“Down here, down here,” panted Mr. Weasley, taking two steps at a time. “The lift doesn’t even come down this far … why they’re do-ing it there …”

They reached the bottom of the steps and ran along yet another corridor, which bore a great resemblance to that which led to Snape’s dungeon at Hogwarts, with rough stone walls and torches in brackets. The doors they passed here were heavy wooden ones with iron bolts and keyholes.

“Courtroom … ten … I think … we’re nearly … yes.”

Mr. Weasley stumbled to a halt outside a grimy dark door with an immense iron lock and slumped against the wall, clutching at a stitch in his chest.

“Go on,” he panted, pointing his thumb at the door. “Get in there.”

“Aren’t — aren’t you coming with — ?”

“No, no, I’m not allowed. Good luck!”

Harry’s heart was beating a violent tattoo against his Adam’s apple. He swallowed hard, turned the heavy iron door handle, and stepped inside the courtroom.

Chapter 8 The Hearing

Harry gasped; he could not help himself. The large dungeon he had entered was horribly familiar. He had not only seen it before, he had been here before: This was the place he had visited in-side Dumbledore's Pensieve, the place where he had watched the Lestranges sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban.

The walls were made of dark stone, dimly lit by torches. Empty benches rose on either side of him, but ahead, in the highest benches of all, were many shadowy figures. They had been talking in low voices, but as the heavy door swung closed behind Harry an ominous silence fell.

A cold male voice rang across the courtroom.

"You're late."

"Sorry," said Harry nervously. "I-I didn't know the time had changed."

"That is not the Wizengamot's fault," said the voice. "An owl was sent to you this morning. Take your seat."

Harry dropped his gaze to the chair in the center of the room, the arms of which were covered in chains. He had seen those chains spring to life and bind whoever sat between them. His footsteps echoed loudly as he walked across the stone floor. When he sat gingerly on the edge of the chair the chains clinked rather threateningly but did not bind him. Feeling rather sick he looked up at the people seated at the bench above.

There were about fifty of them, all, as far as he could see, wearing plum-colored robes with an elaborately worked silver W on the left-hand side of the chest and all staring down their noses at him, some with very austere expressions, others looks of frank curiosity.

In the very middle of the front row sat Cornelius Fudge, the Min-ister of Magic. Fudge was a portly man who often sported a lime-green bowler hat, though today he had dispensed with it; he had dispensed too with the indulgent smile he had once worn when he spoke to Harry. A broad, square-jawed witch with very short gray hair sat on Fudge's left; she wore a monocle and looked forbidding. On Fudge's right was another witch, but she was sitting so far back on the bench that her face was in shadow.

"Very well," said Fudge. "The accused being present — finally — let us begin. Are you ready?" he called down the row.

"Yes, sir," said an eager voice Harry knew. Ron's brother Percy was sitting at the very end of the front bench. Harry looked at Percy, ex-pecting some sign of recognition from him, but none came. Percy's eyes, behind his horn-rimmed glasses, were fixed on his parchment, a quill poised in his hand.

"Disciplinary hearing of the twelfth of August," said Fudge in a ringing voice, and Percy began taking notes at once, "into offenses committed under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Un-derage Sorcery and the International Statute of Secrecy by Harry James Potter, resident at number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey.

"Interrogators: Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister of Magic; Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law En-forcement; Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Court Scribe, Percy Ignatius Weasley —"

"— Witness for the defense, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumble-dore," said a quiet voice from behind Harry, who turned his head so fast he cricked his neck.

Dumbledore was striding serenely across the room wearing long midnight-blue robes and a perfectly calm expression. His long silver beard and hair gleamed in the torchlight as he drew level with Harry

and looked up at Fudge through the half-moon spectacles that rested halfway down his very crooked nose.

The members of the Wizengamot were muttering. All eyes were now on Dumbledore. Some looked annoyed, others slightly fright-ened; two elderly witches in the back row, however, raised their hands and waved in welcome.

A powerful emotion had risen in Harry's chest at the sight of Dumbledore, a fortified, hopeful feeling rather like that which phoenix song gave him. He wanted to catch Dumbledore's eye, but Dumble-dore was not looking his way; he was continuing to look up at the obviously flustered Fudge.

"Ah," said Fudge, who looked thoroughly disconcerted. "Dumbledore. Yes. You — er — got our — er — message that the time and — er — place of the hearing had been changed, then?"

"I must have missed it," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "However, due to a lucky mistake I arrived at the Ministry three hours early, so no harm done."

"Yes — well — I suppose we'll need another chair — I — Weasley, could you — ?"

"Not to worry, not to worry," said Dumbledore pleasantly; he took out his wand, gave it a little flick, and a squashy chintz armchair appeared out of nowhere next to Harry. Dumbledore sat down, put the tips of his long fingers together, and looked at Fudge over them with an expression of polite interest. The Wizengamot was still muttering and fidgeting restlessly; only when Fudge spoke again did they settle down.

"Yes," said Fudge again, shuffling his notes. "Well, then. So. The charges. Yes."

He extricated a piece of parchment from the pile before him, took a deep breath, and read, "The charges against the accused are as follows: That he did knowingly, deliberately, and in full awareness of the illegality of his actions, having received a previous written warning from the Ministry of Magic on a similar charge, produce a Patronus Charm in a Muggle-inhabited area, in the presence of a Muggle, on August the second at twenty-three minutes past nine, which constitutes an offense under paragraph C of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, and also under section thirteen of the International Confederation of Wizards' Statute of Secrecy.

"You are Harry James Potter, of number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey?" Fudge said, glaring at Harry over the top of his parchment.

"Yes," Harry said.

"You received an official warning from the Ministry for using ille-gal magic three years ago, did you not?"

"Yes, but —"

"And yet you conjured a Patronus on the night of the second of August?" said Fudge.

"Yes," said Harry, "but —"

"Knowing that you are not permitted to use magic outside school while you are under the age of seventeen?"

"Yes, but —"

"Knowing that you were in an area full of Muggles?"

"Yes, but —"

“Fully aware that you were in close proximity to a Muggle at the time?

“Yes,” said Harry angrily, “but I only used it because we were —”

The witch with the monocle on Fudge’s left cut across him in a booming voice.

“You produced a fully fledged Patronus?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “because —”

“A corporeal Patronus?”

“A — what?” said Harry.

“Your Patronus had a clearly defined form? I mean to say, it was more than vapor or smoke?”

“Yes,” said Harry, feeling both impatient and slightly desperate, “it’s a stag, it’s always a stag.”

“Always?” boomed Madam Bones. “You have produced a Patronus before now?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “I’ve been doing it for over a year —”

“And you are fifteen years old?”

“Yes, and —”

“You learned this at school?”

“Yes, Professor Lupin taught me in my third year, because of the —”

“Impressive,” said Madam Bones, staring down at him, “a true Patronus at that age … very impressive indeed.”

Some of the wizards and witches around her were muttering again; a few nodded, but others were frowning and shaking their heads.

"It's not a question of how impressive the magic was," said Fudge in a testy voice. "In fact, the more impressive the worse it is, I would have thought, given that the boy did it in plain view of a Muggle!"

Those who had been frowning now murmured in agreement, but it was the sight of Percy's sanctimonious little nod that goaded Harry into speech.

"I did it because of the dementors!" he said loudly, before anyone could interrupt him again.

He had expected more muttering, but the silence that fell seemed to be somehow denser than before.

"Dementors?" said Madam Bones after a moment, raising her thick eyebrows so that her monocle looked in danger of falling out. "What do you mean, boy?"

"I mean there were two dementors down that alleyway and they went for me and my cousin!"

"Ah," said Fudge again, smirking unpleasantly as he looked around at the Wizengamot, as though inviting them to share the joke. "Yes. Yes, I thought we'd be hearing something like this."

"Dementors in Little Whinging?" Madam Bones said in tones of great surprise. "I don't understand —"

"Don't you, Amelia?" said Fudge, still smirking. "Let me explain. He's been thinking it through and decided dementors would make a very nice little cover story, very nice indeed. Muggles can't see dementors, can they, boy? Highly convenient, highly convenient … so it's just your word and no witnesses. …"

“I’m not lying!” said Harry loudly, over another outbreak of mut-tering from the court. “There were two of them, coming from oppo-site ends of the alley, everything went dark and cold and my cousin felt them and ran for it —”

“Enough, enough!” said Fudge with a very supercilious look on his face. “I’m sorry to interrupt what I’m sure would have been a very well-rehearsed story —”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. The Wizengamot fell silent again.

“We do, in fact, have a witness to the presence of dementors in that alleyway,” he said, “other than Dudley Dursley, I mean.”

Fudge’s plump face seemed to slacken, as though somebody had let air out of it. He stared down at Dumbledore for a moment or two, then, with the appearance of a man pulling himself back together, said, “We haven’t got time to listen to more taradiddles, I’m afraid, Dumbledore. I want this dealt with quickly —”

“I may be wrong,” said Dumbledore pleasantly, “but I am sure that under the Wizengamot Charter of Rights, the accused has the right to present witnesses for his or her case? Isn’t that the policy of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Madam Bones?” he continued, addressing the witch in the monocle.

“True,” said Madam Bones. “Perfectly true.”

“Oh, very well, very well,” snapped Fudge. “Where is this person?”

“I brought her with me,” said Dumbledore. “She’s just outside the door. Should I — ?”

“No — Weasley, you go,” Fudge barked at Percy, who got up at once, hurried down the stone steps from the judge’s balcony, and hastened past Dumbledore and Harry without glancing at them.

A moment later, Percy returned, followed by Mrs. Figg. She looked scared and more batty than ever. Harry wished she had thought to change out of her carpet slippers.

Dumbledore stood up and gave Mrs. Figg his chair, conjuring a second one for himself.

"Full name?" said Fudge loudly, when Mrs. Figg had perched her-self nervously on the very edge of her seat.

"Arabella Doreen Figg," said Mrs. Figg in her quavery voice.

"And who exactly are you?" said Fudge, in a bored and lofty voice.

"I'm a resident of Little Whinging, close to where Harry Potter lives," said Mrs. Figg.

"We have no record of any witch or wizard living in Little Whing-ing other than Harry Potter," said Madam Bones at once. "That situ-ation has always been closely monitored, given … given past events."

"I'm a Squib," said Mrs. Figg. "So you wouldn't have me registered, would you?"

"A Squib, eh?" said Fudge, eyeing her suspiciously. "We'll be check-ing that. You'll leave details of your parentage with my assistant, Weasley. Incidentally, can Squibs see dementors?" he added, looking left and right along the bench where he sat.

"Yes, we can!" said Mrs. Figg indignantly.

Fudge looked back down at her, his eyebrows raised. "Very well," he said coolly. "What is your story?"

"I had gone out to buy cat food from the corner shop at the end of Wisteria Walk, shortly after nine on the evening of the second of August," gabbled Mrs. Figg at once, as though she had learned what

she was saying by heart, “when I heard a disturbance down the alleyway between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk. On approaching the mouth of the alleyway I saw dementors running —”

“Running?” said Madam Bones sharply. “Dementors don’t run, they glide.”

“That’s what I meant to say,” said Mrs. Figg quickly, patches of pink appearing in her withered cheeks. “Gliding along the alley to-ward what looked like two boys.”

“What did they look like?” said Madam Bones, narrowing her eyes so that the monocle’s edges disappeared into her flesh.

“Well, one was very large and the other one rather skinny —”

“No, no,” said Madam Bones impatiently, “the dementors … de-scribe them.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Figg, the pink flush creeping up her neck now. “They were big. Big and wearing cloaks.”

Harry felt a horrible sinking in the pit of his stomach. Whatever Mrs. Figg said to the contrary, it sounded to him as though the most she had ever seen was a picture of a dementor, and a picture could never convey the truth of what these beings were like: the eerie way they moved, hovering inches over the ground, or the rotting smell of them, or that terrible, rattling noise they made as they sucked on the surrounding air … A dumpy wizard with a large black mustache in the second row leaned close to his neighbor, a frizzy-haired witch, and whispered something in her ear. She smirked and nodded.

“Big and wearing cloaks,” repeated Madam Bones coolly, while Fudge snorted derisively. “I see. Anything else?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Figg. “I felt them. Everything went cold, and this was a very warm summer’s night, mark you. And I felt … as though all

happiness had gone from the world … and I remembered … dreadful things. …"

Her voice shook and died.

Madam Bones' eyes widened slightly. Harry could see red marks under her eyebrow where the monocle had dug into it.

"What did the dementors do?" she asked, and Harry felt a rush of hope.

"They went for the boys," said Mrs. Figg, her voice stronger and more confident now, the pink flush ebbing away from her face. "One of them had fallen. The other was backing away, trying to repel the dementor. That was Harry. He tried twice and produced silver vapor. On the third attempt, he produced a Patronus, which charged down the first dementor and then, with his encouragement, chased away the second from his cousin. And that … that was what happened," Mrs. Figg finished, somewhat lamely.

Madam Bones looked down at Mrs. Figg in silence; Fudge was not looking at her at all, but fidgeting with his papers. Finally he raised his eyes and said, rather aggressively "That's what you saw, is it?"

"That was what happened," Mrs. Figg repeated.

"Very well," said Fudge. "You may go."

Mrs. Figg cast a frightened look from Fudge to Dumbledore, then got up and shuffled off toward the door again. Harry heard it thud shut behind her.

"Not a very convincing witness," said Fudge loftily.

"Oh, I don't know," said Madam Bones in her booming voice. "She certainly described the effects of a dementor attack very accurately.

And I can't imagine why she would say they were there if they weren't —"

"But dementors wandering into a Muggle suburb and just happening to come across a wizard?" snorted Fudge. "The odds on that must be very, very long, even Bagman wouldn't have bet —"

"Oh, I don't think any of us believe the dementors were there by coincidence," said Dumbledore lightly.

The witch sitting to the right of Fudge with her face in shadow moved slightly, but everyone else was quite still and silent.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" asked Fudge icily.

"It means that I think they were ordered there," said Dumbledore.

"I think we might have a record of it if someone had ordered a pair of dementors to go strolling through Little Whinging!" barked Fudge.

"Not if the dementors are taking orders from someone other than the Ministry of Magic these days," said Dumbledore calmly. "I have already given you my views on this matter, Cornelius."

"Yes, you have," said Fudge forcefully, "and I have no reason to believe that your views are anything other than bilge, Dumbledore. The dementors remain in place in Azkaban and are doing everything we ask them to."

"Then," said Dumbledore, quietly but clearly, "we must ask our-selves why somebody within the Ministry ordered a pair of dementors into that alleyway on the second of August."

In the complete silence that greeted these words, the witch to the right of Fudge leaned forward so that Harry saw her for the first time.

He thought she looked just like a large, pale toad. She was rather squat with a broad, flabby face, as little neck as Uncle Vernon, and a very wide, slack mouth. Her eyes were large, round, and slightly bulging. Even the little black velvet bow perched on top of her short curly hair put him in mind of a large fly she was about to catch on a long sticky tongue.

"The Chair recognizes Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister," said Fudge.

The witch spoke in a fluttery, girlish, high-pitched voice that took Harry aback; he had been expecting a croak.

"I'm sure I must have misunderstood you, Professor Dumbledore," she said with a simper that left her big, round eyes as cold as ever. "So silly of me. But it sounded for a teensy moment as though you were sug-gesting that the Ministry of Magic had ordered an attack on this boy!"

She gave a silvery laugh that made the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stand up. A few other members of the Wizengamot laughed with her. It could not have been plainer that not one of them was really amused.

"If it is true that the dementors are taking orders only from the Ministry of Magic, and it is also true that two dementors attacked Harry and his cousin a week ago, then it follows logically that somebody at the Ministry might have ordered the attacks," said Dumbledore politely. "Of course, these particular dementors may have been outside Ministry control —"

"There are no dementors outside Ministry control!" snapped Fudge, who had turned brick red.

Dumbledore inclined his head in a little bow.

"Then undoubtedly the Ministry will be making a full inquiry into why two dementors were so very far from Azkaban and why they attacked without authorization."

"It is not for you to decide what the Ministry of Magic does or does not do, Dumbledore!" snapped Fudge, now a shade of magenta of which Uncle Vernon would have been proud.

"Of course it isn't," said Dumbledore mildly. "I was merely ex-pressing my confidence that this matter will not go uninvestigated."

He glanced at Madam Bones, who readjusted her monocle and stared back at him, frowning slightly.

"I would remind everybody that the behavior of these dementors, if indeed they are not figments of this boy's imagination, is not the subject of this hearing!" said Fudge. "We are here to examine Harry Potter's offenses under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery!"

"Of course we are," said Dumbledore, "but the presence of dementors in that alleyway is highly relevant. Clause seven of the Decree states that magic may be used before Muggles in exceptional circumstances, and as those exceptional circumstances include situations that threaten the life of the wizard or witch himself, or witches, wizards, or Muggles present at the time of the —"

"We are familiar with clause seven, thank you very much!" snarled Fudge.

"Of course you are," said Dumbledore courteously. "Then we are in agreement that Harry's use of the Patronus Charm in these circumstances falls precisely into the category of exceptional circumstances it describes?"

"If there were dementors, which I doubt —"

“You have heard from an eyewitness,” Dumbledore interrupted. “If you still doubt her truthfulness, call her back, question her again. I am sure she would not object.”

“I — that — not —” blustered Fudge, fiddling with the papers be-fore him. “It’s — I want this over with today, Dumbledore!”

“But naturally, you would not care how many times you heard from a witness, if the alternative was a serious miscarriage of justice,” said Dumbledore.

“Serious miscarriage, my hat!” said Fudge at the top of his voice. “Have you ever bothered to tot up the number of cock-and-bull stories this boy has come out with, Dumbledore, while trying to cover up his flagrant misuse of magic out of school? I suppose you’ve forgotten the Hover Charm he used three years ago —”

“That wasn’t me, it was a house-elf!” said Harry.

“YOU SEE?” roared Fudge, gesturing flamboyantly in Harry’s direction. “A house-elf! In a Muggle house! I ask you —”

“The house-elf in question is currently in the employ of Hogwarts School,” said Dumbledore. “I can summon him here in an instant to give evidence if you wish.”

“I — not — I haven’t got time to listen to house-elves! Anyway, that’s not the only — he blew up his aunt, for God’s sake!” Fudge shouted, banging his fist on the judge’s bench and upsetting a bottle of ink.

“And you very kindly did not press charges on that occasion, accepting, I presume, that even the best wizards cannot always control their emotions,” said Dumbledore calmly, as Fudge attempted to scrub the ink off his notes.

“And I haven’t even started on what he gets up to at school —”

"— but as the Ministry has no authority to punish Hogwarts students for misdemeanors at school, Harry's behavior there is not rel-evant to this inquiry," said Dumbledore, politely as ever, but now with a suggestion of coolness behind his words.

"Oho!" said Fudge. "Not our business what he does at school, eh? You think so?"

"The Ministry does not have the power to expel Hogwarts stu-dents, Cornelius, as I reminded you on the night of the second of August," said Dumbledore. "Nor does it have the right to confiscate wands until charges have been successfully proven, again, as I re-minded you on the night of the second of August. In your admirable haste to ensure that the law is upheld, you appear, inadvertently I am sure, to have overlooked a few laws yourself."

"Laws can be changed," said Fudge savagely.

"Of course they can," said Dumbledore, inclining his head. "And you certainly seem to be making many changes, Cornelius. Why, in the few short weeks since I was asked to leave the Wizengamot, it has already become the practice to hold a full criminal trial to deal with a simple matter of underage magic!"

A few of the wizards above them shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Fudge turned a slightly deeper shade of puce. The toadlike witch on his right, however, merely gazed at Dumbledore, her face quite expressionless.

"As far as I am aware, however," Dumbledore continued, "there is no law yet in place that says this court's job is to punish Harry for every bit of magic he has ever performed. He has been charged with a specific offense and he has presented his defense. All he and I can do now is to await your verdict."

Dumbledore put his fingertips together again and said no more. Fudge glared at him, evidently incensed. Harry glanced sideways at

Dumbledore, seeking reassurance; he was not at all sure that Dumble-dore was right in telling the Wizengamot, in effect, that it was about time they made a decision. Again, however, Dumbledore seemed oblivious to Harry's attempt to catch his eye. He continued to look up at the benches where the entire Wizengamot had fallen into urgent, whispered conversations.

Harry looked at his feet. His heart, which seemed to have swollen to an unnatural size, was thumping loudly under his ribs. He had ex-pected the hearing to last longer than this. He was not at all sure that he had made a good impression. He had not really said very much. He ought to have explained more fully about the dementors, about how he had fallen over, about how both he and Dudley had nearly been kissed. …Twice he looked up at Fudge and opened his mouth to speak, but his swollen heart was now constricting his air passages and both times he merely took a deep breath and looked back at his shoes.

Then the whispering stopped. Harry wanted to look up at the judges, but found that it was really much, much easier to keep exam-ining his laces.

"Those in favor of clearing the accused of all charges?" said Madam Bones's booming voice.

Harry's head jerked upward. There were hands in the air, many of them … more than half! Breathing very fast, he tried to count, but before he could finish Madam Bones had said, "And those in favor of conviction?"

Fudge raised his hand; so did half a dozen others, including the witch on his right and the heavily mustached wizard and the frizzy-haired witch in the second row.

Fudge glanced around at them all, looking as though there was something large stuck in his throat, then lowered his own hand. He

took two deep breaths and then said, in a voice distorted by suppressed rage, “Very well, very well … cleared of all charges.”

“Excellent,” said Dumbledore briskly, springing to his feet, pulling out his wand, and causing the two chintz armchairs to vanish. “Well, I must be getting along. Good day to you all.”

And without looking once at Harry, he swept from the dungeon.

Chapter 9 The Woes of Mrs. Weasley

Dumbledore's abrupt departure took Harry completely by sur-prise. He remained sitting where he was in the chained chair, struggling with his feelings of shock and relief. The Wizengamot were all getting to their feet, talking, and gathering up their papers and packing them away. Harry stood up. Nobody seemed to be paying him the slightest bit of attention except the toadlike witch on Fudge's right, who was now gazing down at him instead of at Dumbledore. Ig-noring her, he tried to catch Fudge's eye, or Madam Bones's, wanting to ask whether he was free to go, but Fudge seemed quite determined not to notice Harry, and Madam Bones was busy with her briefcase, so he took a few tentative steps toward the exit and when nobody called him back, broke into a very fast walk.

He took the last few steps at a run, wrenched open the door, and al-most collided with Mr. Weasley, who was standing right outside, looking pale and apprehensive.

"Dumbledore didn't say —"

"Cleared," Harry said, pulling the door closed behind him, "of all charges!"

Beaming, Mr. Weasley seized Harry by the shoulders.

"Harry, that's wonderful! Well, of course, they couldn't have found you guilty, not on the evidence, but even so, I can't pretend I wasn't —"

But Mr. Weasley broke off, because the courtroom door had just opened again. The Wizengamot were filing out.

"Merlin's beard," said Mr. Weasley wonderingly, pulling Harry aside to let them all pass, "you were tried by the full court?"

"I think so," said Harry quietly.

One or two of the passing wizards nodded to Harry as they passed and a few, including Madam Bones, said, “Morning, Arthur,” to Mr. Weasley, but most averted their eyes. Cornelius Fudge and the toad-like witch were almost the last to leave the dungeon. Fudge acted as though Mr. Weasley and Harry were part of the wall, but again, the witch looked almost appraisingly at Harry as she passed. Last of all to pass was Percy. Like Fudge, he completely ignored his father and Harry; he marched past clutching a large roll of parchment and a handful of spare quills, his back rigid and his nose in the air. The lines around Mr. Weasley’s mouth tightened slightly, but other than this he gave no sign that he had noticed his third son.

“I’m going to take you straight back so you can tell the others the good news,” he said, beckoning Harry forward as Percy’s heels disap-peared up the stairs to the ninth level. I’ll drop you off on the way to that toilet in Bethnal Green. Come on. …”

“So what will you have to do about the toilet?” Harry asked, grin-ning. Everything suddenly seemed five times funnier than usual. It was starting to sink in: He was cleared, he was going back to Hogwarts.

“Oh, it’s a simple enough anti-jinx,” said Mr. Weasley as they mounted the stairs, “but it’s not so much having to repair the damage, it’s more the attitude behind the vandalism, Harry. Muggle-baiting might strike some wizards as funny, but it’s an expression of some-thing much deeper and nastier, and I for one —”

Mr. Weasley broke off in mid-sentence. They had just reached the ninth-level corridor, and Cornelius Fudge was standing a few feet away from them, talking quietly to a tall man with sleek blond hair and a pointed, pale face.

The second man turned at the sound of their footsteps. He too broke off in mid-conversation, his cold gray eyes narrowed and fixed upon Harry’s face.

“Well, well, well … Patronus Potter,” said Lucius Malfoy coolly.

Harry felt winded, as though he had just walked into something heavy. He had last seen those cool gray eyes through slits in a Death Eater's hood, and last heard that man's voice jeering in a dark graveyard while Lord Voldemort tortured him. He could not believe that Lucius Malfoy dared look him in the face; he could not believe that he was here, in the Ministry of Magic, or that Cornelius Fudge was talking to him, when Harry had told Fudge mere weeks ago that Malfoy was a Death Eater.

"The Minister was just telling me about your lucky escape, Potter," drawled Mr. Malfoy. "Quite astonishing, the way you continue to wriggle out of very tight holes. … Snakelike, in fact …"

Mr. Weasley gripped Harry's shoulder in warning.

"Yeah," said Harry, "yeah, I'm good at escaping. …"

Lucius Malfoy raised his eyes to Mr. Weasley's face.

"And Arthur Weasley too! What are you doing here, Arthur?"

"I work here," said Mr. Weasley shortly.

"Not here, surely?" said Mr. Malfoy, raising his eyebrows and glancing toward the door over Mr. Weasley's shoulder. "I thought you were up on the second floor. … Don't you do something that involves sneaking Muggle artifacts home and bewitching them?"

"No," said Mr. Weasley curtly, his fingers now biting into Harry's shoulder.

"What are you doing here anyway?" Harry asked Lucius Malfoy.

"I don't think private matters between myself and the Minister are any concern of yours, Potter," said Malfoy, smoothing the front of his robes; Harry distinctly heard the gentle clinking of what sounded like a full pocket of gold. "Really, just because you are Dumbledore's fa-

vorite boy, you must not expect the same indulgence from the rest of us. … Shall we go up to your office, then, Minister?"

"Certainly," said Fudge, turning his back on Harry and Mr. Weasley. "This way, Lucius."

They strode off together, talking in low voices. Mr. Weasley did not let go of Harry's shoulder until they had disappeared into the lift.

"Why wasn't he waiting outside Fudge's office if they've got busi-ness to do together?" Harry burst out furiously. "What was he doing down here?"

"Trying to sneak down to the courtroom, if you ask me," said Mr. Weasley, looking extremely agitated as he glanced over his shoulder as though making sure they could not be overheard. "Trying to find out whether you'd been expelled or not. I'll leave a note for Dumbledore when I drop you off, he ought to know Malfoy's been talking to Fudge again."

"What private business have they got together anyway?"

"Gold, I expect," said Mr. Weasley angrily. "Malfoy's been giving generously to all sorts of things for years. … Gets him in with the right people … then he can ask favors … delay laws he doesn't want passed … Oh, he's very well connected, Lucius Malfoy. …"

The lift arrived; it was empty except for a flock of memos that flapped around Mr. Weasley's head as he pressed the button for the Atrium and the doors clanged shut; he waved them away irritably.

"Mr. Weasley," said Harry slowly, "if Fudge is meeting Death Eaters like Malfoy, if he's seeing them alone, how do we know they haven't put the Imperius Curse on him?"

"Don't think it hadn't occurred to us, Harry," muttered Mr. Weasley. "But Dumbledore thinks Fudge is acting of his own accord at the

moment — which, as Dumbledore says, is not a lot of comfort. … Best not talk about it anymore just now, Harry. …"

The doors slid open and they stepped out into the now almost-deserted Atrium. Eric the security man was hidden behind his Daily Prophet again. They had walked straight past the golden fountain before Harry remembered.

"Wait. …" he told Mr. Weasley, and pulling his money bag from his pocket, he turned back to the fountain.

He looked up into the handsome wizard's face, but up close, Harry thought he looked rather weak and foolish. The witch was wearing a vapid smile like a beauty contestant, and from what Harry knew of goblins and centaurs, they were most unlikely to be caught staring this soppily at humans of any description. Only the house-elf's attitude of creeping servility looked convincing. With a grin at the thought of what Hermione would say if she could see the statue of the elf, Harry turned his money bag upside down and emptied not just ten Galleons, but the whole contents into the pool at the statues' feet.

"I knew it!" yelled Ron, punching the air. "You always get away with stuff!"

"They were bound to clear you," said Hermione, who had looked positively faint with anxiety when Harry had entered the kitchen and was now holding a shaking hand over her eyes. "There was no case against you, none at all. …"

"Everyone seems quite relieved, though, considering they all knew I'd get off," said Harry, smiling.

Mrs. Weasley was wiping her face on her apron, and Fred, George, and Ginny were doing a kind of war dance to a chant that went "He got off, he got off, he got off —"

“That’s enough, settle down!” shouted Mr. Weasley, though he too was smiling. “Listen, Sirius, Lucius Malfoy was at the Ministry —”

“What?” said Sirius sharply.

“He got off, he got off, he got off —”

“Be quiet, you three! Yes, we saw him talking to Fudge on level nine, then they went up to Fudge’s office together. Dumbledore ought to know.”

“Absolutely,” said Sirius. “We’ll tell him, don’t worry.”

“Well, I’d better get going, there’s a vomiting toilet in Bethnal Green waiting for me. Molly, I’ll be late, I’m covering for Tonks, but Kingsley might be dropping in for dinner —”

“He got off, he got off, he got off —”

“That’s enough — Fred — George — Ginny!” said Mrs. Weasley, as Mr. Weasley left the kitchen. “Harry dear, come and sit down, have some lunch, you hardly ate breakfast. …”

Ron and Hermione sat themselves down opposite him looking happier than they had done since he had first arrived at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and Harry’s feeling of giddy relief, which had been somewhat dented by his encounter with Lucius Malfoy, swelled again. The gloomy house seemed warmer and more welcoming all of a sudden; even Kreacher looked less ugly as he poked his snoutlike nose into the kitchen to investigate the source of all the noise.

“ ’Course, once Dumbledore turned up on your side, there was no way they were going to convict you,” said Ron happily, now dishing great mounds of mashed potatoes onto everyone’s plates.

“Yeah, he swung it for me,” said Harry. He felt that it would sound highly ungrateful, not to mention childish, to say, “I wish he’d talked to me, though. Or even looked at me.”

And as he thought this, the scar on his forehead burned so badly that he clapped his hand to it.

“What’s up?” said Hermione, looking alarmed.

“Scar,” Harry mumbled. “But it’s nothing. … It happens all the time now. …”

None of the others had noticed a thing; all of them were now help-ing themselves to food while gloating over Harry’s narrow escape; Fred, George, and Ginny were still singing. Hermione looked rather anxious, but before she could say anything, Ron said happily, “I bet Dumbledore turns up this evening to celebrate with us, you know.”

“I don’t think he’ll be able to, Ron,” said Mrs. Weasley, setting a huge plate of roast chicken down in front of Harry. “He’s really very busy at the moment.”

“HE GOT OFF, HE GOT OFF, HE GOT OFF —”

“SHUT UP!” roared Mrs. Weasley.

Over the next few days Harry could not help noticing that there was one person within number twelve, Grimmauld Place, who did not seem wholly overjoyed that he would be returning to Hogwarts. Sir-ius had put up a very good show of happiness on first hearing the news, wringing Harry’s hand and beaming just like the rest of them; soon, however, he was moodier and surlier than before, talking less to everybody, even Harry, and spending increasing amounts of time shut up in his mother’s room with Buckbeak.

“Don’t you go feeling guilty!” said Hermione sternly, after Harry had confided some of his feelings to her and Ron while they scrubbed out

a moldy cupboard on the third floor a few days later. "You belong at Hogwarts and Sirius knows it. Personally, I think he's being selfish."

"That's a bit harsh, Hermione," said Ron, frowning as he at-tempted to prize off a bit of mold that had attached itself firmly to his finger, "you wouldn't want to be stuck inside this house without company."

"He'll have company!" said Hermione. "It's headquarters to the Order of the Phoenix, isn't it? He just got his hopes up that Harry would be coming to live here with him."

"I don't think that's true," said Harry, wringing out his cloth. "He wouldn't give me a straight answer when I asked him if I could."

"He just didn't want to get his own hopes up even more," said Hermione wisely. "And he probably felt a bit guilty himself, because I think a part of him was really hoping you'd be expelled. Then you'd both be outcasts together."

"Come off it!" said Harry and Ron together, but Hermione merely shrugged.

"Suit yourselves. But I sometimes think Ron's mum's right, and Sir-ius gets confused about whether you're you or your father, Harry."

"So you think he's touched in the head?" said Harry heatedly.

"No, I just think he's been very lonely for a long time," said Hermione simply.

At this point Mrs. Weasley entered the bedroom behind them.

"Still not finished?" she said, poking her head into the cupboard.

"I thought you might be here to tell us to have a break!" said Ron bitterly. "D'you know how much mold we've got rid of since we ar-rived here?"

“You were so keen to help the Order,” said Mrs. Weasley, “you can do your bit by making headquarters fit to live in.”

“I feel like a house-elf,” grumbled Ron.

“Well, now that you understand what dreadful lives they lead, perhaps you’ll be a bit more active in S.P.E.W.!” said Hermione hopefully, as Mrs. Weasley left them to it again. “You know, maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to show people exactly how horrible it is to clean all the time — we could do a sponsored scrub of Gryffindor common room, all proceeds to S.P.E.W., it would raise awareness as well as funds —”

“I’ll sponsor you to shut up about spew,” Ron muttered irritably, but only so Harry could hear him.

Harry found himself daydreaming about Hogwarts more and more as the end of the holidays approached; he could not wait to see Hagrid again, to play Quidditch, even to stroll across the vegetable patches to the Herbology greenhouses. It would be a treat just to leave this dusty, musty house, where half of the cupboards were still bolted shut and Kreacher wheezed insults out of the shadows as you passed, though Harry was careful not to say any of this within earshot of Sirius.

The fact was that living at the headquarters of the anti-Voldemort movement was not nearly as interesting or exciting as Harry would have expected before he’d experienced it. Though members of the Or-der of the Phoenix came and went regularly, sometimes staying for meals, sometimes only for a few minutes’ whispered conversation, Mrs. Weasley made sure that Harry and the others were kept well out of earshot (whether Extendable or normal) and nobody, not even Sirius, seemed to feel that Harry needed to know anything more than he had heard on the night of his arrival.

On the very last day of the holidays Harry was sweeping up Hedwig’s owl droppings from the top of the wardrobe when Ron entered

their bedroom carrying a couple of envelopes.

"Booklists have arrived," he said, throwing one of the envelopes up to Harry, who was standing on a chair. "About time, I thought they'd forgotten, they usually come much earlier than this. …"

Harry swept the last of the droppings into a rubbish bag and threw the bag over Ron's head into the wastepaper basket in the corner, which swallowed it and belched loudly. He then opened his letter: It contained two pieces of parchment, one the usual reminder that term started on the first of September, the other telling him which books he would need for the coming year.

"Only two new ones," he said, reading the list. "The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5, by Miranda Goshawk and Defensive Magical Theory, by Wilbert Slinkhard."

Crack.

Fred and George Apparated right beside Harry. He was so used to them doing this by now that he didn't even fall off his chair.

"We were just wondering who assigned the Slinkhard book," said Fred conversationally.

"Because it means Dumbledore's found a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," said George.

"And about time too," said Fred.

"What d'you mean?" Harry asked, jumping down beside them.

"Well, we overheard Mum and Dad talking on the Extendable Ears a few weeks back," Fred told Harry, "and from what they were saying, Dumbledore was having real trouble finding anyone to do the job this year."

“Not surprising, is it, when you look at what’s happened to the last four?” said George.

“One sacked, one dead, one’s memory removed, and one locked in a trunk for nine months,” said Harry, counting them off on his fin-gers. “Yeah, I see what you mean.”

“What’s up with you, Ron?” asked Fred.

Ron did not answer. Harry looked around. Ron was standing very still with his mouth slightly open, gaping at his letter from Hogwarts.

“What’s the matter?” said Fred impatiently, moving around Ron to look over his shoulder at the parchment.

Fred’s mouth fell open too.

“Prefect?” he said, staring incredulously at the letter. “Prefect?”

George leapt forward, seized the envelope in Ron’s other hand, and turned it upside down. Harry saw something scarlet and gold fall into George’s palm.

“No way,” said George in a hushed voice.

“There’s been a mistake,” said Fred, snatching the letter out of Ron’s grasp and holding it up to the light as though checking for a watermark. “No one in their right mind would make Ron a prefect. …”

The twins’ heads turned in unison and both of them stared at Harry.

“We thought you were a cert!” said Fred in a tone that suggested Harry had tricked them in some way.

“We thought Dumbledore was bound to pick you!” said George indignantly.

“Winning the Triwizard and everything!” said Fred.

“I suppose all the mad stuff must’ve counted against him,” said George to Fred.

“Yeah,” said Fred slowly. “Yeah, you’ve caused too much trouble, mate. Well, at least one of you’s got their priorities right.”

He strode over to Harry and clapped him on the back while giving Ron a scathing look.

“Prefect … ickle Ronnie the prefect …”

“Oh, Mum’s going to be revolting,” groaned George, thrusting the prefect badge back at Ron as though it might contaminate him.

Ron, who still had not said a word, took the badge, stared at it for a moment, and then held it out to Harry as though asking mutely for confirmation that it was genuine. Harry took it. A large P was superimposed on the Gryffindor lion. He had seen a badge just like this on Percy’s chest on his very first day at Hogwarts.

The door banged open. Hermione came tearing into the room, her cheeks flushed and her hair flying. There was an envelope in her hand.

“Did you — did you get — ?”

She spotted the badge in Harry’s hand and let out a shriek.

“I knew it!” she said excitedly, brandishing her letter. “Me too, Harry, me too!”

“No,” said Harry quickly, pushing the badge back into Ron’s hand. “It’s Ron, not me.”

“It — what?”

“Ron’s prefect, not me,” Harry said.

“Ron?” said Hermione, her jaw dropping. “But … are you sure? I mean —”

She turned red as Ron looked around at her with a defiant expression on his face.

“It’s my name on the letter,” he said.

“I …” said Hermione, looking thoroughly bewildered. “I … well … wow! Well done, Ron! That’s really —”

“Unexpected,” said George, nodding.

“No,” said Hermione, blushing harder than ever, “no, it’s not … Ron’s done loads of … he’s really …”

The door behind her opened a little wider and Mrs. Weasley backed into the room carrying a pile of freshly laundered robes.

“Ginny said the booklists had come at last,” she said, glancing around at all the envelopes as she made her way over to the bed and started sorting the robes into two piles. “If you give them to me I’ll take them over to Diagon Alley this afternoon and get your books while you’re packing. Ron, I’ll have to get you more pajamas, these are at least six inches too short, I can’t believe how fast you’re growing … what color would you like?”

“Get him red and gold to match his badge,” said George, smirking.

“Match his what?” said Mrs. Weasley absently, rolling up a pair of maroon socks and placing them on Ron’s pile.

“His badge,” said Fred, with the air of getting the worst over quickly. “His lovely shiny new prefect’s badge.”

Fred’s words took a moment to penetrate Mrs. Weasley’s preoccupation about pajamas.

"His … but … Ron, you're not… ?"

Ron held up his badge.

Mrs. Weasley let out a shriek just like Hermione's.

"I don't believe it! I don't believe it! Oh, Ron, how wonderful! A prefect! That's everyone in the family!"

"What are Fred and I, next-door neighbors?" said George indignantly, as his mother pushed him aside and flung her arms around her youngest son.

"Wait until your father hears! Ron, I'm so proud of you, what wonderful news, you could end up Head Boy just like Bill and Percy, it's the first step! Oh, what a thing to happen in the middle of all this worry, I'm just thrilled, oh Ronnie —"

Fred and George were both making loud retching noises behind her back but Mrs. Weasley did not notice; arms tight around Ron's neck, she was kissing him all over his face, which had turned a brighter scarlet than his badge.

"Mum … don't … Mum, get a grip. …" he muttered, trying to push her away.

She let go of him and said breathlessly, "Well, what will it be? We gave Percy an owl, but you've already got one, of course."

"W-what do you mean?" said Ron, looking as though he did not dare believe his ears.

"You've got to have a reward for this!" said Mrs. Weasley fondly. "How about a nice new set of dress robes?"

"We've already bought him some," said Fred sourly, who looked as though he sincerely regretted this generosity.

“Or a new cauldron, Charlie’s old one’s rusting through, or a new rat, you always liked Scabbers —”

“Mum,” said Ron hopefully, “can I have a new broom?”

Mrs. Weasley’s face fell slightly; broomsticks were expensive.

“Not a really good one!” Ron hastened to add. “Just — just a new one for a change …”

Mrs. Weasley hesitated, then smiled.

“Of course you can. … Well, I’d better get going if I’ve got a broom to buy too. I’ll see you all later. … Little Ronnie, a prefect! And don’t forget to pack your trunks. … A prefect … Oh, I’m all of a dither!”

She gave Ron yet another kiss on the cheek, sniffed loudly, and bustled from the room.

Fred and George exchanged looks.

“You don’t mind if we don’t kiss you, do you, Ron?” said Fred in a falsely anxious voice.

“We could curtsy, if you like,” said George.

“Oh, shut up,” said Ron, scowling at them.

“Or what?” said Fred, an evil grin spreading across his face. “Going to put us in detention?”

“I’d love to see him try,” sniggered George.

“He could if you don’t watch out!” said Hermione angrily, at which Fred and George burst out laughing and Ron muttered, “Drop it, Hermione.”

“We’re going to have to watch our step, George,” said Fred, pretending to tremble, “with these two on our case. …”

“Yeah, it looks like our law-breaking days are finally over,” said George, shaking his head.

And with another loud crack, the twins Disapparated.

“Those two!” said Hermione furiously, staring up at the ceiling, through which they could now hear Fred and George roaring with laughter in the room upstairs. “Don’t pay any attention to them, Ron, they’re only jealous!”

“I don’t think they are,” said Ron doubtfully, also looking up at the ceiling. “They’ve always said only prats become prefects. … Still,” he added on a happier note, “they’ve never had new brooms! I wish I could go with Mum and choose. … She’ll never be able to afford a Nimbus, but there’s the new Cleansweep out, that’d be great. … Yeah, I think I’ll go and tell her I like the Cleansweep, just so she knows. …”

He dashed from the room, leaving Harry and Hermione alone.

For some reason, Harry found that he did not want to look at Hermione. He turned to his bed, picked up the pile of clean robes Mrs. Weasley had laid upon it, and crossed the room to his trunk.

“Harry?” said Hermione tentatively.

“Well done,” said Harry, so heartily it did not sound like his voice at all, and still not looking at her. “Brilliant. Prefect. Great.”

“Thanks,” said Hermione. “Erm — Harry — could I borrow Hedwig so I can tell Mum and Dad? They’ll be really pleased — I mean, prefect is something they can understand —”

“Yeah, no problem,” said Harry, still in the horrible hearty voice that did not belong to him. “Take her!”

He leaned over his trunk, laid the robes on the bottom of it, and pretended to be rummaging for something while Hermione crossed to the wardrobe and called Hedwig down. A few moments passed; Harry heard the door close but remained bent double, listening; the only sounds he could hear were the blank picture on the wall sniggering again and the wastepaper basket in the corner coughing up the owl droppings.

He straightened up and looked behind him. Hermione and Hed-wig had gone. Harry returned slowly to his bed and sank onto it, gaz-ing unseeingly at the foot of the wardrobe.

He had forgotten completely about prefects being chosen in the fifth year. He had been too anxious about the possibility of being ex-pelled to spare a thought for the fact that badges must be winging their way toward certain people. But if he had remembered … if he had thought about it … what would he have expected?

Not this, said a small and truthful voice inside his head.

Harry screwed up his face and buried it in his hands. He could not lie to himself; if he had known the prefect badge was on its way, he would have expected it to come to him, not Ron. Did this make him as arrogant as Draco Malfoy? Did he think himself superior to every-one else? Did he really believe he was better than Ron?

No, said the small voice defiantly.

Was that true? Harry wondered, anxiously probing his own feelings.

I’m better at Quidditch, said the voice. But I’m not better at anything else.

That was definitely true, Harry thought; he was no better than Ron in lessons. But what about outside lessons? What about those adventures he, Ron, and Hermione had had together since they had started at Hogwarts, often risking much worse than expulsion?

Well, Ron and Hermione were with me most of the time, said the voice in Harry's head.

Not all the time, though, Harry argued with himself. They didn't fight Quirrell with me. They didn't take on Riddle and the basilisk. They didn't get rid of all those dementors the night Sirius escaped. They weren't in that graveyard with me, the night Voldemort returned. … And the same feeling of ill usage that had overwhelmed him on the night he had arrived rose again. I've definitely done more, Harry thought indignantly. I've done more than either of them!

But maybe, said the small voice fairly, maybe Dumbledore doesn't choose prefects because they've got themselves into a load of dangerous situ-ations. … Maybe he chooses them for other reasons. … Ron must have something you don't. …Harry opened his eyes and stared through his fingers at the ward-robe's clawed feet, remembering what Fred had said.

"No one in their right mind would make Ron a prefect. …"

Harry gave a small snort of laughter. A second later he felt sickened with himself.

Ron had not asked Dumbledore to give him the prefect badge. This was not Ron's fault. Was he, Harry, Ron's best friend in the world, going to sulk because he didn't have a badge, laugh with the twins behind Ron's back, ruin this for Ron when, for the first time, he had beaten Harry at something?

At this point Harry heard Ron's footsteps on the stairs again. He stood up, straightened his glasses, and hitched a grin onto his face as Ron bounded back through the door.

"Just caught her!" he said happily. "She says she'll get the Cleansweep if she can."

"Cool," Harry said, and he was relieved to hear that his voice had stopped sounding hearty. "Listen — Ron — well done, mate."

The smile faded off Ron's face.

"I never thought it would be me!" he said, shaking his head, "I thought it would be you!"

"Nah, I've caused too much trouble," Harry said, echoing Fred.

"Yeah," said Ron, "yeah, I suppose. … Well, we'd better get our trunks packed, hadn't we?"

It was odd how widely their possessions seemed to have scattered themselves since they had arrived. It took them most of the afternoon to retrieve their books and belongings from all over the house and stow them back inside their school trunks. Harry noticed that Ron kept moving his prefect's badge around, first placing it on his bedside table, then putting it into his jeans pocket, then taking it out and laying it on his folded robes, as though to see the effect of the red on the black. Only when Fred and George dropped in and offered to attach it to his forehead with a Permanent Sticking Charm did he wrap it tenderly in his maroon socks and lock it in his trunk.

Mrs. Weasley returned from Diagon Alley around six o'clock, laden with books and carrying a long package wrapped in thick brown paper that Ron took from her with a moan of longing.

"Never mind unwrapping it now, people are arriving for dinner, I want you all downstairs," she said, but the moment she was out of sight Ron ripped off the paper in a frenzy and examined every inch of his new broom, an ecstatic expression on his face.

Down in the basement Mrs. Weasley had hung a scarlet banner over the heavily laden dinner table, which read CONGRATULATIONS RON AND HERMIONE — NEW PREFECTS. She looked in a better mood than Harry had seen her all holiday.

“I thought we’d have a little party, not a sit-down dinner,” she told Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Ginny as they entered the room. “Your father and Bill are on their way, Ron, I’ve sent them both owls and they’re thrilled,” she added, beaming.

Fred rolled his eyes.

Sirius, Lupin, Tonks, and Kingsley Shacklebolt were already there and Mad-Eye Moody stumped in shortly after Harry had got himself a butterbeer.

“Oh, Alastor, I am glad you’re here,” said Mrs. Weasley brightly, as Mad-Eye shrugged off his traveling cloak. “We’ve been wanting to ask you for ages — could you have a look in the writing desk in the draw-ing room and tell us what’s inside it? We haven’t wanted to open it just in case it’s something really nasty.”

“No problem, Molly …”

Moody’s electric-blue eye swiveled upward and stared fixedly through the ceiling of the kitchen.

“Drawing room …” he growled, as the pupil contracted. “Desk in the corner? Yeah, I see it. … Yeah, it’s a boggart. … Want me to go up and get rid of it, Molly?”

“No, no, I’ll do it myself later,” beamed Mrs. Weasley. “You have your drink. We’re having a little bit of a celebration, actually. …” She gestured at the scarlet banner. “Fourth prefect in the family!” she said fondly, ruffling Ron’s hair.

“Prefect, eh?” growled Moody, his normal eye on Ron and his magical eye swiveling around to gaze into the side of his head. Harry had the very uncomfortable feeling it was looking at him and moved away toward Sirius and Lupin.

“Well, congratulations,” said Moody, still glaring at Ron with his normal eye, “authority figures always attract trouble, but I suppose Dumbledore thinks you can withstand most major jinxes or he wouldn’t have appointed you. …”

Ron looked rather startled at this view of the matter but was saved the trouble of responding by the arrival of his father and eldest brother. Mrs. Weasley was in such a good mood she did not even complain that they had brought Mundungus with them too; he was wearing a long overcoat that seemed oddly lumpy in unlikely places and declined the offer to remove it and put it with Moody’s traveling cloak.

“Well, I think a toast is in order,” said Mr. Weasley, when everyone had a drink. He raised his goblet. “To Ron and Hermione, the new Gryffindor prefects!”

Ron and Hermione beamed as everyone drank to them and then applauded.

“I was never a prefect myself,” said Tonks brightly from behind Harry as everybody moved toward the table to help themselves to food. Her hair was tomato-red and waist length today; she looked like Ginny’s older sister. “My Head of House said I lacked certain neces-sary qualities.”

“Like what?” said Ginny, who was choosing a baked potato.

“Like the ability to behave myself,” said Tonks.

Ginny laughed; Hermione looked as though she did not know whether to smile or not and compromised by taking an extra large

gulp of butterbeer and choking on it.

“What about you, Sirius?” Ginny asked, thumping Hermione on the back.

Sirius, who was right beside Harry, let out his usual barklike laugh.

“No one would have made me a prefect, I spent too much time in detention with James. Lupin was the good boy, he got the badge.”

“I think Dumbledore might have hoped that I would be able to exercise some control over my best friends,” said Lupin. “I need scarcely say that I failed dismally.”

Harry’s mood suddenly lifted. His father had not been a prefect either. All at once the party seemed much more enjoyable; he loaded up his plate, feeling unusually fond of everyone in the room.

Ron was rhapsodizing about his new broom to anybody who would listen.

“… naught to seventy in ten seconds, not bad, is it? When you think the Comet Two Ninety’s only naught to sixty and that’s with a decent tailwind according to Which Broomstick?”

Hermione was talking very earnestly to Lupin about her view of elf rights.

“I mean, it’s the same kind of nonsense as werewolf segregation, isn’t it? It all stems from this horrible thing wizards have of thinking they’re superior to other creatures. …”

Mrs. Weasley and Bill were having their usual argument about Bill’s hair.

“… getting really out of hand, and you’re so good-looking, it would look much better shorter, wouldn’t it, Harry?”

“Oh — I dunno —” said Harry, slightly alarmed at being asked his opinion; he slid away from them in the direction of Fred and George, who were huddled in a corner with Mundungus.

Mundungus stopped talking when he saw Harry, but Fred winked and beckoned Harry closer.

“It’s okay,” he told Mundungus, “we can trust Harry, he’s our fi-nancial backer.”

“Look what Dung’s gotten us,” said George, holding out his hand to Harry. It was full of what looked like shriveled black pods. A faint rattling noise was coming from them, even though they were completely stationary.

“Venomous Tentacula seeds,” said George. “We need them for the Skiving Snackboxes but they’re a Class C Non-Tradeable Substance so we’ve been having a bit of trouble getting hold of them.”

“Ten Galleons the lot, then, Dung?” said Fred.

“Wiv all the trouble I went to to get ’em?” said Mundungus, his saggy, bloodshot eyes stretching even wider. “I’m sorry, lads, but I’m not taking a Knut under twenty.”

“Dung likes his little joke,” Fred said to Harry.

“Yeah, his best one so far has been six Sickles for a bag of knarl quills,” said George.

“Be careful,” Harry warned them quietly.

“What?” said Fred. “Mum’s busy cooing over Prefect Ron, we’re okay.”

“But Moody could have his eye on you,” Harry pointed out.

Mundungus looked nervously over his shoulder.

“Good point, that,” he grunted. “All right, lads, ten it is, if you’ll take ’em quick.”

“Cheers, Harry!” said Fred delightedly, when Mundungus had emptied his pockets into the twins’ outstretched hands and scuttled off toward the food. “We’d better get these upstairs. …”

Harry watched them go, feeling slightly uneasy. It had just oc-curred to him that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would want to know how Fred and George were financing their joke shop business when, as was inevitable, they finally found out about it. Giving the twins his Tri-wizard winnings had seemed a simple thing to do at the time, but what if it led to another family row and a Percy-like estrangement? Would Mrs. Weasley still feel that Harry was as good as her son if she found out he had made it possible for Fred and George to start a career she thought quite unsuitable?

Standing where the twins had left him with nothing but a guilty weight in the pit of his stomach for company, Harry caught the sound of his own name. Kingsley Shacklebolt’s deep voice was audible even over the surrounding chatter.

“… why Dumbledore didn’t make Potter a prefect?” said Kingsley.

“He’ll have had his reasons,” replied Lupin.

“But it would’ve shown confidence in him. It’s what I’d’ve done,” persisted Kingsley, “ ’specially with the Daily Prophet having a go at him every few days. …”

Harry did not look around; he did not want Lupin or Kingsley to know he had heard. He followed Mundungus back toward the table, though not remotely hungry. His pleasure in the party had evaporated as quickly as it had come; he wished he were upstairs in bed.

Mad-Eye Moody was sniffing at a chicken leg with what remained of his nose; evidently he could not detect any trace of poison, because

he then tore a strip off it with his teeth.

"… the handle's made of Spanish oak with anti-jinx varnish and in-built vibration control —" Ron was saying to Tonks.

Mrs. Weasley yawned widely.

"Well, I think I'll sort out that boggart before I turn in. … Arthur, I don't want this lot up too late, all right? 'Night, Harry, dear."

She left the kitchen. Harry set down his plate and wondered whether he could follow her without attracting attention.

"You all right, Potter?" grunted Moody.

"Yeah, fine," lied Harry.

Moody took a swig from his hip flask, his electric blue eye staring sideways at Harry.

"Come here, I've got something that might interest you," he said.

From an inner pocket of his robes Moody pulled a very tattered old Wizarding photograph.

"Original Order of the Phoenix," growled Moody. "Found it last night when I was looking for my spare Invisibility Cloak, seeing as Podmore hasn't had the manners to return my best one. … Thought people might like to see it."

Harry took the photograph. A small crowd of people, some waving at him, others lifting their glasses, looked back up at him.

"There's me," said Moody unnecessarily, pointing at himself. The Moody in the picture was unmistakable, though his hair was slightly less gray and his nose was intact. "And there's Dumbledore beside me, Dedalus Diggle on the other side … That's Marlene McKinnon,

she was killed two weeks after this was taken, they got her whole family. That's Frank and Alice Longbottom —"

Harry's stomach, already uncomfortable, clenched as he looked at Alice Longbottom; he knew her round, friendly face very well, even though he had never met her, because she was the image of her son, Neville.

"Poor devils," growled Moody. "Better dead than what happened to them … and that's Emmeline Vance, you've met her, and that there's Lupin, obviously … Benjy Fenwick, he copped it too, we only ever found bits of him … shift aside there," he added, poking the pic-ture, and the little photographic people edged sideways, so that those who were partially obscured could move to the front.

"That's Edgar Bones … brother of Amelia Bones, they got him and his family too, he was a great wizard … Sturgis Podmore, blimey, he looks young … Caradoc Dearborn, vanished six months after this, we never found his body … Hagrid, of course, looks exactly the same as ever … Elphias Doge, you've met him, I'd forgotten he used to wear that stupid hat … Gideon Prewett, it took five Death Eaters to kill him and his brother Fabian, they fought like heroes … budge along, budge along …"

The little people in the photograph jostled among themselves, and those hidden right at the back appeared at the forefront of the picture.

"That's Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth, only time I ever met him, strange bloke … That's Dorcas Meadowes, Voldemort killed her per-sonally … Sirius, when he still had short hair … and … there you go, thought that would interest you!"

Harry's heart turned over. His mother and father were beaming up at him, sitting on either side of a small, watery-eyed man Harry rec-ognized at once as Wormtail: He was the one who had betrayed their whereabouts to Voldemort and so helped bring about their deaths.

“Eh?” said Moody.

Harry looked up into Moody’s heavily scarred and pitted face. Evidently Moody was under the impression he had just given Harry a bit of a treat.

“Yeah,” said Harry, attempting to grin again. “Er … listen, I’ve just remembered, I haven’t packed my …”

He was spared the trouble of inventing an object he had not packed; Sirius had just said, “What’s that you’ve got there, Mad-Eye?” and Moody had turned toward him. Harry crossed the kitchen, slipped through the door and up the stairs before anyone could call him back.

He did not know why he had received such a shock; he had seen his parents’ pictures before, after all, and he had met Wormtail … but to have them sprung on him like that, when he was least expecting it … No one would like that, he thought angrily. …And then, to see them surrounded by all those other happy faces … Benjy Fenwick, who had been found in bits, and Gideon Prewett, who had died like a hero, and the Longbottoms, who had been tor-tured into madness … all waving happily out of the photograph forevermore, not knowing that they were doomed. … Well, Moody might find that interesting … he, Harry, found it disturbing. …Harry tiptoed up the stairs in the hall past the stuffed elf heads, glad to be on his own again, but as he approached the first landing he heard noises. Someone was sobbing in the drawing room.

“Hello?” Harry said.

There was no answer but the sobbing continued. He climbed the remaining stairs two at a time, walked across the landing, and opened the drawing-room door.

Someone was cowering against the dark wall, her wand in her hand, her whole body shaking with sobs. Sprawled on the dusty old carpet in a patch of moonlight, clearly dead, was Ron.

All the air seemed to vanish from Harry's lungs; he felt as though he were falling through the floor; his brain turned icy cold — Ron dead, no, it couldn't be —But wait a moment, it couldn't be — Ron was downstairs —"Mrs. Weasley?" Harry croaked.

"R-r-riddikulus!" Mrs. Weasley sobbed, pointing her shaking wand at Ron's body.

Crack.

Ron's body turned into Bill's, spread-eagled on his back, his eyes wide open and empty. Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever.

"R-riddikulus!" she sobbed again.

Crack.

Mr. Weasley's body replaced Bill's, his glasses askew, a trickle of blood running down his face.

"No!" Mrs. Weasley moaned. "No … riddikulus! Riddikulus! RIDDIKULUS!"

Crack. Dead twins. Crack. Dead Percy. Crack. Dead Harry …"Mrs. Weasley, just get out of here!" shouted Harry, staring down at his own dead body on the floor. "Let someone else —"

"What's going on?"

Lupin had come running into the room, closely followed by Sirius, with Moody stumping along behind them. Lupin looked from Mrs. Weasley to the dead Harry on the floor and seemed to understand in an instant. Pulling out his own wand he said, very firmly and clearly, "Riddikulus!"

Harry's body vanished. A silvery orb hung in the air over the spot where it had lain. Lupin waved his wand once more and the orb van-

ished in a puff of smoke.

“Oh — oh — oh!” gulped Mrs. Weasley, and she broke into a storm of crying, her face in her hands.

“Molly,” said Lupin bleakly, walking over to her, “Molly, don’t …”

Next second she was sobbing her heart out on Lupin’s shoulder.

“Molly, it was just a boggart,” he said soothingly, patting her on the head. “Just a stupid boggart …”

“I see them d-d-dead all the time!” Mrs. Weasley moaned into his shoulder. “All the t-t-time! I d-d-dream about it …”

Sirius was staring at the patch of carpet where the boggart, pretending to be Harry’s body, had lain. Moody was looking at Harry, who avoided his gaze. He had a funny feeling Moody’s magical eye had followed him all the way out of the kitchen.

“D-d-don’t tell Arthur,” Mrs. Weasley was gulping now, mopping her eyes frantically with her cuffs. “I d-d-don’t want him to know. … Being silly …”

Lupin handed her a handkerchief and she blew her nose.

“Harry, I’m so sorry, what must you think of me?” she said shakily. “Not even able to get rid of a boggart …”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Harry, trying to smile.

“I’m just s-s-so worried,” she said, tears spilling out of her eyes again. “Half the f-f-family’s in the Order, it’ll b-b-be a miracle if we all come through this. … and P-P-Percy’s not talking to us. … What if something d-d-dreadful happens and we had never m-m-made up? And what’s going to happen if Arthur and I get killed, who’s g-g-going to look after Ron and Ginny?”

“Molly, that’s enough,” said Lupin firmly. “This isn’t like last time. The Order is better prepared, we’ve got a head start, we know what Voldemort’s up to —”

Mrs. Weasley gave a little squeak of fright at the sound of the name.

“Oh, Molly, come on, it’s about time you got used to hearing it — look, I can’t promise no one’s going to get hurt, nobody can promise that, but we’re much better off than we were last time, you weren’t in the Order then, you don’t understand, last time we were outnumbered twenty to one by the Death Eaters and they were picking us off one by one. …”

Harry thought of the photograph again, of his parents’ beaming faces. He knew Moody was still watching him.

“Don’t worry about Percy,” said Sirius abruptly. “He’ll come round. It’s a matter of time before Voldemort moves into the open; once he does, the whole Ministry’s going to be begging us to forgive them. And I’m not sure I’ll be accepting their apology,” he added bitterly.

“And as for who’s going to look after Ron and Ginny if you and Arthur died,” said Lupin, smiling slightly, “what do you think we’d do, let them starve?”

Mrs. Weasley smiled tremulously.

“Being silly,” she muttered again, mopping her eyes.

But Harry, closing his bedroom door behind him some ten minutes later, could not think Mrs. Weasley silly. He could still see his parents beaming up at him from the tattered old photograph, unaware that their lives, like so many of those around them, were drawing to a close. The image of the boggart posing as the corpse of each member of Mrs. Weasley’s family in turn kept flashing before his eyes.

Without warning, the scar on his forehead seared with pain again and his stomach churned horribly.

“Cut it out,” he said firmly, rubbing the scar as the pain receded again.

“First sign of madness, talking to your own head,” said a sly voice from the empty picture on the wall.

Harry ignored it. He felt older than he had ever felt in his life, and it seemed extraordinary to him that barely an hour ago he had been worried about a joke shop and who had gotten a prefect’s badge.

Chapter 10 Luna Lovegood

Harry had a troubled night's sleep. His parents wove in and out of his dreams, never speaking; Mrs. Weasley sobbed over Kreacher's dead body watched by Ron and Hermione, who were wear-ing crowns, and yet again Harry found himself walking down a corri-dor ending in a locked door. He awoke abruptly with his scar prickling to find Ron already dressed and talking to him.

"… better hurry up, Mum's going ballistic, she says we're going to miss the train. …"

There was a lot of commotion in the house. From what he heard as he dressed at top speed, Harry gathered that Fred and George had be-witched their trunks to fly downstairs to save the bother of carrying them, with the result that they had hurtled straight into Ginny and knocked her down two flights of stairs into the hall; Mrs. Black and Mrs. Weasley were both screaming at the top of their voices.

"— COULD HAVE DONE HER A SERIOUS INJURY, YOU IDIOTS —"

"— FILTHY HALF-BREEDS, BESMIRCHING THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS —"

Hermione came hurrying into the room looking flustered just as Harry was putting on his trainers; Hedwig was swaying on her shoul-der, and she was carrying a squirming Crookshanks in her arms.

"Mum and Dad just sent Hedwig back" — the owl fluttered oblig-ingly over and perched on top of her cage — "are you ready yet?"

"Nearly — Ginny all right?" Harry asked, shoving on his glasses.

"Mrs. Weasley's patched her up," said Hermione. "But now Mad-Eye's complaining that we can't leave unless Sturgis Podmore's here,

otherwise the guard will be one short."

"Guard?" said Harry. "We have to go to King's Cross with a guard?"

"You have to go to King's Cross with a guard," Hermione corrected him.

"Why?" said Harry irritably. "I thought Voldemort was supposed to be lying low, or are you telling me he's going to jump out from behind a dustbin to try and do me in?"

"I don't know, it's just what Mad-Eye says," said Hermione distractedly, looking at her watch. "But if we don't leave soon we're definitely going to miss the train. …"

"WILL YOU LOT GET DOWN HERE NOW, PLEASE!" Mrs. Weasley bellowed and Hermione jumped as though scalded and hurried out of the room. Harry seized Hedwig, stuffed her unceremo-niously into her cage, and set off downstairs after Hermione, dragging his trunk.

Mrs. Black's portrait was howling with rage but nobody was both-ering to close the curtains over her; all the noise in the hall was bound to rouse her again anyway.

"Harry, you're to come with me and Tonks," shouted Mrs. Weasley over the repeated screeches of "MUDBLOODS! SCUM! CREATURES OF DIRT!" "Leave your trunk and your owl, Alastor's going to deal with the luggage. … Oh, for heaven's sake, Sirius, Dumbledore said no!"

A bearlike black dog had appeared at Harry's side as Harry clambered over the various trunks cluttering the hall to get to Mrs. Weasley.

"Oh honestly …" said Mrs. Weasley despairingly, "well, on your own head be it!"

She wrenched open the front door and stepped out into the weak September sunlight. Harry and the dog followed her. The door slammed behind them and Mrs. Black's screeches were cut off instantly.

"Where's Tonks?" Harry said, looking around as they went down the stone steps of number twelve, which vanished the moment they reached the pavement.

"She's waiting for us just up here," said Mrs. Weasley stiffly, avert-ing her eyes from the lolloping black dog beside Harry.

An old woman greeted them on the corner. She had tightly curled gray hair and wore a purple hat shaped like a porkpie.

"Wotcher, Harry," she said, winking. "Better hurry up, hadn't we, Molly?" she added, checking her watch.

"I know, I know," moaned Mrs. Weasley, lengthening her stride, "but Mad-Eye wanted to wait for Sturgis. … If only Arthur could have got us cars from the Ministry again … but Fudge wouldn't let him borrow so much as an empty ink bottle these days. … How Muggles can stand traveling without magic …"

But the great black dog gave a joyful bark and gamboled around them, snapping at pigeons, and chasing its own tail. Harry couldn't help laughing. Sirius had been trapped inside for a very long time. Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips in an almost Aunt Petunia-ish way.

It took them twenty minutes to reach King's Cross by foot and nothing more eventful happened during that time than Sirius scaring a couple of cats for Harry's entertainment. Once inside the station they lingered casually beside the barrier between platforms nine and ten until the coast was clear, then each of them leaned against it in turn and fell easily through onto platform nine and three quarters, where the Hogwarts Express stood belching sooty steam over a plat-form packed with departing students and their families. Harry inhaled the

familiar smell and felt his spirits soar. … He was really going back. …“I hope the others make it in time,” said Mrs. Weasley anxiously, staring behind her at the wrought-iron arch spanning the platform, through which new arrivals would come.

“Nice dog, Harry!” called a tall boy with dreadlocks.

“Thanks, Lee,” said Harry, grinning, as Sirius wagged his tail frantically.

“Oh good,” said Mrs. Weasley, sounding relieved, “here’s Alastor with the luggage, look …”

A porter’s cap pulled low over his mismatched eyes, Moody came limping through the archway pushing a cart full of their trunks.

“All okay,” he muttered to Mrs. Weasley and Tonks. “Don’t think we were followed. …”

Seconds later, Mr. Weasley emerged onto the platform with Ron and Hermione. They had almost unloaded Moody’s luggage cart when Fred, George, and Ginny turned up with Lupin.

“No trouble?” growled Moody.

“Nothing,” said Lupin.

“I’ll still be reporting Sturgis to Dumbledore,” said Moody. “That’s the second time he’s not turned up in a week. Getting as unreliable as Mundungus.”

“Well, look after yourselves,” said Lupin, shaking hands all round. He reached Harry last and gave him a clap on the shoulder. “You too, Harry. Be careful.”

“Yeah, keep your head down and your eyes peeled,” said Moody, shaking Harry’s hand too. “And don’t forget, all of you — careful what

you put in writing. If in doubt, don't put it in a letter at all."

"It's been great meeting all of you," said Tonks, hugging Hermione and Ginny. "We'll see you soon, I expect."

A warning whistle sounded; the students still on the platform started hurrying onto the train.

"Quick, quick," said Mrs. Weasley distractedly, hugging them at random and catching Harry twice. "Write. … Be good. … If you've forgotten anything we'll send it on. … Onto the train, now, hurry. …"

For one brief moment, the great black dog reared onto its hind legs and placed its front paws on Harry's shoulders, but Mrs. Weasley shoved Harry away toward the train door hissing, "For heaven's sake act more like a dog, Sirius!"

"See you!" Harry called out of the open window as the train began to move, while Ron, Hermione, and Ginny waved beside him. The figures of Tonks, Lupin, Moody, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley shrank rapidly but the black dog was bounding alongside the window, wagging its tail; blurred people on the platform were laughing to see it chasing the train, and then they turned the corner, and Sirius was gone.

"He shouldn't have come with us," said Hermione in a worried voice.

"Oh lighten up," said Ron, "he hasn't seen daylight for months, poor bloke."

"Well," said Fred, clapping his hands together, "can't stand around chatting all day, we've got business to discuss with Lee. See you later," and he and George disappeared down the corridor to the right.

The train was gathering still more speed, so that the houses outside the window flashed past and they swayed where they stood.

“Shall we go and find a compartment, then?” Harry asked Ron and Hermione.

Ron and Hermione exchanged looks.

“Er,” said Ron.

“We’re — well — Ron and I are supposed to go into the prefect carriage,” Hermione said awkwardly.

Ron wasn’t looking at Harry; he seemed to have become intensely interested in the fingernails on his left hand.

“Oh,” said Harry. “Right. Fine.”

“I don’t think we’ll have to stay there all journey,” said Hermione quickly. “Our letters said we just get instructions from the Head Boy and Girl and then patrol the corridors from time to time.”

“Fine,” said Harry again. “Well, I-I might see you later, then.”

“Yeah, definitely,” said Ron, casting a shifty, anxious look at Harry. “It’s a pain having to go down there, I’d rather — but we have to — I mean, I’m not enjoying it, I’m not Percy,” he finished defiantly.

“I know you’re not,” said Harry and he grinned. But as Hermione and Ron dragged their trunks, Crookshanks, and a caged Pigwidgeon off toward the engine end of the train, Harry felt an odd sense of loss. He had never traveled on the Hogwarts Express without Ron.

“Come on,” Ginny told him, “if we get a move on we’ll be able to save them places.”

“Right,” said Harry, picking up Hedwig’s cage in one hand and the handle of his trunk in the other. They struggled off down the corridor, peering through the glass-paneled doors into the compartments they passed, which were already full. Harry could not help noticing that a

lot of people stared back at him with great interest and that several of them nudged their neighbors and pointed him out. After he had met this behavior in five consecutive carriages he remembered that the Daily Prophet had been telling its readers all summer what a lying show-off he was. He wondered bleakly whether the people now staring and whispering believed the stories.

In the very last carriage they met Neville Longbottom, Harry's fel-low fifth-year Gryffindor, his round face shining with the effort of pulling his trunk along and maintaining a one-handed grip on his struggling toad, Trevor.

"Hi, Harry," he panted. "Hi, Ginny. … Everywhere's full. … I can't find a seat. …"

"What are you talking about?" said Ginny, who had squeezed past Neville to peer into the compartment behind him. "There's room in this one, there's only Loony Lovegood in here —"

Neville mumbled something about not wanting to disturb anyone.

"Don't be silly," said Ginny, laughing, "she's all right."

She slid the door open and pulled her trunk inside it. Harry and Neville followed.

"Hi, Luna," said Ginny. "Is it okay if we take these seats?"

The girl beside the window looked up. She had straggly, waist-length, dirty-blond hair, very pale eyebrows, and protuberant eyes that gave her a permanently surprised look. Harry knew at once why Neville had chosen to pass this compartment by. The girl gave off an aura of distinct dottiness. Perhaps it was the fact that she had stuck her wand behind her left ear for safekeeping, or that she had chosen to wear a necklace of butterbeer caps, or that she was reading a magazine upside down. Her eyes ranged over Neville and came to rest on Harry. She nodded.

“Thanks,” said Ginny, smiling at her.

Harry and Neville stowed the three trunks and Hedwig’s cage in the luggage rack and sat down. The girl called Luna watched them over her upside-down magazine, which was called The Quibbler. She did not seem to need to blink as much as normal humans. She stared and stared at Harry, who had taken the seat opposite her and now wished he had not.

“Had a good summer, Luna?” Ginny asked.

“Yes,” said Luna dreamily, without taking her eyes off Harry. “Yes, it was quite enjoyable, you know. You’re Harry Potter,” she added.

“I know I am,” said Harry.

Neville chuckled. Luna turned her pale eyes upon him instead.

“And I don’t know who you are.”

“I’m nobody,” said Neville hurriedly.

“No you’re not,” said Ginny sharply. “Neville Longbottom — Luna Lovegood. Luna’s in my year, but in Ravenclaw.”

“Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure,” said Luna in a singsong voice.

She raised her upside-down magazine high enough to hide her face and fell silent. Harry and Neville looked at each other with their eyebrows raised. Ginny suppressed a giggle.

The train rattled onward, speeding them out into open country. It was an odd, unsettled sort of day; one moment the carriage was full of sunlight and the next they were passing beneath ominously gray clouds.

“Guess what I got for my birthday?” said Neville.

“Another Remembrall?” said Harry, remembering the marblelike device Neville’s grandmother had sent him in an effort to improve his abysmal memory.

“No,” said Neville, “I could do with one, though, I lost the old one ages ago. … No, look at this. …”

He dug the hand that was not keeping a firm grip on Trevor into his schoolbag and after a little bit of rummaging pulled out what appeared to be a small gray cactus in a pot, except that it was covered with what looked like boils rather than spines.

“Mimbulus mimbletonia,” he said proudly.

Harry stared at the thing. It was pulsating slightly, giving it the rather sinister look of some diseased internal organ.

“It’s really, really rare,” said Neville, beaming. “I don’t know if there’s one in the greenhouse at Hogwarts, even. I can’t wait to show it to Professor Sprout. My great-uncle Algie got it for me in Assyria. I’m going to see if I can breed from it.”

Harry knew that Neville’s favorite subject was Herbology, but for the life of him he could not see what he would want with this stunted little plant.

“Does it — er — do anything?” he asked.

“Loads of stuff!” said Neville proudly. “It’s got an amazing defen-sive mechanism — hold Trevor for me. …”

He dumped the toad into Harry’s lap and took a quill from his schoolbag. Luna Lovegood’s popping eyes appeared over the top of her upside-down magazine again, watching what Neville was doing. Neville held the Mimbulus mimbletonia up to his eyes, his tongue between his teeth, chose his spot, and gave the plant a sharp prod with the tip of his quill.

Liquid squirted from every boil on the plant, thick, stinking, dark-green jets of it; they hit the ceiling, the windows, and spattered Luna Lovegood's magazine. Ginny, who had flung her arms up in front of her face just in time, merely looked as though she was wearing a slimy green hat, but Harry, whose hands had been busy preventing the es-cape of Trevor, received a face full. It smelled like rancid manure.

Neville, whose face and torso were also drenched, shook his head to get the worst out of his eyes.

"S-sorry," he gasped. "I haven't tried that before. … Didn't realize it would be quite so … Don't worry, though, Stinksap's not poiso-nous," he added nervously, as Harry spat a mouthful onto the floor.

At that precise moment the door of their compartment slid open.

"Oh … hello, Harry," said a nervous voice. "Um … bad time?"

Harry wiped the lenses of his glasses with his Trevor-free hand. A very pretty girl with long, shiny black hair was standing in the doorway smiling at him: Cho Chang, the Seeker on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team.

"Oh … hi," said Harry blankly.

"Um …" said Cho. "Well … just thought I'd say hello … 'bye then."

She closed the door again, rather pink in the face, and departed. Harry slumped back in his seat and groaned. He would have liked Cho to discover him sitting with a group of very cool people laughing their heads off at a joke he had just told; he would not have chosen to be sitting with Neville and Loony Lovegood, clutching a toad and dripping in Stinksap.

"Never mind," said Ginny bracingly. "Look, we can get rid of all this easily." She pulled out her wand. "Scourgify!"

The Stinksap vanished.

“Sorry,” said Neville again, in a small voice.

Ron and Hermione did not turn up for nearly an hour, by which time the food trolley had already gone by. Harry, Ginny, and Neville had finished their Pumpkin Pasties and were busy swapping Choco-late Frog cards when the compartment door slid open and they walked in, accompanied by Crookshanks and a shrilly hooting Pig-widgeon in his cage.

“I’m starving,” said Ron, stowing Pigwidgeon next to Hedwig, grabbing a Chocolate Frog from Harry and throwing himself into the seat next to him. He ripped open the wrapper, bit off the Frog’s head, and leaned back with his eyes closed as though he had had a very ex-hausting morning.

“Well, there are two fifth-year prefects from each House,” said Hermione, looking thoroughly disgruntled as she took her seat. “Boy and girl from each.”

“And guess who’s a Slytherin prefect?” said Ron, still with his eyes closed.

“Malfoy,” replied Harry at once, his worst fear confirmed.

“ ’Course,” said Ron bitterly, stuffing the rest of the Frog into his mouth and taking another.

“And that complete cow Pansy Parkinson,” said Hermione vicious-ly. “How she got to be a prefect when she’s thicker than a concussed troll …”

“Who’s Hufflepuff?” Harry asked.

“Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott,” said Ron thickly.

“And Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil for Ravenclaw,” said Hermione.

“You went to the Yule Ball with Padma Patil,” said a vague voice.

Everyone turned to look at Luna Lovegood, who was gazing unblinkingly at Ron over the top of The Quibbler. He swallowed his mouthful of Frog.

“Yeah, I know I did,” he said, looking mildly surprised.

“She didn’t enjoy it very much,” Luna informed him. “She doesn’t think you treated her very well, because you wouldn’t dance with her. I don’t think I’d have minded,” she added thoughtfully, “I don’t like dancing very much.”

She retreated behind The Quibbler again. Ron stared at the cover with his mouth hanging open for a few seconds, then looked around at Ginny for some kind of explanation, but Ginny had stuffed her knuckles in her mouth to stop herself giggling. Ron shook his head, bemused, then checked his watch.

“We’re supposed to patrol the corridors every so often,” he told Harry and Neville, “and we can give out punishments if people are misbehaving. I can’t wait to get Crabbe and Goyle for something. …”

“You’re not supposed to abuse your position, Ron!” said Hermione sharply.

“Yeah, right, because Malfoy won’t abuse it at all,” said Ron sarcastically.

“So you’re going to descend to his level?”

“No, I’m just going to make sure I get his mates before he gets mine.”

“For heaven’s sake, Ron —”

“I’ll make Goyle do lines, it’ll kill him, he hates writing,” said Ron happily. He lowered his voice to Goyle’s low grunt and, screwing up his face in a look of pained concentration, mimed writing in midair. “I … must … not … look … like … a … baboon’s … backside. …”

Everyone laughed, but nobody laughed harder than Luna Love-good. She let out a scream of mirth that caused Hedwig to wake up and flap her wings indignantly and Crookshanks to leap up into the luggage rack, hissing. She laughed so hard that her magazine slipped out of her grasp, slid down her legs, and onto the floor.

“That was funny!”

Her prominent eyes swam with tears as she gasped for breath, staring at Ron. Utterly nonplussed, he looked around at the others, who were now laughing at the expression on Ron’s face and at the ludicrously prolonged laughter of Luna Lovegood, who was rocking backward and forward, clutching her sides.

“Are you taking the mickey?” said Ron, frowning at her.

“Baboon’s … backside!” she choked, holding her ribs.

Everyone else was watching Luna laughing, but Harry, glancing at the magazine on the floor, noticed something that made him dive for it. Upside down it had been hard to tell what the picture on the front was, but Harry now realized it was a fairly bad cartoon of Cornelius Fudge; Harry only recognized him because of the lime-green bowler hat. One of Fudge’s hands was clenched around a bag of gold; the other hand was throttling a goblin. The cartoon was captioned: How Far Will Fudge Go to Gain Gringotts?

Beneath this were listed the titles of other articles inside the magazine.

CORRUPTION IN THE QUIDDITCH LEAGUE:How the Tornados Are Taking ControlSECRETS OF THE ANCIENT RUNES

REVEALEDSIRIUS BLACK: Villain or Victim?

“Can I have a look at this?” Harry asked Luna eagerly.

She nodded, still gazing at Ron, breathless with laughter.

Harry opened the magazine and scanned the index; until this moment he had completely forgotten the magazine Kingsley had handed Mr. Weasley to give to Sirius, but it must have been this edition of The Quibbler. He found the page and turned excitedly to the article.

This too was illustrated by a rather bad cartoon; in fact, Harry would not have known it was supposed to be Sirius if it hadn’t been captioned. Sirius was standing on a pile of human bones with his wand out. The headline on the article read:SIRIUS - Black As He’s Painted?

Notorious Mass Murderer OR Innocent Singing Sensation?

Harry had to read this sentence several times before he was convinced that he had not misunderstood it. Since when had Sirius been a singing sensation?

For fourteen years Sirius Black has been believed guilty of the mass murder of twelve innocent Mug-gles and one wizard. Black’s audacious escape from Azkaban two years ago has led to the widest man-hunt ever conducted by the Ministry of Magic. None of us has ever questioned that he deserves to be re-captured and handed back to the dementors.

BUT DOES HE?

Startling new evidence has recently come to light that Sirius Black may not have committed the crimes for which he was sent to Azkaban. In fact, says Doris Purkiss, of 18 Acanthia Way, Little Norton, Black may not even have been present at the killings.

“What people don’t realize is that Sirius Black is a false name,” says Mrs. Purkiss. “The man people believe to be Sirius Black is actually Stubby Board-man, lead singer of the popular singing group The Hobgoblins, who retired from public life after being struck in the ear by a turnip at a concert in Little Nor-ton Church Hall nearly fifteen years ago. I recognized him the moment I saw his picture in the paper. Now, Stubby couldn’t possibly have committed those crimes, because on the day in question he happened to be enjoying a romantic candlelit dinner with me. I have written to the Minister of Magic and am expect-ing him to give Stubby, alias Sirius, a full pardon any day now.”

Harry finished reading and stared at the page in disbelief. Perhaps it was a joke, he thought, perhaps the magazine often printed spoof items. He flicked back a few pages and found the piece on Fudge.

Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, denied that he had any plans to take over the running of the Wiz-arding Bank, Gringotts, when he was elected Minister of Magic five years ago. Fudge has always insisted that he wants nothing more than to “cooperate peacefully” with the guardians of our gold.

BUT DOES HE?

Sources close to the Minister have recently dis-closed that Fudge’s dearest ambition is to seize control of the goblin gold supplies and that he will not hesitate to use force if need be.

“It wouldn’t be the first time, either,” said a Ministry insider. “Cornelius ‘Goblin-Crusher’ Fudge, that’s what his friends call him, if you could hear him when he thinks no one’s listening, oh, he’s always talking about the goblins he’s had done in; he’s had them drowned, he’s had them dropped off buildings, he’s had them poisoned, he’s had them cooked in pies. …”

Harry did not read any further. Fudge might have many faults but Harry found it extremely hard to imagine him ordering goblins to be

cooked in pies. He flicked through the rest of the magazine. Pausing every few pages he read an accusation that the Tutshill Tornados were winning the Quidditch League by a combination of blackmail, illegal broom-tampering, and torture; an interview with a wizard who claimed to have flown to the moon on a Cleansweep Six and brought back a bag of moon frogs to prove it; and an article on ancient runes, which at least explained why Luna had been reading The Quibbler up-side down. According to the magazine, if you turned the runes on their heads they revealed a spell to make your enemy's ears turn into kumquats. In fact, compared to the rest of the articles in The Quibbler, the suggestion that Sirius might really be the lead singer of The Hob-goblins was quite sensible.

"Anything good in there?" asked Ron as Harry closed the magazine.

"Of course not," said Hermione scathingly, before Harry could answer, "The Quibbler's rubbish, everyone knows that."

"Excuse me," said Luna; her voice had suddenly lost its dreamy quality. "My father's the editor."

"I — oh," said Hermione, looking embarrassed. "Well … it's got some interesting … I mean, it's quite …"

"I'll have it back, thank you," said Luna coldly, and leaning forward she snatched it out of Harry's hands. Rifling through it to page fifty-seven, she turned it resolutely upside down again and disappeared behind it, just as the compartment door opened for the third time. Harry looked around; he had expected this, but that did not make the sight of Draco Malfoy smirking at him from between his cronies Crabbe and Goyle any more enjoyable.

"What?" he said aggressively, before Malfoy could open his mouth.

"Manners, Potter, or I'll have to give you a detention," drawled Malfoy, whose sleek blond hair and pointed chin were just like his father's.

“You see, I, unlike you, have been made a prefect, which means that I, unlike you, have the power to hand out punishments.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “but you, unlike me, are a git, so get out and leave us alone.”

Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville laughed. Malfoy’s lip curled.

“Tell me, how does it feel being second-best to Weasley, Potter?” he asked.

“Shut up, Malfoy,” said Hermione sharply.

“I seem to have touched a nerve,” said Malfoy, smirking. “Well, just watch yourself, Potter, because I’ll be dogging your footsteps in case you step out of line.”

“Get out!” said Hermione, standing up.

Sniggering, Malfoy gave Harry a last malicious look and departed, Crabbe and Goyle lumbering in his wake. Hermione slammed the compartment door behind them and turned to look at Harry, who knew at once that she, like him, had registered what Malfoy had said and been just as unnerved by it.

“Chuck us another Frog,” said Ron, who had clearly noticed nothing.

Harry could not talk freely in front of Neville and Luna. He ex-changed another nervous look with Hermione and then stared out of the window.

He had thought Sirius coming with him to the station was a bit of a laugh, but suddenly it seemed reckless, if not downright dangerous. … Hermione had been right. … Sirius should not have come. What if Mr. Malfoy had noticed the black dog and told Draco, what if he had deduced that the Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks, and Moody knew where

Sirius was hiding? Or had Malfoy's use of the word "dogging" been a coincidence?

The weather remained undecided as they traveled farther and farther north. Rain spattered the windows in a halfhearted way, then the sun put in a feeble appearance before clouds drifted over it once more. When darkness fell and lamps came on inside the carriages, Luna rolled up The Quibbler, put it carefully away in her bag, and took to staring at everyone in the compartment instead.

Harry was sitting with his forehead pressed against the train win-dow, trying to get a first distant glimpse of Hogwarts, but it was a moonless night and the rain-streaked window was grimy.

"We'd better change," said Hermione at last. She and Ron pinned their prefect badges carefully to their chests. Harry saw Ron checking how it looked in the black window.

At last the train began to slow down and they heard the usual racket up and down it as everybody scrambled to get their luggage and pets assembled, ready for departure. Ron and Hermione were supposed to supervise all this; they disappeared from the carriage again, leaving Harry and the others to look after Crookshanks and Pigwidgeon.

"I'll carry that owl, if you like," said Luna to Harry, reaching out for Pigwidgeon as Neville stowed Trevor carefully in an inside pocket.

"Oh — er — thanks," said Harry, handing her the cage and hoist-ing Hedwig's more securely into his arms.

They shuffled out of the compartment feeling the first sting of the night air on their faces as they joined the crowd in the corridor. Slowly they moved toward the doors. Harry could smell the pine trees that lined the path down to the lake. He stepped down onto the platform and looked around, listening for the familiar call of "Firs' years over here … firs' years …"

But it did not come. Instead a quite different voice, a brisk female one, was calling, “First years line up over here, please! All first years to me!”

A lantern came swinging toward Harry and by its light he saw the prominent chin and severe haircut of Professor Grubbly-Plank, the witch who had taken over Hagrid’s Care of Magical Creatures lessons for a while the previous year.

“Where’s Hagrid?” he said out loud.

“I don’t know,” said Ginny, “but we’d better get out of the way, we’re blocking the door.”

“Oh yeah …”

Harry and Ginny became separated as they moved off along the platform and out through the station. Jostled by the crowd, Harry squinted through the darkness for a glimpse of Hagrid; he had to be here, Harry had been relying on it — seeing Hagrid again had been one of the things to which he had been looking forward most. But there was no sign of him at all.

He can’t have left, Harry told himself as he shuffled slowly through a narrow doorway onto the road outside with the rest of the crowd. He’s just got a cold or something. …He looked around for Ron or Hermione, wanting to know what they thought about the reappearance of Professor Grubbly-Plank, but neither of them was anywhere near him, so he allowed himself to be shunted forward onto the dark rain-washed road outside Hogsmeade station.

Here stood the hundred or so horseless stagecoaches that always took the students above first year up to the castle. Harry glanced quickly at them, turned away to keep a lookout for Ron and Hermione, then did a double take.

The coaches were no longer horseless. There were creatures standing between the carriage shafts; if he had had to give them a name, he supposed he would have called them horses, though there was some-thing reptilian about them, too. They were completely fleshless, their black coats clinging to their skeletons, of which every bone was visi-ble. Their heads were dragonish, and their pupil-less eyes white and staring. Wings sprouted from each wither — vast, black leathery wings that looked as though they ought to belong to giant bats. Standing still and quiet in the gloom, the creatures looked eerie and sinister. Harry could not understand why the coaches were being pulled by these horrible horses when they were quite capable of moving along by themselves.

"Where's Pig?" said Ron's voice, right behind Harry.

"That Luna girl was carrying him," said Harry, turning quickly, ea-ger to consult Ron about Hagrid. "Where d'you reckon —"

"— Hagrid is? I dunno," said Ron, sounding worried. "He'd better be okay. …"

A short distance away, Draco Malfoy, followed by a small gang of cronies including Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy Parkinson, was pushing some timid-looking second years out of the way so that they could get a coach to themselves. Seconds later Hermione emerged panting from the crowd.

"Malfoy was being absolutely foul to a first year back there, I swear I'm going to report him, he's only had his badge three minutes and he's using it to bully people worse than ever. … Where's Crookshanks?"

"Ginny's got him," said Harry. "There she is. …"

Ginny had just emerged from the crowd, clutching a squirming Crookshanks.

“Thanks,” said Hermione, relieving Ginny of the cat. “Come on, let’s get a carriage together before they all fill up. …”

“I haven’t got Pig yet!” Ron said, but Hermione was already head-ing off toward the nearest unoccupied coach. Harry remained behind with Ron.

“What are those things, d’you reckon?” he asked Ron, nodding at the horrible horses as the other students surged past them.

“What things?”

“Those horse —”

Luna appeared holding Pigwidgeon’s cage in her arms; the tiny owl was twittering excitedly as usual.

“Here you are,” she said. “He’s a sweet little owl, isn’t he?”

“Er … yeah … He’s all right,” said Ron gruffly. “Well, come on then, let’s get in. … what were you saying, Harry?”

“I was saying, what are those horse things?” Harry said, as he, Ron, and Luna made for the carriage in which Hermione and Ginny were already sitting.

“What horse things?”

“The horse things pulling the carriages!” said Harry impatiently; they were, after all, about three feet from the nearest one; it was watching them with empty white eyes. Ron, however, gave Harry a perplexed look.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about — look!”

Harry grabbed Ron's arm and wheeled him about so that he was face-to-face with the winged horse. Ron stared straight at it for a second, then looked back at Harry.

"What am I supposed to be looking at?"

"At the — there, between the shafts! Harnessed to the coach! It's right there in front —"

But as Ron continued to look bemused, a strange thought occurred to Harry.

"Can't … can't you see them?"

"See what?"

"Can't you see what's pulling the carriages?"

Ron looked seriously alarmed now.

"Are you feeling all right, Harry?"

"I … yeah …"

Harry felt utterly bewildered. The horse was there in front of him, gleaming solidly in the dim light issuing from the station windows behind them, vapor rising from its nostrils in the chilly night air. Yet unless Ron was faking — and it was a very feeble joke if he was — Ron could not see it at all.

"Shall we get in, then?" said Ron uncertainly, looking at Harry as though worried about him.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah, go on …"

"It's all right," said a dreamy voice from beside Harry as Ron vanished into the coach's dark interior. "You're not going mad or anything. I can see them too."

“Can you?” said Harry desperately, turning to Luna. He could see the bat-winged horses reflected in her wide, silvery eyes.

“Oh yes,” said Luna, “I’ve been able to see them ever since my first day here. They’ve always pulled the carriages. Don’t worry. You’re just as sane as I am.”

Smiling faintly, she climbed into the musty interior of the carriage after Ron. Not altogether reassured, Harry followed her.

Chapter 11 The Sorting Hat's New Song

Harry did not want to tell the others that he and Luna were having the same hallucination, if that was what it was, so he said nothing about the horses as he sat down inside the carriage and slammed the door behind him. Nevertheless, he could not help watching the silhouettes of the horses moving beyond the window.

“Did everyone see that Grubbly-Plank woman?” asked Ginny. “What’s she doing back here? Hagrid can’t have left, can he?”

“I’ll be quite glad if he has,” said Luna. “He isn’t a very good teacher, is he?”

“Yes, he is!” said Harry, Ron, and Ginny angrily.

Harry glared at Hermione; she cleared her throat and quickly said, “Erm … yes … he’s very good.”

“Well, we think he’s a bit of a joke in Ravenclaw,” said Luna, unfazed.

“You’ve got a rubbish sense of humor then,” Ron snapped, as the wheels below them creaked into motion.

Luna did not seem perturbed by Ron’s rudeness; on the contrary, she simply watched him for a while as though he were a mildly interesting television program.

Rattling and swaying, the carriages moved in convoy up the road. When they passed between the tall stone pillars topped with winged boars on either side of the gates to the school grounds, Harry leaned forward to try and see whether there were any lights on in Hagrid’s cabin by the Forbidden Forest, but the grounds were in complete darkness. Hogwarts Castle, however, loomed ever closer: a towering mass of turrets, jet-black against the dark sky, here and there a window blazing fiery bright above them.

The carriages jingled to a halt near the stone steps leading up to the oak front doors and Harry got out of the carriage first. He turned again to look for lit windows down by the forest, but there was defi-nitely no sign of life within Hagrid's cabin. Unwillingly, because he had half hoped they would have vanished, he turned his eyes instead upon the strange, skeletal creatures standing quietly in the chill night air, their blank white eyes gleaming.

Harry had once before had the experience of seeing something that Ron could not, but that had been a reflection in a mirror, something much more insubstantial than a hundred very solid-looking beasts strong enough to pull a fleet of carriages. If Luna was to be believed, the beasts had always been there but invisible; why, then, could Harry suddenly see them, and why could Ron not?

"Are you coming or what?" said Ron beside him.

"Oh … yeah," said Harry quickly, and they joined the crowd hur-rying up the stone steps into the castle.

The entrance hall was ablaze with torches and echoing with foot-steps as the students crossed the flagged stone floor for the double doors to the right, leading to the Great Hall and the start-of-term feast.

The four long House tables in the Great Hall were filling up under the starless black ceiling, which was just like the sky they could glimpse through the high windows. Candles floated in midair all along the tables, illuminating the silvery ghosts who were dotted about the Hall and the faces of the students talking eagerly to one an-other, exchanging summer news, shouting greetings at friends from other Houses, eyeing one another's new haircuts and robes. Again Harry noticed people putting their heads together to whisper as he passed; he gritted his teeth and tried to act as though he neither no-ticed nor cared.

Luna drifted away from them at the Ravenclaw table. The moment they reached Gryffindor's, Ginny was hailed by some fellow fourth

years and left to sit with them; Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville found seats together about halfway down the table between Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor House ghost, and Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, the last two of whom gave Harry airy, overly friendly greetings that made him quite sure they had stopped talking about him a split second before. He had more important things to worry about, however: He was looking over the students' heads to the staff table that ran along the top wall of the Hall.

"He's not there."

Ron and Hermione scanned the staff table too, though there was no real need; Hagrid's size made him instantly obvious in any lineup.

"He can't have left," said Ron, sounding slightly anxious.

"Of course he hasn't," said Harry firmly.

"You don't think he's … hurt, or anything, do you?" said Hermione uneasily.

"No," said Harry at once.

"But where is he, then?"

There was a pause, then Harry said very quietly, so that Neville, Parvati, and Lavender could not hear, "Maybe he's not back yet. You know — from his mission — the thing he was doing over the sum-mer for Dumbledore."

"Yeah … yeah, that'll be it," said Ron, sounding reassured, but Hermione bit her lip, looking up and down the staff table as though hoping for some conclusive explanation of Hagrid's absence.

"Who's that?" she said sharply, pointing toward the middle of the staff table.

Harry's eyes followed hers. They lit first upon Professor Dumble-dore, sitting in his high-backed golden chair at the center of the long staff table, wearing deep-purple robes scattered with silvery stars and a matching hat. Dumbledore's head was inclined toward the woman sitting next to him, who was talking into his ear. She looked, Harry thought, like somebody's maiden aunt: squat, with short, curly, mouse-brown hair in which she had placed a horrible pink Alice band that matched the fluffy pink cardigan she wore over her robes. Then she turned her face slightly to take a sip from her goblet and he saw, with a shock of recognition, a pallid, toadlike face and a pair of prominent, pouchy eyes.

"It's that Umbridge woman!"

"Who?" said Hermione.

"She was at my hearing, she works for Fudge!"

"Nice cardigan," said Ron, smirking.

"She works for Fudge?" Hermione repeated, frowning. "What on earth's she doing here, then?"

"Dunno …"

Hermione scanned the staff table, her eyes narrowed.

"No," she muttered, "no, surely not …"

Harry did not understand what she was talking about but did not ask; his attention had just been caught by Professor Grubbly-Plank who had just appeared behind the staff table; she worked her way along to the very end and took the seat that ought to have been Ha-grid's. That meant that the first years must have crossed the lake and reached the castle, and sure enough, a few seconds later, the doors from the entrance hall opened. A long line of scared-looking first years entered, led by Professor McGonagall, who was carrying a

stool on which sat an ancient wizard's hat, heavily patched and darned with a wide rip near the frayed brim.

The buzz of talk in the Great Hall faded away. The first years lined up in front of the staff table facing the rest of the students, and Professor McGonagall placed the stool carefully in front of them, then stood back.

The first years' faces glowed palely in the candlelight. A small boy right in the middle of the row looked as though he was trembling. Harry recalled, fleetingly, how terrified he had felt when he had stood there, waiting for the unknown test that would determine to which House he belonged.

The whole school waited with bated breath. Then the rip near the hat's brim opened wide like a mouth and the Sorting Hat burst into song:In times of old when I was newAnd Hogwarts barely started

The founders of our noble schoolThought never to be parted:

United by a common goal,

They had the selfsame yearning,To make the world's best magic schoolAnd pass along their learning.

"Together we will build and teach!"

The four good friends decided

And never did they dream that theyMight someday be divided,

For were there such friends anywhereAs Slytherin and Gryffndor?

Unless it was the second pair

Of Huffepuff and Ravenclaw?

So how could it have gone so wrong?

How could such friendships fail?

Why, I was there and so can tellThe whole sad, sorry tale.

Said Slytherin, “We’ll teach just thoseWhose ancestry is purest.”

Said Ravenclaw, “We’ll teach those whoseIntelligence is surest.”

Said Gryffindor, “We’ll teach all thoseWith brave deeds to their name,”

Said Hufflepuff, “I’ll teach the lot,And treat them just the same.”

These differences caused little strifeWhen first they came to light,For each of the four founders hadA House in which they might

Take only those they wanted, so,For instance, Slytherin

Took only pure-blood wizards

Of great cunning, just like him,And only those of sharpest mindWere taught by Ravenclaw

While the bravest and the boldestWent to daring Gryffindor.

Good Hufflepuff she took the rest,And taught them all she knew,

Thus the Houses and their foundersRetained friendships firm and true.

So Hogwarts worked in harmony

For several happy years,

But then discord crept among usFeeding on our faults and fears.

The Houses that, like pillars four,Had once held up our school,

Now turned upon each other and,Divided, sought to rule.

And for a while it seemed the schoolMust meet an early end,

What with dueling and with fightingAnd the clash of friend on friendAnd at last there came a morningWhen old Slytherin departed

And though the fighting then died outHe left us quite downhearted.

And never since the founders fourWere whittled down to three

Have the Houses been united

As they once were meant to be.

And now the Sorting Hat is hereAnd you all know the score:

I sort you into Houses

Because that is what I'm for,But this year I'll go further,Listen closely to my song:

Though condemned I am to split youStill I worry that it's wrong,Though I must fulfill my duty

And must quarter every year

Still I wonder whether sortingMay not bring the end I fear.

Oh, know the perils, read the signs,The warning history shows,

For our Hogwarts is in danger

From external, deadly foes

And we must unite inside her

Or we'll crumble from within.

I have told you, I have warned you. …Let the Sorting now begin.

The hat became motionless once more; applause broke out, though it was punctured, for the first time in Harry's memory, with mutter-ing and whispers. All across the Great Hall students were exchanging remarks with their neighbors and Harry, clapping along with every-one else, knew exactly what they were talking about.

"Branched out a bit this year, hasn't it?" said Ron, his eyebrows raised.

"Too right it has," said Harry.

The Sorting Hat usually confined itself to describing the different qualities looked for by each of the four Hogwarts Houses and its own role in sorting them; Harry could not remember it ever trying to give the school advice before.

"I wonder if it's ever given warnings before?" said Hermione, sounding slightly anxious.

"Yes, indeed," said Nearly Headless Nick knowledgeably, leaning across Neville toward her (Neville winced, it was very uncomfortable to have a ghost lean through you). "The hat feels itself honor-bound to give the school due warning whenever it feels —"

But Professor McGonagall, who was waiting to read out the list of first years' names, was giving the whispering students the sort of look that scorches. Nearly Headless Nick placed a see-through finger to his lips and sat primly upright again as the muttering came to an abrupt end. With a last frowning look that swept the four House tables, Pro-fessor McGonagall lowered her eyes to her long piece of parchment and called out,"Abercrombie, Euan."

The terrified-looking boy Harry had noticed earlier stumbled forward and put the hat on his head; it was only prevented from falling right down to his shoulders by his very prominent ears. The hat considered

for a moment, then the rip near the brim opened again and shouted, “GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry clapped loudly with the rest of Gryffindor House as Euan Abercrombie staggered to their table and sat down, looking as though he would like very much to sink through the floor and never be looked at again.

Slowly the long line of first years thinned; in the pauses between the names and the Sorting Hat’s decisions, Harry could hear Ron’s stomach rumbling loudly. Finally, “Zeller, Rose” was sorted into Hufflepuff, and Professor McGonagall picked up the hat and stool and marched them away as Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet.

Harry was somehow soothed to see Dumbledore standing before them all, whatever his recent bitter feelings toward his headmaster. Between the absence of Hagrid and the presence of those dragonish horses, he had felt that his return to Hogwarts, so long anticipated, was full of unexpected surprises like jarring notes in a familiar song. But this, at least, was how it was supposed to be: their headmaster ris-ing to greet them all before the start-of-term feast.

“To our newcomers,” said Dumbledore in a ringing voice, his arms stretched wide and a beaming smile on his lips, “welcome! To our old hands — welcome back! There is a time for speech making, but this is not it. Tuck in!”

There was an appreciative laugh and an outbreak of applause as Dum-bledore sat down neatly and threw his long beard over his shoulder so as to keep it out of the way of his plate — for food had appeared out of nowhere, so that the five long tables were groaning under joints and pies and dishes of vegetables, bread, sauces, and flagons of pumpkin juice.

“Excellent,” said Ron, with a kind of groan of longing, and he seized the nearest plate of chops and began piling them onto his plate, watched wistfully by Nearly Headless Nick.

“What were you saying before the Sorting?” Hermione asked the ghost. “About the hat giving warnings?”

“Oh yes,” said Nick, who seemed glad of a reason to turn away from Ron, who was now eating roast potatoes with almost indecent enthusiasm. “Yes, I have heard the hat give several warnings before, always at times when it detects periods of great danger for the school. And always, of course, its advice is the same: Stand together, be strong from within.”

“Ow kunnit nofe skusin danger ifzat?” said Ron.

His mouth was so full Harry thought it was quite an achievement for him to make any noise at all.

“I beg your pardon?” said Nearly Headless Nick politely, while Hermione looked revolted. Ron gave an enormous swallow and said, “How can it know if the school’s in danger if it’s a hat?”

“I have no idea,” said Nearly Headless Nick. “Of course, it lives in Dumbledore’s office, so I daresay it picks things up there.”

“And it wants all the Houses to be friends?” said Harry, looking over at the Slytherin table, where Draco Malfoy was holding court. “Fat chance.”

“Well, now, you shouldn’t take that attitude,” said Nick reprovingly. “Peaceful cooperation, that’s the key. We ghosts, though we belong to separate Houses, maintain links of friendship. In spite of the competitiveness between Gryffindor and Slytherin, I would never dream of seeking an argument with the Bloody Baron.”

“Only because you’re terrified of him,” said Ron.

Nearly Headless Nick looked highly affronted.

“Terrified? I hope I, Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, have never been guilty of cowardice in my life! The noble blood that runs in my veins —”

“What blood?” asked Ron. “Surely you haven’t still got — ?”

“It’s a figure of speech!” said Nearly Headless Nick, now so annoyed his head was trembling ominously on his partially severed neck. “I assume I am still allowed to enjoy the use of whichever words I like, even if the pleasures of eating and drinking are denied me! But I am quite used to students poking fun at my death, I assure you!”

“Nick, he wasn’t really laughing at you!” said Hermione, throwing a furious look at Ron.

Unfortunately, Ron’s mouth was packed to exploding point again and all he could manage was “node iddum eentup sechew,” which Nick did not seem to think constituted an adequate apology. Rising into the air, he straightened his feathered hat and swept away from them to the other end of the table, coming to rest between the Creevey brothers, Colin and Dennis.

“Well done, Ron,” snapped Hermione.

“What?” said Ron indignantly, having managed, finally, to swallow his food. “I’m not allowed to ask a simple question?”

“Oh forget it,” said Hermione irritably, and the pair of them spent the rest of the meal in huffy silence.

Harry was too used to their bickering to bother trying to reconcile them; he felt it was a better use of his time to eat his way steadily through his steak-and-kidney pie, then a large plateful of his favorite treacle tart.

When all the students had finished eating and the noise level in the hall was starting to creep upward again, Dumbledore got to his feet

once more. Talking ceased immediately as all turned to face the headmaster. Harry was feeling pleasantly drowsy now. His four-poster bed was waiting somewhere above, wonderfully warm and soft. …“Well, now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast, I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices,” said Dumbledore. “First years ought to know that the forest in the grounds is out of bounds to students — and a few of our older students ought to know by now too.” (Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged smirks.)“Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me, for what he tells me is the four hundred and sixty-second time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes, nor are a number of other things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr. Filch’s office door.

“We have had two changes in staffing this year. We are very pleased to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be taking Care of Magical Creatures lessons; we are also delighted to introduce Profes-sor Umbridge, our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

There was a round of polite but fairly unenthusiastic applause dur-ing which Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged slightly panicked looks; Dumbledore had not said for how long Grubbly-Plank would be teaching.

Dumbledore continued, “Tryouts for the House Quidditch teams will take place on the —”

He broke off, looking inquiringly at Professor Umbridge. As she was not much taller standing than sitting, there was a moment when nobody understood why Dumbledore had stopped talking, but then Professor Umbridge said, “Hem, hem,” and it became clear that she had got to her feet and was intending to make a speech.

Dumbledore only looked taken aback for a moment, then he sat back down smartly and looked alertly at Professor Umbridge as though he

desired nothing better than to listen to her talk. Other members of staff were not as adept at hiding their surprise. Professor Sprout's eyebrows had disappeared into her flyaway hair, and Profes-sor McGonagall's mouth was as thin as Harry had ever seen it. No new teacher had ever interrupted Dumbledore before. Many of the students were smirking; this woman obviously did not know how things were done at Hogwarts.

"Thank you, Headmaster," Professor Umbridge simpered, "for those kind words of welcome."

Her voice was high-pitched, breathy, and little-girlish and again, Harry felt a powerful rush of dislike that he could not explain to him-self; all he knew was that he loathed everything about her, from her stupid voice to her fluffy pink cardigan. She gave another little throat-clearing cough ("Hem, hem") and continued: "Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say!" She smiled, revealing very pointed teeth. "And to see such happy little faces looking back at me!"

Harry glanced around. None of the faces he could see looked happy; on the contrary, they all looked rather taken aback at being addressed as though they were five years old.

"I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all, and I'm sure we'll be very good friends!"

Students exchanged looks at this; some of them were barely con-cealing grins.

"I'll be her friend as long as I don't have to borrow that cardigan," Parvati whispered to Lavender, and both of them lapsed into silent giggles.

Professor Umbridge cleared her throat again ("Hem, hem"), but when she continued, some of the breathiness had vanished from her voice. She sounded much more businesslike and now her words had a dull learned-by-heart sound to them.

“The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the Wiz-arding community must be passed down through the generations lest we lose them forever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished, and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching.”

Professor Umbridge paused here and made a little bow to her fellow staff members, none of whom bowed back. Professor McGona-gall’s dark eyebrows had contracted so that she looked positively hawklike, and Harry distinctly saw her exchange a significant glance with Professor Sprout as Umbridge gave another little “Hem, hem” and went on with her speech.

“Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be, for without progress there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress’s sake must be discour-aged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation …”

Harry found his attentiveness ebbing, as though his brain was slip-ping in and out of tune. The quiet that always filled the Hall when Dumbledore was speaking was breaking up as students put their heads together, whispering and giggling. Over at the Ravenclaw table, Cho Chang was chatting animatedly with her friends. A few seats along from Cho, Luna Lovegood had got out The Quibbler again. Mean-while at the Hufflepuff table, Ernie Macmillan was one of the few still staring at Professor Umbridge, but he was glassy-eyed and Harry was sure he was only pretending to listen in an attempt to live up to the new prefect’s badge gleaming on his chest.

Professor Umbridge did not seem to notice the restlessness of her audience. Harry had the impression that a full-scale riot could have broken out under her nose and she would have plowed on with her speech. The teachers, however, were still listening very attentively, and Hermione seemed to be drinking in every word Umbridge spoke, though judging by her expression, they were not at all to her taste.

"… because some changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognized as errors of judgment. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness, and account-ability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited."

She sat down. Dumbledore clapped. The staff followed his lead, though Harry noticed that several of them brought their hands to-gether only once or twice before stopping. A few students joined in, but most had been taken unawares by the end of the speech, not hav-ing listened to more than a few words of it, and before they could start applauding properly, Dumbledore had stood up again.

"Thank you very much, Professor Umbridge, that was most illuminating," he said, bowing to her. "Now — as I was saying, Quidditch tryouts will be held …"

"Yes, it certainly was illuminating," said Hermione in a low voice.

"You're not telling me you enjoyed it?" Ron said quietly, turning a glazed face upon Hermione. "That was about the dullest speech I've ever heard, and I grew up with Percy."

"I said illuminating, not enjoyable," said Hermione. "It explained a lot."

"Did it?" said Harry in surprise. "Sounded like a load of waffle to me."

"There was some important stuff hidden in the waffle," said Hermione grimly.

"Was there?" said Ron blankly.

"How about 'progress for progress's sake must be discouraged'? How about 'pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited'?"

"Well, what does that mean?" said Ron impatiently.

"I'll tell you what it means," said Hermione ominously. "It means the Ministry's interfering at Hogwarts."

There was a great clattering and banging all around them; Dumbledore had obviously just dismissed the school, because everyone was standing up ready to leave the Hall. Hermione jumped up, looking flustered.

"Ron, we're supposed to show the first years where to go!"

"Oh yeah," said Ron, who had obviously forgotten. "Hey — hey you lot! Midgets!"

"Ron!"

"Well, they are, they're titchy. …"

"I know, but you can't call them midgets. … First years!" Hermione called commandingly along the table. "This way, please!"

A group of new students walked shyly up the gap between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, all of them trying hard not to lead the group. They did indeed seem very small; Harry was sure he had not appeared that young when he had arrived here. He grinned at them. A blond boy next to Euan Abercrombie looked petrified, nudged Euan, and whispered something in his ear. Euan Abercrombie looked

equally frightened and stole a horrified look at Harry, who felt the grin slide off his face like Stinksap.

“See you later,” he said to Ron and Hermione and he made his way out of the Great Hall alone, doing everything he could to ignore more whispering, staring, and pointing as he passed. He kept his eyes fixed ahead as he wove his way through the crowd in the entrance hall, then he hurried up the marble staircase, took a couple of concealed short-cuts, and had soon left most of the crowds behind.

He had been stupid not to expect this, he thought angrily, as he walked through much emptier upstairs corridors. Of course everyone was staring at him: He had emerged from the Triwizard maze two months ago clutching the dead body of a fellow student and claiming to have seen Lord Voldemort return to power. There had not been time last term to explain himself before everyone went home, even if he had felt up to giving the whole school a detailed account of the terrible events in that graveyard.

He had reached the end of the corridor to the Gryffindor common room and had come to a halt in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady before he realized that he did not know the new password.

“Er …” he said glumly, staring up at the Fat Lady, who smoothed the folds of her pink satin dress and looked sternly back at him.

“No password, no entrance,” she said loftily.

“Harry, I know it!” someone panted from behind him, and he turned to see Neville jogging toward him. “Guess what it is? I’m actu-ally going to be able to remember it for once —” He waved the stunted little cactus he had shown them on the train. “Mimbulus mimbletonia!”

“Correct,” said the Fat Lady, and her portrait swung open toward them like a door, revealing a circular hole in the wall behind, through which Harry and Neville now climbed.

The Gryffindor common room looked as welcoming as ever, a cozy circular tower room full of dilapidated squashy armchairs and rickety old tables. A fire was crackling merrily in the grate and a few people were warming their hands before going up to their dormitories; on the other side of the room Fred and George Weasley were pinning something up on the notice board. Harry waved good night to them and headed straight for the door to the boys' dormitories; he was not in much of a mood for talking at the moment. Neville followed him.

Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan had reached the dormitory first and were in the process of covering the walls beside their beds with posters and photographs. They had been talking as Harry pushed open the door but stopped abruptly the moment they saw him. Harry wondered whether they had been talking about him, then whether he was being paranoid.

"Hi," he said, moving across to his own trunk and opening it.

"Hey, Harry," said Dean, who was putting on a pair of pajamas in the West Ham colors. "Good holiday?"

"Not bad," muttered Harry, as a true account of his holiday would have taken most of the night to relate and he could not face it. "You?"

"Yeah, it was okay," chuckled Dean. "Better than Seamus's anyway, he was just telling me."

"Why, what happened, Seamus?" Neville asked as he placed his Mimbulus mimbletonia tenderly on his bedside cabinet.

Seamus did not answer immediately; he was making rather a meal of ensuring that his poster of the Kenmare Kestrels Quidditch team was quite straight. Then he said, with his back still turned to Harry, "Me mam didn't want me to come back."

"What?" said Harry, pausing in the act of pulling off his robes.

“She didn’t want me to come back to Hogwarts.”

Seamus turned away from his poster and pulled his own pajamas out of his trunk, still not looking at Harry.

“But — why?” said Harry, astonished. He knew that Seamus’s mother was a witch and could not understand, therefore, why she should have come over so Dursley-ish.

Seamus did not answer until he had finished buttoning his pajamas.

“Well,” he said in a measured voice, “I suppose … because of you.”

“What d’you mean?” said Harry quickly. His heart was beating rather fast. He felt vaguely as though something was closing in on him.

“Well,” said Seamus again, still avoiding Harry’s eyes, “she … er … well, it’s not just you, it’s Dumbledore too …”

“She believes the Daily Prophet?” said Harry. “She thinks I’m a liar and Dumbledore’s an old fool?”

Seamus looked up at him. “Yeah, something like that.”

Harry said nothing. He threw his wand down onto his bedside table, pulled off his robes, stuffed them angrily into his trunk, and pulled on his pajamas. He was sick of it; sick of being the person who was stared at and talked about all the time. If any of them knew, if any of them had the faintest idea what it felt like to be the one all these things had happened to … Mrs. Finnigan had no idea, the stupid woman, he thought savagely.

He got into bed and made to pull the hangings closed around him, but before he could do so, Seamus said, “Look … what did happen that night when … you know, when … with Cedric Diggory and all?”

Seamus sounded nervous and eager at the same time. Dean, who had been bending over his trunk, trying to retrieve a slipper, went oddly still and Harry knew he was listening hard.

“What are you asking me for?” Harry retorted. “Just read the Daily Prophet like your mother, why don’t you? That’ll tell you all you need to know.”

“Don’t you have a go at my mother,” snapped Seamus.

“I’ll have a go at anyone who calls me a liar,” said Harry.

“Don’t talk to me like that!”

“I’ll talk to you how I want,” said Harry, his temper rising so fast he snatched his wand back from his bedside table. “If you’ve got a problem sharing a dormitory with me, go and ask McGonagall if you can be moved, stop your mummy worrying —”

“Leave my mother out of this, Potter!”

“What’s going on?”

Ron had appeared in the doorway. His wide eyes traveled from Harry, who was kneeling on his bed with his wand pointing at Seamus, to Seamus, who was standing there with his fists raised.

“He’s having a go at my mother!” Seamus yelled.

“What?” said Ron. “Harry wouldn’t do that — we met your mother, we liked her. …”

“That’s before she started believing every word the stinking Daily Prophet writes about me!” said Harry at the top of his voice.

“Oh,” said Ron, comprehension dawning across his freckled face. “Oh … right.”

“You know what?” said Seamus heatedly, casting Harry a venomous look. “He’s right, I don’t want to share a dormitory with him any-more, he’s a madman.”

“That’s out of order, Seamus,” said Ron, whose ears were starting to glow red, always a danger sign.

“Out of order, am I?” shouted Seamus, who in contrast with Ron was turning paler. “You believe all the rubbish he’s come out with about You-Know-Who, do you, you reckon he’s telling the truth?”

“Yeah, I do!” said Ron angrily.

“Then you’re mad too,” said Seamus in disgust.

“Yeah? Well unfortunately for you, pal, I’m also a prefect!” said Ron, jabbing himself in the chest with a finger. “So unless you want detention, watch your mouth!”

Seamus looked for a few seconds as though detention would be a reasonable price to pay to say what was going through his mind; but with a noise of contempt he turned on his heel, vaulted into bed, and pulled the hangings shut with such violence that they were ripped from the bed and fell in a dusty pile to the floor. Ron glared at Seamus, then looked at Dean and Neville.

“Anyone else’s parents got a problem with Harry?” he said aggressively.

“My parents are Muggles, mate,” said Dean, shrugging. “They don’t know nothing about no deaths at Hogwarts, because I’m not stupid enough to tell them.”

“You don’t know my mother, she’ll weasel anything out of anyone!” Seamus snapped at him. “Anyway, your parents don’t get the Daily Prophet, they don’t know our headmaster’s been sacked from the

Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards because he's losing his marbles —"

"My gran says that's rubbish," piped up Neville. "She says it's the Daily Prophet that's going downhill, not Dumbledore. She's canceled our subscription. We believe Harry," he said simply. He climbed into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin, looking owlishly over them at Seamus. "My gran's always said You-Know-Who would come back one day. She says if Dumbledore says he's back, he's back."

Harry felt a rush of gratitude toward Neville. Nobody else said anything. Seamus got out his wand, repaired the bed hangings, and vanished behind them. Dean got into bed, rolled over, and fell silent. Neville, who appeared to have nothing more to say either, was gazing fondly at his moonlit cactus.

Harry lay back on his pillows while Ron bustled around the next bed, putting his things away. He felt shaken by the argument with Seamus, whom he had always liked very much. How many more peo-ple were going to suggest that he was lying or unhinged?

Chapter 12 Professor Umbridge

Seamus dressed at top speed next morning and left the dormitory before Harry had even put on his socks.

“Does he think he’ll turn into a nutter if he stays in a room with me too long?” asked Harry loudly, as the hem of Seamus’s robes whipped out of sight.

“Don’t worry about it, Harry,” Dean muttered, hoisting his school-bag onto his shoulder. “He’s just …” But apparently he was unable to say exactly what Seamus was, and after a slightly awkward pause followed him out of the room.

Neville and Ron both gave Harry it’s-his-problem-not-yours looks, but Harry was not much consoled. How much more of this was he going to have to take?

“What’s the matter?” asked Hermione five minutes later, catching up with Harry and Ron halfway across the common room as they all headed toward breakfast. “You look absolutely — oh for heaven’s sake.”

She was staring at the common room notice board, where a large new sign had been put up.

GALLONS OF GALLEONS!

Pocket money failing to keep pace with your outgoings?

Like to earn a little extra gold?

———————————————————Contact Fred and George Weasley,Gryffindor common room,

for simple, part-time, virtually painless jobs(WE REGRET THAT ALL WORK IS UNDERTAKEN AT APPLICANT'S OWN RISK)"They are the limit," said Hermione grimly, taking down the sign, which Fred and George had pinned up over a poster giving the date of the first Hogsmeade weekend in October. "We'll have to talk to them, Ron."

Ron looked positively alarmed.

"Why?"

"Because we're prefects!" said Hermione, as they climbed out through the portrait hole. "It's up to us to stop this kind of thing!"

Ron said nothing; Harry could tell from his glum expression that the prospect of stopping Fred and George doing exactly what they liked was not one that he found inviting.

"Anyway, what's up, Harry?" Hermione continued, as they walked down a flight of stairs lined with portraits of old witches and wizards, all of whom ignored them, being engrossed in their own conversation. "You look really angry about something."

"Seamus reckons Harry's lying about You-Know-Who," said Ron succinctly, when Harry did not respond.

Hermione, whom Harry had expected to react angrily on his behalf, sighed.

"Yes, Lavender thinks so too," she said gloomily.

"Been having a nice little chat with her about whether or not I'm a lying, attention-seeking prat, have you?" Harry said loudly.

"No," said Hermione calmly, "I told her to keep her big fat mouth shut about you, actually. And it would be quite nice if you stopped jumping down Ron's and my throats, Harry, because if you haven't noticed, we're on your side."

There was a short pause.

“Sorry,” said Harry in a low voice.

“That’s quite all right,” said Hermione with dignity. Then she shook her head. “Don’t you remember what Dumbledore said at the end-of-term feast last year?”

Harry and Ron both looked at her blankly, and Hermione sighed again.

“About You-Know-Who. He said, ‘His gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust —’ ”

“How do you remember stuff like that?” asked Ron, looking at her in admiration.

“I listen, Ron,” said Hermione with a touch of asperity.

“So do I, but I still couldn’t tell you exactly what —”

“The point,” Hermione pressed on loudly, “is that this sort of thing is exactly what Dumbledore was talking about. You-Know-Who’s only been back two months, and we’ve started fighting among our-selves. And the Sorting Hat’s warning was the same — stand together, be united —”

“And Harry said it last night,” retorted Ron, “if that means we’re supposed to get matey with the Slytherins, fat chance.”

“Well, I think it’s a pity we’re not trying for a bit of inter-House unity,” said Hermione crossly.

They had reached the foot of the marble staircase. A line of fourth-year Ravenclaws was crossing the entrance hall; they caught sight of

Harry and hurried to form a tighter group, as though frightened he might attack stragglers.

“Yeah, we really ought to be trying to make friends with people like that,” said Harry sarcastically.

They followed the Ravenclaws into the Great Hall, looking in-stinctively at the staff table as they entered. Professor Grubbly-Plank was chatting to Professor Sinistra, the Astronomy teacher, and Hagrid was once again conspicuous only by his absence. The enchanted ceil-ing above them echoed Harry’s mood; it was a miserable rain-cloud gray.

“Dumbledore didn’t even mention how long that Grubbly-Plank woman’s staying,” he said, as they made their way across to the Gryffindor table.

“Maybe …” said Hermione thoughtfully.

“What?” said both Harry and Ron together.

“Well … maybe he didn’t want to draw attention to Hagrid not being here.”

“What d’you mean, draw attention to it?” said Ron, half laughing. “How could we not notice?”

Before Hermione could answer, a tall black girl with long, braided hair had marched up to Harry.

“Hi, Angelina.”

“Hi,” she said briskly, “good summer?” And without waiting for an answer, “Listen, I’ve been made Gryffindor Quidditch Captain.”

“Nice one,” said Harry, grinning at her; he suspected Angelina’s pep talks might not be as long-winded as Oliver Wood’s had been, which

could only be an improvement.

“Yeah, well, we need a new Keeper now Oliver’s left. Tryouts are on Friday at five o’clock and I want the whole team there, all right? Then we can see how the new person’ll fit in.”

“Okay,” said Harry, and she smiled at him and departed.

“I’d forgotten Wood had left,” said Hermione vaguely, sitting down beside Ron and pulling a plate of toast toward her. “I suppose that will make quite a difference to the team?”

“I s’pose,” said Harry, taking the bench opposite. “He was a good Keeper. …”

“Still, it won’t hurt to have some new blood, will it?” said Ron.

With a whoosh and a clatter, hundreds of owls came soaring in through the upper windows. They descended all over the Hall, bringing letters and packages to their owners and showering the breakfasters with droplets of water; it was clearly raining hard outside. Hedwig was nowhere to be seen, but Harry was hardly surprised; his only corre-spondent was Sirius, and he doubted Sirius would have anything new to tell him after only twenty-four hours apart. Hermione, however, had to move her orange juice aside quickly to make way for a large damp barn owl bearing a sodden Daily Prophet in its beak.

“What are you still getting that for?” said Harry irritably, thinking of Seamus, as Hermione placed a Knut in the leather pouch on the owl’s leg and it took off again. “I’m not bothering … load of rubbish.”

“It’s best to know what the enemy are saying,” said Hermione darkly, and she unfurled the newspaper and disappeared behind it, not emerging until Harry and Ron had finished eating.

"Nothing," she said simply, rolling up the newspaper and laying it down by her plate. "Nothing about you or Dumbledore or anything."

Professor McGonagall was now moving along the table handing out schedules.

"Look at today!" groaned Ron. "History of Magic, double Potions, Divination, and double Defense Against the Dark Arts … Binns, Snape, Trelawney, and that Umbridge woman all in one day! I wish Fred and George'd hurry up and get those Skiving Snackboxes sorted. …"

"Do mine ears deceive me?" said Fred, arriving with George and squeezing onto the bench beside Harry. "Hogwarts prefects surely don't wish to skive off lessons?"

"Look what we've got today," said Ron grumpily, shoving his schedule under Fred's nose. "That's the worst Monday I've ever seen."

"Fair point, little bro," said Fred, scanning the column. "You can have a bit of Nosebleed Nougat cheap if you like."

"Why's it cheap?" said Ron suspiciously.

"Because you'll keep bleeding till you shrivel up, we haven't got an antidote yet," said George, helping himself to a kipper.

"Cheers," said Ron moodily, pocketing his schedule, "but I think I'll take the lessons."

"And speaking of your Skiving Snackboxes," said Hermione, eyeing Fred and George beadily, "you can't advertise for testers on the Gryffindor notice board."

"Says who?" said George, looking astonished.

"Says me," said Hermione. "And Ron."

“Leave me out of it,” said Ron hastily.

Hermione glared at him. Fred and George sniggered.

“You’ll be singing a different tune soon enough, Hermione,” said Fred, thickly buttering a crumpet. “You’re starting your fifth year, you’ll be begging us for a Snackbox before long.”

“And why would starting fifth year mean I want a Skiving Snack-box?” asked Hermione.

“Fifth year’s O.W.L. year,” said George.

“So?”

“So you’ve got your exams coming up, haven’t you? They’ll be keep-ing your noses so hard to that grindstone they’ll be rubbed raw,” said Fred with satisfaction.

“Half our year had minor breakdowns coming up to O.W.L.s,” said George happily. “Tears and tantrums … Patricia Stimpson kept com-ing over faint. …”

“Kenneth Towler came out in boils, d’you remember?” said Fred reminiscently.

“That’s ’cause you put Bulbadox Powder in his pajamas,” said George.

“Oh yeah,” said Fred, grinning. “I’d forgotten. … Hard to keep track sometimes, isn’t it?”

“Anyway, it’s a nightmare of a year, the fifth,” said George. “If you care about exam results anyway. Fred and I managed to keep our spir-its up somehow.”

“Yeah … you got, what was it, three O.W.L.s each?” said Ron.

“Yep,” said Fred unconcernedly. “But we feel our futures lie outside the world of academic achievement.”

“We seriously debated whether we were going to bother coming back for our seventh year,” said George brightly, “now that we’ve got —”

He broke off at a warning look from Harry, who knew George had been about to mention the Triwizard winnings he had given them.

“— now that we’ve got our O.W.L.s,” George said hastily. “I mean, do we really need N.E.W.T.s? But we didn’t think Mum could take us leaving school early, not on top of Percy turning out to be the world’s biggest prat.”

“We’re not going to waste our last year here, though,” said Fred, looking affectionately around at the Great Hall. “We’re going to use it to do a bit of market research, find out exactly what the average Hogwarts student requires from his joke shop, carefully evaluate the results of our research, and then produce the products to fit the demand.”

“But where are you going to get the gold to start a joke shop?” asked Hermione skeptically. “You’re going to need all the ingredients and materials — and premises too, I suppose. …”

Harry did not look at the twins. His face felt hot; he deliberately dropped his fork and dived down to retrieve it. He heard Fred say overhead, “Ask us no questions and we’ll tell you no lies, Hermione. C’mon, George, if we get there early we might be able to sell a few Ex-tendable Ears before Herbology.”

Harry emerged from under the table to see Fred and George walk-ing away, each carrying a stack of toast.

“What did that mean?” said Hermione, looking from Harry to Ron. “ ‘Ask us no questions …’ Does that mean they’ve already got some gold to start a joke shop?”

“You know, I’ve been wondering about that,” said Ron, his brow furrowed. “They bought me a new set of dress robes this summer, and I couldn’t understand where they got the Galleons. …”

Harry decided it was time to steer the conversation out of these dangerous waters.

“D’you reckon it’s true this year’s going to be really tough? Because of the exams?”

“Oh yeah,” said Ron. “Bound to be, isn’t it? O.W.L.s are really important, affect the jobs you can apply for and everything. We get career advice too, later this year, Bill told me. So you can choose what N.E.W.T.s you want to do next year.”

“D’you know what you want to do after Hogwarts?” Harry asked the other two, as they left the Great Hall shortly afterward and set off toward their History of Magic classroom.

“Not really,” said Ron slowly. “Except … well …”

He looked slightly sheepish.

“What?” Harry urged him.

“Well, it’d be cool to be an Auror,” said Ron in an offhand voice.

“Yeah, it would,” said Harry fervently.

“But they’re, like, the elite,” said Ron. “You’ve got to be really good. What about you, Hermione?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione. “I think I’d really like to do some-thing worthwhile.”

“An Auror’s worthwhile!” said Harry.

"Yes, it is, but it's not the only worthwhile thing," said Hermione thoughtfully. "I mean, if I could take S.P.E.W. further …"

Harry and Ron carefully avoided looking at each other.

History of Magic was by common consent the most boring subject ever devised by Wizard-kind. Professor Binns, their ghost teacher, had a wheezy, droning voice that was almost guaranteed to cause severe drowsiness within ten minutes, five in warm weather. He never varied the form of their lessons, but lectured them without pausing while they took notes, or rather, gazed sleepily into space. Harry and Ron had so far managed to scrape passes in this subject only by copying Hermione's notes before exams; she alone seemed able to resist the so-porific power of Binns's voice.

Today they suffered through three quarters of an hour's droning on the subject of giant wars. Harry heard just enough within the first ten minutes to appreciate dimly that in another teacher's hands this subject might have been mildly interesting, but then his brain disengaged, and he spent the remaining thirty-five minutes playing hangman on a corner of his parchment with Ron, while Hermione shot them filthy looks out of the corner of her eye.

"How would it be," she asked them coldly as they left the classroom for break (Binns drifting away through the blackboard), "if I refused to lend you my notes this year?"

"We'd fail our O.W.L.s," said Ron. "If you want that on your con-science, Hermione …"

"Well, you'd deserve it," she snapped. "You don't even try to listen to him, do you?"

"We do try," said Ron. "We just haven't got your brains or your memory or your concentration — you're just cleverer than we are — is it nice to rub it in?"

“Oh, don’t give me that rubbish,” said Hermione, but she looked slightly mollified as she led the way out into the damp courtyard.

A fine misty drizzle was falling, so that the people standing in huddles around the yard looked blurred at the edges. Harry, Ron, and Hermione chose a secluded corner under a heavily dripping balcony, turning up the collars of their robes against the chilly September air and talking about what Snape was likely to set them in the first lesson of the year. They had got as far as agreeing that it was likely to be something extremely difficult, just to catch them off guard after a two-month holiday, when someone walked around the corner toward them.

“Hello, Harry!”

It was Cho Chang and what was more, she was on her own again. This was most unusual: Cho was almost always surrounded by a gang of giggling girls; Harry remembered the agony of trying to get her by herself to ask her to the Yule Ball.

“Hi,” said Harry, feeling his face grow hot. At least you’re not covered in Stinksap this time, he told himself. Cho seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

“You got that stuff off, then?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, trying to grin as though the memory of their last meeting was funny as opposed to mortifying. “So did you … er … have a good summer?”

The moment he had said this he wished he hadn’t: Cedric had been Cho’s boyfriend and the memory of his death must have affected her holiday almost as badly as it had affected Harry’s. … Something seemed to tauten in her face, but she said, “Oh, it was all right, you know. …”

"Is that a Tornados badge?" Ron demanded suddenly, pointing at the front of Cho's robes, to which a sky-blue badge emblazoned with a double gold T was pinned. "You don't support them, do you?"

"Yeah, I do," said Cho.

"Have you always supported them, or just since they started win-ning the league?" said Ron, in what Harry considered an unnecessarily accusatory tone of voice.

"I've supported them since I was six," said Cho coolly. "Anyway … see you, Harry."

She walked away. Hermione waited until Cho was halfway across the courtyard before rounding on Ron.

"You are so tactless!"

"What? I only asked her if —"

"Couldn't you tell she wanted to talk to Harry on her own?"

"So? She could've done, I wasn't stopping —"

"What on earth were you attacking her about her Quidditch team for?"

"Attacking? I wasn't attacking her, I was only —"

"Who cares if she supports the Tornados?"

"Oh, come on, half the people you see wearing those badges only bought them last season —"

"But what does it matter?"

"It means they're not real fans, they're just jumping on the bandwagon —"

“That’s the bell,” said Harry listlessly, because Ron and Hermione were bickering too loudly to hear it. They did not stop arguing all the way down to Snape’s dungeon, which gave Harry plenty of time to reflect that between Neville and Ron he would be lucky ever to have two minutes’ conversation with Cho that he could look back on without wanting to leave the country.

And yet, he thought, as they joined the queue lining up outside Snape’s classroom door, she had chosen to come and talk to him, hadn’t she? She had been Cedric’s girlfriend; she could easily have hated Harry for coming out of the Triwizard maze alive when Cedric had died, yet she was talking to him in a perfectly friendly way, not as though she thought him mad, or a liar, or in some horrible way responsible for Cedric’s death. … Yes, she had definitely chosen to come and talk to him, and that made the second time in two days … and at this thought, Harry’s spirits rose. Even the ominous sound of Snape’s dun-geon door creaking open did not puncture the small, hopeful bubble that seemed to have swelled in his chest. He filed into the classroom be-hind Ron and Hermione and followed them to their usual table at the back, ignoring the huffy, irritable noises now issuing from both of them.

“Settle down,” said Snape coldly, shutting the door behind him.

There was no real need for the call to order; the moment the class had heard the door close, quiet had fallen and all fidgeting stopped. Snape’s mere presence was usually enough to ensure a class’s silence.

“Before we begin today’s lesson,” said Snape, sweeping over to his desk and staring around at them all, “I think it appropriate to remind you that next June you will be sitting an important examination, during which you will prove how much you have learned about the composition and use of magical potions. Moronic though some of this class undoubtedly are, I expect you to scrape an ‘Acceptable’ in your O.W.L., or suffer my … displeasure.”

His gaze lingered this time upon Neville, who gulped.

“After this year, of course, many of you will cease studying with me,” Snape went on. “I take only the very best into my N.E.W.T. Potions class, which means that some of us will certainly be saying good-bye.”

His eyes rested on Harry and his lip curled. Harry glared back, feeling a grim pleasure at the idea that he would be able to give up Potions after fifth year.

“But we have another year to go before that happy moment of farewell,” said Snape softly, “so whether you are intending to attempt N.E.W.T. or not, I advise all of you to concentrate your efforts upon maintaining the high-pass level I have come to expect from my O.W.L. students.

“Today we will be mixing a potion that often comes up at Ordinary Wizarding Level: the Draught of Peace, a potion to calm anxiety and soothe agitation. Be warned: If you are too heavy-handed with the ingredients you will put the drinker into a heavy and sometimes irreversible sleep, so you will need to pay close attention to what you are doing.” On Harry’s left, Hermione sat up a little straighter, her expression one of the utmost attentiveness. “The ingredients and method” — Snape flicked his wand — “are on the blackboard” — (they appeared there) — “you will find everything you need” — he flicked his wand again — “in the store cupboard” — (the door of the said cupboard sprang open) — “you have an hour and a half. … Start.”

Just as Harry, Ron, and Hermione had predicted, Snape could hardly have set them a more difficult, fiddly potion. The ingredients had to be added to the cauldron in precisely the right order and quan-tities; the mixture had to be stirred exactly the right number of times, firstly in clockwise, then in counterclockwise directions; the heat of the flames on which it was simmering had to be lowered to exactly the right level

for a specific number of minutes before the final ingredient was added.

"A light silver vapor should now be rising from your potion," called Snape, with ten minutes left to go.

Harry, who was sweating profusely, looked desperately around the dungeon. His own cauldron was issuing copious amounts of dark gray steam; Ron's was spitting green sparks. Seamus was feverishly prodding the flames at the base of his cauldron with the tip of his wand, as they had gone out. The surface of Hermione's potion, however, was a shimmering mist of silver vapor, and as Snape swept by he looked down his hooked nose at it without comment, which meant that he could find nothing to criticize. At Harry's cauldron, however, Snape stopped, looking down at Harry with a horrible smirk on his face.

"Potter, what is this supposed to be?"

The Slytherins at the front of the class all looked up eagerly; they loved hearing Snape taunt Harry.

"The Draught of Peace," said Harry tensely.

"Tell me, Potter," said Snape softly, "can you read?"

Draco Malfoy laughed.

"Yes, I can," said Harry, his fingers clenched tightly around his wand.

"Read the third line of the instructions for me, Potter."

Harry squinted at the blackboard; it was not easy to make out the instructions through the haze of multicolored steam now filling the dungeon.

" 'Add powdered moonstone, stir three times counterclockwise, al-low to simmer for seven minutes, then add two drops of syrup of hellebore.' "

His heart sank. He had not added syrup of hellebore, but had proceeded straight to the fourth line of the instructions after allowing his potion to simmer for seven minutes.

"Did you do everything on the third line, Potter?"

"No," said Harry very quietly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"No," said Harry, more loudly. "I forgot the hellebore. …"

"I know you did, Potter, which means that this mess is utterly worthless. Evanesco."

The contents of Harry's potion vanished; he was left standing foolishly beside an empty cauldron.

"Those of you who have managed to read the instructions, fill one flagon with a sample of your potion, label it clearly with your name, and bring it up to my desk for testing," said Snape. "Homework: twelve inches of parchment on the properties of moonstone and its uses in potion-making, to be handed in on Thursday."

While everyone around him filled their flagons, Harry cleared away his things, seething. His potion had been no worse than Ron's, which was now giving off a foul odor of bad eggs, or Neville's, which had achieved the consistency of just-mixed cement and which Neville was now having to gouge out of his cauldron, yet it was he, Harry, who would be receiving zero marks for the day's work. He stuffed his wand back into his bag and slumped down onto his seat, watching everyone else march up to Snape's desk with filled and corked flagons. When at long last the bell rang, Harry was first out of the

dungeon and had al-ready started his lunch by the time Ron and Hermione joined him in the Great Hall. The ceiling had turned an even murkier gray during the morning. Rain was lashing the high windows.

“That was really unfair,” said Hermione consolingly, sitting down next to Harry and helping herself to shepherd’s pie. “Your potion wasn’t nearly as bad as Goyle’s, when he put it in his flagon the whole thing shattered and set his robes on fire.”

“Yeah, well,” said Harry, glowering at his plate, “since when has Snape ever been fair to me?”

Neither of the others answered; all three of them knew that Snape and Harry’s mutual enmity had been absolute from the moment Harry had set foot in Hogwarts.

“I did think he might be a bit better this year,” said Hermione in a disappointed voice. “I mean … you know …” She looked carefully around; there were half a dozen empty seats on either side of them and nobody was passing the table. “… Now he’s in the Order and everything.”

“Poisonous toadstools don’t change their spots,” said Ron sagely. “Anyway, I’ve always thought Dumbledore was cracked trusting Snape, where’s the evidence he ever really stopped working for You-Know-Who?”

“I think Dumbledore’s probably got plenty of evidence, even if he doesn’t share it with you, Ron,” snapped Hermione.

“Oh, shut up, the pair of you,” said Harry heavily, as Ron opened his mouth to argue back. Hermione and Ron both froze, looking an-gry and offended. “Can’t you give it a rest?” he said. “You’re always having a go at each other, it’s driving me mad.” And abandoning his shepherd’s pie, he swung his schoolbag back over his shoulder and left them sitting there.

He walked up the marble staircase two steps at a time, past the many students hurrying toward lunch. The anger that had just flared so unexpectedly still blazed inside him, and the vision of Ron and Hermione's shocked faces afforded him a sense of deep satisfaction. Serve them right, he thought. Why can't they give it a rest? … Bickering all the time … It's enough to drive anyone up the wall. …He passed the large picture of Sir Cadogan the knight on a landing; Sir Cadogan drew his sword and brandished it fiercely at Harry, who ignored him.

"Come back, you scurvy dog, stand fast and fight!" yelled Sir Cadogan in a muffled voice from behind his visor, but Harry merely walked on, and when Sir Cadogan attempted to follow him by running into a neighboring picture, he was rebuffed by its inhabitant, a large and angry-looking wolfhound.

Harry spent the rest of the lunch hour sitting alone underneath the trapdoor at the top of North Tower, and consequently he was the first to ascend the silver ladder that led to Sibyll Trelawney's classroom when the bell rang.

Divination was Harry's least favorite class after Potions, which was due mainly to Professor Trelawney's habit of predicting his premature death every few lessons. A thin woman, heavily draped in shawls and glittering with strings of beads, she always reminded Harry of some kind of insect, with her glasses hugely magnifying her eyes. She was busy putting copies of battered, leather-bound books on each of the spindly little tables with which her room was littered when Harry entered the room, but so dim was the light cast by the lamps covered by scarves and the low-burning, sickly-scented fire that she appeared not to notice him as he took a seat in the shadows. The rest of the class ar-rived over the next five minutes. Ron emerged from the trapdoor, looked around carefully, spotted Harry and made directly for him, or as directly as he could while having to wend his way between tables, chairs, and overstuffed poufs.

“Hermione and me have stopped arguing,” he said, sitting down beside Harry.

“Good,” grunted Harry.

“But Hermione says she thinks it would be nice if you stopped tak-ing out your temper on us,” said Ron.

“I’m not —”

“I’m just passing on the message,” said Ron, talking over him. “But I reckon she’s right. It’s not our fault how Seamus and Snape treat you.”

“I never said it —”

“Good day,” said Professor Trelawney in her usual misty, dreamy voice, and Harry broke off, feeling both annoyed and slightly ashamed of himself again. “And welcome back to Divination. I have, of course, been following your fortunes most carefully over the holidays, and am delighted to see that you have all returned to Hogwarts safely — as, of course, I knew you would.

“You will find on the tables before you copies of The Dream Oracle, by Inigo Imago. Dream interpretation is a most important means of divining the future and one that may very probably be tested in your O.W.L. Not, of course, that I believe examination passes or failures are of the remotest importance when it comes to the sacred art of divination. If you have the Seeing Eye, certificates and grades matter very little. However, the headmaster likes you to sit the examination, so …”

Her voice trailed away delicately, leaving them all in no doubt that Professor Trelawney considered her subject above such sordid matters as examinations.

"Turn, please, to the introduction and read what Imago has to say on the matter of dream interpretation. Then divide into pairs. Use The Dream Oracle to interpret each other's most recent dreams. Carry on.

The one good thing to be said for this lesson was that it was not a double period. By the time they had all finished reading the introduction of the book, they had barely ten minutes left for dream interpretation. At the table next to Harry and Ron, Dean had paired up with Neville, who immediately embarked on a long-winded explanation of a nightmare involving a pair of giant scissors wearing his grandmother's best hat; Harry and Ron merely looked at each other glumly.

"I never remember my dreams," said Ron. "You say one."

"You must remember one of them," said Harry impatiently.

He was not going to share his dreams with anyone. He knew perfectly well what his regular nightmare about a graveyard meant, he did not need Ron or Professor Trelawney or the stupid Dream Oracle to tell him that. …"Well, I had one that I was playing Quidditch the other night," said Ron, screwing up his face in an effort to remember. "What d'you reckon that means?"

"Probably that you're going to be eaten by a giant marshmallow or something," said Harry, turning the pages of The Dream Oracle without interest.

It was very dull work looking up bits of dreams in the Oracle and Harry was not cheered up when Professor Trelawney set them the task of keeping a dream diary for a month as homework. When the bell went, he and Ron led the way back down the ladder, Ron grumbling loudly.

"D'you realize how much homework we've got already? Binns set us a foot-and-a-half-long essay on giant wars, Snape wants a foot on the use of moonstones, and now we've got a month's dream diary from

Trelawney! Fred and George weren't wrong about O.W.L. year, were they? That Umbridge woman had better not give us any. …"

When they entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom they found Professor Umbridge already seated at the teacher's desk, wearing the fluffy pink cardigan of the night before and the black velvet bow on top of her head. Harry was again reminded forcibly of a large fly perched unwisely on top of an even larger toad.

The class was quiet as it entered the room; Professor Umbridge was, as yet, an unknown quantity and nobody knew yet how strict a disciplinarian she was likely to be.

"Well, good afternoon!" she said when finally the whole class had sat down.

A few people mumbled "Good afternoon," in reply.

"Tut, tut," said Professor Umbridge. "That won't do, now, will it? I should like you, please, to reply 'Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge.' One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!"

"Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge," they chanted back at her.

"There, now," said Professor Umbridge sweetly. "That wasn't too difficult, was it? Wands away and quills out, please."

Many of the class exchanged gloomy looks; the order "wands away" had never yet been followed by a lesson they had found interesting. Harry shoved his wand back inside his bag and pulled out quill, ink, and parchment. Professor Umbridge opened her handbag, extracted her own wand, which was an unusually short one, and tapped the blackboard sharply with it; words appeared on the board at once:Defense Against the Dark Arts

A Return to Basic Principles.

“Well now, your teaching in this subject has been rather disrupted and fragmented, hasn’t it?” stated Professor Umbridge, turning to face the class with her hands clasped neatly in front of her. “The constant changing of teachers, many of whom do not seem to have followed any Ministry-approved curriculum, has unfortunately resulted in your being far below the standard we would expect to see in your O.W.L. year.

“You will be pleased to know, however, that these problems are now to be rectified. We will be following a carefully structured, theory-centered, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic this year. Copy down the following, please.”

She rapped the blackboard again; the first message vanished and was replaced by:Course aims:

1. Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic.

2. Learning to recognize situations in which defensive magic can legally be used.

3. Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.

For a couple of minutes the room was full of the sound of scratch-ing quills on parchment. When everyone had copied down Professor Umbridge’s three course aims she said, “Has everybody got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?”

There was a dull murmur of assent throughout the class.

“I think we’ll try that again,” said Professor Umbridge. “When I ask you a question, I should like you to reply ‘Yes, Professor Um-bridge,’ or ‘No, Professor Umbridge.’ So, has everyone got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?”

“Yes, Professor Umbridge,” rang through the room.

“Good,” said Professor Umbridge. “I should like you to turn to page five and read chapter one, ‘Basics for Beginners.’ There will be no need to talk.”

Professor Umbridge left the blackboard and settled herself in the chair behind the teacher’s desk, observing them all with those pouchy toad’s eyes. Harry turned to page five of his copy of Defensive Magical Theory and started to read.

It was desperately dull, quite as bad as listening to Professor Binns. He felt his concentration sliding away from him; he had soon read the same line half a dozen times without taking in more than the first few words. Several silent minutes passed. Next to him, Ron was absent-mindedly turning his quill over and over in his fingers, staring at the same spot on the page. Harry looked right and received a surprise to shake him out of his torpor. Hermione had not even opened her copy of Defensive Magical Theory. She was staring fixedly at Professor Um-bridge with her hand in the air.

Harry could not remember Hermione ever neglecting to read when instructed to, or indeed resisting the temptation to open any book that came under her nose. He looked at her questioningly, but she merely shook her head slightly to indicate that she was not about to answer questions, and continued to stare at Professor Umbridge, who was looking just as resolutely in another direction.

After several more minutes had passed, however, Harry was not the only one watching Hermione. The chapter they had been instructed to read was so tedious that more and more people were choosing to watch Hermione’s mute attempt to catch Professor Umbridge’s eye than to struggle on with “Basics for Beginners.”

When more than half the class were staring at Hermione rather than at their books, Professor Umbridge seemed to decide that she could ignore the situation no longer.

"Did you want to ask something about the chapter, dear?" she asked Hermione, as though she had only just noticed her.

"Not about the chapter, no," said Hermione.

"Well, we're reading just now," said Professor Umbridge, showing her small, pointed teeth. "If you have other queries we can deal with them at the end of class."

"I've got a query about your course aims," said Hermione.

Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows.

"And your name is — ?"

"Hermione Granger," said Hermione.

"Well, Miss Granger, I think the course aims are perfectly clear if you read them through carefully," said Professor Umbridge in a voice of determined sweetness.

"Well, I don't," said Hermione bluntly. "There's nothing written up there about using defensive spells."

There was a short silence in which many members of the class turned their heads to frown at the three course aims still written on the blackboard.

"Using defensive spells?" Professor Umbridge repeated with a little laugh. "Why, I can't imagine any situation arising in my classroom that would require you to use a defensive spell, Miss Granger. You surely aren't expecting to be attacked during class?"

"We're not going to use magic?" Ron ejaculated loudly.

"Students raise their hands when they wish to speak in my class, Mr. — ?"

“Weasley,” said Ron, thrusting his hand into the air.

Professor Umbridge, smiling still more widely, turned her back on him. Harry and Hermione immediately raised their hands too. Professor Umbridge’s pouchy eyes lingered on Harry for a moment before she addressed Hermione.

“Yes, Miss Granger? You wanted to ask something else?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “Surely the whole point of Defense Against the Dark Arts is to practice defensive spells?”

“Are you a Ministry-trained educational expert, Miss Granger?” asked Professor Umbridge in her falsely sweet voice.

“No, but —”

“Well then, I’m afraid you are not qualified to decide what the ‘whole point’ of any class is. Wizards much older and cleverer than you have devised our new program of study. You will be learning about defensive spells in a secure, risk-free way —”

“What use is that?” said Harry loudly. “If we’re going to be attacked it won’t be in a —”

“Hand, Mr. Potter!” sang Professor Umbridge.

Harry thrust his fist in the air. Professor Umbridge promptly turned away from him again, but now several other people had their hands up too.

“And your name is?” Professor Umbridge said to Dean.

“Dean Thomas.”

“Well, Mr. Thomas?”

“Well, it’s like Harry said, isn’t it?” said Dean. “If we’re going to be attacked, it won’t be risk-free —”

“I repeat,” said Professor Umbridge, smiling in a very irritating fashion at Dean, “do you expect to be attacked during my classes?”

“No, but —”

Professor Umbridge talked over him.

“I do not wish to criticize the way things have been run in this school,” she said, an unconvincing smile stretching her wide mouth, “but you have been exposed to some very irresponsible wizards in this class, very irresponsible indeed — not to mention,” she gave a nasty little laugh, “extremely dangerous half-breeds.”

“If you mean Professor Lupin,” piped up Dean Thomas angrily, “he was the best we ever —”

“Hand, Mr. Thomas! As I was saying — you have been introduced to spells that have been complex, inappropriate to your age group, and potentially lethal. You have been frightened into believing that you are likely to meet Dark attacks every other day —”

“No we haven’t,” Hermione said, “we just —”

“Your hand is not up, Miss Granger!”

Hermione put up her hand; Professor Umbridge turned away from her.

“It is my understanding that my predecessor not only performed illegal curses in front of you, he actually performed them on you —”

“Well, he turned out to be a maniac, didn’t he?” said Dean Thomas hotly. “Mind you, we still learned loads —”

"Your hand is not up, Mr. Thomas!" trilled Professor Umbridge. "Now, it is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about. And your name is?" she added, staring at Parvati, whose hand had just shot up.

"Parvati Patil, and isn't there a practical bit in our Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L.? Aren't we supposed to show that we can actu-ally do the countercurses and things?"

"As long as you have studied the theory hard enough, there is no reason why you should not be able to perform the spells under care-fully controlled examination conditions," said Professor Umbridge dismissively.

"Without ever practicing them before?" said Parvati incredulously. "Are you telling us that the first time we'll get to do the spells will be during our exam?"

"I repeat, as long as you have studied the theory hard enough —"

"And what good's theory going to be in the real world?" said Harry loudly, his fist in the air again.

Professor Umbridge looked up.

"This is school, Mr. Potter, not the real world," she said softly.

"So we're not supposed to be prepared for what's waiting out there?"

"There is nothing waiting out there, Mr. Potter."

"Oh yeah?" said Harry. His temper, which seemed to have been bubbling just beneath the surface all day, was reaching boiling point.

"Who do you imagine wants to attack children like yourselves?" inquired Professor Umbridge in a horribly honeyed voice.

“Hmm, let’s think …” said Harry in a mock thoughtful voice, “maybe Lord Voldemort?”

Ron gasped; Lavender Brown uttered a little scream; Neville slipped sideways off his stool. Professor Umbridge, however, did not flinch. She was staring at Harry with a grimly satisfied expression on her face.

“Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter.”

The classroom was silent and still. Everyone was staring at either Umbridge or Harry.

“Now, let me make a few things quite plain.”

Professor Umbridge stood up and leaned toward them, her stubby-fingered hands splayed on her desk.

“You have been told that a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead —”

“He wasn’t dead,” said Harry angrily, “but yeah, he’s returned!”

“Mr.-Potter-you-have-already-lost-your-House-ten-points-do-not-make-matters-worse-for-yourself,” said Professor Umbridge in one breath without looking at him. “As I was saying, you have been informed that a certain Dark wizard is at large once again. This is a lie.”

“It is NOT a lie!” said Harry. “I saw him, I fought him!”

“Detention, Mr. Potter!” said Professor Umbridge triumphantly. “Tomorrow evening. Five o’clock. My office. I repeat, this is a lie. The Ministry of Magic guarantees that you are not in danger from any Dark wizard. If you are still worried, by all means come and see me outside class hours. If someone is alarming you with fibs about reborn Dark wizards, I would like to hear about it. I am here to help. I

am your friend. And now, you will kindly continue your reading. Page five, 'Basics for Beginners.' "

Professor Umbridge sat down behind her desk again. Harry, however, stood up. Everyone was staring at him; Seamus looked half-scared, half-fascinated.

"Harry, no!" Hermione whispered in a warning voice, tugging at his sleeve, but Harry jerked his arm out of her reach.

"So, according to you, Cedric Diggory dropped dead of his own accord, did he?" Harry asked, his voice shaking.

There was a collective intake of breath from the class, for none of them, apart from Ron and Hermione, had ever heard Harry talk about what had happened on the night that Cedric had died. They stared avidly from Harry to Professor Umbridge, who had raised her eyes and was staring at him without a trace of a fake smile on her face.

"Cedric Diggory's death was a tragic accident," she said coldly.

"It was murder," said Harry. He could feel himself shaking. He had hardly talked to anyone about this, least of all thirty eagerly listening classmates. "Voldemort killed him, and you know it."

Professor Umbridge's face was quite blank. For a moment he thought she was going to scream at him. Then she said, in her softest, most sweetly girlish voice, "Come here, Mr. Potter, dear."

He kicked his chair aside, strode around Ron and Hermione and up to the teacher's desk. He could feel the rest of the class holding its breath. He felt so angry he did not care what happened next.

Professor Umbridge pulled a small roll of pink parchment out of her handbag, stretched it out on the desk, dipped her quill into a bot-tle of ink, and started scribbling, hunched over so that Harry could not see what she was writing. Nobody spoke. After a minute or so she rolled

up the parchment and tapped it with her wand; it sealed itself seamlessly so that he could not open it.

“Take this to Professor McGonagall, dear,” said Professor Um-bridge, holding out the note to him.

He took it from her without saying a word and left the room, not even looking back at Ron and Hermione, and slamming the class-room door shut behind him. He walked very fast along the corridor, the note to McGonagall clutched tight in his hand, and turning a cor-ner walked slap into Peeves the Poltergeist, a wide-faced little man floating on his back in midair, juggling several inkwells.

“Why, it’s Potty Wee Potter!” cackled Peeves, allowing two of the inkwells to fall to the ground where they smashed and spattered the walls with ink; Harry jumped backward out of the way with a snarl.

“Get out of it, Peeves.”

“Oooh, Crackpot’s feeling cranky,” said Peeves, pursuing Harry along the corridor, leering as he zoomed along above him. “What is it this time, my fine Potty friend? Hearing voices? Seeing visions? Speaking in” — Peeves blew a gigantic raspberry — “tongues?”

“I said, leave me ALONE!” Harry shouted, running down the nearest flight of stairs, but Peeves merely slid down the banister on his back beside him.

“Oh, most think he’s barking, the Potty wee lad,But some are more kindly and think he’s just sad,But Peevesy knows better and says that he’s mad —”

“SHUT UP!”

A door to his left flew open and Professor McGonagall emerged from her office looking grim and slightly harassed.

“What on earth are you shouting about, Potter?” she snapped, as Peeves cackled gleefully and zoomed out of sight. “Why aren’t you in class?”

“I’ve been sent to see you,” said Harry stiffly.

“Sent? What do you mean, sent?”

He held out the note from Professor Umbridge. Professor McGonagall took it from him, frowning, slit it open with a tap of her wand, stretched it out, and began to read. Her eyes zoomed from side to side behind their square spectacles as she read what Umbridge had written, and with each line they became narrower.

“Come in here, Potter.”

He followed her inside her study. The door closed automatically behind him.

“Well?” said Professor McGonagall, rounding on him. “Is this true?”

“Is what true?” Harry asked, rather more aggressively than he had intended. “Professor?” he added in an attempt to sound more polite.

“Is it true that you shouted at Professor Umbridge?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

“You called her a liar?”

“Yes.”

“You told her He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back?”

“Yes.”

Professor McGonagall sat down behind her desk, frowning at Harry. Then she said, “Have a biscuit, Potter.”

"Have — what?"

"Have a biscuit," she repeated impatiently, indicating a tartan tin of cookies lying on top of one of the piles of papers on her desk. "And sit down."

There had been a previous occasion when Harry, expecting to be caned by Professor McGonagall, had instead been appointed by her to the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He sank into a chair opposite her and helped himself to a Ginger Newt, feeling just as confused and wrong-footed as he had done on that occasion.

Professor McGonagall set down Professor Umbridge's note and looked very seriously at Harry.

"Potter, you need to be careful."

Harry swallowed his mouthful of Ginger Newt and stared at her. Her tone of voice was not at all what he was used to; it was not brisk, crisp, and stern; it was low and anxious and somehow much more hu-man than usual.

"Misbehavior in Dolores Umbridge's class could cost you much more than House points and a detention."

"What do you — ?"

"Potter, use your common sense," snapped Professor McGonagall, with an abrupt return to her usual manner. "You know where she comes from, you must know to whom she is reporting."

The bell rang for the end of the lesson. Overhead and all around came the elephantine sounds of hundreds of students on the move.

"It says here she's given you detention every evening this week, starting tomorrow," Professor McGonagall said, looking down at Umbridge's note again.

“Every evening this week!” Harry repeated, horrified. “But, Profes-sor, couldn’t you — ?”

“No, I couldn’t,” said Professor McGonagall flatly.

“But —”

“She is your teacher and has every right to give you detention. You will go to her room at five o’clock tomorrow for the first one. Just re-member: Tread carefully around Dolores Umbridge.”

“But I was telling the truth!” said Harry, outraged. “Voldemort’s back, you know he is, Professor Dumbledore knows he is —”

“For heaven’s sake, Potter!” said Professor McGonagall, straighten-ing her glasses angrily (she had winced horribly when he had used Voldemort’s name). “Do you really think this is about truth or lies? It’s about keeping your head down and your temper under control!”

She stood up, nostrils wide and mouth very thin, and he stood too.

“Have another biscuit,” she said irritably, thrusting the tin at him.

“No, thanks,” said Harry coldly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she snapped.

He took one.

“Thanks,” he said grudgingly.

“Didn’t you listen to Dolores Umbridge’s speech at the start-of-term feast, Potter?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Yeah … she said … progress will be prohib-ited or … well, it meant that … that the Ministry of Magic is trying to interfere at Hogwarts.”

Professor McGonagall eyed him for a moment, then sniffed, walked around her desk, and held open the door for him.

“Well, I’m glad you listen to Hermione Granger at any rate,” she said, pointing him out of her office.

Chapter 13 Detention with Dolores

Dinner in the Great Hall that night was not a pleasant experi-ence for Harry. The news about his shouting match with Umbridge seemed to have traveled exceptionally fast even by Hog-warts standards. He heard whispers all around him as he sat eating between Ron and Hermione. The funny thing was that none of the whisperers seemed to mind him overhearing what they were saying about him — on the contrary, it was as though they were hoping he would get angry and start shouting again, so that they could hear his story firsthand.

“He says he saw Cedric Diggory murdered. …”

“He reckons he dueled with You-Know-Who. …”

“Come off it. …”

“Who does he think he’s kidding?”

“Pur-lease …”

“What I don’t get,” said Harry in a shaking voice, laying down his knife and fork (his hands were trembling too much to hold them steady), “is why they all believed the story two months ago when Dumbledore told them. …”

“The thing is, Harry, I’m not sure they did,” said Hermione grimly. “Oh, let’s get out of here.”

She slammed down her own knife and fork; Ron looked sadly at his half-finished apple pie but followed suit. People stared at them all the way out of the Hall.

“What d’you mean, you’re not sure they believed Dumbledore?” Harry asked Hermione when they reached the first-floor landing.

“Look, you don’t understand what it was like after it happened,” said Hermione quietly. “You arrived back in the middle of the lawn clutching Cedric’s dead body. … None of us saw what happened in the maze. … We just had Dumbledore’s word for it that You-Know-Who had come back and killed Cedric and fought you.”

“Which is the truth!” said Harry loudly.

“I know it is, Harry, so will you please stop biting my head off?” said Hermione wearily. “It’s just that before the truth could sink in, everyone went home for the summer, where they spent two months reading about how you’re a nutcase and Dumbledore’s going senile!”

Rain pounded on the windowpanes as they strode along the empty corridors back to Gryffindor Tower. Harry felt as though his first day had lasted a week, but he still had a mountain of homework to do before bed. A dull pounding pain was developing over his right eye. He glanced out of a rain-washed window at the dark grounds as they turned into the Fat Lady’s corridor. There was still no light in Hagrid’s cabin.

“Mimbulus mimbletonia,” said Hermione, before the Fat Lady could ask. The portrait swung open to reveal the hole behind and the three of them scrambled back through it.

The common room was almost empty; nearly everyone was still down at dinner. Crookshanks uncoiled himself from an armchair and trotted to meet them, purring loudly, and when Harry, Ron, and Hermione took their three favorite chairs at the fireside he leapt lightly into Hermione’s lap and curled up there like a furry ginger cushion. Harry gazed into the flames, feeling drained and exhausted.

“How can Dumbledore have let this happen?” Hermione cried suddenly, making Harry and Ron jump; Crookshanks leapt off her, looking affronted. She pounded the arms of her chair in fury, so that bits of stuffing leaked out of the holes. “How can he let that terrible woman teach us? And in our O.W.L. year too!”

“Well, we’ve never had great Defense Against the Dark Arts teach-ers, have we?” said Harry. “You know what it’s like, Hagrid told us, nobody wants the job, they say it’s jinxed.”

“Yes, but to employ someone who’s actually refusing to let us do magic! What’s Dumbledore playing at?”

“And she’s trying to get people to spy for her,” said Ron darkly. “Re-member when she said she wanted us to come and tell her if we hear anyone saying You-Know-Who’s back?”

“Of course she’s here to spy on us all, that’s obvious, why else would Fudge have wanted her to come?” snapped Hermione.

“Don’t start arguing again,” said Harry wearily, as Ron opened his mouth to retaliate. “Can’t we just … Let’s just do that homework, get it out of the way. …”

They collected their schoolbags from a corner and returned to the chairs by the fire. People were coming back from dinner now. Harry kept his face averted from the portrait hole, but could still sense the stares he was attracting.

“Shall we do Snape’s stuff first?” said Ron, dipping his quill into his ink. “ ‘The properties … of moonstone … and its uses …in potion-making …’ ” he muttered, writing the words across the top of his parchment as he spoke them. “There.” He underlined the title, then looked up expectantly at Hermione.

“So what are the properties of moonstone and its uses in potion-making?”

But Hermione was not listening; she was squinting over into the far corner of the room, where Fred, George, and Lee Jordan were now sit-ting at the center of a knot of innocent-looking first years, all of whom were chewing something that seemed to have come out of a large pa-per bag that Fred was holding.

"No, I'm sorry, they've gone too far," she said, standing up and looking positively furious. "Come on, Ron."

"I — what?" said Ron, plainly playing for time. "No — come on, Hermione — we can't tell them off for giving out sweets. …"

"You know perfectly well that those are bits of Nosebleed Nougat or — or Puking Pastilles or —"

"Fainting Fancies?" Harry suggested quietly.

One by one, as though hit over the heads with invisible mallets, the first years were slumping unconscious in their seats; some slid right onto the floor, others merely hung over the arms of their chairs, their tongues lolling out. Most of the people watching were laughing; Hermione, however, squared her shoulders and marched directly over to where Fred and George now stood with clipboards, closely observing the unconscious first years. Ron rose halfway out of his chair, hovered uncertainly for a moment or two, then muttered to Harry, "She's got it under control," before sinking as low in his chair as his lanky frame permitted.

"That's enough!" Hermione said forcefully to Fred and George, both of whom looked up in mild surprise.

"Yeah, you're right," said George, nodding, "this dosage looks strong enough, doesn't it?"

"I told you this morning, you can't test your rubbish on students!"

"We're paying them!" said Fred indignantly.

"I don't care, it could be dangerous!"

"Rubbish," said Fred.

“Calm down, Hermione, they’re fine!” said Lee reassuringly as he walked from first year to first year, inserting purple sweets into their open mouths.

“Yeah, look, they’re coming round now,” said George.

A few of the first years were indeed stirring. Several looked so shocked to find themselves lying on the floor, or dangling off their chairs, that Harry was sure Fred and George had not warned them what the sweets were going to do.

“Feel all right?” said George kindly to a small dark-haired girl lying at his feet.

“I-I think so,” she said shakily.

“Excellent,” said Fred happily, but the next second Hermione had snatched both his clipboard and the paper bag of Fainting Fancies from his hands.

“It is NOT excellent!”

“ ’Course it is, they’re alive, aren’t they?” said Fred angrily.

“You can’t do this, what if you made one of them really ill?”

“We’re not going to make them ill, we’ve already tested them all on ourselves, this is just to see if everyone reacts the same —”

“If you don’t stop doing it, I’m going to —”

“Put us in detention?” said Fred in an I’d-like-to-see-you-try-it voice.

“Make us write lines?” said George, smirking.

Onlookers all over the room were laughing. Hermione drew herself up to her full height; her eyes were narrowed and her bushy hair seemed to crackle with electricity.

"No," she said, her voice quivering with anger, "but I will write to your mother."

"You wouldn't," said George, horrified, taking a step back from her.

"Oh, yes, I would," said Hermione grimly. "I can't stop you eating the stupid things yourselves, but you're not giving them to first years."

Fred and George looked thunderstruck. It was clear that as far as they were concerned, Hermione's threat was way below the belt. With a last threatening look at them, she thrust Fred's clipboard and the bag of Fancies back into his arms and stalked back to her chair by the fire.

Ron was now so low in his seat that his nose was roughly level with his knees.

"Thank you for your support, Ron," Hermione said acidly.

"You handled it fine by yourself," Ron mumbled.

Hermione stared down at her blank piece of parchment for a few seconds, then said edgily, "Oh, it's no good, I can't concentrate now. I'm going to bed."

She wrenched her bag open; Harry thought she was about to put her books away, but instead she pulled out two misshapen woolly objects, placed them carefully on a table by the fireplace, covered them with a few screwed-up bits of parchment and a broken quill, and stood back to admire the effect.

"What in the name of Merlin are you doing?" said Ron, watching her as though fearful for her sanity.

"They're hats for house-elves," she said briskly, now stuffing her books back into her bag. "I did them over the summer. I'm a really

slow knitter without magic, but now I'm back at school I should be able to make lots more."

"You're leaving out hats for the house-elves?" said Ron slowly. "And you're covering them up with rubbish first?"

"Yes," said Hermione defiantly, swinging her bag onto her back.

"That's not on," said Ron angrily. "You're trying to trick them into picking up the hats. You're setting them free when they might not want to be free."

"Of course they want to be free!" said Hermione at once, though her face was turning pink. "Don't you dare touch those hats, Ron!"

She left. Ron waited until she had disappeared through the door to the girls' dormitories, then cleared the rubbish off the woolly hats.

"They should at least see what they're picking up," he said firmly. "Anyway …" He rolled up the parchment on which he had written the title of Snape's essay. "There's no point trying to finish this now, I can't do it without Hermione, I haven't got a clue what you're supposed to do with moonstones, have you?"

Harry shook his head, noticing as he did so that the ache in his right temple was getting worse. He thought of the long essay on giant wars and the pain stabbed at him sharply. Knowing perfectly well that he would regret not finishing his homework tonight when the morn-ing came, he piled his books back into his bag.

"I'm going to bed too."

He passed Seamus on the way to the door leading to the dormitories, but did not look at him. Harry had a fleeting impression that Seamus had opened his mouth to speak, but sped up, and reached the soothing peace of the stone spiral staircase without having to endure any more provocation.

The following day dawned just as leaden and rainy as the previous one. Hagrid was still absent from the staff table at breakfast.

“But on the plus side, no Snape today,” said Ron bracingly.

Hermione yawned widely and poured herself some coffee. She looked mildly pleased about something, and when Ron asked her what she had to be so happy about, she simply said, “The hats have gone. Seems the house-elves do want freedom after all.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Ron told her cuttingly. “They might not count as clothes. They didn’t look anything like hats to me, more like woolly bladders.”

Hermione did not speak to him all morning.

Double Charms was succeeded by double Transfiguration. Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall both spent the first fifteen minutes of their lessons lecturing the class on the importance of O.W.L.s.

“What you must remember,” said little Professor Flitwick squeak-ily, perched as ever on a pile of books so that he could see over the top of his desk, “is that these examinations may influence your futures for many years to come! If you have not already given serious thought to your careers, now is the time to do so. And in the meantime, I’m afraid, we shall be working harder than ever to ensure that you all do yourselves justice!”

They then spent more than an hour reviewing Summoning Charms, which according to Professor Flitwick were bound to come up in their O.W.L., and he rounded off the lesson by setting them their largest amount of Charms homework ever.

It was the same, if not worse, in Transfiguration.

“You cannot pass an O.W.L.,” said Professor McGonagall grimly, “without serious application, practice, and study. I see no reason why everybody in this class should not achieve an O.W.L. in Transfiguration as long as they put in the work.” Neville made a sad little disbeliev-ing noise. “Yes, you too, Longbottom,” said Professor McGonagall. “There’s nothing wrong with your work except lack of confidence. So … today we are starting Vanishing Spells. These are easier than Con-juring Spells, which you would not usually attempt until N.E.W.T. level, but they are still among the most difficult magic you will be tested on in your O.W.L.”

She was quite right; Harry found the Vanishing Spells horribly difficult. By the end of a double period, neither he nor Ron had managed to vanish the snails on which they were practicing, though Ron said hopefully that he thought his looked a bit paler. Hermione, on the other hand, successfully vanished her snail on the third attempt, earning her a ten-point bonus for Gryffindor from Professor McGonagall. She was the only person not given homework; everybody else was told to practice the spell overnight, ready for a fresh attempt on their snails the following afternoon.

Now panicking slightly about the amount of homework they had to do, Harry and Ron spent their lunch hour in the library looking up the uses of moonstones in potion-making. Still angry about Ron’s slur on her woolly hats, Hermione did not join them. By the time they reached Care of Magical Creatures in the afternoon, Harry’s head was aching again.

The day had become cool and breezy, and, as they walked down the sloping lawn toward Hagrid’s cabin on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, they felt the occasional drop of rain on their faces. Professor Grubbly-Plank stood waiting for the class some ten yards from Hagrid’s front door, a long trestle table in front of her laden with many twigs. As Harry and Ron reached her, a loud shout of laughter sounded behind them; turning, they saw Draco Malfoy striding toward them, surrounded by his usual gang of Slytherin cronies. He

had clearly just said something highly amusing, because Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy Parkinson, and the rest continued to snigger heartily as they gathered around the trestle table. Judging by the fact that all of them kept looking over at Harry, he was able to guess the subject of the joke without too much difficulty.

“Everyone here?” barked Professor Grubbly-Plank, once all the Slytherins and Gryffindors had arrived. “Let’s crack on then — who can tell me what these things are called?”

She indicated the heap of twigs in front of her. Hermione’s hand shot into the air. Behind her back, Malfoy did a buck-toothed imita-tion of her jumping up and down in eagerness to answer a question. Pansy Parkinson gave a shriek of laughter that turned almost at once into a scream, as the twigs on the table leapt into the air and revealed themselves to be what looked like tiny pixieish creatures made of wood, each with knobbly brown arms and legs, two twiglike fingers at the end of each hand, and a funny, flat, barklike face in which a pair of beetle-brown eyes glittered.

“Oooooh!” said Parvati and Lavender, thoroughly irritating Harry: Anyone would have thought that Hagrid never showed them impres-sive creatures; admittedly the flobberworms had been a bit dull, but the salamanders and hippogriffs had been interesting enough, and the Blast-Ended Skrewts perhaps too much so.

“Kindly keep your voices down, girls!” said Professor Grubbly-Plank sharply, scattering a handful of what looked like brown rice among the stick-creatures, who immediately fell upon the food. “So — anyone know the names of these creatures? Miss Granger?”

“Bowtruckles,” said Hermione. “They’re tree-guardians, usually live in wand-trees.”

“Five points for Gryffindor,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank. “Yes, these are bowtruckles and, as Miss Granger rightly says, they generally live

in trees whose wood is of wand quality. Anybody know what they eat?"

"Wood lice," said Hermione promptly, which explained why what Harry had taken for grains of brown rice were moving. "But fairy eggs if they can get them."

"Good girl, take another five points. So whenever you need leaves or wood from a tree in which a bowtruckle lodges, it is wise to have a gift of wood lice ready to distract or placate it. They may not look dangerous, but if angered they will gouge out human eyes with their fingers, which, as you can see, are very sharp and not at all desirable near the eyeballs. So if you'd like to gather closer, take a few wood lice and a bowtruckle — I have enough here for one between three — you can study them more closely. I want a sketch from each of you with all body parts labeled by the end of the lesson."

The class surged forward around the trestle table. Harry deliberately circled around the back so that he ended up right next to Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"Where's Hagrid?" he asked her, while everyone else was choosing bowtruckles.

"Never you mind," said Professor Grubbly-Plank repressively, which had been her attitude last time Hagrid had failed to turn up for a class too. Smirking all over his pointed face, Draco Malfoy leaned across Harry and seized the largest bowtruckle.

"Maybe," said Malfoy in an undertone, so that only Harry could hear him, "the stupid great oaf's got himself badly injured."

"Maybe you will if you don't shut up," said Harry out of the side of his mouth.

"Maybe he's been messing with stuff that's too big for him, if you get my drift."

Malfoy walked away, smirking over his shoulder at Harry, who suddenly felt sick. Did Malfoy know something? His father was a Death Eater, after all; what if he had information about Hagrid's fate that had not yet reached the Order's ears? He hurried back around the table to Ron and Hermione, who were squatting on the grass some distance away and attempting to persuade a bowtruckle to remain still long enough to draw it. Harry pulled out parchment and quill, crouched down beside the others, and related in a whisper what Mal-foy had just said.

"Dumbledore would know if something had happened to Hagrid," said Hermione at once. "It's just playing into Malfoy's hands to look worried, it tells him we don't know exactly what's going on. We've got to ignore him, Harry. Here, hold the bowtruckle for a moment, just so I can draw its face. …"

"Yes," came Malfoy's clear drawl from the group nearest them, "Father was talking to the Minister just a couple of days ago, you know, and it sounds as though the Ministry's really determined to crack down on substandard teaching in this place. So even if that over-grown moron does show up again, he'll probably be sent packing straight away."

"OUCH!"

Harry had gripped the bowtruckle so hard that it had almost snapped; it had just taken a great retaliatory swipe at his hand with its sharp fingers, leaving two long deep cuts there. Harry dropped it; Crabbe and Goyle, who had already been guffawing at the idea of Ha-grid being sacked, laughed still harder as the bowtruckle set off at full tilt toward the forest, a little, moving stickman soon swallowed up by the tree roots. When the bell echoed distantly over the grounds Harry rolled up his bloodstained bowtruckle picture and marched off to Herbology with his hand wrapped in a handkerchief of Hermione's and Malfoy's derisive laughter still ringing in his ears.

“If he calls Hagrid a moron one more time …” snarled Harry.

“Harry, don’t go picking a row with Malfoy, don’t forget, he’s a pre-fect now, he could make life difficult for you. …”

“Wow, I wonder what it’d be like to have a difficult life?” said Harry sarcastically. Ron laughed, but Hermione frowned. Together they traipsed across the vegetable patch. The sky still appeared unable to make up its mind whether it wanted to rain or not.

“I just wish Hagrid would hurry up and get back, that’s all,” said Harry in a low voice, as they reached the greenhouses. “And don’t say that Grubbly-Plank woman’s a better teacher!” he added threateningly.

“I wasn’t going to,” said Hermione calmly.

“Because she’ll never be as good as Hagrid,” said Harry firmly, fully aware that he had just experienced an exemplary Care of Magical Creatures lesson and was thoroughly annoyed about it.

The door of the nearest greenhouse opened and some fourth years spilled out of it, including Ginny.

“Hi,” she said brightly as she passed. A few seconds later, Luna Lovegood emerged, trailing behind the rest of the class, a smudge of earth on her nose and her hair tied in a knot on the top of her head. When she saw Harry, her prominent eyes seemed to bulge excitedly and she made a beeline straight for him. Many of his classmates turned curiously to watch. Luna took a great breath and then said, without so much as a preliminary hello: “I believe He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back, and I believe you fought him and escaped from him.”

“Er — right,” said Harry awkwardly. Luna was wearing what looked like a pair of orange radishes for earrings, a fact that Parvati and Lavender seemed to have noticed, as they were both giggling and pointing at her earlobes.

“You can laugh!” Luna said, her voice rising, apparently under the impression that Parvati and Lavender were laughing at what she had said rather than what she was wearing. “But people used to believe there were no such things as the Blibbering Humdinger or the Crumple-Horned Snorkack!”

“Well, they were right, weren’t they?” said Hermione impatiently. “There weren’t any such things as the Blibbering Humdinger or the Crumple-Horned Snorkack.”

Luna gave her a withering look and flounced away, radishes swinging madly. Parvati and Lavender were not the only ones hooting with laughter now.

“D’you mind not offending the only people who believe me?” Harry asked Hermione as they made their way into class.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Harry, you can do better than her,” said Hermione. “Ginny’s told me all about her, apparently she’ll only believe in things as long as there’s no proof at all. Well, I wouldn’t expect anything else from someone whose father runs The Quibbler.”

Harry thought of the sinister winged horses he had seen on the night he had arrived and how Luna had said she could see them too. His spirits sank slightly. Had she been lying? But before he could de-vote much more thought to the matter, Ernie Macmillan had stepped up to him.

“I want you to know, Potter,” he said in a loud, carrying voice, “that it’s not only weirdos who support you. I personally believe you one hundred percent. My family have always stood firm behind Dumbledore, and so do I.”

“Er — thanks very much, Ernie,” said Harry, taken aback but pleased. Ernie might be pompous on occasions like these, but Harry was in a mood to deeply appreciate a vote of confidence from some-body who was not wearing radishes in their ears. Ernie’s words had certainly

wiped the smile from Lavender Brown's face and, as he turned to talk to Ron and Hermione, Harry caught Seamus's expres-sion, which looked both confused and defiant.

To nobody's surprise, Professor Sprout started their lesson by lec-turing them about the importance of O.W.L.s. Harry wished all the teachers would stop doing this; he was starting to get an anxious, twisted feeling in his stomach every time he remembered how much homework he had to do, a feeling that worsened dramatically when Professor Sprout gave them yet another essay at the end of class. Tired and smelling strongly of dragon dung, Professor Sprout's preferred brand of fertilizer, the Gryffindors trooped back up to the castle an hour and a half later, none of them talking very much; it had been an-other long day.

As Harry was starving, and he had his first detention with Um-bridge at five o'clock, he headed straight for dinner without dropping off his bag in Gryffindor Tower so that he could bolt something down before facing whatever she had in store for him. He had barely reached the entrance of the Great Hall, however, when a loud and angry voice said, "Oy, Potter!"

"What now?" he muttered wearily, turning to face Angelina John-son, who looked as though she was in a towering temper.

"I'll tell you what now," she said, marching straight up to him and poking him hard in the chest with her finger. "How come you've landed yourself in detention for five o'clock on Friday?"

"What?" said Harry. "Why … oh yeah, Keeper tryouts!"

"Now he remembers!" snarled Angelina. "Didn't I tell you I wanted to do a tryout with the whole team, and find someone who fitted in with everyone? Didn't I tell you I'd booked the Quidditch pitch spe-cially? And now you've decided you're not going to be there!"

“I didn’t decide not to be there!” said Harry, stung by the injustice of these words. “I got detention from that Umbridge woman, just because I told her the truth about You-Know-Who —”

“Well, you can just go straight to her and ask her to let you off on Friday,” said Angelina fiercely, “and I don’t care how you do it, tell her You-Know-Who’s a figment of your imagination if you like, just make sure you’re there!”

She stormed away.

“You know what?” Harry said to Ron and Hermione as they en-tered the Great Hall. “I think we’d better check with Puddlemere United whether Oliver Wood’s been killed during a training session, because she seems to be channeling his spirit.”

“What d’you reckon are the odds of Umbridge letting you off on Friday?” said Ron skeptically, as they sat down at the Gryffindor table.

“Less than zero,” said Harry glumly, tipping lamb chops onto his plate and starting to eat. “Better try, though, hadn’t I? I’ll offer to do two more detentions or something, I dunno. …” He swallowed a mouthful of potato and added, “I hope she doesn’t keep me too long this evening. You realize we’ve got to write three essays, practice Vanishing Spells for McGonagall, work out a countercharm for Flitwick, finish the bowtruckle drawing, and start that stupid dream diary for Trelawney?”

Ron moaned and for some reason glanced up at the ceiling.

“And it looks like it’s going to rain.”

“What’s that got to do with our homework?” said Hermione, her eyebrows raised.

“Nothing,” said Ron at once, his ears reddening.

At five to five Harry bade the other two good-bye and set off for Umbridge's office on the third floor. When he knocked on the door she said, "Come in," in a sugary voice. He entered cautiously, looking around.

He had known this office under three of its previous occupants. In the days when Gilderoy Lockhart had lived here it had been plastered in beaming portraits of its owner. When Lupin had occupied it, it was likely you would meet some fascinating Dark creature in a cage or tank if you came to call. In the impostor Moody's days it had been packed with various instruments and artifacts for the detection of wrongdoing and concealment.

Now, however, it looked totally unrecognizable. The surfaces had all been draped in lacy covers and cloths. There were several vases full of dried flowers, each residing on its own doily, and on one of the walls was a collection of ornamental plates, each decorated with a large technicolor kitten wearing a different bow around its neck. These were so foul that Harry stared at them, transfixed, until Professor Umbridge spoke again.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter."

Harry started and looked around. He had not noticed her at first because she was wearing a luridly flowered set of robes that blended only too well with the tablecloth on the desk behind her.

"Evening," Harry said stiffly.

"Well, sit down," she said, pointing toward a small table draped in lace beside which she had drawn up a straight-backed chair. A piece of blank parchment lay on the table, apparently waiting for him.

"Er," said Harry, without moving. "Professor Umbridge? Er — before we start, I-I wanted to ask you a … a favor."

Her bulging eyes narrowed.

“Oh yes?”

“Well I’m … I’m on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. And I was supposed to be at the tryouts for the new Keeper at five o’clock on Fri-day and I was — was wondering whether I could skip detention that night and do it — do it another night … instead …”

He knew long before he reached the end of his sentence that it was no good.

“Oh no,” said Umbridge, smiling so widely that she looked as though she had just swallowed a particularly juicy fly. “Oh no, no, no. This is your punishment for spreading evil, nasty, attention-seeking stories, Mr. Potter, and punishments certainly cannot be adjusted to suit the guilty one’s convenience. No, you will come here at five o’clock tomorrow, and the next day, and on Friday too, and you will do your detentions as planned. I think it rather a good thing that you are missing something you really want to do. It ought to reinforce the lesson I am trying to teach you.”

Harry felt the blood surge to his head and heard a thumping noise in his ears. So he told evil, nasty, attention-seeking stories, did he?

She was watching him with her head slightly to one side, still smil-ing widely, as though she knew exactly what he was thinking and was waiting to see whether he would start shouting again. With a massive effort Harry looked away from her, dropped his schoolbag beside the straight-backed chair, and sat down.

“There,” said Umbridge sweetly, “we’re getting better at controlling our temper already, aren’t we? Now, you are going to be doing some lines for me, Mr. Potter. No, not with your quill,” she added, as Harry bent down to open his bag. “You’re going to be using a rather special one of mine. Here you are.”

She handed him a long, thin black quill with an unusually sharp point.

“I want you to write ‘I must not tell lies,’ ” she told him softly.

“How many times?” Harry asked, with a creditable imitation of politeness.

“Oh, as long as it takes for the message to sink in,” said Umbridge sweetly. “Off you go.”

She moved over to her desk, sat down, and bent over a stack of parchment that looked like essays for marking. Harry raised the sharp black quill and then realized what was missing.

“You haven’t given me any ink,” he said.

“Oh, you won’t need ink,” said Professor Umbridge with the mer-est suggestion of a laugh in her voice.

Harry placed the point of the quill on the paper and wrote: I must not tell lies.

He let out a gasp of pain. The words had appeared on the parch-ment in what appeared to be shining red ink. At the same time, the words had appeared on the back of Harry’s right hand, cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel — yet even as he stared at the shining cut, the skin healed over again, leaving the place where it had been slightly redder than before but quite smooth.

Harry looked around at Umbridge. She was watching him, her wide, toadlike mouth stretched in a smile.

“Yes?”

“Nothing,” said Harry quietly.

He looked back at the parchment, placed the quill upon it once more, wrote I must not tell lies, and felt the searing pain on the back of his

hand for a second time; once again the words had been cut into his skin, once again they healed over seconds later.

And on it went. Again and again Harry wrote the words on the parchment in what he soon came to realize was not ink, but his own blood. And again and again the words were cut into the back of his hand, healed, and then reappeared the next time he set quill to parchment.

Darkness fell outside Umbridge's window. Harry did not ask when he would be allowed to stop. He did not even check his watch. He knew she was watching him for signs of weakness and he was not go-ing to show any, not even if he had to sit here all night, cutting open his own hand with this quill. …"Come here," she said, after what seemed hours.

He stood up. His hand was stinging painfully. When he looked down at it he saw that the cut had healed, but that the skin there was red raw.

"Hand," she said.

He extended it. She took it in her own. Harry repressed a shudder as she touched him with her thick, stubby fingers on which she wore a number of ugly old rings.

"Tut, tut, I don't seem to have made much of an impression yet," she said, smiling. "Well, we'll just have to try again tomorrow evening, won't we? You may go."

Harry left her office without a word. The school was quite deserted; it was surely past midnight. He walked slowly up the corridor then, when he had turned the corner and was sure that she would not hear him, broke into a run.

He had not had time to practice Vanishing Spells, had not written a single dream in his dream diary, and had not finished the drawing of

the bowtruckle, nor had he written his essays. He skipped breakfast next morning to scribble down a couple of made-up dreams for Divination, their first lesson, and was surprised to find a disheveled Ron keeping him company.

“How come you didn’t do it last night?” Harry asked, as Ron stared wildly around the common room for inspiration. Ron, who had been fast asleep when Harry got back to the dormitory, muttered something about “doing other stuff,” bent low over his parchment, and scrawled a few words.

“That’ll have to do,” he said, slamming the diary shut, “I’ve said I dreamed I was buying a new pair of shoes, she can’t make anything weird out of that, can she?”

They hurried off to North Tower together.

“How was detention with Umbridge, anyway? What did she make you do?”

Harry hesitated for a fraction of a second, then said, “Lines.”

“That’s not too bad, then, eh?” said Ron.

“Nope,” said Harry.

“Hey — I forgot — did she let you off for Friday?”

“No,” said Harry.

Ron groaned sympathetically.

It was another bad day for Harry; he was one of the worst in Transfiguration, not having practiced Vanishing Spells at all. He had to give up his lunch hour to complete the picture of the bowtruckle, and meanwhile, Professors McGonagall, Grubbly-Plank, and Sinistra gave them yet more homework, which he had no prospect of finishing

that evening because of his second detention with Umbridge. To cap it all, Angelina Johnson tracked him down at dinner again and, on learning that he would not be able to attend Friday's Keeper tryouts, told him she was not at all impressed by his attitude and that she expected play-ers who wished to remain on the team to put training before their other commitments.

"I'm in detention!" Harry yelled after her as she stalked away. "D'you think I'd rather be stuck in a room with that old toad or play-ing Quidditch?"

"At least it's only lines," said Hermione consolingly, as Harry sank back onto his bench and looked down at his steak-and-kidney pie, which he no longer fancied very much. "It's not as if it's a dreadful punishment, really. …"

Harry opened his mouth, closed it again, and nodded. He was not really sure why he was not telling Ron and Hermione exactly what was happening in Umbridge's room: He only knew that he did not want to see their looks of horror; that would make the whole thing seem worse and therefore more difficult to face. He also felt dimly that this was between himself and Umbridge, a private battle of wills, and he was not going to give her the satisfaction of hearing that he had com-plained about it.

"I can't believe how much homework we've got," said Ron miserably.

"Well, why didn't you do any last night?" Hermione asked him. "Where were you anyway?"

"I was … I fancied a walk," said Ron shiftily.

Harry had the distinct impression that he was not alone in con-cealing things at the moment.

* * *

The second detention was just as bad as the previous one. The skin on the back of Harry's hand became irritated more quickly now, red and inflamed; Harry thought it unlikely to keep healing as effectively for long. Soon the cut would remain etched in his hand and Umbridge would, perhaps, be satisfied. He let no moan of pain escape him, how-ever, and from the moment of entering the room to the moment of his dismissal, again past midnight, he said nothing but "Good evening" and "Good night."

His homework situation, however, was now desperate, and when he returned to the Gryffindor common room he did not, though exhausted, go to bed, but opened his books and began Snape's moonstone essay. It was half-past two by the time he had finished it. He knew he had done a poor job, but there was no help for it; unless he had something to give in he would be in detention with Snape next. He then dashed off answers to the questions Professor McGonagall had set them, cobbled together something on the proper handling of bowtruckles for Professor Grubbly-Plank, and staggered up to bed, where he fell fully clothed on top of the bed covers and fell asleep immediately.

Thursday passed in a haze of tiredness. Ron seemed very sleepy too, though Harry could not see why he should be. Harry's third detention passed in the same way as the previous two, except that after two hours the words "I must not tell lies" did not fade from the back of Harry's hand, but remained scratched there, oozing droplets of blood. The pause in the pointed quill's scratching made Professor Umbridge look up.

"Ah," she said softly, moving around her desk to examine his hand herself. "Good. That ought to serve as a reminder to you, oughtn't it? You may leave for tonight."

"Do I still have to come back tomorrow?" said Harry, picking up his schoolbag with his left hand rather than his smarting right.

“Oh yes,” said Professor Umbridge, smiling widely as before. “Yes, I think we can etch the message a little deeper with another evening’s work.”

He had never before considered the possibility that there might be another teacher in the world he hated more than Snape, but as he walked back toward Gryffindor Tower he had to admit he had found a contender. She’s evil, he thought, as he climbed a staircase to the sev-enth floor, she’s an evil, twisted, mad, old —“Ron?”

He had reached the top of the stairs, turned right, and almost walked into Ron, who was lurking behind a statue of Lachlan the Lanky, clutching his broomstick. He gave a great leap of surprise when he saw Harry and attempted to hide his new Cleansweep Eleven behind his back.

“What are you doing?”

“Er — nothing. What are you doing?”

Harry frowned at him.

“Come on, you can tell me! What are you hiding here for?”

“I’m — I’m hiding from Fred and George, if you must know,” said Ron. “They just went past with a bunch of first years, I bet they’re testing stuff on them again, I mean, they can’t do it in the common room now, can they, not with Hermione there.”

He was talking in a very fast, feverish way.

“But what have you got your broom for, you haven’t been flying, have you?” Harry asked.

“I — well — well, okay, I’ll tell you, but don’t laugh, all right?” Ron said defensively, turning redder with every second. “I-I thought I’d try out

for Gryffindor Keeper now I've got a decent broom. There. Go on. Laugh."

"I'm not laughing," said Harry. Ron blinked. "It's a brilliant idea! It'd be really cool if you got on the team! I've never seen you play Keeper, are you good?"

"I'm not bad," said Ron, who looked immensely relieved at Harry's reaction. "Charlie, Fred, and George always made me Keep for them when they were training during the holidays."

"So you've been practicing tonight?"

"Every evening since Tuesday … just on my own, though, I've been trying to bewitch Quaffles to fly at me, but it hasn't been easy and I don't know how much use it'll be." Ron looked nervous and anxious. "Fred and George are going to laugh themselves stupid when I turn up for the tryouts. They haven't stopped taking the mickey out of me since I got made a prefect."

"I wish I was going to be there," said Harry bitterly, as they set off together toward the common room.

"Yeah, so do — Harry, what's that on the back of your hand?"

Harry, who had just scratched his nose with his free right hand, tried to hide it, but had as much success as Ron with his Cleansweep.

"It's just a cut — it's nothing — it's —"

But Ron had grabbed Harry's forearm and pulled the back of Harry's hand up level with his eyes. There was a pause, during which he stared at the words carved into the skin, then he released Harry, looking sick.

"I thought you said she was giving you lines?"

Harry hesitated, but after all, Ron had been honest with him, so he told Ron the truth about the hours he had been spending in Umbridge's office.

"The old hag!" Ron said in a revolted whisper as they came to a halt in front of the Fat Lady, who was dozing peacefully with her head against her frame. "She's sick! Go to McGonagall, say something!"

"No," said Harry at once. "I'm not giving her the satisfaction of knowing she's got to me."

"Got to you? You can't let her get away with this!"

"I don't know how much power McGonagall's got over her," said Harry.

"Dumbledore, then, tell Dumbledore!"

"No," said Harry flatly.

"Why not?"

"He's got enough on his mind," said Harry, but that was not the true reason. He was not going to go to Dumbledore for help when Dumbledore had not spoken to him once since last June.

"Well, I reckon you should —" Ron began, but he was interrupted by the Fat Lady, who had been watching them sleepily and now burst out, "Are you going to give me the password or will I have to stay awake all night waiting for you to finish your conversation?"

Friday dawned sullen and sodden as the rest of the week. Though Harry glanced toward the staff table automatically when he entered the Great Hall, it was without real hope of seeing Hagrid and he turned his mind immediately to his more pressing problems, such as the mountainous pile of homework he had to do and the prospect of yet another detention with Umbridge.

Two things sustained Harry that day. One was the thought that it was almost the weekend; the other was that, dreadful though his final detention with Umbridge was sure to be, he had a distant view of the Quidditch pitch from her window and might, with luck, be able to see something of Ron's tryout. These were rather feeble rays of light, it was true, but Harry was grateful for anything that might lighten his present darkness; he had never had a worse first week of term at Hogwarts.

At five o'clock that evening he knocked on Professor Umbridge's office door for what he sincerely hoped would be the final time, was told to enter and did so. The blank parchment lay ready for him on the lace-covered table, the pointed black quill beside it.

"You know what to do, Mr. Potter," said Umbridge, smiling sweetly over at him.

Harry picked up the quill and glanced through the window. If he just shifted his chair an inch or so to the right … On the pretext of shifting himself closer to the table he managed it. He now had a dis-tant view of the Gryffindor Quidditch team soaring up and down the pitch, while half a dozen black figures stood at the foot of the three high goalposts, apparently awaiting their turn to Keep. It was impos-sible to tell which one was Ron at this distance.

I must not tell lies, Harry wrote. The cut in the back of his right hand opened and began to bleed afresh.

I must not tell lies. The cut dug deeper, stinging and smarting.

I must not tell lies. Blood trickled down his wrist.

He chanced another glance out of the window. Whoever was de-fending the goalposts now was doing a very poor job indeed. Katie Bell scored twice in the few seconds Harry dared watch. Hoping very much that the Keeper wasn't Ron, he dropped his eyes back to the parchment dotted with blood.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

He looked up whenever he thought he could risk it, when he could hear the scratching of Umbridge's quill or the opening of a desk drawer. The third person to try out was pretty good, the fourth was terrible, the fifth dodged a Bludger exceptionally well but then fumbled an easy save. The sky was darkening so that Harry doubted he would be able to watch the sixth and seventh people at all.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

The parchment was now shining with drops of blood from the back of his hand, which was searing with pain. When he next looked up, night had fallen and the Quidditch pitch was no longer visible.

"Let's see if you've gotten the message yet, shall we?" said Umbridge's soft voice half an hour later.

She moved toward him, stretching out her short be-ringed fingers for his arm. And then, as she took hold of him to examine the words now cut into his skin, pain seared, not across the back of his hand, but across the scar on his forehead. At the same time, he had a most peculiar sensation somewhere around his midriff.

He wrenched his arm out of her grip and leapt to his feet, staring at her. She looked back at him, a smile stretching her wide, slack mouth.

"Yes, it hurts, doesn't it?" she said softly.

He did not answer. His heart was thumping very hard and fast. Was she talking about his hand or did she know what he had just felt in his forehead?

“Well, I think I’ve made my point, Mr. Potter. You may go.”

He caught up his schoolbag and left the room as quickly as he could.

Stay calm, he told himself as he sprinted up the stairs. Stay calm, it doesn’t necessarily mean what you think it means. …“Mimbulus mimbletonia!” he gasped at the Fat Lady, who swung forward once more.

A roar of sound greeted him. Ron came running toward him, beaming all over his face and slopping butterbeer down his front from the goblet he was clutching.

“Harry, I did it, I’m in, I’m Keeper!”

“What? Oh — brilliant!” said Harry, trying to smile naturally, while his heart continued to race and his hand throbbed and bled.

“Have a butterbeer.” Ron pressed a bottle onto him. “I can’t believe it — where’s Hermione gone?”

“She’s there,” said Fred, who was also swigging butterbeer, and pointed to an armchair by the fire. Hermione was dozing in it, her drink tipping precariously in her hand.

“Well, she said she was pleased when I told her,” said Ron, looking slightly put out.

“Let her sleep,” said George hastily. It was a few moments before Harry noticed that several of the first years gathered around them bore unmistakable signs of recent nosebleeds.

“Come here, Ron, and see if Oliver’s old robes fit you,” called Katie Bell. “We can take off his name and put yours on instead. …”

As Ron moved away, Angelina came striding up to Harry.

“Sorry I was a bit short with you earlier, Potter,” she said abruptly. “It’s stressful, this managing lark, you know, I’m starting to think I was a bit hard on Wood sometimes.” She was watching Ron over the rim of her goblet with a slight frown on her face.

“Look, I know he’s your best mate, but he’s not fabulous,” she said bluntly. “I think with a bit of training he’ll be all right, though. He comes from a family of good Quidditch players. I’m banking on him turning out to have a bit more talent than he showed today, to be honest. Vicky Frobisher and Geoffrey Hooper both flew better this evening, but Hooper’s a real whiner, he’s always moaning about something or other, and Vicky’s involved in all sorts of societies, she admitted herself that if training clashed with her Charm Club she’d put Charms first. Anyway, we’re having a practice session at two o’clock tomorrow, so just make sure you’re there this time. And do me a favor and help Ron as much as you can, okay?”

He nodded and Angelina strolled back to Alicia Spinnet. Harry moved over to sit next to Hermione, who awoke with a jerk as he put down his bag.

“Oh, Harry, it’s you. … Good about Ron, isn’t it?” she said blearily. “I’m just so — so — so tired,” she yawned. “I was up until one o’clock making more hats. They’re disappearing like mad!”

And sure enough, now that he looked, Harry saw that there were woolly hats concealed all around the room where unwary elves might accidentally pick them up.

“Great,” said Harry distractedly; if he did not tell somebody soon, he would burst. “Listen, Hermione, I was just up in Umbridge’s office and she touched my arm …”

Hermione listened closely. When Harry had finished she said slowly, “You’re worried that You-Know-Who’s controlling her like he controlled Quirrell?”

“Well,” said Harry, dropping his voice, “it’s a possibility, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so,” said Hermione, though she sounded unconvinced. “But I don’t think he can be possessing her the way he possessed Quir-rell, I mean, he’s properly alive again now, isn’t he, he’s got his own body, he wouldn’t need to share someone else’s. He could have her un-der the Imperius Curse, I suppose. …”

Harry watched Fred, George, and Lee Jordan juggling empty but-terbeer bottles for a moment. Then Hermione said, “But last year your scar hurt when nobody was touching you, and didn’t Dumble-dore say it had to do with what You-Know-Who was feeling at the time? I mean, maybe this hasn’t got anything to do with Umbridge at all, maybe it’s just coincidence it happened while you were with her?”

“She’s evil,” said Harry flatly. “Twisted.”

“She’s horrible, yes, but … Harry, I think you ought to tell Dum-bledore your scar hurt.”

It was the second time in two days he had been advised to go to Dumbledore and his answer to Hermione was just the same as his an-swer to Ron.

“I’m not bothering him with this. Like you just said, it’s not a big deal. It’s been hurting on and off all summer — it was just a bit worse tonight, that’s all —”

“Harry, I’m sure Dumbledore would want to be bothered by this —”

“Yeah,” said Harry, before he could stop himself, “that’s the only bit of me Dumbledore cares about, isn’t it, my scar?”

“Don’t say that, it’s not true!”

“I think I’ll write and tell Sirius about it, see what he thinks —”

“Harry, you can’t put something like that in a letter!” said Hermione, looking alarmed. “Don’t you remember, Moody told us to be careful what we put in writing! We just can’t guarantee owls aren’t being intercepted anymore!”

“All right, all right, I won’t tell him, then!” said Harry irritably. He got to his feet. “I’m going to bed. Tell Ron for me, will you?”

“Oh no,” said Hermione, looking relieved, “if you’re going that means I can go without being rude too, I’m absolutely exhausted and I want to make some more hats tomorrow. Listen, you can help me if you like, it’s quite fun, I’m getting better, I can do patterns and bob-bles and all sorts of things now.”

Harry looked into her face, which was shining with glee, and tried to look as though he was vaguely tempted by this offer.

“Er … no, I don’t think I will, thanks,” he said. “Er — not tomor-row. I’ve got loads of homework to do. …”

And he traipsed off to the boys’ stairs, leaving her looking slightly disappointed behind him.

Chapter 14 Percy and Padfoot

Harry was the first to awake in his dormitory next morning. He lay for a moment watching dust swirl in the chink of sunlight falling through the gap in his four-poster's hangings and sa-vored the thought that it was Saturday. The first week of term seemed to have dragged on forever, like one gigantic History of Magic lesson.

Judging by the sleepy silence and the freshly minted look of that beam of sunlight, it was just after daybreak. He pulled open the cur-tains around his bed, got up, and started to dress. The only sound apart from the distant twittering of birds was the slow, deep breathing of his fellow Gryffindors. He opened his schoolbag carefully, pulled out parchment and quill, and headed out of the dormitory for the common room.

Making straight for his favorite squashy old armchair beside the now extinct fire, Harry settled himself down comfortably and un-rolled his parchment while looking around the room. The detritus of crumpled-up bits of parchment, old Gobstones, empty ingredient jars, and candy wrappers that usually covered the common room at the end of each day was gone, as were all Hermione's elf hats. Wondering vaguely how many elves had now been set free whether they wanted to be or not, Harry uncorked his ink bottle, dipped his quill into it, and then held it suspended an inch above the smooth yellowish sur-face of his parchment, thinking hard. … But after a minute or so he found himself staring into the empty grate, at a complete loss for what to say.

He could now appreciate how hard it had been for Ron and Hermione to write him letters over the summer. How was he sup-posed to tell Sirius everything that had happened over the past week and pose all the questions he was burning to ask without giving po-tential letter-thieves a lot of information he did not want them to have?

He sat quite motionless for a while, gazing into the fireplace, then, finally coming to a decision, he dipped his quill into the ink bottle once more and set it resolutely upon the parchment.

Dear Snuffles,

Hope you're okay, the first week back here's been terrible, I'm really glad it's the weekend.

We've got a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Pro-fessor Umbridge. She's nearly as nice as your mum. I'm writing because that thing I wrote to you about last summer happened again last night when I was doing a detention with Umbridge.

We're all missing our biggest friend, we hope he'll be back soon.

Please write back quickly.

Best,

Harry

Harry reread this letter several times, trying to see it from the point of view of an outsider. He could not see how they would know what he was talking about — or who he was talking to — just from reading this letter. He did hope Sirius would pick up the hint about Hagrid and tell them when he might be back: Harry did not want to ask di-rectly in case it drew too much attention to what Hagrid might be up to while he was not at Hogwarts.

Considering it was a very short letter it had taken a long time to write; sunlight had crept halfway across the room while he had been working on it, and he could now hear distant sounds of movement from the dormitories above. Sealing the parchment carefully he climbed through the portrait hole and headed off for the Owlery.

“I would not go that way if I were you,” said Nearly Headless Nick, drifting disconcertingly through a wall just ahead of him as he walked down the passage. “Peeves is planning an amusing joke on the next person to pass the bust of Paracelsus halfway down the corridor.”

“Does it involve Paracelsus falling on top of the person’s head?” asked Harry.

“Funnily enough, it does,” said Nearly Headless Nick in a bored voice. “Subtlety has never been Peeves’s strong point. I’m off to try and find the Bloody Baron. … He might be able to put a stop to it. … See you, Harry. …”

“Yeah, ’bye,” said Harry and instead of turning right, he turned left, taking a longer but safer route up to the Owlery. His spirits rose as he walked past window after window showing brilliantly blue sky; he had training later, he would be back on the Quidditch pitch at last — Something brushed his ankles. He looked down and saw the caretaker’s skeletal gray cat, Mrs. Norris, slinking past him. She turned lamplike yellow eyes upon him for a moment before disappearing behind a statue of Wilfred the Wistful.

“I’m not doing anything wrong,” Harry called after her. She had the unmistakable air of a cat that was off to report to her boss, yet Harry could not see why; he was perfectly entitled to walk up to the Owlery on a Saturday morning.

The sun was high in the sky now and when Harry entered the Owlery the glassless windows dazzled his eyes; thick silvery beams of sunlight crisscrossed the circular room in which hundreds of owls nes-tled on rafters, a little restless in the early morning light, some clearly just returned from hunting. The straw-covered floor crunched a little as he stepped across tiny animal bones, craning his neck for a sight of Hedwig.

“There you are,” he said, spotting her somewhere near the very top of the vaulted ceiling. “Get down here, I’ve got a letter for you.”

With a low hoot she stretched her great white wings and soared down onto his shoulder.

“Right, I know this says ‘Snuffles’ on the outside,” he told her, giv-ing her the letter to clasp in her beak and, without knowing exactly why, whispering, “but it’s for Sirius, okay?”

She blinked her amber eyes once and he took that to mean that she understood.

“Safe flight, then,” said Harry and he carried her to one of the win-dows; with a moment’s pressure on his arm Hedwig took off into the blindingly bright sky. He watched her until she became a tiny black speck and vanished, then switched his gaze to Hagrid’s hut, clearly vis-ible from this window, and just as clearly uninhabited, the chimney smokeless, the curtains drawn.

The treetops of the Forbidden Forest swayed in a light breeze. Harry watched them, savoring the fresh air on his face, thinking about Quidditch later … and then he saw it. A great, reptilian winged horse, just like the ones pulling the Hogwarts carriages, with leathery black wings spread wide like a pterodactyl’s, rose up out of the trees like a grotesque, giant bird. It soared in a great circle and then plunged once more into the trees. The whole thing had happened so quickly Harry could hardly believe what he had seen, except that his heart was hammering madly.

The Owlery door opened behind him. He leapt in shock, and turn-ing quickly, saw Cho Chang holding a letter and a parcel in her hands.

“Hi,” said Harry automatically.

“Oh … hi,” she said breathlessly. “I didn’t think anyone would be up here this early. … I only remembered five minutes ago, it’s my mum’s birthday.”

She held up the parcel.

“Right,” said Harry. His brain seemed to have jammed. He wanted to say something funny and interesting, but the memory of that terri-ble winged horse was fresh in his mind.

“Nice day,” he said, gesturing to the windows. His insides seemed to shrivel with embarrassment. The weather. He was talking about the weather. …“Yeah,” said Cho, looking around for a suitable owl. “Good Quid-ditch conditions. I haven’t been out all week, have you?”

“No,” said Harry.

Cho had selected one of the school barn owls. She coaxed it down onto her arm where it held out an obliging leg so that she could attach the parcel.

“Hey, has Gryffindor got a new Keeper yet?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “It’s my friend Ron Weasley, d’you know him?”

“The Tornado-hater?” said Cho rather coolly. “Is he any good?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “I think so. I didn’t see his tryout, though, I was in detention.”

Cho looked up, the parcel only half-attached to the owl’s legs.

“That Umbridge woman’s foul,” she said in a low voice. “Putting you in detention just because you told the truth about how — how — how he died. Everyone heard about it, it was all over the school. You were really brave standing up to her like that.”

Harry’s insides reinflated so rapidly he felt as though he might ac-tually float a few inches off the dropping-strewn floor. Who cared about a stupid flying horse, Cho thought he had been really brave. … For a moment he considered accidentally-on-purpose showing her his cut hand as he helped her tie her parcel onto her owl. … But the

very instant that this thrilling thought occurred, the Owlery door opened again.

Filch, the caretaker, came wheezing into the room. There were purple patches on his sunken, veined cheeks, his jowls were aquiver and his thin gray hair disheveled; he had obviously run here. Mrs. Norris came trotting at his heels, gazing up at the owls overhead and mewing hungrily. There was a restless shifting of wings from above, and a large brown owl snapped his beak in a menacing fashion.

“Aha!” said Filch, taking a flat-footed step toward Harry, his pouchy cheeks trembling with anger. “I’ve had a tip-off that you are intending to place a massive order for Dungbombs!”

Harry folded his arms and stared at the caretaker.

“Who told you I was ordering Dungbombs?”

Cho was looking from Harry to Filch, also frowning; the barn owl on her arm, tired of standing on one leg, gave an admonitory hoot but she ignored it.

“I have my sources,” said Filch in a self-satisfied hiss. “Now hand over whatever it is you’re sending.”

Feeling immensely thankful that he had not dawdled in posting off the letter, Harry said, “I can’t, it’s gone.”

“Gone?” said Filch, his face contorting with rage.

“Gone,” said Harry calmly.

Filch opened his mouth furiously, mouthed for a few seconds, then raked Harry’s robes with his eyes. “How do I know you haven’t got it in your pocket?”

“Because —”

“I saw him send it,” said Cho angrily.

Filch rounded on her.

“You saw him — ?”

“That’s right, I saw him,” she said fiercely.

There was a moment’s pause in which Filch glared at Cho and Cho glared right back, then the caretaker turned and shuffled back toward the door. He stopped with his hand on the handle and looked back at Harry.

“If I get so much as a whiff of a Dungbomb …”

He stumped off down the stairs. Mrs. Norris cast a last longing look at the owls and followed him.

Harry and Cho looked at each other.

“Thanks,” Harry said.

“No problem,” said Cho, finally fixing the parcel to the barn owl’s other leg, her face slightly pink. “You weren’t ordering Dungbombs, were you?”

“No,” said Harry.

“I wonder why he thought you were, then?” she said, as she carried the owl to the window.

Harry shrugged; he was quite as mystified by that as she was, though, oddly, it was not bothering him very much at the moment.

They left the Owlery together. At the entrance of a corridor that led toward the west wing of the castle, Cho said, “I’m going this way. Well, I’ll … I’ll see you around, Harry.”

“Yeah … see you.”

She smiled at him and departed. He walked on, feeling quietly elated. He had managed to have an entire conversation with her and not embarrassed himself once. … You were really brave standing up to her like that. … She had called him brave. … She did not hate him for being alive. …Of course, she had preferred Cedric, he knew that. … Though if he’d only asked her to the ball before Cedric had, things might have turned out differently. … She had seemed sincerely sorry that she had to refuse when Harry had asked her. …“Morning,” Harry said brightly to Ron and Hermione, joining them at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall.

“What are you looking so pleased about?” said Ron, eyeing Harry in surprise.

“Erm … Quidditch later,” said Harry happily, pulling a large plat-ter of bacon and eggs toward him.

“Oh … yeah …” said Ron. He put down the bit of toast he was eating and took a large swig of pumpkin juice. Then he said, “Listen … you don’t fancy going out a bit earlier with me, do you? Just to — er — give me some practice before training? So I can, you know, get my eye in a bit …”

“Yeah, okay,” said Harry.

“Look, I don’t think you should,” said Hermione seriously, “you’re both really behind on homework as it —”

But she broke off; the morning post was arriving and, as usual, the Daily Prophet was soaring toward her in the beak of a screech owl, which landed perilously close to the sugar bowl and held out a leg; Hermione pushed a Knut into its leather pouch, took the newspaper, and scanned the front page critically as the owl took off again.

“Anything interesting?” said Ron; Harry smiled — he knew Ron was keen to get her off the subject of homework.

“No,” she sighed, “just some guff about the bass player in the Weird Sisters getting married. …”

She opened the paper and disappeared behind it. Harry devoted himself to another helping of eggs and bacon; Ron was staring up at the high windows, looking slightly preoccupied.

“Wait a moment,” said Hermione suddenly. “Oh no … Sirius!”

“What’s happened?” said Harry, and he snatched at the paper so violently that it ripped down the middle so that he and Hermione were holding half each.

“ ‘The Ministry of Magic has received a tip-off from a reliable source that Sirius Black, notorious mass murderer … blah blah blah … is cur-rently hiding in London!’ ” Hermione read from her half in an anguished whisper.

“Lucius Malfoy, I’ll bet anything,” said Harry in a low, furious voice. “He did recognize Sirius on the platform. …”

“What?” said Ron, looking alarmed. “You didn’t say —”

“Shh!” said the other two.

“… ‘Ministry warns Wizarding community that Black is very danger-ous … killed thirteen people … broke out of Azkaban …’ the usual rubbish,” Hermione concluded, laying down her half of the paper and looking fearfully at Harry and Ron. “Well, he just won’t be able to leave the house again, that’s all,” she whispered. “Dumbledore did warn him not to.”

Harry looked down glumly at the bit of the Prophet he had torn off. Most of the page was devoted to an advertisement for Madame

Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, which was apparently having a sale.

"Hey!" he said, flattening it down so Hermione and Ron could both see it. "Look at this!"

"I've got all the robes I want," said Ron.

"No," said Harry, "look … this little piece here …"

Ron and Hermione bent closer to read it; the item was barely an inch long and placed right at the bottom of a column. It was head-lined:TRESPASS AT MINISTRY

Sturgis Podmore, 38, of number two, Laburnum Gardens, Clapham, has appeared in front of the Wizengamot charged with trespass and attempted robbery at the Ministry of Magic on 31st August. Podmore was arrested by Ministry of Magic watch-wizard Eric Munch, who found him attempting to force his way through a top-security door at one o'clock in the morning. Podmore, who refused to speak in his own defense, was convicted on both charges and sentenced to six months in Azkaban.

"Sturgis Podmore?" said Ron slowly, "but he's that bloke who looks like his head's been thatched, isn't he? He's one of the Ord —"

"Ron, shh!" said Hermione, casting a terrified look around them.

"Six months in Azkaban!" whispered Harry, shocked. "Just for try-ing to get through a door!"

"Don't be silly, it wasn't just for trying to get through a door — what on earth was he doing at the Ministry of Magic at one o'clock in the morning?" breathed Hermione.

"D'you reckon he was doing something for the Order?" Ron muttered.

“Wait a moment. …” said Harry slowly. “Sturgis was supposed to come and see us off, remember?”

The other two looked at him.

“Yeah, he was supposed to be part of our guard going to King’s Cross, remember? And Moody was all annoyed because he didn’t turn up, so that doesn’t seem like he was supposed to be on a job for them, does it?”

“Well, maybe they didn’t expect him to get caught,” said Hermione.

“It could be a frame-up!” Ron exclaimed excitedly. “No — listen!” he went on, dropping his voice dramatically at the threatening look on Hermione’s face. “The Ministry suspects he’s one of Dumbledore’s lot so — I dunno — they lured him to the Ministry, and he wasn’t trying to get through a door at all! Maybe they’ve just made some-thing up to get him!”

There was a pause while Harry and Hermione considered this. Harry thought it seemed far-fetched; Hermione, on the other hand, looked rather impressed and said, “Do you know, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if that were true.”

She folded up her half of the newspaper thoughtfully. When Harry laid down his knife and fork she seemed to come out of a reverie.

“Right, well, I think we should tackle that essay for Sprout on Self-Fertilizing Shrubs first, and if we’re lucky we’ll be able to start McGo-nagall’s Inanimatus Conjurus before lunch. …”

Harry felt a small twinge of guilt at the thought of the pile of homework awaiting him upstairs, but the sky was a clear, exhilarating blue, and he had not been on his Firebolt for a week. …“I mean, we can do it tonight,” said Ron, as he and Harry walked down the sloping lawns toward the Quidditch pitch, their broom-sticks over their shoulders, Hermione’s dire warnings that they would fail all their O.W.L.s still

ringing in their ears. “And we’ve got tomor-row. She gets too worked up about work, that’s her trouble. …” There was a pause and he added, in a slightly more anxious tone, “D’you think she meant it when she said we weren’t copying from her?”

“Yeah, I do,” said Harry. “Still, this is important too, we’ve got to practice if we want to stay on the Quidditch team. …”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Ron in a heartened tone. “And we have got plenty of time to do it all. …”

Harry glanced over to his right as they approached the Quidditch pitch, to where the trees of the Forbidden Forest were swaying darkly. Nothing flew out of them; the sky was empty but for a few distant owls fluttering around the Owlery Tower. He had enough to worry about; the flying horse wasn’t doing him any harm: He pushed it out of his mind.

They collected balls from the cupboard in the changing room and set to work, Ron guarding the three tall goalposts, Harry playing Chaser and trying to get the Quaffle past Ron. Harry thought Ron was pretty good; he blocked three-quarters of the goals Harry at-tempted to put past him and played better the longer they practiced. After a couple of hours they returned to the school, where they ate lunch, during which Hermione made it quite clear that she thought they were irresponsible, then returned to the Quidditch pitch for the real training session. All their teammates but Angelina were already in the changing room when they entered.

“All right, Ron?” said George, winking at him.

“Yeah,” said Ron, who had become quieter and quieter all the way down to the pitch.

“Ready to show us all up, Ickle Prefect?” said Fred, emerging tousle-haired from the neck of his Quidditch robes, a slightly mali-cious grin on his face.

“Shut up,” said Ron, stony-faced, pulling on his own team robes for the first time. They fitted him well considering they had been Oliver Wood’s, who was rather broader in the shoulder.

“Okay everyone,” said Angelina, entering from the Captain’s office, already changed. “Let’s get to it; Alicia and Fred, if you can just bring the ball crate out for us. Oh, and there are a couple of people out there watching but I want you to just ignore them, all right?”

Something in her would-be casual voice made Harry think he might know who the uninvited spectators were, and sure enough, when they left the changing room for the bright sunlight of the pitch it was to a storm of catcalls and jeers from the Slytherin Quidditch team and assorted hangers-on, who were grouped halfway up the empty stands and whose voices echoed loudly around the stadium.

“What’s that Weasley’s riding?” Malfoy called in his sneering drawl. “Why would anyone put a Flying Charm on a moldy old log like that?”

Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy Parkinson guffawed and shrieked with laughter. Ron mounted his broom and kicked off from the ground and Harry followed him, watching his ears turn red from behind.

“Ignore them,” he said, accelerating to catch up with Ron. “We’ll see who’s laughing after we play them. …”

“Exactly the attitude I want, Harry,” said Angelina approvingly, soaring around them with the Quaffle under her arm and slowing to hover on the spot in front of her airborne team. “Okay everyone, we’re going to start with some passes just to warm up, the whole team please —”

“Hey, Johnson, what’s with that hairstyle anyway?” shrieked Pansy Parkinson from below. “Why would anyone want to look like they’ve got worms coming out of their head?”

Angelina swept her long braided hair out of her face and said calmly, “Spread out, then, and let’s see what we can do. …”

Harry reversed away from the others to the far side of the pitch. Ron fell back toward the opposite goal. Angelina raised the Quaffle with one hand and threw it hard to Fred, who passed to George, who passed to Harry, who passed to Ron, who dropped it.

The Slytherins, led by Malfoy, roared and screamed with laughter. Ron, who had pelted toward the ground to catch the Quaffle before it landed, pulled out of the dive untidily, so that he slipped sideways on his broom, and returned to playing height, blushing. Harry saw Fred and George exchange looks, but uncharacteristically neither of them said anything, for which he was grateful.

"Pass it on, Ron," called Angelina, as though nothing had happened.

Ron threw the Quaffle to Alicia, who passed back to Harry, who passed to George. …"Hey, Potter, how's your scar feeling?" called Malfoy. "Sure you don't need a lie-down? It must be, what, a whole week since you were in the hospital wing, that's a record for you, isn't it?"

Fred passed to Angelina; she reverse passed to Harry, who had not been expecting it, but caught it in the very tips of his fingers and passed it quickly to Ron, who lunged for it and missed by inches.

"Come on now, Ron," said Angelina crossly, as Ron dived for the ground again, chasing the Quaffle. "Pay attention."

It would have been hard to say whether Ron's face or the Quaffle was a deeper scarlet when he returned again to playing height. Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherin team were howling with laughter.

On his third attempt, Ron caught the Quaffle; perhaps out of relief he passed it on so enthusiastically that it soared straight through Katie's outstretched hands and hit her hard in the face.

"Sorry!" Ron groaned, zooming forward to see whether he had done any damage.

“Get back in position, she’s fine!” barked Angelina. “But as you’re passing to a teammate, do try not to knock her off her broom, won’t you? We’ve got Bludgers for that!”

Katie’s nose was bleeding. Down below the Slytherins were stamping their feet and jeering. Fred and George converged on Katie.

“Here, take this,” Fred told her, handing her something small and purple from out of his pocket. “It’ll clear it up in no time.”

“All right,” called Angelina, “Fred, George, go and get your bats and a Bludger; Ron, get up to the goalposts, Harry, release the Snitch when I say so. We’re going to aim for Ron’s goal, obviously.”

Harry zoomed off after the twins to fetch the Snitch.

“Ron’s making a right pig’s ear of things, isn’t he?” muttered George, as the three of them landed at the crate containing the balls and opened it to extract one of the Bludgers and the Snitch.

“He’s just nervous,” said Harry. “He was fine when I was practicing with him this morning.”

“Yeah, well, I hope he hasn’t peaked too soon,” said Fred gloomily.

They returned to the air. When Angelina blew her whistle, Harry released the Snitch and Fred and George let fly the Bludger; from that moment on, Harry was barely aware of what the others were doing. It was his job to recapture the tiny fluttering golden ball that was worth a hundred and fifty points to the Seeker’s team and doing so required enormous speed and skill. He accelerated, rolling and swerving in and out of the Chasers, the warm autumn air whipping his face and the distant yells of the Slytherins so much meaningless roaring in his ears. … But too soon, the whistle brought him to a halt again.

“Stop — stop – STOP!” screamed Angelina. “Ron — you’re not covering your middle post!”

Harry looked around at Ron, who was hovering in front of the left-hand hoop, leaving the other two completely unprotected.

“Oh … sorry …”

“You keep shifting around while you’re watching the Chasers!” said Angelina. “Either stay in center position until you have to move to defend a hoop, or else circle the hoops, but don’t drift vaguely off to one side, that’s how you let in the last three goals!”

“Sorry …” Ron repeated, his red face shining like a beacon against the bright blue sky.

“And Katie, can’t you do something about that nosebleed?”

“It’s just getting worse!” said Katie thickly, attempting to stem the flow with her sleeve.

Harry glanced around at Fred, who was looking anxious and checking his pockets. He saw Fred pull out something purple, examine it for a second, and then look around at Katie, evidently horrorstruck.

“Well, let’s try again,” said Angelina. She was ignoring the Slyth-erins, who had now set up a chant of “Gryffindor are losers, Gryffindor are losers,” but there was a certain rigidity about her seat on the broom nevertheless.

This time they had been flying for barely three minutes when Angelina’s whistle sounded. Harry, who had just sighted the Snitch circling the opposite goalpost, pulled up feeling distinctly aggrieved.

“What now?” he said impatiently to Alicia, who was nearest.

“Katie,” she said shortly.

Harry turned and saw Angelina, Fred, and George all flying as fast as they could toward Katie. Harry and Alicia sped toward her too. It was plain that Angelina had stopped training just in time; Katie was now chalk-white and covered in blood.

“She needs the hospital wing,” said Angelina.

“We’ll take her,” said Fred. “She — er — might have swallowed a Blood Blisterpod by mistake —”

“Well, there’s no point continuing with no Beaters and a Chaser gone,” said Angelina glumly, as Fred and George zoomed off toward the castle supporting Katie between them. “Come on, let’s go and get changed.”

The Slytherins continued to chant as they trailed back into the changing rooms.

“How was practice?” asked Hermione rather coolly half an hour later, as Harry and Ron climbed through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room.

“It was —” Harry began.

“Completely lousy,” said Ron in a hollow voice, sinking into a chair beside Hermione. She looked up at Ron and her frostiness seemed to melt.

“Well, it was only your first one,” she said consolingly, “it’s bound to take time to —”

“Who said it was me who made it lousy?” snapped Ron.

“No one,” said Hermione, looking taken aback, “I thought —”

“You thought I was bound to be rubbish?”

“No, of course I didn’t! Look, you said it was lousy so I just —”

“I’m going to get started on some homework,” said Ron angrily and stomped off to the staircase to the boys’ dormitories and vanished from sight. Hermione turned to Harry.

“Was he lousy?”

“No,” said Harry loyally.

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“Well, I suppose he could’ve played better,” Harry muttered, “but it was only the first training session, like you said. …”

Neither Harry nor Ron seemed to make much headway with their homework that night. Harry knew Ron was too preoccupied with how badly he had performed at Quidditch practice and he himself was having difficulty in getting the chant of “Gryffindor are losers” out of his head.

They spent the whole of Sunday in the common room, buried in their books while the room around them filled up, then emptied: It was another clear, fine day and most of their fellow Gryffindors spent the day out in the grounds, enjoying what might well be some of the last sunshine that year. By the evening Harry felt as though somebody had been beating his brain against the inside of his skull.

“You know, we probably should try and get more homework done during the week,” Harry muttered to Ron, as they finally laid aside Professor McGonagall’s long essay on the Inanimatus Conjurus spell and turned miserably to Professor Sinistra’s equally long and difficult essay about Jupiter’s moons.

“Yeah,” said Ron, rubbing slightly bloodshot eyes and throwing his fifth spoiled bit of parchment into the fire beside them. “Listen … shall we just ask Hermione if we can have a look at what she’s done?”

Harry glanced over at her; she was sitting with Crookshanks on her lap and chatting merrily to Ginny as a pair of knitting needles flashed in midair in front of her, now knitting a pair of shapeless elf socks.

"No," he said heavily, "you know she won't let us."

And so they worked on while the sky outside the windows became steadily darker; slowly, the crowd in the common room began to thin again. At half-past eleven, Hermione wandered over to them, yawning.

"Nearly done?"

"No," said Ron shortly.

"Jupiter's biggest moon is Ganymede, not Callisto," she said, pointing over Ron's shoulder at a line in his Astronomy essay, "and it's Io that's got the volcanos."

"Thanks," snarled Ron, scratching out the offending sentences.

"Sorry, I only —"

"Yeah, well, if you've just come over here to criticize —"

"Ron —"

"I haven't got time to listen to a sermon, all right, Hermione, I'm up to my neck in it here —"

"No — look!"

Hermione was pointing to the nearest window. Harry and Ron both looked over. A handsome screech owl was standing on the windowsill, gazing into the room at Ron.

"Isn't that Hermes?" said Hermione, sounding amazed.

“Blimey, it is!” said Ron quietly, throwing down his quill and get-ting to his feet. “What’s Percy writing to me for?”

He crossed to the window and opened it; Hermes flew inside, landed upon Ron’s essay, and held out a leg to which a letter was at-tached. Ron took it off and the owl departed at once, leaving inky footprints across Ron’s drawing of the moon Io.

“That’s definitely Percy’s handwriting,” said Ron, sinking back into his chair and staring at the words on the outside of the scroll: To Ronald Weasley, Gryffindor House, Hogwarts. He looked up at the other two. “What d’you reckon?”

“Open it!” said Hermione eagerly. Harry nodded.

Ron unrolled the scroll and began to read. The farther down the parchment his eyes traveled, the more pronounced became his scowl. When he had finished reading, he looked disgusted. He thrust the let-ter at Harry and Hermione, who leaned toward each other to read it together:Dear Ron,

I have only just heard (from no less a person than the Minister of Magic himself, who has it from your new teacher, Professor Umbridge) that you have become a Hogwarts prefect.

I was most pleasantly surprised when I heard this news and must firstly offer my congratulations. I must admit that I have al-ways been afraid that you would take what we might call the “Fred and George” route, rather than following in my footsteps, so you can imagine my feelings on hearing you have stopped flouting authority and have decided to shoulder some real responsibility.

But I want to give you more than congratulations, Ron, I want to give you some advice, which is why I am sending this at night rather than by the usual morning post. Hopefully you will be able to read this away from prying eyes and avoid awkward questions.

From something the Minister let slip when telling me you are now a prefect, I gather that you are still seeing a lot of Harry Pot-ter. I must tell you, Ron, that nothing could put you in danger of losing your badge more than continued fraternization with that boy. Yes, I am sure you are surprised to hear this — no doubt you will say that Potter has always been Dumbledore's favorite — but I feel bound to tell you that Dumbledore may not be in charge at Hogwarts much longer and the people who count have a very dif-ferent — and probably more accurate — view of Potters behav-ior. I shall say no more here, but if you look at the Daily Prophet tomorrow you will get a good idea of the way the wind is blow-ing — and see if you can spot yours truly!

Seriously, Ron, you do not want to be tarred with the same brush as Potter, it could be very damaging to your future prospects, and I am talking here about life after school too. As you must be aware, given that our father escorted him to court, Pot-ter had a disciplinary hearing this summer in front of the whole Wizengamot and he did not come out of it looking too good. He got off on a mere technicality if you ask me and many of the peo-ple I've spoken to remain convinced of his guilt.

It may be that you are afraid to sever ties with Potter — I know that he can be unbalanced and, for all I know, violent — but if you have any worries about this, or have spotted anything else in Potter's behavior that is troubling you, I urge you to speak to Dolores Umbridge, a really delightful woman, who I know will be only too happy to advise you.

This leads me to my other bit of advice. As I have hinted above, Dumbledore's regime at Hogwarts may soon be over. Your loyalty, Ron, should be not to him, but to the school and the Ministry. I am very sorry to hear that so far Professor Umbridge is en-countering very little cooperation from staff as she strives to make those necessary changes within Hogwarts that the Ministry so ar-dently desires (although she should find this easier from next week — again, see the Prophet tomorrow!). I shall say only this — a student who

shows himself willing to help Professor Um-bridge now may be very well placed for Head Boyship in a couple of years!

I am sorry that I was unable to see more of you over the sum-mer. It pains me to criticize our parents, but I am afraid I can no longer live under their roof while they remain mixed up with the dangerous crowd around Dumbledore (if you are writing to Mother at any point, you might tell her that a certain Sturgis Podmore, who is a great friend of Dumbledore's, has recently been sent to Azkaban for trespass at the Ministry. Perhaps that will open their eyes to the kind of petty criminals with whom they are currently rubbing shoulders). I count myself very lucky to have es-caped the stigma of association with such people — the Minister really could not be more gracious to me — and I do hope, Ron, that you will not allow family ties to blind you to the misguided nature of our parents' beliefs and actions either. I sincerely hope that, in time, they will realize how mistaken they were and I shall, of course, be ready to accept a full apology when that day comes.

Please think over what I have said most carefully, particularly the bit about Harry Potter, and congratulations again on becom-ing prefect.

Your brother,

Percy

Harry looked up at Ron.

"Well," he said, trying to sound as though he found the whole thing a joke, "if you want to — er — what is it?" (He checked Percy's letter.) "Oh yeah — 'sever ties' with me, I swear I won't get violent."

"Give it back," said Ron, holding out his hand. "He is —" Ron said jerkily, tearing Percy's letter in half, "the world's" — he tore it into quarters — "biggest" — he tore it into eighths — "git." He threw the pieces into the fire.

“Come on, we’ve got to get this finished some time before dawn,” he said briskly to Harry, pulling Professor Sinistra’s essay back toward him.

Hermione was looking at Ron with an odd expression on her face.

“Oh, give them here,” she said abruptly.

“What?” said Ron.

“Give them to me, I’ll look through them and correct them,” she said.

“Are you serious? Ah, Hermione, you’re a lifesaver,” said Ron, “what can I — ?”

“What you can say is, ‘We promise we’ll never leave our homework this late again,’ ” she said, holding out both hands for their essays, but she looked slightly amused all the same.

“Thanks a million, Hermione,” said Harry weakly, passing over his essay and sinking back into his armchair, rubbing his eyes.

It was now past midnight and the common room was deserted but for the three of them and Crookshanks. The only sound was that of Hermione’s quill scratching out sentences here and there on their essays and the ruffle of pages as she checked various facts in the refer-ence books strewn across the table. Harry was exhausted. He also felt an odd, sick, empty feeling in his stomach that had nothing to do with tiredness and everything to do with the letter now curling blackly in the heart of the fire.

He knew that half the people inside Hogwarts thought him strange, even mad; he knew that the Daily Prophet had been making snide allusions to him for months, but there was something about see-ing it written down like that in Percy’s writing, about knowing that Percy was advising Ron to drop him and even to tell tales on him to Umbridge, that made his situation real to him as nothing else had. He

had known Percy for four years, had stayed in his house during the summers, shared a tent with him during the Quidditch World Cup, had even been awarded full marks by him in the second task of the Triwizard Tournament last year, yet now, Percy thought him unbalanced and possibly violent.

And with a surge of sympathy for his godfather, Harry thought that Sirius was probably the only person he knew who could really understand how he felt at the moment, because Sirius was in the same situ-ation; nearly everyone in the Wizarding world thought Sirius a dangerous murderer and a great Voldemort supporter and he had had to live with that knowledge for fourteen years. …Harry blinked. He had just seen something in the fire that could not have been there. It had flashed into sight and vanished immedi-ately. No … it could not have been. … He had imagined it because he had been thinking about Sirius. …"Okay, write that down," Hermione said to Ron, pushing his essay and a sheet covered in her own writing back to Ron, "and then copy out this conclusion that I've written for you."

"Hermione, you are honestly the most wonderful person I've ever met," said Ron weakly, "and if I'm ever rude to you again —"

"— I'll know you're back to normal," said Hermione. "Harry, yours is okay except for this bit at the end, I think you must have mis-heard Professor Sinistra, Europa's covered in ice, not mice — Harry?"

Harry had slid off his chair onto his knees and was now crouching on the singed and threadbare hearthrug, gazing into the flames.

"Er — Harry?" said Ron uncertainly. "Why are you down there?"

"Because I've just seen Sirius's head in the fire," said Harry.

He spoke quite calmly; after all, he had seen Sirius's head in this very fire the previous year and talked to it too. Nevertheless, he could not be sure that he had really seen it this time. … It had vanished so quickly. …"Sirius's head?" Hermione repeated. "You mean like when

he wanted to talk to you during the Triwizard Tournament? But he wouldn't do that now, it would be too — Sirius!"

She gasped, gazing at the fire; Ron dropped his quill. There in the middle of the dancing flames sat Sirius's head, long dark hair falling around his grinning face.

"I was starting to think you'd go to bed before everyone else had disappeared," he said. "I've been checking every hour."

"You've been popping into the fire every hour?" Harry said, half laughing.

"Just for a few seconds to check if the coast was clear yet."

"But what if you'd been seen?" said Hermione anxiously.

"Well, I think a girl — first year by the look of her — might've got a glimpse of me earlier, but don't worry," Sirius said hastily, as Hermione clapped a hand to her mouth. "I was gone the moment she looked back at me and I'll bet she just thought I was an oddly shaped log or something."

"But Sirius, this is taking an awful risk —" Hermione began.

"You sound like Molly," said Sirius. "This was the only way I could come up with of answering Harry's letter without resorting to a code — and codes are breakable."

At the mention of Harry's letter, Hermione and Ron had both turned to stare at him.

"You didn't say you'd written to Sirius!" said Hermione accusingly.

"I forgot," said Harry, which was perfectly true; his meeting with Cho in the Owlery had driven everything before it out of his mind. "Don't

look at me like that, Hermione, there was no way anyone would have got secret information out of it, was there, Sirius?"

"No, it was very good," said Sirius, smiling. "Anyway, we'd better be quick, just in case we're disturbed — your scar."

"What about — ?" Ron began, but Hermione said quickly, "We'll tell you afterward, go on, Sirius."

"Well, I know it can't be fun when it hurts, but we don't think it's anything to really worry about. It kept aching all last year, didn't it?"

"Yeah, and Dumbledore said it happened whenever Voldemort was feeling a powerful emotion," said Harry, ignoring, as usual, Ron and Hermione's winces. "So maybe he was just, I dunno, really angry or something the night I had that detention."

"Well, now he's back it's bound to hurt more often," said Sirius.

"So you don't think it had anything to do with Umbridge touching me when I was in detention with her?" Harry asked.

"I doubt it," said Sirius. "I know her by reputation and I'm sure she's no Death Eater —"

"She's foul enough to be one," said Harry darkly and Ron and Hermione nodded vigorously in agreement.

"Yes, but the world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters," said Sirius with a wry smile. "I know she's a nasty piece of work, though — you should hear Remus talk about her."

"Does Lupin know her?" asked Harry quickly, remembering Umbridge's comments about dangerous half-breeds during her first lesson.

“No,” said Sirius, “but she drafted a bit of anti-werewolf legislation two years ago that makes it almost impossible for him to get a job.”

Harry remembered how much shabbier Lupin looked these days and his dislike of Umbridge deepened even further.

“What’s she got against werewolves?” said Hermione angrily.

“Scared of them, I expect,” said Sirius, smiling at her indignation. “Apparently she loathes part-humans; she campaigned to have merpeople rounded up and tagged last year too. Imagine wasting your time and energy persecuting merpeople when there are little toerags like Kreacher on the loose —”

Ron laughed but Hermione looked upset.

“Sirius!” she said reproachfully. “Honestly, if you made a bit of an effort with Kreacher I’m sure he’d respond, after all, you are the only member of his family he’s got left, and Professor Dumbledore said —”

“So what are Umbridge’s lessons like?” Sirius interrupted. “Is she training you all to kill half-breeds?”

“No,” said Harry, ignoring Hermione’s affronted look at being cut off in her defense of Kreacher. “She’s not letting us use magic at all!”

“All we do is read the stupid textbook,” said Ron.

“Ah, well, that figures,” said Sirius. “Our information from inside the Ministry is that Fudge doesn’t want you trained in combat.”

“Trained in combat?” repeated Harry incredulously. “What does he think we’re doing here, forming some sort of wizard army?”

“That’s exactly what he thinks you’re doing,” said Sirius, “or rather, that’s exactly what he’s afraid Dumbledore’s doing — forming his own

private army, with which he will be able to take on the Ministry of Magic."

There was a pause at this, then Ron said, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard, including all the stuff that Luna Lovegood comes out with."

"So we're being prevented from learning Defense Against the Dark Arts because Fudge is scared we'll use spells against the Ministry?" said Hermione, looking furious.

"Yep," said Sirius. "Fudge thinks Dumbledore will stop at nothing to seize power. He's getting more paranoid about Dumbledore by the day. It's a matter of time before he has Dumbledore arrested on some trumped-up charge."

This reminded Harry of Percy's letter.

"D'you know if there's going to be anything about Dumbledore in the Daily Prophet tomorrow? Only Ron's brother Percy reckons there will be —"

"I don't know," said Sirius, "I haven't seen anyone from the Order all weekend, they're all busy. It's just been Kreacher and me here. …"

There was a definite note of bitterness in Sirius's voice.

"So you haven't had any news about Hagrid, either?"

"Ah …" said Sirius, "well, he was supposed to be back by now, no one's sure what's happened to him." Then, seeing their stricken faces, he added quickly, "But Dumbledore's not worried, so don't you three get yourselves in a state; I'm sure Hagrid's fine."

"But if he was supposed to be back by now …" said Hermione in a small, worried voice.

"Madame Maxime was with him, we've been in touch with her and she says they got separated on the journey home — but there's nothing to suggest he's hurt or — well, nothing to suggest he's not perfectly okay."

Unconvinced, Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged worried looks.

"Listen, don't go asking too many questions about Hagrid," said Sirius hastily, "it'll just draw even more attention to the fact that he's not back, and I know Dumbledore doesn't want that. Hagrid's tough, he'll be okay." And when they did not appear cheered by this, Sirius added, "When's your next Hogsmeade weekend anyway? I was thinking, we got away with the dog disguise at the station, didn't we? I thought I could —"

"NO!" said Harry and Hermione together, very loudly.

"Sirius, didn't you see the Daily Prophet?" said Hermione anxiously.

"Oh that," said Sirius, grinning, "they're always guessing where I am, they haven't really got a clue —"

"Yeah, but we think this time they have," said Harry. "Something Malfoy said on the train made us think he knew it was you, and his father was on the platform, Sirius — you know, Lucius Malfoy — so don't come up here, whatever you do, if Malfoy recognizes you again —"

"All right, all right, I've got the point," said Sirius. He looked most displeased. "Just an idea, thought you might like to get together —"

"I would, I just don't want you chucked back in Azkaban!" said Harry.

There was a pause in which Sirius looked out of the fire at Harry, a crease between his sunken eyes.

"You're less like your father than I thought," he said finally, a defi-nite coolness in his voice. "The risk would've been what made it fun for James."

"Look —"

"Well, I'd better get going, I can hear Kreacher coming down the stairs," said Sirius, but Harry was sure he was lying. "I'll write to tell you a time I can make it back into the fire, then, shall I? If you can stand to risk it?"

There was a tiny pop, and the place where Sirius's head had been was flickering flame once more.

Chapter 15 The Hogwarts High Inquisitor

They had expected to have to comb Hermione's Daily Prophet carefully next morning to find the article Percy had mentioned in his letter. However, the departing delivery owl had barely cleared the top of the milk jug when Hermione let out a huge gasp and flat-tened the newspaper to reveal a large photograph of Dolores Um-bridge, smiling widely and blinking slowly at them from beneath the headline:MINISTRY SEEKS EDUCATIONAL REFORMDOLORES UMBRIDGE APPOINTED FIRST-EVER "HIGH INQUISITOR"

" 'High Inquisitor'?" said Harry darkly, his half-eaten bit of toast slipping from his fingers. "What does that mean?"

Hermione read aloud:

"In a surprise move last night the Ministry of Magic passed new legis-lation giving itself an unprecedented level of control at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

" 'The Minister has been growing uneasy about goings-on at Hogwarts for some time,' said Junior Assistant to the Minister, Percy Weasley. 'He is now responding to concerns voiced by anxious parents, who feel the school may be moving in a direction they do not approve.'"This is not the first time in recent weeks Fudge has used new laws to effect improvements at the Wizarding school. As recently as August 30th Educational Decree Twenty-two was passed, to ensure that, in the event of the current headmaster being unable to provide a candidate for a teaching post, the Ministry should select an appropriate person.

" 'That's how Dolores Umbridge came to be appointed to the teaching staff at Hogwarts,' said Weasley last night. 'Dumbledore couldn't find any-one, so the Minister put in Umbridge and of course, she's been an imme-diate success —' "

“She’s been a WHAT?” said Harry loudly.

“Wait, there’s more,” said Hermione grimly.

“ ‘— an immediate success, totally revolutionizing the teaching of Defense Against the Dark Arts and providing the Minister with on-the-ground feedback about what’s really happening at Hogwarts.’“It is this last function that the Ministry has now formalized with the passing of Educational Decree Twenty-three, which creates the new posi-tion of ‘Hogwarts High Inquisitor.’“ ‘This is an exciting new phase in the Minister’s plan to get to grips with what some are calling the “falling standards” at Hogwarts,’ said Weasley. ‘The Inquisitor will have powers to inspect her fellow educators and make sure that they are coming up to scratch. Professor Umbridge has been offered this position in addition to her own teaching post, and we are delighted to say that she has accepted.’“The Ministry’s new moves have received enthusiastic support from parents of students at Hogwarts.

“ ‘I feel much easier in my mind now that I know that Dumbledore is being subjected to fair and objective evaluation,’ said Mr. Lucius Malfoy, 41, speaking from his Wiltshire mansion last night. ‘Many of us with our children’s best interests at heart have been concerned about some of Dumbledore’s eccentric decisions in the last few years and will be glad to know that the Ministry is keeping an eye on the situation.’“Among those ‘eccentric decisions’ are undoubtedly the controversial staff appointments previously described in this newspaper, which have in-cluded the hiring of werewolf Remus Lupin, half giant Rubeus Hagrid, and delusional ex-Auror ‘Mad-Eye’ Moody.

“Rumors abound, of course, that Albus Dumbledore, once Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, is no longer up to the task of managing the prestigious school of Hogwarts.

" 'I think the appointment of the Inquisitor is a first step toward ensuring that Hogwarts has a headmaster in whom we can all repose confidence,' said a Ministry insider last night.

"Wizengamot elders Griselda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden have resigned in protest at the introduction of the post of Inquisitor to Hogwarts.

" 'Hogwarts is a school, not an outpost of Cornelius Fudge's office,'said Madam Marchbanks. 'This is a further disgusting attempt to discredit Al-bus Dumbledore.' (For a full account of Madam Marchbanks' alleged links to subversive goblin groups, turn to page 17)."

Hermione finished reading and looked across the table at the other two.

"So now we know how we ended up with Umbridge! Fudge passed this 'Educational Decree' and forced her on us! And now he's given her the power to inspect other teachers!" Hermione was breathing fast and her eyes were very bright. "I can't believe this. It's outrageous. …"

"I know it is," said Harry. He looked down at his right hand, clenched upon the tabletop, and saw the faint white outline of the words Umbridge had forced him to cut into his skin.

But a grin was unfurling on Ron's face.

"What?" said Harry and Hermione together, staring at him.

"Oh, I can't wait to see McGonagall inspected," said Ron happily. "Umbridge won't know what's hit her."

"Well, come on," said Hermione, jumping up, "we'd better get go-ing, if she's inspecting Binns's class we don't want to be late. …"

But Professor Umbridge was not inspecting their History of Magic lesson, which was just as dull as the previous Monday, nor was she in Snape's dungeon when they arrived for double Potions, where Harry's moonstone essay was handed back to him with a large, spiky black D scrawled in an upper corner.

"I have awarded you the grades you would have received if you presented this work in your O.W.L," said Snape with a smirk, as he swept among them, passing back their homework. "This should give you a realistic idea of what to expect in your examination."

Snape reached the front of the class and turned to face them.

"The general standard of this homework was abysmal. Most of you would have failed had this been your examination. I expect to see a great deal more effort for this week's essay on the various varieties of venom antidotes, or I shall have to start handing out detentions to those dunces who get D's."

He smirked as Malfoy sniggered and said in a carrying whisper, "Some people got D's? Ha!"

Harry realized that Hermione was looking sideways to see what grade he had received; he slid his moonstone essay back into his bag as quickly as possible, feeling that he would rather keep that information private.

Determined not to give Snape an excuse to fail him this lesson, Harry read and reread every line of the instructions on the blackboard at least three times before acting on them. His Strengthening Solution was not precisely the clear turquoise shade of Hermione's but it was at least blue rather than pink, like Neville's, and he delivered a flask of it to Snape's desk at the end of the lesson with a feeling of mingled defi-ance and relief.

"Well, that wasn't as bad as last week, was it?" said Hermione, as they climbed the steps out of the dungeon and made their way across

the entrance hall toward lunch. “And the homework didn’t go too badly either, did it?”

When neither Ron nor Harry answered, she pressed on, “I mean, all right, I didn’t expect the top grade, not if he’s marking to O.W.L. standard, but a pass is quite encouraging at this stage, wouldn’t you say?”

Harry made a noncommittal noise in his throat.

“Of course, a lot can happen between now and the exam, we’ve got plenty of time to improve, but the grades we’re getting now are a sort of baseline, aren’t they? Something we can build on …”

They sat down together at the Gryffindor table.

“Obviously, I’d have been thrilled if I’d gotten an O —”

“Hermione,” said Ron sharply, “if you want to know what grades we got, ask.”

“I don’t — I didn’t mean — well, if you want to tell me —”

“I got a P,” said Ron, ladling soup into his bowl. “Happy?”

“Well, that’s nothing to be ashamed of,” said Fred, who had just arrived at the table with George and Lee Jordan and was sitting down on Harry’s right. “Nothing wrong with a good healthy P.”

“But,” said Hermione, “doesn’t P stand for …”

“ ‘Poor,’ yeah,” said Lee Jordan. “Still, better than D, isn’t it? ‘Dreadful’?”

Harry felt his face grow warm and faked a small coughing fit over his roll. When he emerged from this he was sorry to find that Hermione was still in full flow about O.W.L. grades.

“So top grade’s O for ‘Outstanding,’ ” she was saying, “and then there’s A —”

“No, E,” George corrected her, “E for ‘Exceeds Expectations.’ And I’ve always thought Fred and I should’ve got E in everything, because we exceeded expectations just by turning up for the exams.”

They all laughed except Hermione, who plowed on, “So after E, it’s A for ‘Acceptable,’ and that’s the last pass grade, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” said Fred, dunking an entire roll in his soup, transferring it to his mouth, and swallowing it whole.

“Then you get P for ‘Poor’ ” — Ron raised both his arms in mock celebration — “and D for ‘Dreadful.’ ”

“And then T,” George reminded him.

“T?” asked Hermione, looking appalled. “Even lower than a D? What on earth does that stand for?”

“ ‘Troll,’ ” said George promptly.

Harry laughed again, though he was not sure whether or not George was joking. He imagined trying to conceal from Hermione that he had received T’s in all his O.W.L.s and immediately resolved to work harder from now on.

“You lot had an inspected lesson yet?” Fred asked them.

“No,” said Hermione at once, “have you?”

“Just now, before lunch,” said George. “Charms.”

“What was it like?” Harry and Hermione asked together.

Fred shrugged.

"Not that bad. Umbridge just lurked in the corner making notes on a clipboard. You know what Flitwick's like, he treated her like a guest, didn't seem to bother him at all. She didn't say much. Asked Alicia a couple of questions about what the classes are normally like, Alicia told her they were really good, that was it."

"I can't see old Flitwick getting marked down," said George, "he usually gets everyone through their exams all right."

"Who've you got this afternoon?" Fred asked Harry.

"Trelawney —"

"A T if ever I saw one —"

"— and Umbridge herself."

"Well, be a good boy and keep your temper with Umbridge today," said George. "Angelina'll do her nut if you miss any more Quidditch practices."

But Harry did not have to wait for Defense Against the Dark Arts to meet Professor Umbridge. He was pulling out his dream diary in a seat at the very back of the shadowy Divination room when Ron elbowed him in the ribs and, looking round, he saw Professor Umbridge emerging through the trapdoor in the floor. The class, which had been talking cheerily, fell silent at once. The abrupt fall in the noise level made Professor Trelawney, who had been wafting about handing out Dream Oracles, look round.

"Good afternoon, Professor Trelawney," said Professor Umbridge with her wide smile. "You received my note, I trust? Giving the time and date of your inspection?"

Professor Trelawney nodded curtly and, looking very disgruntled, turned her back on Professor Umbridge and continued to give out books. Still smiling, Professor Umbridge grasped the back of the

nearest armchair and pulled it to the front of the class so that it was a few inches behind Professor Trelawney's seat. She then sat down, took her clipboard from her flowery bag, and looked up expectantly, waiting for the class to begin.

Professor Trelawney pulled her shawls tight about her with slightly trembling hands and surveyed the class through her hugely magnifying lenses. "We shall be continuing our study of prophetic dreams today," she said in a brave attempt at her usual mystic tones, though her voice shook slightly. "Divide into pairs, please, and interpret each other's latest nighttime visions with the aid of the Oracle."

She made as though to sweep back to her seat, saw Professor Umbridge sitting right beside it, and immediately veered left toward Parvati and Lavender, who were already deep in discussion about Parvati's most recent dream.

Harry opened his copy of The Dream Oracle, watching Umbridge covertly. She was making notes on her clipboard now. After a few min-utes she got to her feet and began to pace the room in Trelawney's wake, listening to her conversations with students and posing ques-tions here and there. Harry bent his head hurriedly over his book.

"Think of a dream, quick," he told Ron, "in case the old toad comes our way."

"I did it last time," Ron protested, "it's your turn, you tell me one."

"Oh, I dunno …" said Harry desperately, who could not remem-ber dreaming anything at all over the last few days. "Let's say I dreamed I was … drowning Snape in my cauldron. Yeah, that'll do. …"

Ron chortled as he opened his Dream Oracle.

"Okay, we've got to add your age to the date you had the dream, the number of letters in the subject … would that be 'drowning' or 'caul-

dron' or 'Snape'?"

"It doesn't matter, pick any of them," said Harry, chancing a glance behind him. Professor Umbridge was now standing at Professor Trelawney's shoulder making notes while the Divination teacher questioned Neville about his dream diary.

"What night did you dream this again?" Ron said, immersed in calculations.

"I dunno, last night, whenever you like," Harry told him, trying to listen to what Umbridge was saying to Professor Trelawney. They were only a table away from him and Ron now. Professor Umbridge was making another note on her clipboard and Professor Trelawney was looking extremely put out.

"Now," said Umbridge, looking up at Trelawney, "you've been in this post how long, exactly?"

Professor Trelawney scowled at her, arms crossed and shoulders hunched as though wishing to protect herself as much as possible from the indignity of the inspection. After a slight pause in which she seemed to decide that the question was not so offensive that she could reasonably ignore it, she said in a deeply resentful tone, "Nearly six-teen years."

"Quite a period," said Professor Umbridge, making a note on her clipboard. "So it was Professor Dumbledore who appointed you?"

"That's right," said Professor Trelawney shortly.

Professor Umbridge made another note.

"And you are a great-great-granddaughter of the celebrated Seer Cassandra Trelawney?"

"Yes," said Professor Trelawney, holding her head a little higher.

Another note on the clipboard.

"But I think — correct me if I am mistaken — that you are the first in your family since Cassandra to be possessed of second sight?"

"These things often skip — er — three generations," said Professor Trelawney.

Professor Umbridge's toadlike smile widened.

"Of course," she said sweetly, making yet another note. "Well, if you could just predict something for me, then?"

She looked up inquiringly, still smiling. Professor Trelawney had stiffened as though unable to believe her ears.

"I don't understand you," said Professor Trelawney, clutching convulsively at the shawl around her scrawny neck.

"I'd like you to make a prediction for me," said Professor Umbridge very clearly.

Harry and Ron were not the only people watching and listening sneakily from behind their books now; most of the class were staring transfixed at Professor Trelawney as she drew herself up to her full height, her beads and bangles clinking.

"The Inner Eye does not See upon command!" she said in scandalized tones.

"I see," said Professor Umbridge softly, making yet another note on her clipboard.

"I — but — but … wait!" said Professor Trelawney suddenly, in an attempt at her usual ethereal voice, though the mystical effect was ruined somewhat by the way it was shaking with anger. "I … I think I

do see something … something that concerns you. … Why, I sense something … something dark … some grave peril …”

Professor Trelawney pointed a shaking finger at Professor Um-bridge who continued to smile blandly at her, eyebrows raised.

“I am afraid … I am afraid that you are in grave danger!” Professor Trelawney finished dramatically.

There was a pause. Professor Umbridge’s eyebrows were still raised.

“Right,” she said softly, scribbling on her clipboard once more. “Well, if that’s really the best you can do …”

She turned away, leaving Professor Trelawney standing rooted to the spot, her chest heaving. Harry caught Ron’s eye and knew that Ron was thinking exactly the same as he was: They both knew that Professor Trelawney was an old fraud, but on the other hand, they loathed Umbridge so much that they felt very much on Tre-lawney’s side — until she swooped down on them a few seconds later, that was.

“Well?” she said, snapping her long fingers under Harry’s nose, un-characteristically brisk. “Let me see the start you’ve made on your dream diary, please.”

And by the time she had interpreted Harry’s dreams at the top of her voice (all of which, even the ones that involved eating porridge, apparently foretold a gruesome and early death), he was feeling much less sympathetic toward her. All the while, Professor Umbridge stood a few feet away, making notes on that clipboard, and when the bell rang she descended the silver ladder first so that she was waiting for them all when they reached their Defense Against the Dark Arts les-son ten minutes later.

She was humming and smiling to herself when they entered the room. Harry and Ron told Hermione, who had been in Arithmancy,

exactly what had happened in Divination while they all took out their copies of Defensive Magical Theory, but before Hermione could ask any questions Professor Umbridge had called them all to order and si-lence fell.

“Wands away,” she instructed them all smilingly, and those people who had been hopeful enough to take them out sadly returned them to their bags. “As we finished chapter one last lesson, I would like you all to turn to page nineteen today and commence chapter two, ‘Common De-fensive Theories and Their Derivation.’ There will be no need to talk.”

Still smiling her wide, self-satisfied smile, she sat down at her desk. The class gave an audible sigh as it turned, as one, to page nineteen. Harry wondered dully whether there were enough chapters in the book to keep them reading through all this year’s lessons and was on the point of checking the contents when he noticed that Hermione had her hand in the air again.

Professor Umbridge had noticed too, and what was more, she seemed to have worked out a strategy for just such an eventuality. In-stead of trying to pretend she had not noticed Hermione, she got to her feet and walked around the front row of desks until they were face-to-face, then she bent down and whispered, so that the rest of the class could not hear, “What is it this time, Miss Granger?”

“I’ve already read chapter two,” said Hermione.

“Well then, proceed to chapter three.”

“I’ve read that too. I’ve read the whole book.”

Professor Umbridge blinked but recovered her poise almost instantly.

“Well, then, you should be able to tell me what Slinkhard says about counterjinxes in chapter fifteen.”

"He says that counterjinxes are improperly named," said Hermione promptly. "He says 'counterjinx' is just a name people give their jinxes when they want to make them sound more acceptable."

Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows, and Harry knew she was impressed against her will.

"But I disagree," Hermione continued.

Professor Umbridge's eyebrows rose a little higher and her gaze became distinctly colder.

"You disagree?"

"Yes, I do," said Hermione, who, unlike Umbridge, was not whispering, but speaking in a clear, carrying voice that had by now attracted the rest of the class's attention. "Mr. Slinkhard doesn't like jinxes, does he? But I think they can be very useful when they're used defensively."

"Oh, you do, do you?" said Professor Umbridge, forgetting to whisper and straightening up. "Well, I'm afraid it is Mr. Slinkhard's opinion, and not yours, that matters within this classroom, Miss Granger."

"But —" Hermione began.

"That is enough," said Professor Umbridge. She walked back to the front of the class and stood before them, all the jauntiness she had shown at the beginning of the lesson gone. "Miss Granger, I am going to take five points from Gryffindor House."

There was an outbreak of muttering at this.

"What for?" said Harry angrily.

"Don't you get involved!" Hermione whispered urgently to him.

“For disrupting my class with pointless interruptions,” said Profes-sor Umbridge smoothly. “I am here to teach you using a Ministry-approved method that does not include inviting students to give their opinions on matters about which they understand very little. Your previous teachers in this subject may have allowed you more license, but as none of them — with the possible exception of Professor Quirrell, who did at least appear to have restricted himself to age-appropriate subjects — would have passed a Ministry inspection —”

“Yeah, Quirrell was a great teacher,” said Harry loudly, “there was just that minor drawback of him having Lord Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head.”

This pronouncement was followed by one of the loudest silences Harry had ever heard. Then —“I think another week’s detentions would do you some good, Mr. Potter,” said Umbridge sleekly.

* * *

The cut on the back of Harry’s hand had barely healed and by the following morning, it was bleeding again. He did not complain dur-ing the evening’s detention; he was determined not to give Umbridge the satisfaction; over and over again he wrote I must not tell lies and not a sound escaped his lips, though the cut deepened with every letter.

The very worst part of this second week’s worth of detentions was, just as George had predicted, Angelina’s reaction. She cornered him just as he arrived at the Gryffindor table for breakfast on Tuesday and shouted so loudly that Professor McGonagall came sweeping down upon the pair of them from the staff table.

“Miss Johnson, how dare you make such a racket in the Great Hall! Five points from Gryffindor!”

“But Professor — he’s gone and landed himself in detention again —”

“What’s this, Potter?” said Professor McGonagall sharply, rounding on Harry. “Detention? From whom?”

“From Professor Umbridge,” muttered Harry, not meeting Profes-sor McGonagall’s beady, square-framed eyes.

“Are you telling me,” she said, lowering her voice so that the group of curious Ravenclaws behind them could not hear, “that after the warning I gave you last Monday you lost your temper in Professor Umbridge’s class again?”

“Yes,” Harry muttered, speaking to the floor.

“Potter, you must get a grip on yourself! You are heading for seri-ous trouble! Another five points from Gryffindor!”

“But — what? Professor, no!” Harry said, furious at this injustice. “I’m already being punished by her, why do you have to take points as well?”

“Because detentions do not appear to have any effect on you whatsoever!” said Professor McGonagall tartly. “No, not another word of complaint, Potter! And as for you, Miss Johnson, you will confine your shouting matches to the Quidditch pitch in future or risk losing the team Captaincy!”

She strode back toward the staff table. Angelina gave Harry a look of deepest disgust and stalked away, upon which Harry flung himself onto the bench beside Ron, fuming.

“She’s taken points off Gryffindor because I’m having my hand sliced open every night! How is that fair, how?”

“I know, mate,” said Ron sympathetically, tipping bacon onto Harry’s plate, “she’s bang out of order.”

Hermione, however, merely rustled the pages of her Daily Prophet and said nothing.

“You think McGonagall was right, do you?” said Harry angrily to the picture of Cornelius Fudge obscuring Hermione’s face.

“I wish she hadn’t taken points from you, but I think she’s right to warn you not to lose your temper with Umbridge,” said Hermione’s voice, while Fudge gesticulated forcefully from the front page, clearly giving some kind of speech.

Harry did not speak to Hermione all through Charms, but when they entered Transfiguration he forgot his anger; Professor Umbridge and her clipboard were sitting in a corner and the sight of her drove the memory of breakfast right out of his head.

“Excellent,” whispered Ron, as they sat down in their usual seats. “Let’s see Umbridge get what she deserves.”

Professor McGonagall marched into the room without giving the slightest indication that she knew Professor Umbridge was there.

“That will do,” she said and silence fell immediately. “Mr. Finni-gan, kindly come here and hand back the homework — Miss Brown, please take this box of mice — don’t be silly, girl, they won’t hurt you — and hand one to each student —”

“Hem, hem,” said Professor Umbridge, employing the same silly little cough she had used to interrupt Dumbledore on the first night of term. Professor McGonagall ignored her. Seamus handed back Harry’s essay; Harry took it without looking at him and saw, to his relief, that he had managed an A.

“Right then, everyone, listen closely — Dean Thomas, if you do that to the mouse again I shall put you in detention — most of you have now successfully vanished your snails and even those who were left

with a certain amount of shell have the gist of the spell. Today we shall be —"

"Hem, hem," said Professor Umbridge.

"Yes?" said Professor McGonagall, turning round, her eyebrows so close together they seemed to form one long, severe line.

"I was just wondering, Professor, whether you received my note telling you of the date and time of your inspec —"

"Obviously I received it, or I would have asked you what you are doing in my classroom," said Professor McGonagall, turning her back firmly on Professor Umbridge. Many of the students exchanged looks of glee. "As I was saying, today we shall be practicing the altogether more difficult vanishment of mice. Now, the Vanishing Spell —"

"Hem, hem."

"I wonder," said Professor McGonagall in cold fury, turning on Professor Umbridge, "how you expect to gain an idea of my usual teaching methods if you continue to interrupt me? You see, I do not generally permit people to talk when I am talking."

Professor Umbridge looked as though she had just been slapped in the face. She did not speak, but straightened the parchment on her clipboard and began scribbling furiously. Looking supremely unconcerned, Professor McGonagall addressed the class once more.

"As I was saying, the Vanishing Spell becomes more difficult with the complexity of the animal to be vanished. The snail, as an invertebrate, does not present much of a challenge; the mouse, as a mammal, offers a much greater one. This is not, therefore, magic you can accom-plish with your mind on your dinner. So — you know the incantation, let me see what you can do. …"

“How she can lecture me about not losing my temper with Umbridge!” Harry said to Ron under his voice, but he was grinning; his anger with Professor McGonagall had quite evaporated.

Professor Umbridge did not follow Professor McGonagall around the class as she had followed Professor Trelawney; perhaps she thought that Professor McGonagall would not permit it. She did, however, take many more notes while she sat in her corner, and when Professor McGonagall finally told them all to pack away, rose with a grim ex-pression on her face.

“Well, it’s a start,” said Ron, holding up a long, wriggling mouse tail and dropping it back into the box Lavender was passing around.

As they filed out of the classroom, Harry saw Professor Umbridge approach the teacher’s desk; he nudged Ron, who nudged Hermione in turn, and the three of them deliberately fell back to eavesdrop.

“How long have you been teaching at Hogwarts?” Professor Um-bridge asked.

“Thirty-nine years this December,” said Professor McGonagall brusquely, snapping her bag shut.

Professor Umbridge made a note.

“Very well,” she said, “you will receive the results of your inspection in ten days’ time.”

“I can hardly wait,” said Professor McGonagall in a coldly indiffer-ent voice, and she strode off toward the door. “Hurry up, you three,” she added, sweeping Harry, Ron, and Hermione before her. Harry could not help giving her a faint smile and could have sworn he re-ceived one in return.

He had thought that the next time he would see Umbridge would be in his detention that evening, but he was wrong. When they walked

down the lawns toward the forest for Care of Magical Creatures, they found her and her clipboard waiting for them beside Professor Grubbly-Plank.

“You do not usually take this class, is that correct?” Harry heard her ask as they arrived at the trestle table where the group of captive bowtruckles were scrabbling around for wood lice like so many living twigs.

“Quite correct,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank, hands behind her back and bouncing on the balls of her feet. “I am a substitute teacher standing in for Professor Hagrid.”

Harry exchanged uneasy looks with Ron and Hermione. Malfoy was whispering with Crabbe and Goyle; he would surely love this opportunity to tell tales on Hagrid to a member of the Ministry.

“Hmm,” said Professor Umbridge, dropping her voice, though Harry could still hear her quite clearly, “I wonder — the headmaster seems strangely reluctant to give me any information on the matter — can you tell me what is causing Professor Hagrid’s very extended leave of absence?”

Harry saw Malfoy look up eagerly.

“ ’Fraid I can’t,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank breezily. “Don’t know anything more about it than you do. Got an owl from Dumble-dore, would I like a couple of weeks teaching work, accepted — that’s as much as I know. Well … shall I get started then?”

“Yes, please do,” said Professor Umbridge, scribbling upon her clipboard.

Umbridge took a different tack in this class and wandered among the students, questioning them on magical creatures. Most people were able to answer well and Harry’s spirits lifted somewhat; at least the class was not letting Hagrid down.

“Overall,” said Professor Umbridge, returning to Professor Grubbly-Plank’s side after a lengthy interrogation of Dean Thomas, “how do you, as a temporary member of staff — an objective outsider, I suppose you might say — how do you find Hogwarts? Do you feel you receive enough support from the school management?”

“Oh, yes, Dumbledore’s excellent,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank heartily. “No, I’m very happy with the way things are run, very happy indeed.”

Looking politely incredulous, Umbridge made a tiny note on her clipboard and went on, “And what are you planning to cover with this class this year — assuming, of course, that Professor Hagrid does not return?”

“Oh, I’ll take them through the creatures that most often come up in O.W.L.,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank. “Not much left to do — they’ve studied unicorns and nifflers, I thought we’d cover porlocks and kneazles, make sure they can recognize crups and knarls, you know. …”

“Well, you seem to know what you’re doing, at any rate,” said Professor Umbridge, making a very obvious tick on her clipboard. Harry did not like the emphasis she put on “you” and liked it even less when she put her next question to Goyle: “Now, I hear there have been injuries in this class?”

Goyle gave a stupid grin. Malfoy hastened to answer the question.

“That was me,” he said. “I was slashed by a hippogriff.”

“A hippogriff?” said Professor Umbridge, now scribbling frantically.

“Only because he was too stupid to listen to what Hagrid told him to do,” said Harry angrily.

Both Ron and Hermione groaned. Professor Umbridge turned her head slowly in Harry's direction.

"Another night's detention, I think," she said softly. "Well, thank you very much, Professor Grubbly-Plank, I think that's all I need here. You will be receiving the results of your inspection within ten days."

"Jolly good," said Professor Grubbly-Plank, and Professor Um-bridge set off back across the lawn to the castle.

* * *

It was nearly midnight when Harry left Umbridge's office that night, his hand now bleeding so severely that it was staining the scarf he had wrapped around it. He expected the common room to be empty when he returned, but Ron and Hermione had sat up waiting for him. He was pleased to see them, especially as Hermione was disposed to be sympathetic rather than critical.

"Here," she said anxiously, pushing a small bowl of yellow liquid toward him, "soak your hand in that, it's a solution of strained and pickled murtlap tentacles, it should help."

Harry placed his bleeding, aching hand into the bowl and experi-enced a wonderful feeling of relief. Crookshanks curled around his legs, purring loudly, and then leapt into his lap and settled down.

"Thanks," he said gratefully, scratching behind Crookshanks's ears with his left hand.

"I still reckon you should complain about this," said Ron in a low voice.

"No," said Harry flatly.

"McGonagall would go nuts if she knew —"

“Yeah, she probably would,” said Harry. “And how long d’you reckon it’d take Umbridge to pass another Decree saying anyone who complains about the High Inquisitor gets sacked immediately?”

Ron opened his mouth to retort but nothing came out and after a moment he closed it again in a defeated sort of way.

“She’s an awful woman,” said Hermione in a small voice. “Awful. You know, I was just saying to Ron when you came in … we’ve got to do something about her.”

“I suggested poison,” said Ron grimly.

“No … I mean, something about what a dreadful teacher she is, and how we’re not going to learn any defense from her at all,” said Hermione.

“Well, what can we do about that?” said Ron, yawning. “ ’S too late, isn’t it? She got the job, she’s here to stay, Fudge’ll make sure of that.”

“Well,” said Hermione tentatively. “You know, I was thinking to-day. …” She shot a slightly nervous look at Harry and then plunged on, “I was thinking that — maybe the time’s come when we should just — just do it ourselves.”

“Do what ourselves?” said Harry suspiciously, still floating his hand in the essence of murtlap tentacles.

“Well — learn Defense Against the Dark Arts ourselves,” said Hermione.

“Come off it,” groaned Ron. “You want us to do extra work? D’you realize Harry and I are behind on homework again and it’s only the second week?”

“But this is much more important than homework!” said Hermione.

Harry and Ron goggled at her.

"I didn't think there was anything in the universe more important than homework," said Ron.

"Don't be silly, of course there is!" said Hermione, and Harry saw, with an ominous feeling, that her face was suddenly alight with the kind of fervor that S.P.E.W. usually inspired in her. "It's about preparing ourselves, like Harry said in Umbridge's first lesson, for what's waiting out there. It's about making sure we really can defend ourselves. If we don't learn anything for a whole year —"

"We can't do much by ourselves," said Ron in a defeated voice. "I mean, all right, we can go and look jinxes up in the library and try and practice them, I suppose —"

"No, I agree, we've gone past the stage where we can just learn things out of books," said Hermione. "We need a teacher, a proper one, who can show us how to use the spells and correct us if we're go-ing wrong."

"If you're talking about Lupin …" Harry began.

"No, no, I'm not talking about Lupin," said Hermione. "He's too busy with the Order and anyway, the most we could see him is during Hogsmeade weekends and that's not nearly often enough."

"Who, then?" said Harry, frowning at her.

Hermione heaved a very deep sigh.

"Isn't it obvious?" she said. "I'm talking about you, Harry."

There was a moment's silence. A light night breeze rattled the windowpanes behind Ron and the fire guttered.

"About me what?" said Harry.

“I’m talking about you teaching us Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Harry stared at her. Then he turned to Ron, ready to exchange the exasperated looks they sometimes shared when Hermione elaborated on far-fetched schemes like S.P.E.W. To Harry’s consternation, how-ever, Ron did not look exasperated. He was frowning slightly, appar-ently thinking. Then he said, “That’s an idea.”

“What’s an idea?” said Harry.

“You,” said Ron. “Teaching us to do it.”

“But …”

Harry was grinning now, sure the pair of them were pulling his leg.

“But I’m not a teacher, I can’t —”

“Harry, you’re the best in the year at Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Hermione.

“Me?” said Harry, now grinning more broadly than ever. “No I’m not, you’ve beaten me in every test —”

“Actually, I haven’t,” said Hermione coolly. “You beat me in our third year — the only year we both sat the test and had a teacher who actually knew the subject. But I’m not talking about test results, Harry. Look what you’ve done!”

“How d’you mean?”

“You know what, I’m not sure I want someone this stupid teaching me,” Ron said to Hermione, smirking slightly. He turned to Harry. “Let’s think,” he said, pulling a face like Goyle concentrating. “Uh … first year — you saved the Stone from You-Know-Who.”

“But that was luck,” said Harry, “that wasn’t skill —”

“Second year,” Ron interrupted, “you killed the basilisk and destroyed Riddle.”

“Yeah, but if Fawkes hadn’t turned up I —”

“Third year,” said Ron, louder still, “you fought off about a hun-dred dementors at once —”

“You know that was a fluke, if the Time-Turner hadn’t —”

“Last year,” Ron said, almost shouting now, “you fought off You-Know-Who again —”

“Listen to me!” said Harry, almost angrily, because Ron and Hermione were both smirking now. “Just listen to me, all right? It sounds great when you say it like that, but all that stuff was luck — I didn’t know what I was doing half the time, I didn’t plan any of it, I just did whatever I could think of, and I nearly always had help —”

Ron and Hermione were still smirking and Harry felt his temper rise; he wasn’t even sure why he was feeling so angry.

“Don’t sit there grinning like you know better than I do, I was there, wasn’t I?” he said heatedly. “I know what went on, all right? And I didn’t get through any of that because I was brilliant at Defense Against the Dark Arts, I got through it all because — because help came at the right time, or because I guessed right — but I just blundered through it all, I didn’t have a clue what I was doing — STOP LAUGHING!”

The bowl of murtlap essence fell to the floor and smashed. He became aware that he was on his feet, though he couldn’t remember standing up. Crookshanks streaked away under a sofa; Ron and Hermione’s smiles had vanished.

“You don’t know what it’s like! You — neither of you — you’ve never had to face him, have you? You think it’s just memorizing a bunch of

spells and throwing them at him, like you're in class or something? The whole time you know there's nothing between you and dying except your own — your own brain or guts or whatever — like you can think straight when you know you're about a second from being murdered, or tortured, or watching your friends die — they've never taught us that in their classes, what it's like to deal with things like that — and you two sit there acting like I'm a clever little boy to be standing here, alive, like Diggory was stupid, like he messed up — you just don't get it, that could just as easily have been me, it would have been if Voldemort hadn't needed me —"

"We weren't saying anything like that, mate," said Ron, looking aghast. "We weren't having a go at Diggory, we didn't — you've got the wrong end of the —"

He looked helplessly at Hermione, whose face was stricken.

"Harry," she said timidly, "don't you see? This … this is exactly why we need you. … We need to know what it's r-really like … fac-ing him … facing V-Voldemort."

It was the first time she had ever said Voldemort's name, and it was this, more than anything else, that calmed Harry. Still breathing hard, he sank back into his chair, becoming aware as he did so that his hand was throbbing horribly again. He wished he had not smashed the bowl of murtlap essence.

"Well … think about it," said Hermione quietly. "Please?"

Harry could not think of anything to say. He was feeling ashamed of his outburst already. He nodded, hardly aware of what he was agreeing to.

Hermione stood up.

"Well, I'm off to bed," she said in a voice that was clearly as natural as she could make it. "Erm … 'night."

Ron had gotten to his feet too.

“Coming?” he said awkwardly to Harry.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “In … in a minute. I’ll just clear this up.”

He indicated the smashed bowl on the floor. Ron nodded and left.

“Reparo,” Harry muttered, pointing his wand at the broken pieces of china. They flew back together, good as new, but there was no returning the murtlap essence to the bowl.

He was suddenly so tired that he was tempted to sink back into his armchair and sleep there, but instead he got to his feet and followed Ron upstairs. His restless night was punctuated once more by dreams of long corridors and locked doors, and he awoke next day with his scar prickling again.

Chapter 16 In the Hog's Head

Hermione made no mention of Harry giving Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons for two whole weeks after her original suggestion. Harry's detentions with Umbridge were finally over (he doubted whether the words now etched on the back of his hand would ever fade entirely); Ron had had four more Quidditch practices and not been shouted at during the last two; and all three of them had managed to vanish their mice in Transfiguration (Hermione had actually progressed to vanishing kittens), before the subject was broached again, on a wild, blustery evening at the end of September, when the three of them were sitting in the library, looking up potion ingredients for Snape.

"I was wondering," Hermione said suddenly, "whether you'd thought any more about Defense Against the Dark Arts, Harry."

" 'Course I have," said Harry grumpily. "Can't forget it, can we, with that hag teaching us —"

"I meant the idea Ron and I had" — Ron cast her an alarmed, threatening kind of look; she frowned at him — "oh, all right, the idea I had, then — about you teaching us."

Harry did not answer at once. He pretended to be perusing a page of Asiatic Anti-Venoms, because he did not want to say what was in his mind.

The fact was that he had given the matter a great deal of thought over the past fortnight. Sometimes it seemed an insane idea, just as it had on the night Hermione had proposed it, but at others, he had found himself thinking about the spells that had served him best in his various encounters with Dark creatures and Death Eaters — found himself, in fact, subconsciously planning lessons. …"Well," he said

slowly, when he could not pretend to find Asiatic anti-venoms interesting much longer, "yeah, I — I've thought about it a bit."

"And?" said Hermione eagerly.

"I dunno," said Harry, playing for time. He looked up at Ron.

"I thought it was a good idea from the start," said Ron, who seemed keener to join in this conversation now that he was sure that Harry was not going to start shouting again.

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"You did listen to what I said about a load of it being luck, didn't you?"

"Yes, Harry," said Hermione gently, "but all the same, there's no point pretending that you're not good at Defense Against the Dark Arts, because you are. You were the only person last year who could throw off the Imperius Curse completely, you can produce a Patronus, you can do all sorts of stuff that full-grown wizards can't, Viktor al-ways said —"

Ron looked around at her so fast he appeared to crick his neck; rub-bing it, he said, "Yeah? What did Vicky say?"

"Ho ho," said Hermione in a bored voice. "He said Harry knew how to do stuff even he didn't, and he was in the final year at Durmstrang."

Ron was looking at Hermione suspiciously.

"You're not still in contact with him, are you?"

"So what if I am?" said Hermione coolly, though her face was a lit-tle pink. "I can have a pen pal if I —"

"He didn't only want to be your pen pal," said Ron accusingly.

Hermione shook her head exasperatedly and, ignoring Ron, who was continuing to watch her, said to Harry, “Well, what do you think? Will you teach us?”

“Just you and Ron, yeah?”

“Well,” said Hermione, now looking a mite anxious again. “Well … now, don’t fly off the handle again, Harry, please. … But I really think you ought to teach anyone who wants to learn. I mean, we’re talking about defending ourselves against V-Voldemort — oh, don’t be pathetic, Ron — it doesn’t seem fair if we don’t offer the chance to other people.”

Harry considered this for a moment, then said, “Yeah, but I doubt anyone except you two would want to be taught by me. I’m a nutter, remember?”

“Well, I think you might be surprised how many people would be interested in hearing what you’ve got to say,” said Hermione seriously. “Look,” she leaned toward him; Ron, who was still watching her with a frown on his face, leaned forward to listen too, “you know the first weekend in October’s a Hogsmeade weekend? How would it be if we tell anyone who’s interested to meet us in the village and we can talk it over?”

“Why do we have to do it outside school?” said Ron.

“Because,” said Hermione, returning to the diagram of the Chinese Chomping Cabbage she was copying, “I don’t think Umbridge would be very happy if she found out what we were up to.”

Harry had been looking forward to the weekend trip into Hogsmeade, but there was one thing worrying him. Sirius had maintained a stony silence since he had appeared in the fire at the beginning of September; Harry knew they had made him angry by saying that they did not want him to come — but he still worried from time to time that Sirius might throw caution to the winds and turn up anyway. What

were they going to do if the great black dog came bounding up the street toward them in Hogsmeade, perhaps under the nose of Draco Malfoy?

“Well, you can’t blame him for wanting to get out and about,” said Ron, when Harry discussed his fears with him and Hermione. “I mean, he’s been on the run for over two years, hasn’t he, and I know that can’t have been a laugh, but at least he was free, wasn’t he? And now he’s just shut up all the time with that lunatic elf.”

Hermione scowled at Ron, but otherwise ignored the slight on Kreacher.

“The trouble is,” she said to Harry, “until V-Voldemort — oh for heaven’s sake, Ron — comes out into the open, Sirius is going to have to stay hidden, isn’t he? I mean, the stupid Ministry isn’t going to re-alize Sirius is innocent until they accept that Dumbledore’s been telling the truth about him all along. And once the fools start catch-ing real Death Eaters again it’ll be obvious Sirius isn’t one … I mean, he hasn’t got the Mark, for one thing.”

“I don’t reckon he’d be stupid enough to turn up,” said Ron brac-ingly. “Dumbledore’d go mad if he did and Sirius listens to Dumble-dore even if he doesn’t like what he hears.”

When Harry continued to look worried, Hermione said, “Listen, Ron and I have been sounding out people who we thought might want to learn some proper Defense Against the Dark Arts, and there are a couple who seem interested. We’ve told them to meet us in Hogsmeade.”

“Right,” said Harry vaguely, his mind still on Sirius.

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Hermione said quietly. “You’ve got enough on your plate without Sirius too.”

She was quite right, of course; he was barely keeping up with his homework, though he was doing much better now that he was no longer spending every evening in detention with Umbridge. Ron was even further behind with his work than Harry, because while they both had Quidditch practices twice a week, Ron also had prefect du-ties. However, Hermione, who was taking more subjects than either of them, had not only finished all her homework but was also finding time to knit more elf clothes. Harry had to admit that she was getting better; it was now almost always possible to distinguish between the hats and the socks.

The morning of the Hogsmeade visit dawned bright but windy. Af-ter breakfast they queued up in front of Filch, who matched their names to the long list of students who had permission from their par-ents or guardian to visit the village. With a slight pang, Harry re-membered that if it hadn't been for Sirius, he would not have been going at all.

When Harry reached Filch, the caretaker gave a great sniff as though trying to detect a whiff of something from Harry. Then he gave a curt nod that set his jowls aquiver again and Harry walked on, out onto the stone steps and the cold, sunlit day.

"Er — why was Filch sniffing you?" asked Ron, as he, Harry, and Hermione set off at a brisk pace down the wide drive to the gates.

"I suppose he was checking for the smell of Dungbombs," said Harry with a small laugh. "I forgot to tell you …"

And he recounted the story of sending his letter to Sirius and Filch bursting in seconds later, demanding to see the letter. To his slight sur-prise, Hermione found this story highly interesting, much more, in-deed, than he did himself.

"He said he was tipped off you were ordering Dungbombs? But who had tipped him off?"

“I dunno,” said Harry, shrugging. “Maybe Malfoy, he’d think it was a laugh.”

They walked between the tall stone pillars topped with winged boars and turned left onto the road into the village, the wind whip-ping their hair into their eyes.

“Malfoy?” said Hermione, very skeptically. “Well … yes … maybe …”

And she remained deep in thought all the way into the outskirts of Hogsmeade.

“Where are we going anyway?” Harry asked. “The Three Broom-sticks?”

“Oh — no,” said Hermione, coming out of her reverie, “no, it’s al-ways packed and really noisy. I’ve told the others to meet us in the Hog’s Head, that other pub, you know the one, it’s not on the main road. I think it’s a bit … you know … dodgy … but students don’t normally go in there, so I don’t think we’ll be overheard.”

They walked down the main street past Zonko’s Joke Shop, where they were unsurprised to see Fred, George, and Lee Jordan, past the post office, from which owls issued at regular intervals, and turned up a side street at the top of which stood a small inn. A battered wooden sign hung from a rusty bracket over the door, with a picture upon it of a wild boar’s severed head leaking blood onto the white cloth around it. The sign creaked in the wind as they approached. All three of them hesitated outside the door.

“Well, come on,” said Hermione slightly nervously. Harry led the way inside.

It was not at all like the Three Broomsticks, whose large bar gave an impression of gleaming warmth and cleanliness. The Hog’s Head bar comprised one small, dingy, and very dirty room that smelled strongly of something that might have been goats. The bay windows were so

encrusted with grime that very little daylight could permeate the room, which was lit instead with the stubs of candles sitting on rough wooden tables. The floor seemed at first glance to be earthy, though as Harry stepped onto it he realized that there was stone beneath what seemed to be the accumulated filth of centuries.

Harry remembered Hagrid mentioning this pub in his first year: “Yeh get a lot o’ funny folk in the Hog’s Head,” he had said, explaining how he had won a dragons egg from a hooded stranger there. At the time Harry had wondered why Hagrid had not found it odd that the stranger kept his face hidden throughout their encounter; now he saw that keeping your face hidden was something of a fashion in the Hog’s Head. There was a man at the bar whose whole head was wrapped in dirty gray bandages, though he was still managing to gulp endless glasses of some smoking, fiery substance through a slit over his mouth. Two figures shrouded in hoods sat at a table in one of the windows; Harry might have thought them dementors if they had not been talk-ing in strong Yorkshire accents; in a shadowy corner beside the fireplace sat a witch with a thick, black veil that fell to her toes. They could just see the tip of her nose because it caused the veil to protrude slightly.

“I don’t know about this, Hermione,” Harry muttered, as they crossed to the bar. He was looking particularly at the heavily veiled witch. “Has it occurred to you Umbridge might be under that?”

Hermione cast an appraising eye at the veiled figure.

“Umbridge is shorter than that woman,” she said quietly. “And anyway, even if Umbridge does come in here there’s nothing she can do to stop us, Harry, because I’ve double- and triple-checked the school rules. We’re not out-of-bounds; I specifically asked Professor Flitwick whether students were allowed to come in the Hog’s Head, and he said yes, but he advised me strongly to bring our own glasses. And I’ve looked up everything I can think of about study groups and

homework groups and they're definitely allowed. I just don't think it's a good idea if we parade what we're doing."

"No," said Harry dryly, "especially as it's not exactly a homework group you're planning, is it?"

The barman sidled toward them out of a back room. He was a grumpy-looking old man with a great deal of long gray hair and beard. He was tall and thin and looked vaguely familiar to Harry.

"What?" he grunted.

"Three butterbeers, please," said Hermione.

The man reached beneath the counter and pulled up three very dusty, very dirty bottles, which he slammed on the bar.

"Six Sickles," he said.

"I'll get them," said Harry quickly, passing over the silver. The barman's eyes traveled over Harry, resting for a fraction of a second on his scar. Then he turned away and deposited Harry's money in an ancient wooden till whose drawer slid open automatically to receive it. Harry, Ron, and Hermione retreated to the farthest table from the bar and sat down, looking around, while the man in the dirty gray bandages rapped the counter with his knuckles and received another smoking drink from the barman.

"You know what?" Ron murmured, looking over at the bar with enthusiasm. "We could order anything we liked in here, I bet that bloke would sell us anything, he wouldn't care. I've always wanted to try firewhisky —"

"You — are — a — prefect," snarled Hermione.

"Oh," said Ron, the smile fading from his face. "Yeah …"

“So who did you say is supposed to be meeting us?” Harry asked, wrenching open the rusty top of his butterbeer and taking a swig.

“Just a couple of people,” Hermione repeated, checking her watch and then looking anxiously toward the door. “I told them to be here about now and I’m sure they all know where it is — oh look, this might be them now —”

The door of the pub had opened. A thick band of dusty sunlight split the room in two for a moment and then vanished, blocked by the incoming rush of a crowd of people.

First came Neville with Dean and Lavender, who were closely followed by Parvati and Padma Patil with (Harry’s stomach did a back flip) Cho and one of her usually giggling girlfriends, then (on her own and looking so dreamy that she might have walked in by accident) Luna Lovegood; then Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet, and Angelina Johnson, Colin and Dennis Creevey, Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hannah Abbott, and a Hufflepuff girl with a long plait down her back whose name Harry did not know; three Ravenclaw boys he was pretty sure were called Anthony Goldstein, Michael Cor-ner, and Terry Boot; Ginny, followed by a tall skinny blond boy with an upturned nose whom Harry recognized vaguely as being a member of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, and bringing up the rear, Fred and George Weasley with their friend Lee Jordan, all three of whom were carrying large paper bags crammed with Zonko’s merchandise.

“A couple of people?” said Harry hoarsely to Hermione. “A couple of people?”

“Yes, well, the idea seemed quite popular,” said Hermione happily. “Ron, do you want to pull up some more chairs?”

The barman had frozen in the act of wiping out a glass with a rag so filthy it looked as though it had never been washed. Possibly he had never seen his pub so full.

“Hi,” said Fred, reaching the bar first and counting his companions quickly. “Could we have … twenty-five butterbeers, please?”

The barman glared at him for a moment, then, throwing down his rag irritably as though he had been interrupted in something very important, he started passing up dusty butterbeers from under the bar.

“Cheers,” said Fred, handing them out. “Cough up, everyone, I haven’t got enough gold for all of these. …”

Harry watched numbly as the large chattering group took their beers from Fred and rummaged in their robes to find coins. He could not imagine what all these people had turned up for until the horrible thought occurred to him that they might be expecting some kind of speech, at which he rounded on Hermione.

“What have you been telling people?” he said in a low voice. “What are they expecting?”

“I’ve told you, they just want to hear what you’ve got to say,” said Hermione soothingly; but Harry continued to look at her so furiously that she added quickly, “You don’t have to do anything yet, I’ll speak to them first.”

“Hi, Harry,” said Neville, beaming and taking a seat opposite Harry.

Harry tried to smile back, but did not speak; his mouth was exceptionally dry. Cho had just smiled at him and sat down on Ron’s right. Her friend, who had curly reddish-blonde hair, did not smile, but gave Harry a thoroughly mistrustful look that told Harry plainly that, given her way, she would not be here at all.

In twos and threes the new arrivals settled around Harry, Ron, and Hermione, some looking rather excited, others curious, Luna Lovegood gazing dreamily into space. When everybody had pulled up a chair, the chatter died out. Every eye was upon Harry.

“Er,” said Hermione, her voice slightly higher than usual out of nerves. “Well — er — hi.”

The group focused its attention on her instead, though eyes continued to dart back regularly to Harry.

“Well … erm … well, you know why you’re here. Erm … well, Harry here had the idea — I mean” — Harry had thrown her a sharp look — “I had the idea — that it might be good if people who wanted to study Defense Against the Dark Arts — and I mean, really study it, you know, not the rubbish that Umbridge is doing with us” — (Hermione’s voice became suddenly much stronger and more confident) — “because nobody could call that Defense Against the Dark Arts” — “Hear, hear,” said Anthony Goldstein, and Hermione looked heartened — “well, I thought it would be good if we, well, took matters into our own hands.”

She paused, looked sideways at Harry, and went on, “And by that I mean learning how to defend ourselves properly, not just theory but the real spells —”

“You want to pass your Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. too though, I bet?” said Michael Corner.

“Of course I do,” said Hermione at once. “But I want more than that, I want to be properly trained in Defense because … because …” She took a great breath and finished, “Because Lord Voldemort’s back.”

The reaction was immediate and predictable. Cho’s friend shrieked and slopped butterbeer down herself, Terry Boot gave a kind of involuntary twitch, Padma Patil shuddered, and Neville gave an odd yelp that he managed to turn into a cough. All of them, however, looked fixedly, even eagerly, at Harry.

“Well … that’s the plan anyway,” said Hermione. “If you want to join us, we need to decide how we’re going to —”

“Where’s the proof You-Know-Who’s back?” said the blond Huffle-puff player in a rather aggressive voice.

“Well, Dumbledore believes it —” Hermione began.

“You mean, Dumbledore believes him,” said the blond boy, nod-ding at Harry.

“Who are you?” said Ron rather rudely.

“Zacharias Smith,” said the boy, “and I think we’ve got the right to know exactly what makes him say You-Know-Who’s back.”

“Look,” said Hermione, intervening swiftly, “that’s really not what this meeting was supposed to be about —”

“It’s okay, Hermione,” said Harry.

It had just dawned upon him why there were so many people there. He felt that Hermione should have seen this coming. Some of these people — maybe even most of them — had turned up in the hope of hearing Harry’s story firsthand.

“What makes me say You-Know-Who’s back?” he asked, looking Zacharias straight in the face. “I saw him. But Dumbledore told the whole school what happened last year, and if you didn’t believe him, you don’t believe me, and I’m not wasting an afternoon trying to con-vince anyone.”

The whole group seemed to have held its breath while Harry spoke. Harry had the impression that even the barman was listening in. He was wiping the same glass with the filthy rag; it was becoming steadily dirtier.

Zacharias said dismissively, “All Dumbledore told us last year was that Cedric Diggory got killed by You-Know-Who and that you brought Diggory’s body back to Hogwarts. He didn’t give us details, he didn’t

tell us exactly how Diggory got murdered, I think we'd all like to know —"

"If you've come to hear exactly what it looks like when Voldemort murders someone I can't help you," Harry said. His temper, always so close to the surface these days, was rising again. He did not take his eyes from Zacharias Smith's aggressive face, determined not to look at Cho. "I don't want to talk about Cedric Diggory, all right? So if that's what you're here for, you might as well clear out."

He cast an angry look in Hermione's direction. This was, he felt, all her fault; she had decided to display him like some sort of freak and of course they had all turned up to see just how wild his story was. … But none of them left their seats, not even Zacharias Smith, though he continued to gaze intently at Harry.

"So," said Hermione, her voice very high-pitched again. "So … like I was saying … if you want to learn some defense, then we need to work out how we're going to do it, how often we're going to meet, and where we're going to —"

"Is it true," interrupted the girl with the long plait down her back, looking at Harry, "that you can produce a Patronus?"

There was a murmur of interest around the group at this.

"Yeah," said Harry slightly defensively.

"A corporeal Patronus?"

The phrase stirred something in Harry's memory.

"Er — you don't know Madam Bones, do you?" he asked.

The girl smiled.

“She’s my auntie,” she said. “I’m Susan Bones. She told me about your hearing. So — is it really true? You make a stag Patronus?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

“Blimey, Harry!” said Lee, looking deeply impressed. “I never knew that!”

“Mum told Ron not to spread it around,” said Fred, grinning at Harry. “She said you got enough attention as it was.”

“She’s not wrong,” mumbled Harry and a couple of people laughed. The veiled witch sitting alone shifted very slightly in her seat.

“And did you kill a basilisk with that sword in Dumbledore’s of-fice?” demanded Terry Boot. “That’s what one of the portraits on the wall told me when I was in there last year. …”

“Er — yeah, I did, yeah,” said Harry.

Justin Finch-Fletchley whistled, the Creevey brothers exchanged awestruck looks, and Lavender Brown said “wow” softly. Harry was feeling slightly hot around the collar now; he was determinedly looking anywhere but at Cho.

“And in our first year,” said Neville to the group at large, “he saved that Sorcerous Stone —”

“Sorcerer’s,” hissed Hermione.

“Yes, that, from You-Know-Who,” finished Neville.

Hannah Abbott’s eyes were as round as Galleons.

“And that’s not to mention,” said Cho (Harry’s eyes snapped onto her, she was looking at him, smiling; his stomach did another somersault), “all the tasks he had to get through in the Triwizard

Tournament last year — getting past dragons and merpeople and acromantulas and things. …”

There was a murmur of impressed agreement around the table.

Harry’s insides were squirming. He was trying to arrange his face so that he did not look too pleased with himself. The fact that Cho had just praised him made it much, much harder for him to say the thing he had sworn to himself he would tell them.

“Look,” he said and everyone fell silent at once, “I … I don’t want to sound like I’m trying to be modest or anything, but … I had a lot of help with all that stuff. …”

“Not with the dragon, you didn’t,” said Michael Corner at once. “That was a seriously cool bit of flying. …”

“Yeah, well —” said Harry, feeling it would be churlish to disagree.

“And nobody helped you get rid of those dementors this summer,” said Susan Bones.

“No,” said Harry, “no, okay, I know I did bits of it without help, but the point I’m trying to make is —”

“Are you trying to weasel out of showing us any of this stuff?” said Zacharias Smith.

“Here’s an idea,” said Ron loudly, before Harry could speak, “why don’t you shut your mouth?”

Perhaps the word “weasel” had affected Ron particularly strongly; in any case, he was now looking at Zacharias as though he would like nothing better than to thump him. Zacharias flushed.

“Well, we’ve all turned up to learn from him, and now he’s telling us he can’t really do any of it,” he said.

“That’s not what he said,” snarled Fred Weasley.

“Would you like us to clean out your ears for you?” inquired George, pulling a long and lethal-looking metal instrument from in-side one of the Zonko’s bags.

“Or any part of your body, really, we’re not fussy where we stick this,” said Fred.

“Yes, well,” said Hermione hastily, “moving on … the point is, are we agreed we want to take lessons from Harry?”

There was a murmur of general agreement. Zacharias folded his arms and said nothing, though perhaps this was because he was too busy keeping an eye on the instrument in George’s hand.

“Right,” said Hermione, looking relieved that something had at last been settled. “Well, then, the next question is how often we do it. I really don’t think there’s any point in meeting less than once a week —”

“Hang on,” said Angelina, “we need to make sure this doesn’t clash with our Quidditch practice.”

“No,” said Cho, “nor with ours.”

“Nor ours,” added Zacharias Smith.

“I’m sure we can find a night that suits everyone,” said Hermione, slightly impatiently, “but you know, this is rather important, we’re talking about learning to defend ourselves against V-Voldemort’s Death Eaters —”

“Well said!” barked Ernie Macmillan, whom Harry had been expecting to speak long before this. “Personally I think this is really important, possibly more important than anything else we’ll do this year, even with our O.W.L.s coming up!”

He looked around impressively, as though waiting for people to cry, "Surely not!" When nobody spoke, he went on, "I, personally, am at a loss to see why the Ministry has foisted such a useless teacher upon us at this critical period. Obviously they are in denial about the return of You-Know-Who, but to give us a teacher who is trying to actively pre-vent us from using defensive spells —"

"We think the reason Umbridge doesn't want us trained in Defense Against the Dark Arts," said Hermione, "is that she's got some … some mad idea that Dumbledore could use the students in the school as a kind of private army. She thinks he'd mobilize us against the Ministry."

Nearly everybody looked stunned at this news; everybody except Luna Lovegood, who piped up, "Well, that makes sense. After all, Cornelius Fudge has got his own private army."

"What?" said Harry, completely thrown by this unexpected piece of information.

"Yes, he's got an army of heliopaths," said Luna solemnly.

"No, he hasn't," snapped Hermione.

"Yes, he has," said Luna.

"What are heliopaths?" asked Neville, looking blank.

"They're spirits of fire," said Luna, her protuberant eyes widening so that she looked madder than ever. "Great tall flaming creatures that gallop across the ground burning everything in front of —"

"They don't exist, Neville," said Hermione tartly.

"Oh yes they do!" said Luna angrily.

"I'm sorry, but where's the proof of that?" snapped Hermione.

“There are plenty of eyewitness accounts, just because you’re so narrow-minded you need to have everything shoved under your nose before you —”

“Hem, hem,” said Ginny in such a good imitation of Professor Umbridge that several people looked around in alarm and then laughed. “Weren’t we trying to decide how often we’re going to meet and get Defense lessons?”

“Yes,” said Hermione at once, “yes, we were, you’re right. …”

“Well, once a week sounds cool,” said Lee Jordan.

“As long as —” began Angelina.

“Yes, yes, we know about the Quidditch,” said Hermione in a tense voice. “Well, the other thing to decide is where we’re going to meet. …”

This was rather more difficult; the whole group fell silent.

“Library?” suggested Katie Bell after a few moments.

“I can’t see Madam Pince being too chuffed with us doing jinxes in the library,” said Harry.

“Maybe an unused classroom?” said Dean.

“Yeah,” said Ron, “McGonagall might let us have hers, she did when Harry was practicing for the Triwizard. …”

But Harry was pretty certain that McGonagall would not be so accommodating this time. For all that Hermione had said about study and homework groups being allowed, he had the distinct feeling this one might be considered a lot more rebellious.

“Right, well, we’ll try to find somewhere,” said Hermione. “We’ll send a message round to everybody when we’ve got a time and a place for

the first meeting."

She rummaged in her bag and produced parchment and a quill, then hesitated, rather as though she was steeling herself to say something.

"I-I think everybody should write their name down, just so we know who was here. But I also think," she took a deep breath, "that we all ought to agree not to shout about what we're doing. So if you sign, you're agreeing not to tell Umbridge — or anybody else — what we're up to."

Fred reached out for the parchment and cheerfully put down his signature, but Harry noticed at once that several people looked less than happy at the prospect of putting their names on the list.

"Er …" said Zacharias slowly, not taking the parchment that George was trying to pass him. "Well … I'm sure Ernie will tell me when the meeting is."

But Ernie was looking rather hesitant about signing too. Hermione raised her eyebrows at him.

"I — well, we are prefects," Ernie burst out. "And if this list was found … well, I mean to say … you said yourself, if Umbridge finds out …"

"You just said this group was the most important thing you'd do this year," Harry reminded him.

"I — yes," said Ernie, "yes, I do believe that, it's just …"

"Ernie, do you really think I'd leave that list lying around?" said Hermione testily.

"No. No, of course not," said Ernie, looking slightly less anxious. "I — yes, of course I'll sign."

Nobody raised objections after Ernie, though Harry saw Cho's friend give her a rather reproachful look before adding her name. When the last person — Zacharias — had signed, Hermione took the parchment back and slipped it carefully into her bag. There was an odd feeling in the group now. It was as though they had just signed some kind of contract.

"Well, time's ticking on," said Fred briskly, getting to his feet. "George, Lee, and I have got items of a sensitive nature to purchase, we'll be seeing you all later."

In twos and threes the rest of the group took their leave too. Cho made rather a business of fastening the catch on her bag before leaving, her long dark curtain of hair swinging forward to hide her face, but her friend stood beside her, arms folded, clicking her tongue, so that Cho had little choice but to leave with her. As her friend ushered her through the door, Cho looked back and waved at Harry.

"Well, I think that went quite well," said Hermione happily, as she, Harry, and Ron walked out of the Hog's Head into the bright sunlight a few moments later, Harry and Ron still clutching their bottles of butterbeer.

"That Zacharias bloke's a wart," said Ron, who was glowering after the figure of Smith just discernible in the distance.

"I don't like him much either," admitted Hermione, "but he over-heard me talking to Ernie and Hannah at the Hufflepuff table and he seemed really interested in coming, so what could I say? But the more people the better really — I mean, Michael Corner and his friends wouldn't have come if he hadn't been going out with Ginny —"

Ron, who had been draining the last few drops from his butterbeer bottle, gagged and sprayed butterbeer down his front.

"He's WHAT?" said Ron, outraged, his ears now resembling curls of raw beef. "She's going out with — my sister's going — what d'you

mean, Michael Corner?”

“Well, that’s why he and his friends came, I think — well, they’re obviously interested in learning defense, but if Ginny hadn’t told Michael what was going on —”

“When did this — when did she — ?”

“They met at the Yule Ball and they got together at the end of last year,” said Hermione composedly. They had turned into the High Street and she paused outside Scrivenshaft’s Quill Shop, where there was a handsome display of pheasant-feather quills in the window. “Hmm … I could do with a new quill.”

She turned into the shop. Harry and Ron followed her.

“Which one was Michael Corner?” Ron demanded furiously.

“The dark one,” said Hermione.

“I didn’t like him,” said Ron at once.

“Big surprise,” said Hermione under her breath.

“But,” said Ron, following Hermione along a row of quills in cop-per pots, “I thought Ginny fancied Harry!”

Hermione looked at him rather pityingly and shook her head.

“Ginny used to fancy Harry, but she gave up on him months ago. Not that she doesn’t like you, of course,” she added kindly to Harry while she examined a long black-and-gold quill.

Harry, whose head was still full of Cho’s parting wave, did not find this subject quite as interesting as Ron, who was positively quivering with indignation, but it did bring something home to him that until now he had not really registered.

“So that’s why she talks now?” he asked Hermione. “She never used to talk in front of me.”

“Exactly,” said Hermione. “Yes, I think I’ll have this one. …”

She went up to the counter and handed over fifteen Sickles and two Knuts, Ron still breathing down her neck.

“Ron,” she said severely as she turned and trod on his feet, “this is exactly why Ginny hasn’t told you she’s seeing Michael, she knew you’d take it badly. So don’t harp on about it, for heaven’s sake.”

“What d’you mean, who’s taking anything badly? I’m not going to harp on about anything …”

Ron continued to chunter under his breath all the way down the street. Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry and then said in an undertone, while Ron was muttering imprecations about Michael Corner, “And talking about Michael and Ginny … what about Cho and you?”

“What d’you mean?” said Harry quickly.

It was as though boiling water was rising rapidly inside him; a burning sensation that was causing his face to smart in the cold — had he been that obvious?

“Well,” said Hermione, smiling slightly, “she just couldn’t keep her eyes off you, could she?”

Harry had never before appreciated just how beautiful the village of Hogsmeade was.

Chapter 17 Educational Decree Number Twenty-four

Harry felt happier for the rest of the weekend than he had done all term. He and Ron spent much of Sunday catching up with all their homework again, and although this could hardly be called fun, the last burst of autumn sunshine persisted, so rather than sitting hunched over tables in the common room, they took their work outside and lounged in the shade of a large beech tree on the edge of the lake. Hermione, who of course was up to date with all her work, brought more wool outside with her and bewitched her knitting needles so that they flashed and clicked in midair beside her, producing more hats and scarves.

The knowledge that they were doing something to resist Umbridge and the Ministry, and that he was a key part of the rebellion, gave Harry a feeling of immense satisfaction. He kept reliving Saturday's meeting in his mind: all those people, coming to him to learn Defense Against the Dark Arts … and the looks on their faces as they had heard some of the things he had done … and Cho praising his performance in the Triwizard Tournament. … The knowledge that all those people did not think him a lying weirdo, but someone to be admired, buoyed him up so much that he was still cheerful on Monday morning, despite the imminent prospect of all his least favorite classes.

He and Ron headed downstairs from their dormitory together, discussing Angelina's idea that they were to work on a new move called the Sloth Grip Roll during that night's Quidditch practice, and not until they were halfway across the sunlit common room did they no-tice the addition to the room that had already attracted the attention of a small group of people.

A large sign had been affixed to the Gryffindor notice board, so large that it covered everything else on there — the lists of second-hand

spellbooks for sale, the regular reminders of school rules from Argus Filch, the Quidditch team training schedule, the offers to barter certain Chocolate Frog cards for others, the Weasleys' new advertise-ment for testers, the dates of the Hogsmeade weekends, and the lost-and-found notices. The new sign was printed in large black letters and there was a highly official-looking seal at the bottom beside a neat and curly signature.

— BY ORDER OF —

THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTSAll Student Organizations, Societies, Teams, Groups, and Clubs are henceforth disbanded.

An Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club is hereby defined as a regular meeting of three or more students.

Permission to re-form may be sought from the High Inquisitor (Professor Umbridge).

No Student Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club may exist without the knowledge and approval of the High Inquisitor.

Any student found to have formed, or to belong to, an Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club that has not been approved by the High Inquisitor will be expelled.

The above is in accordance withEducational Decree Number Twenty-four.

Signed:

Dolores Jane Umbridge

HIGH INQUISITOR

Harry and Ron read the notice over the heads of some anxious-looking second years.

“Does this mean they’re going to shut down the Gobstones Club?” one of them asked his friend.

“I reckon you’ll be okay with Gobstones,” Ron said darkly, making the second year jump. “I don’t think we’re going to be as lucky, though, do you?” he asked Harry as the second years hurried away.

Harry was reading the notice through again. The happiness that had filled him since Saturday was gone. His insides were pulsing with rage.

“This isn’t a coincidence,” he said, his hands forming fists. “She knows.”

“She can’t,” said Ron at once.

“There were people listening in that pub. And let’s face it, we don’t know how many of the people who turned up we can trust. … Any of them could have run off and told Umbridge. …”

And he had thought they believed him, thought they even admired him …“Zacharias Smith!” said Ron at once, punching a fist into his hand. “Or — I thought that Michael Corner had a really shifty look too —”

“I wonder if Hermione’s seen this yet?” Harry said, looking around at the door to the girls’ dormitories.

“Let’s go and tell her,” said Ron. He bounded forward, pulled open the door, and set off up the spiral staircase.

He was on the sixth stair when it happened. There was a loud, wailing, klaxonlike sound and the steps melted together to make a long, smooth stone slide. There was a brief moment when Ron tried to keep running, arms working madly like windmills, then he toppled over backward and shot down the newly created slide, coming to rest on his back at Harry’s feet.

“Er — I don’t think we’re allowed in the girls’ dormitories,” said Harry, pulling Ron to his feet and trying not to laugh.

Two fourth-year girls came zooming gleefully down the stone slide.

“Oooh, who tried to get upstairs?” they giggled happily, leaping to their feet and ogling Harry and Ron.

“Me,” said Ron, who was still rather disheveled. “I didn’t realize that would happen. It’s not fair!” he added to Harry, as the girls headed off for the portrait hole, still giggling madly. “Hermione’s al-lowed in our dormitory, how come we’re not allowed — ?”

“Well, it’s an old-fashioned rule,” said Hermione, who had just slid neatly onto a rug in front of them and was now getting to her feet, “but it says in Hogwarts, A History that the founders thought boys were less trustworthy than girls. Anyway, why were you trying to get in there?”

“To see you — look at this!” said Ron, dragging her over to the no-tice board.

Hermione’s eyes slid rapidly down the notice. Her expression be-came stony.

“Someone must have blabbed to her!” Ron said angrily.

“They can’t have done,” said Hermione in a low voice.

“You’re so naive,” said Ron, “you think just because you’re all hon-orable and trustworthy —”

“No, they can’t have done because I put a jinx on that piece of parchment we all signed,” said Hermione grimly. “Believe me, if any-one’s run off and told Umbridge, we’ll know exactly who they are and they will really regret it.”

“What’ll happen to them?” said Ron eagerly.

“Well, put it this way,” said Hermione, “it’ll make Eloise Midgen’s acne look like a couple of cute freckles. Come on, let’s get down to breakfast and see what the others think. … I wonder whether this has been put up in all the Houses?”

It was immediately apparent on entering the Great Hall that Umbridge’s sign had not only appeared in Gryffindor Tower. There was a peculiar intensity about the chatter and an extra measure of movement in the Hall as people scurried up and down their tables conferring on what they had read. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had barely taken their seats when Neville, Dean, Fred, George, and Ginny descended upon them.

“Did you see it?”

“D’you reckon she knows?”

“What are we going to do?”

They were all looking at Harry. He glanced around to make sure there were no teachers near them.

“We’re going to do it anyway, of course,” he said quietly.

“Knew you’d say that,” said George, beaming and thumping Harry on the arm.

“The prefects as well?” said Fred, looking quizzically at Ron and Hermione.

“Of course,” said Hermione coolly.

“Here comes Ernie and Hannah Abbott,” said Ron, looking over his shoulder. “And those Ravenclaw blokes and Smith … and no one looks very spotty.”

Hermione looked alarmed.

"Never mind spots, the idiots can't come over here now, it'll look really suspicious — sit down!" she mouthed to Ernie and Hannah, gesturing frantically to them to rejoin the Hufflepuff table. "Later! We'll — talk — to — you — later!"

"I'll tell Michael," said Ginny impatiently, swinging herself off her bench. "The fool, honestly …"

She hurried off toward the Ravenclaw table; Harry watched her go. Cho was sitting not far away, talking to the curly-haired friend she had brought along to the Hog's Head. Would Umbridge's notice scare her off meeting them again?

But the full repercussions of the sign were not felt until they were leaving the Great Hall for History of Magic.

"Harry! Ron!"

It was Angelina and she was hurrying toward them looking per-fectly desperate.

"It's okay," said Harry quietly, when she was near enough to hear him. "We're still going to —"

"You realize she's including Quidditch in this?" Angelina said over him. "We have to go and ask permission to re-form the Gryffindor team!"

"What?" said Harry.

"No way," said Ron, appalled.

"You read the sign, it mentions teams too! So listen, Harry … I am saying this for the last time. … Please, please don't lose your temper with Umbridge again or she might not let us play anymore!"

“Okay, okay,” said Harry, for Angelina looked as though she was on the verge of tears. “Don’t worry, I’ll behave myself. …”

“Bet Umbridge is in History of Magic,” said Ron grimly, as they set off for Binns’s lesson. “She hasn’t inspected Binns yet. … Bet you anything she’s there. …”

But he was wrong; the only teacher present when they entered was Professor Binns, floating an inch or so above his chair as usual and preparing to continue his monotonous drone on giant wars. Harry did not even attempt to follow what he was saying today; he doodled idly on his parchment ignoring Hermione’s frequent glares and nudges, until a particularly painful poke in the ribs made him look up angrily.

“What?”

She pointed at the window. Harry looked around. Hedwig was perched on the narrow window ledge, gazing through the thick glass at him, a letter tied to her leg. Harry could not understand it; they had just had breakfast, why on earth hadn’t she delivered the letter then, as usual? Many of his classmates were pointing out Hedwig to each other too.

“Oh, I’ve always loved that owl, she’s so beautiful,” Harry heard Lavender sigh to Parvati.

He glanced around at Professor Binns who continued to read his notes, serenely unaware that the class’s attention was even less focused upon him than usual. Harry slipped quietly off his chair, crouched down, and hurried along the row to the window, where he slid the catch and opened it very slowly.

He had expected Hedwig to hold out her leg so that he could re-move the letter and then fly off to the Owlery, but the moment the window was open wide enough she hopped inside, hooting dolefully. He closed the window with an anxious glance at Professor Binns, crouched low again, and sped back to his seat with Hedwig on his

shoulder. He regained his seat, transferred Hedwig to his lap, and made to remove the letter tied to her leg.

It was only then that he realized that Hedwig's feathers were oddly ruffled; some were bent the wrong way, and she was holding one of her wings at an odd angle.

"She's hurt!" Harry whispered, bending his head low over her. Hermione and Ron leaned in closer; Hermione even put down her quill. "Look — there's something wrong with her wing —"

Hedwig was quivering; when Harry made to touch the wing she gave a little jump, all her feathers on end as though she was inflating herself, and gazed at him reproachfully.

"Professor Binns," said Harry loudly, and everyone in the class turned to look at him. "I'm not feeling well."

Professor Binns raised his eyes from his notes, looking amazed, as always, to find the room in front of him full of people.

"Not feeling well?" he repeated hazily.

"Not at all well," said Harry firmly, getting to his feet while con-cealing Hedwig behind his back. "So I think I'll need to go to the hos-pital wing."

"Yes," said Professor Binns, clearly very much wrong-footed. "Yes … yes, hospital wing … well, off you go, then, Perkins …"

Once outside the room Harry returned Hedwig to his shoulder and hurried off up the corridor, pausing to think only when he was out of sight of Binns's door. His first choice of somebody to cure Hedwig would have been Hagrid, of course, but as he had no idea where Hagrid was, his only remaining option was to find Professor Grubbly-Plank and hope she would help.

He peered out of a window at the blustery, overcast grounds. There was no sign of her anywhere near Hagrid's cabin; if she was not teach-ing, she was probably in the staffroom. He set off downstairs, Hedwig hooting feebly as she swayed on his shoulder.

Two stone gargoyles flanked the staffroom door. As Harry approached, one of them croaked, "You should be in class, sunny Jim."

"This is urgent," said Harry curtly.

"Ooooh, urgent, is it?" said the other gargoyle in a high-pitched voice. "Well, that's put us in our place, hasn't it?"

Harry knocked; he heard footsteps and then the door opened and he found himself face-to-face with Professor McGonagall.

"You haven't been given another detention!" she said at once, her square spectacles flashing alarmingly.

"No, Professor!" said Harry hastily.

"Well then, why are you out of class?"

"It's urgent, apparently," said the second gargoyle snidely.

"I'm looking for Professor Grubbly-Plank," Harry explained. "It's my owl, she's injured."

"Injured owl, did you say?"

Professor Grubbly-Plank appeared at Professor McGonagall's shoulder, smoking a pipe and holding a copy of the Daily Prophet.

"Yes," said Harry, lifting Hedwig carefully off his shoulder, "she turned up after the other post owls and her wing's all funny, look —"

Professor Grubbly-Plank stuck her pipe firmly between her teeth and took Hedwig from Harry while Professor McGonagall watched.

“Hmm,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank, her pipe waggling slightly as she talked. “Looks like something’s attacked her. Can’t think what would have done it, though. … Thestrals will sometimes go for birds, of course, but Hagrid’s got the Hogwarts thestrals well trained not to touch owls …”

Harry neither knew nor cared what thestrals were, he just wanted to know that Hedwig was going to be all right. Professor McGonagall, however, looked sharply at Harry and said, “Do you know how far this owl’s traveled, Potter?”

“Er,” said Harry. “From London, I think.”

He met her eyes briefly and knew that she understood “London” to mean “number twelve, Grimmauld Place” by the way her eyebrows had joined in the middle.

Professor Grubbly-Plank pulled a monocle out of the inside of her robes and screwed it into her eye to examine Hedwig’s wing closely. “I should be able to sort this out if you leave her with me, Potter,” she said. “She shouldn’t be flying long distances for a few days, in any case.”

“Er — right — thanks,” said Harry, just as the bell rang for break.

“No problem,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank gruffly, turning back into the staffroom.

“Just a moment, Wilhelmina!” said Professor McGonagall. “Pot-ter’s letter!”

“Oh yeah!” said Harry, who had momentarily forgotten the scroll tied to Hedwig’s leg. Professor Grubbly-Plank handed it over and then disappeared into the staffroom carrying Hedwig, who was staring at Harry as though unable to believe he would give her away like this. Feeling slightly guilty, he turned to go, but Professor McGonagall called him back.

“Potter!”

“Yes, Professor?”

She glanced up and down the corridor; there were students coming from both directions.

“Bear in mind,” she said quickly and quietly, her eyes on the scroll in his hand, “that channels of communication in and out of Hogwarts may be being watched, won’t you?”

“I —” said Harry, but the flood of students rolling along the corri-dor was almost upon him. Professor McGonagall gave him a curt nod and retreated into the staffroom, leaving Harry to be swept out into the courtyard with the crowd. Here he spotted Ron and Hermione already standing in a sheltered corner, their cloak collars turned up against the wind. Harry slit open the scroll as he hurried toward them and found five words in Sirius’s handwriting:Today, same time, same place.

“Is Hedwig okay?” asked Hermione anxiously, the moment he was within earshot.

“Where did you take her?” asked Ron.

“To Grubbly-Plank,” said Harry. “And I met McGonagall. … Listen. …”

And he told them what Professor McGonagall had said. To his surprise, neither of the others looked shocked; on the contrary, they exchanged significant looks.

“What?” said Harry, looking from Ron to Hermione and back again.

“Well, I was just saying to Ron … what if someone had tried to intercept Hedwig? I mean, she’s never been hurt on a flight before, has she?”

“Who’s the letter from anyway?” asked Ron, taking the note from Harry.

“Snuffles,” said Harry quietly.

“ ‘Same time, same place’? Does he mean the fire in the common room?”

“Obviously,” said Hermione, also reading the note. She looked uneasy. “I just hope nobody else has read this. …”

“But it was still sealed and everything,” said Harry, trying to con-vince himself as much as her. “And nobody would understand what it meant if they didn’t know where we’d spoken to him before, would they?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione anxiously, hitching her bag back over her shoulder as the bell rang again. “It wouldn’t be exactly diffi-cult to reseal the scroll by magic. … And if anyone’s watching the Floo Network … but I don’t really see how we can warn him not to come without that being intercepted too!”

They trudged down the stone steps to the dungeons for Potions, all three of them lost in thought, but as they reached the bottom of the stairs they were recalled to themselves by the voice of Draco Malfoy, who was standing just outside Snape’s classroom door, waving around an official-looking piece of parchment and talking much louder than was necessary so that they could hear every word.

“Yeah, Umbridge gave the Slytherin Quidditch team permission to continue playing straightaway, I went to ask her first thing this morning. Well, it was pretty much automatic, I mean, she knows my father really well, he’s always popping in and out of the Ministry. … It’ll be interesting to see whether Gryffindor are allowed to keep playing, wont it?”

“Don’t rise,” Hermione whispered imploringly to Harry and Ron, who were both watching Malfoy, faces set and fists clenched. “It’s what he wants. …”

“I mean,” said Malfoy, raising his voice a little more, his gray eyes glittering malevolently in Harry and Ron’s direction, “if it’s a question of influence with the Ministry, I don’t think they’ve got much chance. … From what my father says, they’ve been looking for an excuse to sack Arthur Weasley for years. … And as for Potter … My father says it’s a matter of time before the Ministry has him carted off to St. Mungo’s. … apparently they’ve got a special ward for people whose brains have been addled by magic. …”

Malfoy made a grotesque face, his mouth sagging open and his eyes rolling. Crabbe and Goyle gave their usual grunts of laughter, Pansy Parkinson shrieked with glee.

Something collided hard with Harry’s shoulder, knocking him sideways. A split second later he realized that Neville had just charged past him, heading straight for Malfoy.

“Neville, no!”

Harry leapt forward and seized the back of Neville’s robes; Neville struggled frantically, his fists flailing, trying desperately to get at Malfoy who looked, for a moment, extremely shocked.

“Help me!” Harry flung at Ron, managing to get an arm around Neville’s neck and dragging him backward, away from the Slytherins. Crabbe and Goyle were now flexing their arms, closing in front of Malfoy, ready for the fight. Ron hurried forward and seized Neville’s arms; together, he and Harry succeeded in dragging Neville back into the Gryffindor line. Neville’s face was scarlet; the pressure Harry was exerting on his throat rendered him quite incomprehensible, but odd words spluttered from his mouth.

“Not… funny … don’t … Mungo’s … show … him …”

The dungeon door opened. Snape appeared there. His black eyes swept up the Gryffindor line to the point where Harry and Ron were wrestling with Neville.

"Fighting, Potter, Weasley, Longbottom?" Snape said in his cold, sneering voice. "Ten points from Gryffindor. Release Longbottom, Potter, or it will be detention. Inside, all of you."

Harry let go of Neville, who stood panting and glaring at him.

"I had to stop you," Harry gasped, picking up his bag. "Crabbe and Goyle would've torn you apart."

Neville said nothing, he merely snatched up his own bag and stalked off into the dungeon.

"What in the name of Merlin," said Ron slowly, as they followed Neville, "was that about?"

Harry did not answer. He knew exactly why the subject of people who were in St. Mungo's because of magical damage to their brains was highly distressing to Neville, but he had sworn to Dumbledore that he would not tell anyone Neville's secret. Even Neville did not know that Harry knew.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione took their usual seats at the back of the class and pulled out parchment, quills, and their copies of One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi. The class around them was whispering about what Neville had just done, but when Snape closed the dun-geon door with an echoing bang everybody fell silent immediately.

"You will notice," said Snape in his low, sneering voice, "that we have a guest with us today."

He gestured toward the dim corner of the dungeon, and Harry saw Professor Umbridge sitting there, clipboard on her knee. He glanced

sideways at Ron and Hermione, his eyebrows raised. Snape and Umbridge, the two teachers he hated most … it was hard to decide which he wanted to triumph over the other.

“We are continuing with our Strengthening Solutions today, you will find your mixtures as you left them last lesson, if correctly made they should have matured well over the weekend — instructions” — he waved his wand again — “on the board. Carry on.”

Professor Umbridge spent the first half hour of the lesson making notes in her corner. Harry was very interested in hearing her question Snape, so interested, that he was becoming careless with his potion again.

“Salamander blood, Harry!” Hermione moaned, grabbing his wrist to prevent him adding the wrong ingredient for the third time. “Not pomegranate juice!”

“Right,” said Harry vaguely, putting down the bottle and continu-ing to watch the corner. Umbridge had just gotten to her feet. “Ha,” he said softly, as she strode between two lines of desks toward Snape, who was bending over Dean Thomas’s cauldron.

“Well, the class seems fairly advanced for their level,” she said briskly to Snape’s back. “Though I would question whether it is ad-visable to teach them a potion like the Strengthening Solution. I think the Ministry would prefer it if that was removed from the syllabus.”

Snape straightened up slowly and turned to look at her.

“Now … how long have you been teaching at Hogwarts?” she asked, her quill poised over her clipboard.

“Fourteen years,” Snape replied. His expression was unfathomable. His eyes on Snape, Harry added a few drops to his potion; it hissed menacingly and turned from turquoise to orange.

“You applied first for the Defense Against the Dark Arts post, I believe?” Professor Umbridge asked Snape.

“Yes,” said Snape quietly.

“But you were unsuccessful?”

Snape’s lip curled.

“Obviously.”

Professor Umbridge scribbled on her clipboard.

“And you have applied regularly for the Defense Against the Dark Arts post since you first joined the school, I believe?”

“Yes,” said Snape quietly, barely moving his lips. He looked very angry.

“Do you have any idea why Dumbledore has consistently refused to appoint you?” asked Umbridge.

“I suggest you ask him,” said Snape jerkily.

“Oh I shall,” said Professor Umbridge with a sweet smile.

“I suppose this is relevant?” Snape asked, his black eyes narrowed.

“Oh yes,” said Professor Umbridge. “Yes, the Ministry wants a thorough understanding of teachers’ — er — backgrounds. …”

She turned away, walked over to Pansy Parkinson and began questioning her about the lessons. Snape looked around at Harry and their eyes met for a second. Harry hastily dropped his gaze to his potion, which was now congealing foully and giving off a strong smell of burned rubber.

“No marks again, then, Potter,” said Snape maliciously, emptying Harry’s cauldron with a wave of his wand. “You will write me an essay on the correct composition of this potion, indicating how and why you went wrong, to be handed in next lesson, do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Harry furiously. Snape had already given them homework, and he had Quidditch practice this evening; this would mean another couple of sleepless nights. It did not seem possible that he had awoken that morning feeling very happy. All he felt now was a fervent desire for this day to end as soon as possible.

“Maybe I’ll skive off Divination,” he said glumly as they stood again in the courtyard after lunch, the wind whipping at the hems of robes and brims of hats. “I’ll pretend to be ill and do Snape’s essay in-stead, then I won’t have to stay up half the night. …”

“You can’t skive off Divination,” said Hermione severely.

“Hark who’s talking, you walked out of Divination, you hate Trelawney!” said Ron indignantly.

“I don’t hate her,” said Hermione loftily. “I just think she’s an absolutely appalling teacher and a real old fraud. … But Harry’s already missed History of Magic and I don’t think he ought to miss anything else today!”

There was too much truth in this to ignore, so half an hour later Harry took his seat in the hot, over-perfumed atmosphere of the Div-ination classroom feeling angry at everybody. Professor Trelawney was handing out copies of The Dream Oracle yet again; he would surely be much better employed doing Snape’s punishment essay than sitting here trying to find meaning in a lot of made-up dreams.

It seemed, however, that he was not the only person in Divination who was in a temper. Professor Trelawney slammed a copy of the Or-acle down on the table between Harry and Ron and swept away, her lips pursed; she threw the next copy of the Oracle at Seamus and

Dean, narrowly avoiding Seamus's head, and thrust the final one into Neville's chest with such force that he slipped off his pouf.

"Well, carry on!" said Professor Trelawney loudly, her voice high pitched and somewhat hysterical. "You know what to do! Or am I such a substandard teacher that you have never learned how to open a book?"

The class stared perplexedly at her and then at each other. Harry, however, thought he knew what was the matter. As Professor Trelawney flounced back to the high-backed teacher's chair, her mag-nified eyes full of angry tears, he leaned his head closer to Ron's and muttered, "I think she's got the results of her inspection back."

"Professor?" said Parvati Patil in a hushed voice (she and Lavender had always rather admired Professor Trelawney). "Professor, is there anything — er — wrong?"

"Wrong!" cried Professor Trelawney in a voice throbbing with emo-tion. "Certainly not! I have been insulted, certainly. … Insinuations have been made against me. … Unfounded accusations levelled … but no, there is nothing wrong, certainly not. …"

She took a great shuddering breath and looked away from Parvati, angry tears spilling from under her glasses.

"I say nothing," she choked, "of sixteen years' devoted service. … It has passed, apparently, unnoticed. … But I shall not be insulted, no, I shall not!"

"But Professor, who's insulting you?" asked Parvati timidly.

"The establishment!" said Professor Trelawney in a deep, dramatic, wavering voice. "Yes, those with eyes too clouded by the Mundane to See as I See, to Know as I Know … Of course, we Seers have always been feared, always persecuted. … It is — alas — our fate. …"

She gulped, dabbed at her wet cheeks with the end of her shawl, and then pulled a small, embroidered handkerchief from her sleeve, into which she blew her nose very hard with a sound like Peeves blow-ing a raspberry. Ron sniggered. Lavender shot him a disgusted look.

“Professor,” said Parvati, “do you mean … is it something Profes-sor Umbridge … ?”

“Do not speak to me about that woman!” cried Professor Trelawney, leaping to her feet, her beads rattling and her spectacles flashing. “Kindly continue with your work!”

And she spent the rest of the lesson striding among them, tears still leaking from behind her glasses, muttering what sounded like threats under her breath.

“… may well choose to leave … the indignity of it … on proba-tion … we shall see … how she dares …”

“You and Umbridge have got something in common,” Harry told Hermione quietly when they met again in Defense Against the Dark Arts. “She obviously reckons Trelawney’s an old fraud too. … Looks like she’s put her on probation.”

Umbridge entered the room as he spoke, wearing her black velvet bow and an expression of great smugness.

“Good afternoon, class.”

“Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge,” they chanted drearily.

“Wands away, please …”

But there was no answering flurry of movement this time; nobody had bothered to take out their wands.

“Please turn to page thirty-four of Defensive Magical Theory and read the third chapter, entitled ‘The Case for Non-Offensive Responses to Magical Attack.’ There will be —”

“— no need to talk,” Harry, Ron, and Hermione said together un-der their breaths.

“No Quidditch practice,” said Angelina in hollow tones when Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the common room that night after dinner.

“But I kept my temper!” said Harry, horrified. “I didn’t say any-thing to her, Angelina, I swear, I —”

“I know, I know,” said Angelina miserably. “She just said she needed a bit of time to consider.”

“Consider what?” said Ron angrily. “She’s given the Slytherins per-mission, why not us?”

But Harry could imagine how much Umbridge was enjoying hold-ing the threat of no Gryffindor Quidditch team over their heads and could easily understand why she would not want to relinquish that weapon over them too soon.

“Well,” said Hermione, “look on the bright side — at least now you’ll have time to do Snape’s essay!”

“That’s a bright side, is it?” snapped Harry, while Ron stared in-credulously at Hermione. “No Quidditch practice and extra Potions?”

Harry slumped down into a chair, dragged his Potions essay reluc-tantly from his bag, and set to work.

It was very hard to concentrate; even though he knew that Sirius was not due in the fire until much later he could not help glancing into the flames every few minutes just in case. There was also an in-credible amount of noise in the room: Fred and George appeared fi-nally to

have perfected one type of Skiving Snackbox, which they were taking turns to demonstrate to a cheering and whooping crowd.

First, Fred would take a bite out of the orange end of a chew, at which he would vomit spectacularly into a bucket they had placed in front of them. Then he would force down the purple end of the chew, at which the vomiting would immediately cease. Lee Jordan, who was assisting the demonstration, was lazily vanishing the vomit at regular intervals with the same Vanishing Spell Snape kept using on Harry's potions.

What with the regular sounds of retching, cheering, and Fred and George taking advance orders from the crowd, Harry was finding it exceptionally difficult to focus on the correct method for Strengthening Solutions. Hermione was not helping matters; the cheers and sound of vomit hitting the bottom of Fred and George's bucket were punctuated by loud and disapproving sniffs that Harry found, if anything, more distracting.

"Just go and stop them, then!" he said irritably, after crossing out the wrong weight of powdered griffin claw for the fourth time.

"I can't, they're not technically doing anything wrong," said Her-mione through gritted teeth. "They're quite within their rights to eat the foul things themselves, and I can't find a rule that says the other idiots aren't entitled to buy them, not unless they're proven to be dangerous in some way, and it doesn't look as though they are. …"

She, Harry, and Ron watched George projectile-vomit into the bucket, gulp down the rest of the chew, and straighten up, beaming with his arms wide to protracted applause.

"You know, I don't get why Fred and George only got three O.W.L.s each," said Harry, watching as Fred, George, and Lee collected gold from the eager crowd. "They really know their stuff. …"

“Oh, they only know flashy stuff that’s no real use to anyone,” said Hermione disparagingly.

“No real use?” said Ron in a strained voice. “Hermione, they’ve got about twenty-six Galleons already. …”

It was a long while before the crowd around the Weasleys dispersed, and then Fred, Lee, and George sat up counting their takings even longer, so that it was well past midnight when Harry, Ron, and Hermione finally had the common room to themselves again. At long last, Fred closed the doorway to the boys’ dormitories behind him, rattling his box of Galleons ostentatiously so that Hermione scowled. Harry, who was making very little progress with his Potions essay, de-cided to give it up for the night. As he put his books away, Ron, who was dozing lightly in an armchair, gave a muffled grunt, awoke, looked blearily into the fire and said, “Sirius!”

Harry whipped around; Sirius’s untidy dark head was sitting in the fire again.

“Hi,” he said, grinning.

“Hi,” chorused Harry, Ron, and Hermione, all three kneeling down upon the hearthrug. Crookshanks purred loudly and ap-proached the fire, trying, despite the heat, to put his face close to Sirius’s.

“How’re things?” said Sirius.

“Not that good,” said Harry, as Hermione pulled Crookshanks back to stop him singeing his whiskers. “The Ministry’s forced through another decree, which means we’re not allowed to have Quid-ditch teams —”

“— or secret Defense Against the Dark Arts groups?” said Sirius.

There was a short pause.

“How did you know about that?” Harry demanded.

“You want to choose your meeting places more carefully,” said Sirius, grinning still more broadly. “The Hog’s Head, I ask you …”

“Well, it was better than the Three Broomsticks!” said Hermione defensively. “That’s always packed with people —”

“— which means you’d have been harder to overhear,” said Sirius. “You’ve got a lot to learn, Hermione.”

“Who overheard us?” Harry demanded.

“Mundungus, of course,” said Sirius, and when they all looked puzzled he laughed. “He was the witch under the veil.”

“That was Mundungus?” Harry said, stunned. “What was he doing in the Hog’s Head?”

“What do you think he was doing?” said Sirius impatiently. “Keep-ing an eye on you, of course.”

“I’m still being followed?” asked Harry angrily.

“Yeah, you are,” said Sirius, “and just as well, isn’t it, if the first thing you’re going to do on your weekend off is organize an illegal de-fense group.”

But he looked neither angry nor worried; on the contrary, he was looking at Harry with distinct pride.

“Why was Dung hiding from us?” asked Ron, sounding disap-pointed. “We’d’ve liked to’ve seen him.”

“He was banned from the Hog’s Head twenty years ago,” said Sirius, “and that barman’s got a long memory. We lost Moody’s spare Invisibility Cloak when Sturgis was arrested, so Dung’s been dressing as a

witch a lot lately. … Anyway … First of all, Ron — I've sworn to pass on a message from your mother."

"Oh yeah?" said Ron, sounding apprehensive.

"She says on no account whatsoever are you to take part in an ille-gal secret Defense Against the Dark Arts group. She says you'll be ex-pelled for sure and your future will be ruined. She says there will be plenty of time to learn how to defend yourself later and that you are too young to be worrying about that right now. She also" — Sirius's eyes turned to the other two — "advises Harry and Hermione not to proceed with the group, though she accepts that she has no authority over either of them and simply begs them to remember that she has their best interests at heart. She would have written all this to you, but if the owl had been intercepted you'd all have been in real trouble, and she can't say it for herself because she's on duty tonight."

"On duty doing what?" said Ron quickly.

"Never you mind, just stuff for the Order," said Sirius. "So it's fallen to me to be the messenger and make sure you tell her I passed it all on, because I don't think she trusts me to."

There was another pause in which Crookshanks, mewing, at-tempted to paw Sirius's head, and Ron fiddled with a hole in the hearthrug.

"So you want me to say I'm not going to take part in the defense group?" he muttered finally.

"Me? Certainly not!" said Sirius, looking surprised. "I think it's an excellent idea!"

"You do?" said Harry, his heart lifting.

"Of course I do!" said Sirius. "D'you think your father and I would've lain down and taken orders from an old hag like Umbridge?"

"But — last term all you did was tell me to be careful and not take risks —"

"Last year all the evidence was that someone inside Hogwarts was trying to kill you, Harry!" said Sirius impatiently. "This year we know that there's someone outside Hogwarts who'd like to kill us all, so I think learning to defend yourselves properly is a very good idea!"

"And if we do get expelled?" Hermione asked, a quizzical look on her face.

"Hermione, this whole thing was your idea!" said Harry, staring at her.

"I know it was. … I just wondered what Sirius thought," she said, shrugging.

"Well, better expelled and able to defend yourselves than sitting safely in school without a clue," said Sirius.

"Hear, hear," said Harry and Ron enthusiastically.

"So," said Sirius, "how are you organizing this group? Where are you meeting?"

"Well, that's a bit of a problem now," said Harry. "Dunno where we're going to be able to go. …"

"How about the Shrieking Shack?" suggested Sirius.

"Hey, that's an idea!" said Ron excitedly, but Hermione made a skeptical noise and all three of them looked at her, Sirius's head turning in the flames.

"Well, Sirius, it's just that there were only four of you meeting in the Shrieking Shack when you were at school," said Hermione, "and all of you could transform into animals and I suppose you could all have squeezed under a single Invisibility Cloak if you'd wanted to. But

there are twenty-eight of us and none of us is an Animagus, so we wouldn't need so much an Invisibility Cloak as an Invisibility Marquee —"

"Fair point," said Sirius, looking slightly crestfallen. "Well, I'm sure you'll come up with somewhere. … There used to be a pretty roomy secret passageway behind that big mirror on the fourth floor, you might have enough space to practice jinxes in there —"

"Fred and George told me it's blocked," said Harry, shaking his head. "Caved in or something."

"Oh …" said Sirius, frowning. "Well, I'll have a think and get back to —"

He broke off. His face was suddenly tense, alarmed. He turned sideways, apparently looking into the solid brick wall of the fireplace.

"Sirius?" said Harry anxiously.

But he had vanished. Harry gaped at the flames for a moment, then turned to look at Ron and Hermione.

"Why did he — ?"

Hermione gave a horrified gasp and leapt to her feet, still staring at the fire.

A hand had appeared amongst the flames, groping as though to catch hold of something; a stubby, short-fingered hand covered in ugly old-fashioned rings. …The three of them ran for it; at the door of the boys' dormitory Harry looked back. Umbridge's hand was still making snatching movements amongst the flames, as though she knew exactly where Sirius's hair had been moments before and was determined to seize it.

Chapter 18 Dumbledore's Army

“Umbridge has been reading your mail, Harry. There’s no other explanation.”

“You think Umbridge attacked Hedwig?” he said, outraged.

“I’m almost certain of it,” said Hermione grimly. “Watch your frog, it’s escaping.”

Harry pointed his wand at the bullfrog that had been hopping hopefully toward the other side of the table — “Accio!”— and it zoomed gloomily back into his hand.

Charms was always one of the best lessons in which to enjoy a private chat: There was generally so much movement and activity that the danger of being overheard was very slight. Today, with the room full of croaking bullfrogs and cawing ravens, and with a heavy downpour of rain clattering and pounding against the classroom windows, Harry, Ron, and Hermione’s whispered discussion about how Umbridge had nearly caught Sirius went quite unnoticed.

“I’ve been suspecting this ever since Filch accused you of ordering Dungbombs, because it seemed such a stupid lie,” Hermione whispered. “I mean, once your letter had been read, it would have been quite clear you weren’t ordering them, so you wouldn’t have been in trouble at all — it’s a bit of a feeble joke, isn’t it? But then I thought, what if somebody just wanted an excuse to read your mail? Well then, it would be a perfect way for Umbridge to manage it — tip off Filch, let him do the dirty work and confiscate the letter, then either find a way of stealing it from him or else demand to see it — I don’t think Filch would object, when’s he ever stuck up for a student’s rights? Harry, you’re squashing your frog.”

Harry looked down; he was indeed squeezing his bullfrog so tightly its eyes were popping; he replaced it hastily upon the desk.

“It was a very, very close call last night,” said Hermione. “I just wonder if Umbridge knows how close it was. Silencio!”

The bullfrog on which she was practicing her Silencing Charm was struck dumb mid-croak and glared at her reproachfully.

“If she’d caught Snuffles …”

Harry finished the sentence for her.

“He’d probably be back in Azkaban this morning.” He waved his wand without really concentrating; his bullfrog swelled like a green balloon and emitted a high-pitched whistle.

“Silencio!” said Hermione hastily, pointing her wand at Harry’s frog, which deflated silently before them. “Well, he mustn’t do it again, that’s all. I just don’t know how we’re going to let him know. We can’t send him an owl.”

“I don’t reckon he’ll risk it again,” said Ron. “He’s not stupid, he knows she nearly got him. Silencio!”

The large and ugly raven in front of him let out a derisive caw.

“Silencio! SILENCIO!”

The raven cawed more loudly.

“It’s the way you’re moving your wand,” said Hermione, watching Ron critically. “You don’t want to wave it, it’s more a sharp jab.”

“Ravens are harder than frogs,” said Ron testily.

“Fine, let’s swap,” said Hermione, seizing Ron’s raven and replacing it with her own fat bullfrog. “Silencio!” The raven continued to open and close its sharp beak, but no sound came out.

“Very good, Miss Granger!” said Professor Flitwick’s squeaky little voice and Harry, Ron, and Hermione all jumped. “Now, let me see you try, Mr. Weasley!”

“Wha — ? Oh — oh, right,” said Ron, very flustered. “Er — Silencio!”

He jabbed at the bullfrog so hard that he poked it in the eye; the frog gave a deafening croak and leapt off the desk.

It came as no surprise to any of them that Harry and Ron were given additional practice of the Silencing Charm for homework.

They were allowed to remain inside over break due to the down-pour outside. They found seats in a noisy and overcrowded classroom on the first floor in which Peeves was floating dreamily up near the chandelier, occasionally blowing an ink pellet at the top of somebody’s head. They had barely sat down when Angelina came struggling to-ward them through the groups of gossiping students.

“I’ve got permission!” she said. “To re-form the Quidditch team!”

“Excellent!” said Ron and Harry together.

“Yeah,” said Angelina, beaming. “I went to McGonagall and I think she might have appealed to Dumbledore — anyway, Umbridge had to give in. Ha! So I want you down at the pitch at seven o’clock tonight, all right, because we’ve got to make up time, you realize we’re only three weeks away from our first match?”

She squeezed away from them, narrowly dodged an ink pellet from Peeves, which hit a nearby first year instead, and vanished from sight.

Ron’s smile slipped slightly as he looked out of the window, which was now opaque with hammering rain.

“Hope this clears up … What’s up with you, Hermione?”

She too was gazing at the window, but not as though she really saw it. Her eyes were unfocused and there was a frown on her face.

“Just thinking …” she said, still frowning at the rain-washed window.

“About Siri … Snuffles?” said Harry.

“No … not exactly …” said Hermione slowly. “More … won-dering … I suppose we’re doing the right thing … I think … aren’t we?

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

“Well, that clears that up,” said Ron. “It would’ve been really annoying if you hadn’t explained yourself properly.”

Hermione looked at him as though she had only just realized he was there.

“I was just wondering,” she said, her voice stronger now, “whether we’re doing the right thing, starting this Defense Against the Dark Arts group.”

“What!” said Harry and Ron together.

“Hermione, it was your idea in the first place!” said Ron indignantly.

“I know,” said Hermione, twisting her fingers together. “But after talking to Snuffles …”

“But he’s all for it!” said Harry.

“Yes,” said Hermione, staring at the window again. “Yes, that’s what made me think maybe it wasn’t a good idea after all. …”

Peeves floated over them on his stomach, peashooter at the ready; automatically all three of them lifted their bags to cover their heads until he had passed.

“Let’s get this straight,” said Harry angrily, as they put their bags back on the floor, “Sirius agrees with us, so you don’t think we should do it anymore?”

Hermione looked tense and rather miserable. Now staring at her own hands she said, “Do you honestly trust his judgment?”

“Yes, I do!” said Harry at once. “He’s always given us great advice!”

An ink pellet whizzed past them, striking Katie Bell squarely in the ear. Hermione watched Katie leap to her feet and start throw-ing things at Peeves; it was a few moments before Hermione spoke again and it sounded as though she was choosing her words very carefully.

“You don’t think he has become … sort of … reckless … since he’s been cooped up in Grimmauld Place? You don’t think he’s … kind of … living through us?”

“What d’you mean, ‘living through us’?” Harry retorted.

“I mean … well, I think he’d love to be forming secret defense societies right under the nose of someone from the Ministry. … I think he’s really frustrated at how little he can do where he is … so I think he’s keen to kind of … egg us on.”

Ron looked utterly perplexed.

“Sirius is right,” he said, “you do sound just like my mother.”

Hermione bit her lip and did not answer. The bell rang just as Peeves swooped down upon Katie and emptied an entire ink bottle over her head.

The weather did not improve as the day wore on, so that at seven o’clock that evening, when Harry and Ron went down to the Quid-ditch pitch for practice, they were soaked through within minutes,

their feet slipping and sliding on the sodden grass. The sky was a deep, thundery gray and it was a relief to gain the warmth and light of the changing rooms, even if they knew the respite was only temporary. They found Fred and George debating whether to use one of their own Skiving Snackboxes to get out of flying.

"— but I bet she'd know what we'd done," Fred said out of the cor-ner of his mouth. "If only I hadn't offered to sell her some Puking Pastilles yesterday —"

"We could try the Fever Fudge," George muttered, "no one's seen that yet —"

"Does it work?" inquired Ron hopefully, as the hammering of rain on the roof intensified and wind howled around the building.

"Well, yeah," said Fred, "your temperature'll go right up —"

"— but you get these massive pus-filled boils too," said George, "and we haven't worked out how to get rid of them yet."

"I can't see any boils," said Ron, staring at the twins.

"No, well, you wouldn't," said Fred darkly, "they're not in a place we generally display to the public —"

"— but they make sitting on a broom a right pain in the —"

"All right, everyone, listen up," said Angelina loudly, emerging from the Captain's office. "I know it's not ideal weather, but there's a good chance we'll be playing Slytherin in conditions like this so it's a good idea to work out how we're going to cope with them. Harry, didn't you do something to your glasses to stop the rain fogging them up when we played Hufflepuff in that storm?"

"Hermione did it," said Harry. He pulled out his wand, tapped his glasses and said, "Impervius!"

“I think we all ought to try that,” said Angelina. “If we could just keep the rain off our faces it would really help visibility — all to-gether, come on — Impervius! Okay. Let’s go.”

They all stowed their wands back in the inside pockets of their robes, shouldered their brooms, and followed Angelina out of the changing rooms.

They squelched through the deepening mud to the middle of the pitch; visibility was still very poor even with the Impervius Charm; light was fading fast and curtains of rain were sweeping the grounds.

“All right, on my whistle,” shouted Angelina.

Harry kicked off from the ground, spraying mud in all directions, and shot upward, the wind pulling him slightly off course. He had no idea how he was going to see the Snitch in this weather; he was hav-ing enough difficulty seeing the one Bludger with which they were practicing; a minute into the practice it almost unseated him and he had to use the Sloth Grip Roll to avoid it. Unfortunately Angelina did not see this; in fact, she did not appear to be able to see anything; none of them had a clue what the others were doing. The wind was picking up; even at a distance Harry could hear the swishing, pound-ing sounds of the rain pummeling the surface of the lake.

Angelina kept them at it for nearly an hour before conceding de-feat. She led her sodden and disgruntled team back into the changing rooms, insisting that the practice had not been a waste of time, though without any real conviction in her voice. Fred and George were look-ing particularly annoyed; both were bandy-legged and winced with every movement. Harry could hear them complaining in low voices as he toweled his hair dry.

“I think a few of mine have ruptured,” said Fred in a hollow voice.

“Mine haven’t,” said George, wincing. “They’re throbbing like mad … feel bigger if anything …”

“OUCH!” said Harry.

He pressed the towel to his face, his eyes screwed tight with pain. The scar on his forehead had seared again, more painfully than in months.

“What’s up?” said several voices.

Harry emerged from behind his towel; the changing room was blurred because he was not wearing his glasses; but he could still tell that everyone’s face was turned toward him.

“Nothing,” he muttered, “I — poked myself in the eye, that’s all. …”

But he gave Ron a significant look and the two of them hung back as the rest of the team filed back outside, muffled in their cloaks, their hats pulled low over their ears.

“What happened?” said Ron, the moment that Alicia had disappeared through the door. “Was it your scar?”

Harry nodded.

“But …” Looking scared, Ron strode across to the window and stared out into the rain, “He — he can’t be near us now, can he?”

“No,” Harry muttered, sinking onto a bench and rubbing his forehead. “He’s probably miles away. It hurt because … he’s … angry.”

Harry had not meant to say that at all, and heard the words as though a stranger had spoken them — yet he knew at once that they were true. He did not know how he knew it, but he did; Voldemort, wherever he was, whatever he was doing, was in a towering temper.

“Did you see him?” said Ron, looking horrified. “Did you … get a vision, or something?”

Harry sat quite still, staring at his feet, allowing his mind and his memory to relax in the aftermath of the pain. …A confused tangle of shapes, a howling rush of voices …"He wants something done, and it's not happening fast enough," he said.

Again, he felt surprised to hear the words coming out of his mouth, and yet quite certain that they were true.

"But … how do you know?" said Ron.

Harry shook his head and covered his eyes with his hands, pressing down upon them with his palms. Little stars erupted in them. He felt Ron sit down on the bench beside him and knew Ron was staring at him.

"Is this what it was about last time?" said Ron in a hushed voice. "When your scar hurt in Umbridge's office? You-Know-Who was angry?"

Harry shook his head.

"What is it, then?"

Harry was thinking himself back. He had been looking into Umbridge's face. … His scar had hurt … and he had had that odd feeling in his stomach … a strange, leaping feeling … a happy feeling. … But, of course, he had not recognized it for what it was, as he had been feeling so miserable himself. …"Last time, it was because he was pleased," he said. "Really pleased.

He thought … something good was going to happen. And the night before we came back to Hogwarts …" He thought back to the moment when his scar had hurt so badly in his and Ron's bedroom in Grimmauld Place. "He was furious. …"

He looked around at Ron, who was gaping at him.

“You could take over from Trelawney, mate,” he said in an awed voice.

“I’m not making prophecies,” said Harry.

“No, you know what you’re doing?” Ron said, sounding both scared and impressed. “Harry, you’re reading You-Know-Who’s mind. …”

“No,” said Harry, shaking his head. “It’s more like … his mood, I suppose. I’m just getting flashes of what mood he’s in. … Dumbledore said something like this was happening last year. … He said that when Voldemort was near me, or when he was feeling hatred, I could tell. Well, now I’m feeling it when he’s pleased too. …”

There was a pause. The wind and rain lashed at the building.

“You’ve got to tell someone,” said Ron.

“I told Sirius last time.”

“Well, tell him about this time!”

“Can’t, can I?” said Harry grimly. “Umbridge is watching the owls and the fires, remember?”

“Well then, Dumbledore —”

“I’ve just told you, he already knows,” said Harry shortly, getting to his feet, taking his cloak off his peg, and swinging it around himself. “There’s no point telling him again.”

Ron did up the fastening of his own cloak, watching Harry thoughtfully.

“Dumbledore’d want to know,” he said.

Harry shrugged.

“C’mon … we’ve still got Silencing Charms to practice …”

They hurried back through the dark grounds, sliding and stum-bling up the muddy lawns, not talking. Harry was thinking hard. What was it that Voldemort wanted done that was not happening quickly enough?

“He’s got other plans … plans he can put into operation very quietly indeed … stuff he can only get by stealth … like a weapon. Something he didn’t have last time.”

He had not thought about those words in weeks; he had been too absorbed in what was going on at Hogwarts, too busy dwelling on the ongoing battles with Umbridge, the injustice of all the Ministry interference. … But now they came back to him and made him wonder. … Voldemort’s anger would make sense if he was no nearer laying hands on the weapon, whatever it was. … Had the Order thwarted him, stopped him from seizing it? Where was it kept? Who had it now?

“Mimbulus mimbletonia,” said Ron’s voice and Harry came back to his senses just in time to clamber through the portrait hole into the common room.

It appeared that Hermione had gone to bed early, leaving Crook-shanks curled in a nearby chair and an assortment of knobbly, knitted elf hats lying on a table by the fire. Harry was rather grateful that she was not around because he did not much want to discuss his scar hurting and have her urge him to go to Dumbledore too. Ron kept throwing him anxious glances, but Harry pulled out his Potions book and set to work to finish his essay, though he was only pretending to concentrate and, by the time that Ron said he was going to bed too, had written hardly anything.

Midnight came and went while Harry was reading and rereading a passage about the uses of scurvy-grass, lovage, and sneezewort and not taking in a word of it. …These plantes are moste efficacious in the inflaming of the braine, and are therefore much used in Confusing

and Befuddlement Draughts, where the wizard is desirous of producing hot-headedness and recklessness. …… Hermione said Sirius was becoming reckless cooped up in Grimmauld Place. …… moste efficacious in the inflaming of the braine, and are therefore much used …… the Daily Prophet would think his brain was inflamed if they found out that he knew what Voldemort was feeling …… therefore much used in Confusing and Befuddlement Draughts …… confusing was the word, all right; why did he know what Volde-mort was feeling? What was this weird connection between them, which Dumbledore had never been able to explain satisfactorily?

… where the wizard is desirous …… how he would like to sleep …… of producing hot-headedness …… It was warm and comfortable in his armchair before the fire, with the rain still beating heavily on the windowpanes and Crook-shanks purring and the crackling of the flames. …The book slipped from Harry's slack grip and landed with a dull thud on the hearthrug. His head fell sideways. …He was walking once more along a windowless corridor, his foot-steps echoing in the silence. As the door at the end of the passage loomed larger his heart beat fast with excitement. … If he could only open it … enter beyond …He stretched out his hand. … His fingertips were inches from it. …"Harry Potter, sir!"

He awoke with a start. The candles had all been extinguished in the common room, but there was something moving close by.

"Whozair?" said Harry, sitting upright in his chair. The fire was al-most extinguished, the room very dark.

"Dobby has your owl, sir!" said a squeaky voice.

"Dobby?" said Harry thickly, peering through the gloom toward the source of the voice.

Dobby the house-elf was standing beside the table on which Hermione had left her half a dozen knitted hats. His large, pointed ears were now sticking out from beneath what looked like all the hats

that Hermione had ever knitted; he was wearing one on top of the other, so that his head seemed elongated by two or three feet, and on the very topmost bobble sat Hedwig, hooting serenely and obviously cured.

"Dobby volunteered to return Harry Potter's owl!" said the elf squeakily, with a look of positive adoration on his face. "Professor Grubbly-Plank says she is all well now, sir!"

He sank into a deep bow so that his pencil-like nose brushed the threadbare surface of the hearthrug and Hedwig gave an indignant hoot and fluttered onto the arm of Harry's chair.

"Thanks, Dobby!" said Harry, stroking Hedwig's head and blinking hard, trying to rid himself of the image of the door in his dream. … It had been very vivid. … Looking back at Dobby, he noticed that the elf was also wearing several scarves and innumerable socks, so that his feet looked far too big for his body.

"Er … have you been taking all the clothes Hermione's been leav-ing out?"

"Oh no, sir," said Dobby happily, "Dobby has been taking some for Winky too, sir."

"Yeah, how is Winky?" asked Harry.

Dobby's ears drooped slightly.

"Winky is still drinking lots, sir," he said sadly, his enormous round green eyes, large as tennis balls, downcast. "She still does not care for clothes, Harry Potter. Nor do the other house-elves. None of them will clean Gryffindor Tower anymore, not with the hats and socks hidden everywhere, they finds them insulting, sir. Dobby does it all himself, sir, but Dobby does not mind, sir, for he always hopes to meet Harry Potter and tonight, sir, he has got his wish!" Dobby sank into a deep bow again. "But Harry Potter does not seem happy," Dobby

went on, straightening up again and looking timidly at Harry. "Dobby heard him muttering in his sleep. Was Harry Potter having bad dreams?"

"Not really bad," said Harry, yawning and rubbing his eyes. "I've had worse."

The elf surveyed Harry out of his vast, orblike eyes. Then he said very seriously, his ears drooping, "Dobby wishes he could help Harry Potter, for Harry Potter set Dobby free and Dobby is much, much happier now. …"

Harry smiled.

"You can't help me, Dobby, but thanks for the offer. …"

He bent and picked up his Potions book. He'd have to try and fin-ish the essay tomorrow. He closed the book and as he did so the fire-light illuminated the thin white scars on the back of his hand — the result of his detention with Umbridge.

"Wait a moment — there is something you can do for me, Dobby," said Harry slowly.

The elf looked around, beaming.

"Name it, Harry Potter, sir!"

"I need to find a place where twenty-eight people can practice De-fense Against the Dark Arts without being discovered by any of the teachers. Especially," Harry clenched his hand on the book, so that the scars shone pearly white, "Professor Umbridge."

He expected the elf's smile to vanish, his ears to droop; he expected him to say that this was impossible, or else that he would try, but his hopes were not high. … What he had not expected was for Dobby to

give a little skip, his ears waggling happily, and clap his hands together.

"Dobby knows the perfect place, sir!" he said happily. "Dobby heard tell of it from the other house-elves when he came to Hogwarts, sir. It is known by us as the Come and Go Room, sir, or else as the Room of Requirement!"

"Why?" said Harry curiously.

"Because it is a room that a person can only enter," said Dobby seriously, "when they have real need of it. Sometimes it is there, and sometimes it is not, but when it appears, it is always equipped for the seeker's needs. Dobby has used it, sir," said the elf, dropping his voice and looking guilty, "when Winky has been very drunk. He has hidden her in the Room of Requirement and he has found antidotes to butterbeer there, and a nice elf-sized bed to settle her on while she sleeps it off, sir. … And Dobby knows Mr. Filch has found extra cleaning materials there when he has run short, sir, and —"

"— and if you really needed a bathroom," said Harry, suddenly remembering something Dumbledore had said at the Yule Ball the previous Christmas, "would it fill itself with chamber pots?"

"Dobby expects so, sir," said Dobby, nodding earnestly. "It is a most amazing room, sir."

"How many people know about it?" said Harry, sitting up straighter in his chair.

"Very few, sir. Mostly people stumbles across it when they needs it, sir, but often they never finds it again, for they do not know that it is always there waiting to be called into service, sir."

"It sounds brilliant," said Harry, his heart racing. "It sounds per-fect, Dobby. When can you show me where it is?"

“Anytime, Harry Potter, sir,” said Dobby, looking delighted at Harry’s enthusiasm. “We could go now, if you like!”

For a moment Harry was tempted to go now; he was halfway out of his seat, intending to hurry upstairs for his Invisibility Cloak when, not for the first time, a voice very much like Hermione’s whispered in his ear: reckless. It was, after all, very late, he was exhausted and had Snape’s essay to finish.

“Not tonight, Dobby,” said Harry reluctantly, sinking back into his chair. “This is really important. … I don’t want to blow it, it’ll need proper planning. … Listen, can you just tell me exactly where this Room of Requirement is and how to get in there?”

Their robes billowed and swirled around them as they splashed across the flooded vegetable patch to double Herbology, where they could hardly hear what Professor Sprout was saying over the hammering of raindrops hard as hailstones on the greenhouse roof. The afternoon’s Care of Magical Creatures lesson was to be relocated from the storm-swept grounds to a free classroom on the ground floor and, to their intense relief, Angelina sought out her team at lunch to tell them that Quidditch practice was canceled.

“Good,” said Harry quietly, when she told him, “because we’ve found somewhere to have our first Defense meeting. Tonight, eight o’clock, seventh floor opposite that tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy being clubbed by those trolls. Can you tell Katie and Alicia?”

She looked slightly taken aback but promised to tell the others; Harry returned hungrily to his sausages and mash. When he looked up to take a drink of pumpkin juice, he found Hermione watching him.

“What?” he said thickly.

“Well … it’s just that Dobby’s plans aren’t always that safe. Don’t you remember when he lost you all the bones in your arm?”

"This room isn't just some mad idea of Dobby's; Dumbledore knows about it too, he mentioned it to me at the Yule Ball."

Hermione's expression cleared.

"Dumbledore told you about it?"

"Just in passing," said Harry, shrugging.

"Oh well, that's all right then," said Hermione briskly and she raised no more objections.

Together with Ron they had spent most of the day seeking out those people who had signed their names to the list in the Hog's Head and telling them where to meet that evening. Somewhat to Harry's disappointment, it was Ginny who managed to find Cho Chang and her friend first; however, by the end of dinner he was confident that the news had been passed to every one of the twenty-five people who had turned up in the Hog's Head.

At half-past seven Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the Gryffindor common room, Harry clutching a certain piece of aged parchment in his hand. Fifth years were allowed to be out in the corridors until nine o'clock, but all three of them kept looking around nervously as they made their way up to the seventh floor.

"Hold it," said Harry warningly, unfolding the piece of parchment at the top of the last staircase, tapping it with his wand, and mutter-ing, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

A map of Hogwarts appeared upon the blank surface of the parch-ment. Tiny black moving dots, labeled with names, showed where various people were.

"Filch is on the second floor," said Harry, holding the map close to his eyes and scanning it closely, "and Mrs. Norris is on the fourth."

“And Umbridge?” said Hermione anxiously.

“In her office,” said Harry, pointing. “Okay, let’s go.”

They hurried along the corridor to the place Dobby had described to Harry, a stretch of blank wall opposite an enormous tapestry depicting Barnabas the Barmy’s foolish attempt to train trolls for the ballet.

“Okay,” said Harry quietly, while a moth-eaten troll paused in his relentless clubbing of the would-be ballet teacher to watch. “Dobby said to walk past this bit of wall three times, concentrating hard on what we need.”

They did so, turning sharply at the window just beyond the blank stretch of wall, then at the man-size vase on its other side. Ron had screwed up his eyes in concentration, Hermione was whispering something under her breath, Harry’s fists were clenched as he stared ahead of him.

We need somewhere to learn to fight. … he thought. Just give us a place to practice … somewhere they can’t find us …“Harry,” said Hermione sharply, as they wheeled around after their third walk past.

A highly polished door had appeared in the wall. Ron was staring at it, looking slightly wary. Harry reached out, seized the brass handle, pulled open the door, and led the way into a spacious room lit with flickering torches like those that illuminated the dungeons eight floors below.

The walls were lined with wooden bookcases, and instead of chairs there were large silk cushions on the floor. A set of shelves at the far end of the room carried a range of instruments such as Sneakoscopes, Secrecy Sensors, and a large, cracked Foe-Glass that Harry was sure had hung, the previous year, in the fake Moody’s office.

“These will be good when we’re practicing Stunning,” said Ron enthusiastically, prodding one of the cushions with his foot.

“And just look at these books!” said Hermione excitedly, running a finger along the spines of the large leather-bound tomes. “A Compendium of Common Curses and Their Counter-Actions … The Dark Arts Outsmarted … Self-Defensive Spellwork … wow …” She looked around at Harry, her face glowing, and he saw that the presence of hundreds of books had finally convinced Hermione that what they were doing was right. “Harry, this is wonderful, there’s everything we need here!”

And without further ado she slid Jinxes for the Jinxed from its shelf, sank onto the nearest cushion, and began to read.

There was a gentle knock on the door. Harry looked around; Ginny, Neville, Lavender, Parvati, and Dean had arrived.

“Whoa,” said Dean, staring around, impressed. “What is this place?”

Harry began to explain, but before he had finished more people had arrived, and he had to start all over again. By the time eight o’clock arrived, every cushion was occupied. Harry moved across to the door and turned the key protruding from the lock; it clicked in a satisfyingly loud way and everybody fell silent, looking at him. Hermione carefully marked her page of Jinxes for the Jinxed and set the book aside.

“Well,” said Harry, slightly nervously. “This is the place we’ve found for practices, and you’ve — er — obviously found it okay —”

“It’s fantastic!” said Cho, and several people murmured their agreement.

“It’s bizarre,” said Fred, frowning around at it. “We once hid from Filch in here, remember, George? But it was just a broom cupboard then. …”

“Hey, Harry, what’s this stuff?” asked Dean from the rear of the room, indicating the Sneakoscopes and the Foe-Glass.

“Dark Detectors,” said Harry, stepping between the cushions to reach them. “Basically they all show when Dark wizards or enemies are around, but you don’t want to rely on them too much, they can be fooled. …”

He gazed for a moment into the cracked Foe-Glass; shadowy fig-ures were moving around inside it, though none was recognizable. He turned his back on it.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about the sort of stuff we ought to do first and — er —” He noticed a raised hand. “What, Hermione?”

“I think we ought to elect a leader,” said Hermione.

“Harry’s leader,” said Cho at once, looking at Hermione as though she were mad, and Harry’s stomach did yet another back flip.

“Yes, but I think we ought to vote on it properly,” said Hermione, unperturbed. “It makes it formal and it gives him authority. So — everyone who thinks Harry ought to be our leader?”

Everybody put up their hands, even Zacharias Smith, though he did it very halfheartedly.

“Er — right, thanks,” said Harry, who could feel his face burning. “And — what, Hermione?”

“I also think we ought to have a name,” she said brightly, her hand still in the air. “It would promote a feeling of team spirit and unity, don’t you think?”

“Can we be the Anti-Umbridge League?” said Angelina hopefully.

“Or the Ministry of Magic Are Morons Group?” suggested Fred.

“I was thinking,” said Hermione, frowning at Fred, “more of a name that didn’t tell everyone what we were up to, so we can refer to it safely outside meetings.”

“The Defense Association?” said Cho. “The D.A. for short, so no-body knows what we’re talking about?”

“Yeah, the D.A.’s good,” said Ginny. “Only let’s make it stand for Dumbledore’s Army because that’s the Ministry’s worst fear, isn’t it?”

There was a good deal of appreciative murmuring and laughter at this.

“All in favor of the D.A.?” said Hermione bossily, kneeling up on her cushion to count. “That’s a majority — motion passed!”

She pinned the piece of paper with all of their names on it on the wall and wrote DUMBLEDORE’S ARMY across the top in large letters.

“Right,” said Harry, when she had sat down again, “shall we get practicing then? I was thinking, the first thing we should do is Expelliarmus, you know, the Disarming Charm. I know it’s pretty basic but I’ve found it really useful —”

“Oh please,” said Zacharias Smith, rolling his eyes and folding his arms. “I don’t think Expelliarmus is exactly going to help us against You-Know-Who, do you?”

“I’ve used it against him,” said Harry quietly. “It saved my life last June.”

Smith opened his mouth stupidly. The rest of the room was very quiet.

“But if you think it’s beneath you, you can leave,” Harry said.

Smith did not move. Nor did anybody else.

“Okay,” said Harry, his mouth slightly drier than usual with all those eyes upon him, “I reckon we should all divide into pairs and practice.”

It felt very odd to be issuing instructions, but not nearly as odd as seeing them followed. Everybody got to their feet at once and divided up. Predictably, Neville was left partnerless.

“You can practice with me,” Harry told him. “Right — on the count of three, then — one, two, three —”

The room was suddenly full of shouts of “Expelliarmus!”: Wands flew in all directions, missed spells hit books on shelves and sent them flying into the air. Harry was too quick for Neville, whose wand went spinning out of his hand, hit the ceiling in a shower of sparks, and landed with a clatter on top of a bookshelf, from which Harry retrieved it with a Summoning Charm. Glancing around he thought he had been right to suggest that they practice the basics first; there was a lot of shoddy spellwork going on; many people were not succeeding in disarming their opponents at all, but merely causing them to jump backward a few paces or wince as the feeble spell whooshed over them.

“Expelliarmus!” said Neville, and Harry, caught unawares, felt his wand fly out of his hand.

“I DID IT!” said Neville gleefully. “I’ve never done it before — I DID IT!”

“Good one!” said Harry encouragingly, deciding not to point out that in a real duel situation Neville’s opponent was unlikely to be star-ing in the opposite direction with his wand held loosely at his side. “Listen, Neville, can you take it in turns to practice with Ron and Hermione for a couple of minutes so I can walk around and see how the rest are doing?”

Harry moved off into the middle of the room. Something very odd was happening to Zacharias Smith; every time he opened his mouth to

disarm Anthony Goldstein, his own wand would fly out of his hand, yet Anthony did not seem to be making a sound. Harry did not have to look far for the solution of the mystery, however; Fred and George were several feet from Smith and taking it in turns to point their wands at his back.

“Sorry, Harry,” said George hastily, when Harry caught his eye. “Couldn’t resist …”

Harry walked around the other pairs, trying to correct those who were doing the spell wrong. Ginny was teamed with Michael Corner; she was doing very well, whereas Michael was either very bad or unwilling to jinx her. Ernie Macmillan was flourishing his wand unnecessarily, giving his partner time to get in under his guard; the Creevey brothers were enthusiastic but erratic and mainly responsible for all the books leaping off the shelves around them. Luna Lovegood was similarly patchy, occasionally sending Justin Finch-Fletchley’s wand spinning out of his hand, at other times merely causing his hair to stand on end.

“Okay, stop!” Harry shouted. “Stop! STOP!”

I need a whistle, he thought, and immediately spotted one lying on top of the nearest row of books. He caught it up and blew hard. Every-one lowered their wands.

“That wasn’t bad,” said Harry, “but there’s definite room for improvement.” Zacharias Smith glared at him. “Let’s try again. …”

He moved off around the room again, stopping here and there to make suggestions. Slowly the general performance improved. He avoided going near Cho and her friend for a while, but after walking twice around every other pair in the room felt he could not ignore them any longer.

“Oh no,” said Cho rather wildly as he approached. “Expelliarmious! I mean, Expellimellius! I — oh, sorry, Marietta!”

Her curly-haired friend's sleeve had caught fire; Marietta extinguished it with her own wand and glared at Harry as though it was his fault.

"You made me nervous, I was doing all right before then!" Cho told Harry ruefully.

"That was quite good," Harry lied, but when she raised her eyebrows he said, "Well, no, it was lousy, but I know you can do it prop-erly, I was watching from over there. …"

She laughed. Her friend Marietta looked at them rather sourly and turned away.

"Don't mind her," Cho muttered. "She doesn't really want to be here but I made her come with me. Her parents have forbidden her to do anything that might upset Umbridge, you see — her mum works for the Ministry."

"What about your parents?" asked Harry.

"Well, they've forbidden me to get on the wrong side of Umbridge too," said Cho, drawing herself up proudly. "But if they think I'm not going to fight You-Know-Who after what happened to Cedric —"

She broke off, looking rather confused, and an awkward silence fell between them; Terry Boot's wand went whizzing past Harry's ear and hit Alicia Spinnet hard on the nose.

"Well, my father is very supportive of any anti-Ministry action!" said Luna Lovegood proudly from just behind Harry; evidently she had been eavesdropping on his conversation while Justin Finch-Fletchley attempted to disentangle himself from the robes that had flown up over his head. "He's always saying he'd believe anything of Fudge, I mean, the number of goblins Fudge has had assassinated! And of course he uses the Department of Mysteries to develop terrible

poisons, which he feeds secretly to anybody who disagrees with him. And then there's his Umgubular Slashkilter —"

"Don't ask," Harry muttered to Cho as she opened her mouth, looking puzzled. She giggled.

"Hey, Harry," Hermione called from the other end of the room, "have you checked the time?"

He looked down at his watch and received a shock — it was al-ready ten past nine, which meant they needed to get back to their common rooms immediately or risk being caught and punished by Filch for being out-of-bounds. He blew his whistle; everybody stopped shouting, "Expelliarmus!" and the last couple of wands clat-tered to the floor.

"Well, that was pretty good," said Harry, "but we've overrun, we'd better leave it here. Same time, same place next week?"

"Sooner!" said Dean Thomas eagerly and many people nodded in agreement.

Angelina, however, said quickly, "The Quidditch season's about to start, we need team practices too!"

"Let's say next Wednesday night, then," said Harry, "and we can decide on additional meetings then. … Come on, we'd better get going. …"

He pulled out the Marauder's Map again and checked it carefully for signs of teachers on the seventh floor. He let them all leave in threes and fours, watching their tiny dots anxiously to see that they re-turned safely to their dormitories: the Hufflepuffs to the basement corridor that also led to the kitchens, the Ravenclaws to a tower on the west side of the castle, and the Gryffindors along the corridor to the seventh floor and the Fat Lady's portrait.

“That was really, really good, Harry,” said Hermione, when finally it was just her, Harry, and Ron left.

“Yeah, it was!” said Ron enthusiastically, as they slipped out of the door and watched it melt back into stone behind them. “Did you see me disarm Hermione, Harry?”

“Only once,” said Hermione, stung. “I got you loads more than you got me —”

“I did not only get you once, I got you at least three times —”

“Well, if you’re counting the one where you tripped over your own feet and knocked the wand out of my hand —”

They argued all the way back to the common room, but Harry was not listening to them. He had one eye on the Marauder’s Map, but he was also thinking of how Cho had said he made her nervous. …

Chapter 19 The Lion and The Serpent

Harry felt as though he were carrying some kind of talisman inside his chest over the following two weeks, a glowing se-cret that supported him through Umbridge's classes and even made it possible for him to smile blandly as he looked into her horrible bulging eyes. He and the D.A. were resisting her under her very nose, doing the very thing that she and the Ministry most feared, and when-ever he was supposed to be reading Wilbert Slinkhard's book during her lessons he dwelled instead on satisfying memories of their most re-cent meetings, remembering how Neville had successfully disarmed Hermione, how Colin Creevey had mastered the Impediment Jinx af-ter three meetings' hard effort, how Parvati Patil had produced such a good Reductor Curse that she had reduced the table carrying all the Sneakoscopes to dust.

He was finding it almost impossible to fix a regular night of the week for D.A. meetings, as they had to accommodate three separate Quidditch teams' practices, which were often rearranged depending on the weather conditions; but Harry was not sorry about this, he had a feeling that it was probably better to keep the timing of their meetings unpredictable. If anyone was watching them, it would be hard to make out a pattern.

Hermione soon devised a very clever method of communicating the time and date of the next meeting to all the members in case they needed to change it at short notice, because it would look so suspi-cious if people from different Houses were seen crossing the Great Hall to talk to each other too often. She gave each of the members of the D.A. a fake Galleon (Ron became very excited when he saw the basket at first, convinced that she was actually giving out gold).

"You see the numerals around the edge of the coins?" Hermione said, holding one up for examination at the end of their fourth meet-ing. The coin gleamed fat and yellow in the light from the torches. "On real

Galleons that's just a serial number referring to the goblin who cast the coin. On these fake coins, though, the numbers will change to reflect the time and date of the next meeting. The coins will grow hot when the date changes, so if you're carrying them in a pocket you'll be able to feel them. We take one each, and when Harry sets the date of the next meeting he'll change the numbers on his coin, and be-cause I've put a Protean Charm on them, they'll all change to mimic his."

A blank silence greeted Hermione's words. She looked around at all the faces upturned to her, rather disconcerted.

"Well — I thought it was a good idea," she said uncertainly, "I mean, even if Umbridge asked us to turn out our pockets, there's nothing fishy about carrying a Galleon, is there? But … well, if you don't want to use them …"

"You can do a Protean Charm?" said Terry Boot.

"Yes," said Hermione.

"But that's … that's N.E.W.T. standard, that is," he said weakly.

"Oh," said Hermione, trying to look modest. "Oh … well … yes, I suppose it is. …"

"How come you're not in Ravenclaw?" he demanded, staring at Hermione with something close to wonder. "With brains like yours?"

"Well, the Sorting Hat did seriously consider putting me in Raven-claw during my Sorting," said Hermione brightly, "but it decided on Gryffindor in the end. So does that mean we're using the Galleons?"

There was a murmur of assent and everybody moved forward to collect one from the basket. Harry looked sideways at Hermione.

"You know what these remind me of?"

"No, what's that?"

"The Death Eaters' scars. Voldemort touches one of them, and all their scars burn, and they know they've got to join him."

"Well … yes," said Hermione quietly. "That is where I got the idea … but you'll notice I decided to engrave the date on bits of metal rather than on our members' skin. …"

"Yeah … I prefer your way," said Harry, grinning, as he slipped his Galleon into his pocket. "I suppose the only danger with these is that we might accidentally spend them."

"Fat chance," said Ron, who was examining his own fake Galleon with a slightly mournful air. "I haven't got any real Galleons to confuse it with."

As the first Quidditch match of the season, Gryffindor versus Slytherin, drew nearer, their D.A. meetings were put on hold because Angelina insisted on almost daily practices. The fact that the Quidditch Cup had not been held for so long added considerably to the interest and excitement surrounding the forthcoming game. The Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were taking a lively interest in the outcome, for they, of course, would be playing both teams over the coming year; and the Heads of House of the competing teams, though they attempted to disguise it under a decent pretense of sportsmanship, were determined to see their side's victory. Harry realized how much Professor McGonagall cared about beating Slytherin when she abstained from giving them homework in the week leading up to the match.

"I think you've got enough to be getting on with at the moment," she said loftily. Nobody could quite believe their ears until she looked directly at Harry and Ron and said grimly, "I've become accustomed to seeing the Quidditch Cup in my study, boys, and I really don't want to have to hand it over to Professor Snape, so use the extra time to practice, won't you?"

Snape was no less obviously partisan: He had booked the Quid-ditch pitch for Slytherin practice so often that the Gryffindors had difficulty getting on it to play. He was also turning a deaf ear to the many reports of Slytherin attempts to hex Gryffindor players in the corridors. When Alicia Spinnet turned up in the hospital wing with her eyebrows growing so thick and fast that they obscured her vision and obstructed her mouth, Snape insisted that she must have at-tempted a Hair-Thickening Charm on herself and refused to listen to the fourteen eyewitnesses who insisted that they had seen the Slytherin Keeper, Miles Bletchley, hit her from behind with a jinx while she worked in the library.

Harry felt optimistic about Gryffindor's chances; they had, after all, never lost to Malfoy's team. Admittedly Ron was still not performing to Wood's standard, but he was working extremely hard to improve. His greatest weakness was a tendency to lose confidence when he made a blunder; if he let in one goal he became flustered and was therefore likely to miss more. On the other hand, Harry had seen Ron make some truly spectacular saves when he was on form: During one memorable practice, he had hung one-handed from his broom and kicked the Quaffle so hard away from the goal hoop that it soared the length of the pitch and through the center hoop at the other end. The rest of the team felt this save compared favorably with one made re-cently by Barry Ryan, the Irish International Keeper, against Poland's top Chaser, Ladislaw Zamojski. Even Fred had said that Ron might yet make him and George proud, and that they were seriously consid-ering admitting that he was related to them, something he assured Ron they had been trying to deny for four years.

The only thing really worrying Harry was how much Ron was al-lowing the tactics of the Slytherin team to upset him before they even got onto the pitch. Harry, of course, had endured their snide com-ments for more than four years, so whispers of, "Hey, Potty, I heard Warrington's sworn to knock you off your broom on Saturday," far from chilling his blood, made him laugh. "Warrington's aim's so pa-thetic I'd be more worried if he was aiming for the person next to me,"

he retorted, which made Ron and Hermione laugh and wiped the smirk off Pansy Parkinson's face.

But Ron had never endured a relentless campaign of insults, jeers, and intimidation. When Slytherins, some of them seventh years and consid-erably larger than he was, muttered as they passed in the corridors, "Got your bed booked in the hospital wing, Weasley?" he did not laugh, but turned a delicate shade of green. When Draco Malfoy imitated Ron dropping the Quaffle (which he did whenever they were within sight of each other), Ron's ears glowed red and his hands shook so badly that he was likely to drop whatever he was holding at the time too.

October extinguished itself in a rush of howling winds and driving rain and November arrived, cold as frozen iron, with hard frosts every morning and icy drafts that bit at exposed hands and faces. The skies and the ceiling of the Great Hall turned a pale, pearly gray, the mountains around Hogwarts became snowcapped, and the temperature in the castle dropped so far that many students wore their thick protective dragon skin gloves in the corridors between lessons.

The morning of the match dawned bright and cold. When Harry awoke he looked around at Ron's bed and saw him sitting bolt upright, his arms around his knees, staring fixedly into space.

"You all right?" said Harry.

Ron nodded but did not speak. Harry was reminded forcibly of the time that Ron had accidentally put a slug-vomiting charm on himself. He looked just as pale and sweaty as he had done then, not to mention as reluctant to open his mouth.

"You just need some breakfast," Harry said bracingly. "C'mon."

The Great Hall was filling up fast when they arrived, the talk louder and the mood more exuberant than usual. As they passed the Slytherin table there was an upsurge of noise; Harry looked around

and saw that nearly everyone there was wearing, in addition to the usual green-and-silver scarves and hats, silver badges in the shape of what seemed to be crowns. For some reason many of them waved at Ron, laughing uproariously. Harry tried to see what was written on the badges as he walked by, but he was too concerned to get Ron past their table quickly to linger long enough to read them.

They received a rousing welcome at the Gryffindor table, where everyone was wearing red and gold, but far from raising Ron's spirits the cheers seemed to sap the last of his morale; he collapsed onto the nearest bench looking as though he were facing his final meal.

"I must've been mental to do this," he said in a croaky whisper. "Mental."

"Don't be thick," said Harry firmly, passing him a choice of cereals. "You're going to be fine. It's normal to be nervous."

"I'm rubbish," croaked Ron. "I'm lousy. I can't play to save my life. What was I thinking?"

"Get a grip," said Harry sternly. "Look at that save you made with your foot the other day, even Fred and George said it was brilliant —"

Ron turned a tortured face to Harry.

"That was an accident," he whispered miserably. "I didn't mean to do it — I slipped off my broom when none of you were looking and I was trying to get back on and I kicked the Quaffle by accident."

"Well," said Harry, recovering quickly from this unpleasant sur-prise, "a few more accidents like that and the game's in the bag, isn't it?"

Hermione and Ginny sat down opposite them wearing red-and-gold scarves, gloves, and rosettes.

“How’re you feeling?” Ginny asked Ron, who was now staring into the dregs of milk at the bottom of his empty cereal bowl as though seriously considering attempting to drown himself in them.

“He’s just nervous,” said Harry.

“Well, that’s a good sign, I never feel you perform as well in exams if you’re not a bit nervous,” said Hermione heartily.

“Hello,” said a vague and dreamy voice from behind them. Harry looked up: Luna Lovegood had drifted over from the Ravenclaw table. Many people were staring at her and a few openly laughing and point-ing; she had managed to procure a hat shaped like a life-size lion’s head, which was perched precariously on her head.

“I’m supporting Gryffindor,” said Luna, pointing unnecessarily at her hat. “Look what it does. …”

She reached up and tapped the hat with her wand. It opened its mouth wide and gave an extremely realistic roar that made everyone in the vicinity jump.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” said Luna happily. “I wanted to have it chewing up a serpent to represent Slytherin, you know, but there wasn’t time. Anyway … good luck, Ronald!”

She drifted away. They had not quite recovered from the shock of Luna’s hat before Angelina came hurrying toward them, accompanied by Katie and Alicia, whose eyebrows had mercifully been returned to normal by Madam Pomfrey.

“When you’re ready,” she said, “we’re going to go straight down to the pitch, check out conditions and change.”

“We’ll be there in a bit,” Harry assured her. “Ron’s just got to have some breakfast.”

It became clear after ten minutes, however, that Ron was not capable of eating anything more and Harry thought it best to get him down to the changing rooms. As they rose from the table, Hermione got up too, and taking Harry's arm, she drew him to one side.

"Don't let Ron see what's on those Slytherins' badges," she whispered urgently.

Harry looked questioningly at her, but she shook her head warn-ingly; Ron had just ambled over to them, looking lost and desperate.

"Good luck, Ron," said Hermione, standing on tiptoe and kissing him on the cheek. "And you, Harry —"

Ron seemed to come to himself slightly as they walked back across the Great Hall. He touched the spot on his face where Hermione had kissed him, looking puzzled, as though he was not quite sure what had just happened. He seemed too distracted to notice much around him, but Harry cast a curious glance at the crown-shaped badges as they passed the Slytherin table, and this time he made out the words etched onto them:WEASLEY

IS OUR KING

With an unpleasant feeling that this could mean nothing good, he hurried Ron across the entrance hall, down the stone steps, and out into the icy air.

The frosty grass crunched under their feet as they hurried down the sloping lawns toward the stadium. There was no wind at all and the sky was a uniform pearly white, which meant that visibility would be good without the drawback of direct sunlight in the eyes. Harry pointed out these encouraging factors to Ron as they walked, but he was not sure that Ron was listening.

Angelina had changed already and was talking to the rest of the team when they entered. Harry and Ron pulled on their robes (Ron

attempted to do his up back-to-front for several minutes before Alicia took pity on him and went to help) and then sat down to listen to the pre-match talk while the babble of voices outside grew steadily louder as the crowd came pouring out of the castle toward the pitch.

“Okay, I’ve only just found out the final lineup for Slytherin,” said Angelina, consulting a piece of parchment. “Last year’s Beaters, Derrick and Bole, have left now, but it looks as though Montague’s replaced them with the usual gorillas, rather than anyone who can fly particularly well. They’re two blokes called Crabbe and Goyle, I don’t know much about them —”

“We do,” said Harry and Ron together.

“Well, they don’t look bright enough to tell one end of a broom from another,” said Angelina, pocketing her parchment, “but then I was always surprised Derrick and Bole managed to find their way onto the pitch without signposts.”

“Crabbe and Goyle are in the same mold,” Harry assured her.

They could hear hundreds of footsteps mounting the banked benches of the spectators’ stands now. Some people were singing, though Harry could not make out the words. He was starting to feel nervous, but he knew his butterflies were as nothing to Ron’s, who was clutching his stomach and staring straight ahead again, his jaw set and his complexion pale gray.

“It’s time,” said Angelina in a hushed voice, looking at her watch. “C’mon everyone … good luck.”

The team rose, shouldered their brooms, and marched in single file out of the changing room and into the dazzling sunlight. A roar of sound greeted them in which Harry could still hear singing, though it was muffled by the cheers and whistles.

The Slytherin team were standing waiting for them. They too were wearing those silver crown-shaped badges. The new captain, Montague, was built along the same lines as Dudley, with massive forearms like hairy hams. Behind him lurked Crabbe and Goyle, almost as large, blinking stupidly in the sunlight, swinging their new Beaters' bats. Malfoy stood to one side, the sunlight gleaming on his white-blond head. He caught Harry's eye and smirked, tapping the crown-shaped badge on his chest.

"Captains shake hands," ordered the umpire, Madam Hooch, as Angelina and Montague reached each other. Harry could tell that Montague was trying to crush Angelina's fingers, though she did not wince. "Mount your brooms. …"

Madam Hooch placed her whistle in her mouth and blew.

The balls were released and the fourteen players shot upward; out of the corner of his eye Harry saw Ron streak off toward the goal hoops. He zoomed higher, dodging a Bludger, and set off on a wide lap of the pitch, gazing around for a glint of gold; on the other side of the stadium, Draco Malfoy was doing exactly the same.

"And it's Johnson, Johnson with the Quaffle, what a player that girl is, I've been saying it for years but she still won't go out with me —"

"JORDAN!" yelled Professor McGonagall.

"Just a fun fact, Professor, adds a bit of interest — and she's ducked Warrington, she's passed Montague, she's — ouch — been hit from behind by a Bludger from Crabbe. … Montague catches the Quaffle, Montague heading back up the pitch and — nice Bludger there from George Weasley, that's a Bludger to the head for Montague, he drops the Quaffle, caught by Katie Bell, Katie Bell of Gryffindor reverse passes to Alicia Spinnet and Spinnet's away —"

Lee Jordan's commentary rang through the stadium and Harry listened as hard as he could through the wind whistling in his ears and

the din of the crowd, all yelling and booing and singing —"— dodges Warrington, avoids a Bludger — close call, Alicia — and the crowd are loving this, just listen to them, what's that they're singing?"

And as Lee paused to listen the song rose loud and clear from the sea of green and silver in the Slytherin section of the stands:Weasley cannot save a thing,

He cannot block a single ring,That's why Slytherins all sing:Weasley is our King.

Weasley was born in a bin,

He always lets the Quaffle in,Weasley will make sure we win,Weasley is our King.

"— and Alicia passes back to Angelina!" Lee shouted, and as Harry swerved, his insides boiling at what he had just heard, he knew Lee was trying to drown out the sound of the singing. "Come on now, Angelina — looks like she's got just the Keeper to beat! — SHE SHOOTS — SHE — aaaah …"

Bletchley, the Slytherin Keeper, had saved the goal; he threw the Quaffle to Warrington who sped off with it, zigzagging in between Alicia and Katie; the singing from below grew louder and louder as he drew nearer and nearer Ron —Weasley is our King,

Weasley is our King,

He always lets the Quaffle in,Weasley is our King.

Harry could not help himself: Abandoning his search for the Snitch, he turned his Firebolt toward Ron, a lone figure at the far end of the pitch, hovering before the three goal hoops while the massive Warrington pelted toward him …"— and it's Warrington with the Quaffle, Warrington heading for goal, he's out of Bludger range with just the Keeper ahead —"

A great swell of song rose from the Slytherin stands below:Weasley cannot save a thing,

He cannot block a single ring …“— so it’s the first test for new Gryffindor Keeper, Weasley, brother of Beaters, Fred and George, and a promising new talent on the team — come on, Ron!”

But the scream of delight came from the Slytherin end: Ron had dived wildly, his arms wide, and the Quaffle had soared between them, straight through Ron’s central hoop.

“Slytherin score!” came Lee’s voice amid the cheering and booing from the crowds below. “So that’s ten-nil to Slytherin — bad luck, Ron …”

The Slytherins sang even louder:WEASLEY WAS BORN IN A BIN,

HE ALWAYS LETS THE QUAFFLE IN …“— and Gryffindor back in possession and it’s Katie Bell tanking up the pitch —” cried Lee valiantly, though the singing was now so deafening that he could hardly make himself heard above it.

WEASLEY WILL MAKE SURE WE WIN,WEASLEY IS OUR KING …

“Harry, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” screamed Angelina, soaring past him to keep up with Katie. “GET GOING!”

Harry realized that he had been stationary in midair for more than a minute, watching the progress of the match without sparing a thought for the whereabouts of the Snitch; horrified, he went into a dive and started circling the pitch again, staring around, trying to ig-nore the chorus now thundering through the stadium:WEASLEY IS OUR KING,

WEASLEY IS OUR KING …

There was no sign of the Snitch anywhere he looked; Malfoy was still circling the stadium just like Harry. They passed midway around the pitch going in opposite directions and Harry heard Malfoy singing loudly,WEASLEY WAS BORN IN A BIN …

"— and it's Warrington again," bellowed Lee, "who passes to Pucey, Pucey's off past Spinnet, come on now Angelina, you can take him — turns out you can't — but nice Bludger from Fred Weasley, I mean, George Weasley, oh who cares, one of them anyway, and Warrington drops the Quaffle and Katie Bell — er — drops it too — so that's Montague with the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Montague takes the Quaffle, and he's off up the pitch, come on now Gryffindor, block him!"

Harry zoomed around the end of the stadium behind the Slytherin goal hoops, willing himself not to look at what was going on at Ron's end; as he sped past the Slytherin Keeper, he heard Bletchley singing along with the crowd below,WEASLEY CANNOT SAVE A THING …"— and Pucey's dodged Alicia again, and he's heading straight for goal, stop it, Ron!"

Harry did not have to look to see what had happened: There was a terrible groan from the Gryffindor end, coupled with fresh screams and applause from the Slytherins. Looking down, Harry saw the pug-faced Pansy Parkinson right at the front of the stands, her back to the pitch as she conducted the Slytherin supporters who were roaring:THAT'S WHY SLYTHERINS ALL SING:WEASLEY IS OUR KING.

But twenty-nil was nothing, there was still time for Gryffindor to catch up or catch the Snitch, a few goals and they would be in the lead as usual, Harry assured himself, bobbing and weaving through the other players in pursuit of something shiny that turned out to be Montague's watch strap. …But Ron let in two more goals. There was an edge of panic in Harry's desire to find the Snitch now. If he could just get it soon and finish the game quickly …"— and Katie Bell of Gryffindor

dodges Pucey, ducks Montague, nice swerve, Katie, and she throws to Johnson, Angelina Johnson takes the Quaffle, she's past Warrington, she's heading for goal, come on now Angelina — GRYFFINDOR SCORE! It's forty-ten, forty-ten to Slytherin and Pucey has the Quaffle. …"

Harry could hear Luna's ludicrous lion hat roaring amidst the Gryffindor cheers and felt heartened; only thirty points in it, that was nothing, they could pull back easily. Harry ducked a Bludger that Crabbe had sent rocketing in his direction and resumed his frantic scouring of the pitch for the Snitch, keeping one eye on Malfoy in case he showed signs of having spotted it, but Malfoy, like him, was continuing to soar around the stadium, searching fruitlessly …"— Pucey throws to Warrington, Warrington to Montague, Mon-tague back to Pucey — Johnson intervenes, Johnson takes the Quaf-fle, Johnson to Bell, this looks good — I mean bad — Bell's hit by a Bludger from Goyle of Slytherin and it's Pucey in possession again …"

WEASLEY WAS BORNIN A BIN,

HE ALWAYS LETS THE QUAFFLE IN,WEASLEY WILL MAKE SURE WE WIN —But Harry had seen it at last: The tiny fluttering Golden Snitch was hovering feet from the ground at the Slytherin end of the pitch.

He dived. …

In a matter of seconds, Malfoy was streaking out of the sky on Harry's left, a green-and-silver blur lying flat on his broom. …The Snitch skirted the foot of one of the goal hoops and scooted off toward the other side of the stands; its change of direction suited Mal-foy, who was nearer. Harry pulled his Firebolt around, he and Malfoy were now neck and neck …Feet from the ground, Harry lifted his right hand from his broom, stretching toward the Snitch … to his right, Malfoy's arm extended too, reaching, groping …It was over in two breathless,

desperate, windswept seconds — Harry's fingers closed around the tiny, struggling ball — Malfoy's fin-gernails scrabbled the back of Harry's hand hopelessly — Harry pulled his broom upward, holding the struggling ball in his hand and the Gryffindor spectators screamed their approval. …They were saved, it did not matter that Ron had let in those goals, nobody would remember as long as Gryffindor had won —WHAM!

A Bludger hit Harry squarely in the small of the back and he flew forward off his broom; luckily he was only five or six feet above the ground, having dived so low to catch the Snitch, but he was winded all the same as he landed flat on his back on the frozen pitch. He heard Madam Hooch's shrill whistle, an uproar in the stands compounded of catcalls, angry yells and jeering, a thud, then Angelina's frantic voice.

"Are you all right?"

" 'Course I am," said Harry grimly, taking her hand and allowing her to pull him to his feet. Madam Hooch was zooming toward one of the Slytherin players above him, though he could not see who it was at this angle.

"It was that thug, Crabbe," said Angelina angrily. "He whacked the Bludger at you the moment he saw you'd got the Snitch — but we won, Harry, we won!"

Harry heard a snort from behind him and turned around, still holding the Snitch tightly in his hand: Draco Malfoy had landed close by; white-faced with fury, he was still managing to sneer.

"Saved Weasley's neck, haven't you?" he said to Harry. "I've never seen a worse Keeper … but then he was born in a bin. … Did you like my lyrics, Potter?"

Harry did not answer; he turned away to meet the rest of the team who were now landing one by one, yelling and punching the air in tri-

umph, all except Ron, who had dismounted from his broom over by the goalposts and was making his way slowly back to the changing rooms alone.

“We wanted to write another couple of verses!” Malfoy called, as Katie and Alicia hugged Harry. “But we couldn’t find rhymes for fat and ugly — we wanted to sing about his mother, see —”

“Talk about sour grapes,” said Angelina, casting Malfoy a disgusted look.

“— we couldn’t fit in useless loser either — for his father, you know —”

Fred and George had realized what Malfoy was talking about. Halfway through shaking Harry’s hand they stiffened, looking around at Malfoy.

“Leave it,” said Angelina at once, taking Fred by the arm. “Leave it, Fred, let him yell, he’s just sore he lost, the jumped-up little —”

“— but you like the Weasleys, don’t you, Potter?” said Malfoy, sneering. “Spend holidays there and everything, don’t you? Can’t see how you stand the stink, but I suppose when you’ve been dragged up by Muggles even the Weasleys’ hovel smells okay —”

Harry grabbed hold of George; meanwhile it was taking the combined efforts of Angelina, Alicia, and Katie to stop Fred leaping on Malfoy, who was laughing openly. Harry looked around for Madam Hooch, but she was still berating Crabbe for his illegal Bludger attack.

“Or perhaps,” said Malfoy, leering as he backed away, “you can remember what your mother’s house stank like, Potter, and Weasley’s pigsty reminds you of it —”

Harry was not aware of releasing George, all he knew was that a second later both of them were sprinting at Malfoy. He had com-

pletely forgotten the fact that all the teachers were watching: All he wanted to do was cause Malfoy as much pain as possible. With no time to draw out his wand, he merely drew back the fist clutching the Snitch and sank it as hard as he could into Malfoy's stomach —"Harry! HARRY! GEORGE! NO!"

He could hear girls' voices screaming, Malfoy yelling, George swearing, a whistle blowing, and the bellowing of the crowd around him, but he did not care, not until somebody in the vicinity yelled "IMPEDIMENTA!" and only when he was knocked over backward by the force of the spell did he abandon the attempt to punch every inch of Malfoy he could reach. …"What do you think you're doing?" screamed Madam Hooch, as Harry leapt to his feet again; it was she who had hit him with the Im-pediment Jinx. She was holding her whistle in one hand and a wand in the other, her broom lay abandoned several feet away. Malfoy was curled up on the ground, whimpering and moaning, his nose bloody; George was sporting a swollen lip; Fred was still being forcibly re-strained by the three Chasers, and Crabbe was cackling in the back-ground. "I've never seen behavior like it — back up to the castle, both of you, and straight to your Head of House's office! Go! Now!"

Harry and George marched off the pitch, both panting, neither say-ing a word to each other. The howling and jeering of the crowd grew fainter and fainter until they reached the entrance hall, where they could hear nothing except the sound of their own footsteps. Harry be-came aware that something was still struggling in his right hand, the knuckles of which he had bruised against Malfoy's jaw; looking down he saw the Snitch's silver wings protruding from between his fingers, struggling for release.

They had barely reached the door of Professor McGonagall's office when she came marching along the corridor behind them. She was wearing a Gryffindor scarf, but tore it from her throat with shaking hands as she strode toward them, looking livid.

“In!” she said furiously, pointing to the door. Harry and George entered. She strode around behind her desk and faced them, quivering with rage as she threw the Gryffindor scarf aside onto the floor.

“Well?” she said. “I have never seen such a disgraceful exhibition. Two onto one! Explain yourselves!”

“Malfoy provoked us,” said Harry stiffly.

“Provoked you?” shouted Professor McGonagall, slamming a fist onto her desk so that her tartan biscuit tin slid sideways off it and burst open, littering the floor with Ginger Newts. “He’d just lost, hadn’t he, of course he wanted to provoke you! But what on earth he can have said that justified what you two —”

“He insulted my parents,” snarled George. “And Harry’s mother.”

“But instead of leaving it to Madam Hooch to sort out, you two decided to give an exhibition of Muggle dueling, did you?” bellowed Professor McGonagall. “Have you any idea what you’ve — ?”

“Hem, hem.”

George and Harry both spun around. Dolores Umbridge was standing in the doorway wrapped in a green tweed cloak that greatly enhanced her resemblance to a giant toad, and smiling in the horribly sickly, ominous way that Harry had come to associate with imminent misery.

“May I help, Professor McGonagall?” asked Professor Umbridge in her most poisonously sweet voice.

Blood rushed into Professor McGonagall’s face.

“Help?” she repeated in a constricted voice. “What do you mean, ‘help’?”

Professor Umbridge moved forward into the office, still smiling her sickly smile.

“Why, I thought you might be grateful for a little extra authority.”

Harry would not have been surprised to see sparks fly from Professor McGonagall’s nostrils.

“You thought wrong,” she said, turning her back on Umbridge. “Now, you two had better listen closely. I do not care what provoca-tion Malfoy offered you, I do not care if he insulted every family member you possess, your behavior was disgusting and I am giving each of you a week’s worth of detention! Do not look at me like that, Potter, you deserve it! And if either of you ever —”

“Hem, hem.”

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes as though praying for patience as she turned her face toward Professor Umbridge again.

“Yes?”

“I think they deserve rather more than detentions,” said Umbridge, smiling still more broadly.

Professor McGonagall’s eyes flew open. “But unfortunately,” she said, with an attempt at a reciprocal smile that made her look as though she had lockjaw, “it is what I think that counts, as they are in my House, Dolores.”

“Well, actually, Minerva,” simpered Umbridge, “I think you’ll find that what I think does count. Now, where is it? Cornelius just sent it. … I mean,” she gave a little false laugh as she rummaged in her handbag, “the Minister just sent it. … Ah yes …”

She had pulled out a piece of parchment that she now unfurled, clearing her throat fussily before starting to read what it said.

"Hem, hem … 'Educational Decree Number Twenty-five …' "

"Not another one!" exclaimed Professor McGonagall violently.

"Well, yes," said Umbridge, still smiling. "As a matter of fact, Min-erva, it was you who made me see that we needed a further amend-ment. … You remember how you overrode me, when I was unwilling to allow the Gryffindor Quidditch team to re-form? How you took the case to Dumbledore, who insisted that the team be allowed to play? Well, now, I couldn't have that. I contacted the Minister at once, and he quite agreed with me that the High Inquisitor has to have the power to strip pupils of privileges, or she — that is to say, I — would have less authority than common teachers! And you see now, don't you, Minerva, how right I was in attempting to stop the Gryffindor team re-forming? Dreadful tempers … Anyway, I was reading out our amendment … hem, hem … 'The High Inquisitor will henceforth have supreme authority over all punishments, sanctions, and removal of privileges pertaining to the students of Hogwarts, and the power to alter such punishments, sanctions, and removals of privileges as may have been ordered by other staff members. Signed, Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, Order of Merlin First Class, etc., etc. …' "

She rolled up the parchment and put it back into her handbag, still smiling.

"So … I really think I will have to ban these two from playing Quidditch ever again," she said, looking from Harry to George and back again.

Harry felt the Snitch fluttering madly in his hand.

"Ban us?" he said, and his voice sounded strangely distant. "From playing … ever again?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter, I think a lifelong ban ought to do the trick," said Umbridge, her smile widening still further as she watched him strug-gle to comprehend what she had said. "You and Mr. Weasley here.

And I think, to be safe, this young man's twin ought to be stopped too — if his teammates had not restrained him, I feel sure he would have attacked young Mr. Malfoy as well. I will want their broomsticks confiscated, of course; I shall keep them safely in my office, to make sure there is no infringement of my ban. But I am not unreasonable, Professor McGonagall," she continued, turning back to Professor McGonagall who was now standing as still as though carved from ice, staring at her. "The rest of the team can continue playing, I saw no signs of violence from any of them. Well … good afternoon to you." And with a look of the utmost satisfaction Umbridge left the room, leaving a horrified silence in her wake.

"Banned," said Angelina in a hollow voice, late that evening in the common room. "Banned. No Seeker and no Beaters … What on earth are we going to do?"

It did not feel as though they had won the match at all. Everywhere Harry looked there were disconsolate and angry faces; the team them-selves were slumped around the fire, all apart from Ron, who had not been seen since the end of the match.

"It's just so unfair," said Alicia numbly. "I mean, what about Crabbe and that Bludger he hit after the whistle had been blown? Has she banned him?"

"No," said Ginny miserably; she and Hermione were sitting on ei-ther side of Harry. "He just got lines, I heard Montague laughing about it at dinner."

"And banning Fred when he didn't even do anything!" said Alicia furiously, pummeling her knee with her fist.

"It's not my fault I didn't," said Fred, with a very ugly look on his face. "I would've pounded the little scumbag to a pulp if you three hadn't been holding me back."

Harry stared miserably at the dark window. Snow was falling. The Snitch he had caught earlier was now zooming around and around the common room; people were watching its progress as though hypnotized and Crookshanks was leaping from chair to chair, trying to catch it.

"I'm going to bed," said Angelina, getting slowly to her feet.

"Maybe this will all turn out to have been a bad dream. … Maybe I'll wake up tomorrow and find we haven't played yet. …"

She was soon followed by Alicia and Katie. Fred and George sloped off to bed some time later, glowering at everyone they passed, and Ginny went not long after that. Only Harry and Hermione were left beside the fire.

"Have you seen Ron?" Hermione asked in a low voice.

Harry shook his head.

"I think he's avoiding us," said Hermione. "Where do you think he — ?"

But at that precise moment, there was a creaking sound behind them as the Fat Lady swung forward and Ron came clambering through the portrait hole. He was very pale indeed and there was snow in his hair. When he saw Harry and Hermione he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Where have you been?" said Hermione anxiously, springing up.

"Walking," Ron mumbled. He was still wearing his Quidditch things.

"You look frozen," said Hermione. "Come and sit down!"

Ron walked to the fireside and sank into the chair farthest from Harry's, not looking at him. The stolen Snitch zoomed over their

heads.

“I’m sorry,” Ron mumbled, looking at his feet.

“What for?” said Harry.

“For thinking I can play Quidditch,” said Ron. “I’m going to resign first thing tomorrow.”

“If you resign,” said Harry testily, “there’ll only be three players left on the team.” And when Ron looked puzzled, he said, “I’ve been given a lifetime ban. So’ve Fred and George.”

“What?” Ron yelped.

Hermione told him the full story; Harry could not bear to tell it again. When she had finished, Ron looked more anguished than ever.

“This is all my fault —”

“You didn’t make me punch Malfoy,” said Harry angrily.

“— if I wasn’t so lousy at Quidditch —”

“— it’s got nothing to do with that —”

“— it was that song that wound me up —”

“— it would’ve wound anyone up —”

Hermione got up and walked to the window, away from the argument, watching the snow swirling down against the pane.

“Look, drop it, will you!” Harry burst out. “It’s bad enough with-out you blaming yourself for everything!”

Ron said nothing but sat gazing miserably at the damp hem of his robes. After a while he said in a dull voice, “This is the worst I’ve ever

felt in my life."

"Join the club," said Harry bitterly.

"Well," said Hermione, her voice trembling slightly. "I can think of one thing that might cheer you both up."

"Oh yeah?" said Harry skeptically.

"Yeah," said Hermione, turning away from the pitch-black, snow-flecked window, a broad smile spreading across her face. "Hagrid's back."

Chapter 20 Hagrid's Tale

Harry sprinted up to the boys' dormitory to fetch the Invisi-bility Cloak and the Marauder's Map from his trunk; he was so quick that he and Ron were ready to leave at least five minutes be-fore Hermione hurried back down from the girls' dormitories, wear-ing scarf, gloves, and one of her own knobbly elf hats.

"Well, it's cold out there!" she said defensively, as Ron clicked his tongue impatiently.

They crept through the portrait hole and covered themselves hastily in the cloak — Ron had grown so much he now needed to crouch to prevent his feet showing — then, moving slowly and cau-tiously, they proceeded down the many staircases, pausing at intervals to check the map for signs of Filch or Mrs. Norris. They were lucky; they saw nobody but Nearly Headless Nick, who was gliding along absentmindedly humming something that sounded horribly like "Weasley Is Our King." They crept across the entrance hall and then out into the silent, snowy grounds. With a great leap of his heart, Harry saw little golden squares of light ahead and smoke coiling up from Hagrid's chimney. He set off at a quick march, the other two jostling and bumping along behind him, and they crunched excitedly through the thickening snow until at last they reached the wooden front door; when Harry raised his fist and knocked three times, a dog started barking frantically inside.

"Hagrid, it's us!" Harry called through the keyhole.

"Shoulda known!" said a gruff voice.

They beamed at one another under the cloak; they could tell that Hagrid's voice was pleased. "Bin home three seconds … Out the way, Fang … Out the way, yeh dozy dog …"

The bolt was drawn back, the door creaked open, and Hagrid's head appeared in the gap.

Hermione screamed.

"Merlin's beard, keep it down!" said Hagrid hastily, staring wildly over their heads. "Under that cloak, are yeh? Well, get in, get in!"

"I'm sorry!" Hermione gasped, as the three of them squeezed past Hagrid into the house and pulled the cloak off themselves so he could see them. "I just — oh, Hagrid!"

"It's nuthin', it's nuthin'!" said Hagrid hastily, shutting the door behind them and hurrying to close all the curtains, but Hermione continued to gaze up at him in horror.

Hagrid's hair was matted with congealed blood, and his left eye had been reduced to a puffy slit amid a mass of purple-and-black bruises. There were many cuts on his face and hands, some of them still bleed-ing, and he was moving gingerly, which made Harry suspect broken ribs. It was obvious that he had only just got home; a thick black trav-eling cloak lay over the back of a chair and a haversack large enough to carry several small children leaned against the wall inside the door. Hagrid himself, twice the size of a normal man and three times as broad, was now limping over to the fire and placing a copper kettle over it.

"What happened to you?" Harry demanded, while Fang danced around them all, trying to lick their faces.

"Told yeh, nuthin'," said Hagrid firmly. "Want a cuppa?"

"Come off it," said Ron, "you're in a right state!"

"I'm tellin' yeh, I'm fine," said Hagrid, straightening up and turn-ing to beam at them all, but wincing. "Blimey, it's good ter see you three again — had good summers, did yeh?"

“Hagrid, you’ve been attacked!” said Ron.

“Fer the las’ time, it’s nuthin’!” said Hagrid firmly.

“Would you say it was nothing if one of us turned up with a pound of mince instead of a face?” Ron demanded.

“You ought to go and see Madam Pomfrey, Hagrid,” said Hermi-one anxiously. “Some of those cuts look nasty.”

“I’m dealin’ with it, all righ’?” said Hagrid repressively.

He walked across to the enormous wooden table that stood in the middle of his cabin and twitched aside a tea towel that had been lying on it. Underneath was a raw, bloody, green-tinged steak slightly larger than the average car tire.

“You’re not going to eat that, are you, Hagrid?” said Ron, leaning in for a closer look. “It looks poisonous.”

“It’s s’posed ter look like that, it’s dragon meat,” Hagrid said. “An’ I didn’ get it ter eat.”

He picked up the steak and slapped it over the left side of his face. Greenish blood trickled down into his beard as he gave a soft moan of satisfaction.

“Tha’s better. It helps with the stingin’, yeh know.”

“So are you going to tell us what’s happened to you?” Harry asked.

“Can’, Harry. Top secret. More’n me job’s worth ter tell yeh that.”

“Did the giants beat you up, Hagrid?” asked Hermione quietly.

Hagrid’s fingers slipped on the dragon steak, and it slid squelchily onto his chest.

"Giants?" said Hagrid, catching the steak before it reached his belt and slapping it back over his face. "Who said anythin' abou' giants? Who yeh bin talkin' to? Who's told yeh what I've — who's said I've bin — eh?"

"We guessed," said Hermione apologetically.

"Oh, yeh did, did yeh?" said Hagrid, fixing her sternly with the eye that was not hidden by the steak.

"It was kind of … obvious," said Ron. Harry nodded.

Hagrid glared at them, then snorted, threw the steak onto the table again and strode back to the kettle, which was now whistling.

"Never known kids like you three fer knowin' more'n yeh oughta," he muttered, splashing boiling water into three of his bucket-shaped mugs. "An' I'm not complimentin' yeh, neither. Nosy, some'd call it. Interferin'."

But his beard twitched.

"So you have been to look for giants?" said Harry, grinning as he sat down at the table.

Hagrid set tea in front of each of them, sat down, picked up his steak again, and slapped it back over his face.

"Yeah, all righ'," he grunted, "I have."

"And you found them?" said Hermione in a hushed voice.

"Well, they're not that difficult ter find, ter be honest," said Hagrid. "Pretty big, see."

"Where are they?" said Ron.

"Mountains," said Hagrid unhelpfully.

“So why don’t Muggles — ?”

“They do,” said Hagrid darkly. “O’ny their deaths are always put down ter mountaineerin’ accidents, aren’ they?”

He adjusted the steak a little so that it covered the worst of the bruising.

“Come on, Hagrid, tell us what you’ve been up to!” said Ron. “Tell us about being attacked by the giants and Harry can tell you about being attacked by the dementors —”

Hagrid choked in his mug and dropped his steak at the same time; a large quantity of spit, tea, and dragon blood was sprayed over the table as Hagrid coughed and spluttered and the steak slid, with a soft splat, onto the floor.

“Whadda yeh mean, attacked by dementors?” growled Hagrid.

“Didn’t you know?” Hermione asked him, wide-eyed.

“I don’ know anything that’s been happenin’ since I left. I was on a secret mission, wasn’ I, didn’ wan’ owls followin’ me all over the place — ruddy dementors! Yeh’re not serious?”

“Yeah, I am, they turned up in Little Whinging and attacked my cousin and me, and then the Ministry of Magic expelled me —”

“WHAT?”

“— and I had to go to a hearing and everything, but tell us about the giants first.”

“You were expelled?”

“Tell us about your summer and I’ll tell you about mine.”

Hagrid glared at him through his one open eye. Harry looked right back, an expression of innocent determination on his face.

"Oh, all righ'," Hagrid said in a resigned voice.

He bent down and tugged the dragon steak out of Fang's mouth.

"Oh, Hagrid, don't, it's not hygien —" Hermione began, but Ha-grid had already slapped the meat back over his swollen eye. He took another fortifying gulp of tea and then said, "Well, we set off righ' af-ter term ended —"

"Madame Maxime went with you, then?" Hermione interjected.

"Yeah, tha's right," said Hagrid, and a softened expression appeared on the few inches of face that were not obscured by beard or green steak. "Yeah, it was jus' the pair of us. An' I'll tell yeh this, she's not afraid of roughin' it, Olympe. Yeh know, she's a fine, well-dressed woman, an' knowin' where we was goin' I wondered 'ow she'd feel abou' clamberin' over boulders an' sleepin' in caves an' tha', bu' she never complained once."

"You knew where you were going?" Harry asked. "You knew where the giants were?"

"Well, Dumbledore knew, an' he told us," said Hagrid.

"Are they hidden?" asked Ron. "Is it a secret, where they are?"

"Not really," said Hagrid, shaking his shaggy head. "It's jus' that mos' wizards aren' bothered where they are, s' long as it's a good long way away. But where they are's very difficult ter get ter, fer humans anyway, so we needed Dumbledore's instructions. Took us abou' a month ter get there —"

"A month?" said Ron, as though he had never heard of a journey lasting such a ridiculously long time. "But — why couldn't you just

grab a Portkey or something?"

There was an odd expression in Hagrid's unobscured eye as he squinted at Ron; it was almost pitying.

"We're bein' watched, Ron," he said gruffly.

"What d'you mean?"

"Yeh don' understand," said Hagrid. "The Ministry's keepin' an eye on Dumbledore an' anyone they reckon's in league with him, an' —"

"We know about that," said Harry quickly, keen to hear the rest of Hagrid's story. "We know about the Ministry watching Dumble-dore —"

"So you couldn't use magic to get there?" asked Ron, looking thun-derstruck. "You had to act like Muggles all the way?"

"Well, not exactly all the way," said Hagrid cagily. "We jus' had ter be careful, 'cause Olympe an' me, we stick out a bit —"

Ron made a stifled noise somewhere between a snort and a sniff and hastily took a gulp of tea.

"— so we're not hard ter follow. We was pretendin' we was goin' on holiday together, so we got inter France an' we made like we was headin' fer where Olympe's school is, 'cause we knew we was bein' tailed by someone from the Ministry. We had to go slow, 'cause I'm not really s'posed ter use magic an' we knew the Ministry'd be lookin' fer a reason ter run us in. But we managed ter give the berk tailin' us the slip round abou' Dee-John —"

"Ooooh, Dijon?" said Hermione excitedly. "I've been there on hol-iday, did you see — ?"

She fell silent at the look on Ron's face.

"We chanced a bit o' magic after that, and it wasn' a bad journey. Ran inter a couple o' mad trolls on the Polish border, an' I had a sligh' disagreement with a vampire in a pub in Minsk, but apart from tha', couldn't'a bin smoother.

"An' then we reached the place, an' we started trekkin' up through the mountains, lookin' fer signs of 'em …"We had ter lay off the magic once we got near 'em. Partly 'cause they don' like wizards an' we didn' want ter put their backs up too soon, and partly 'cause Dumbledore had warned us You-Know-Who was bound ter be after the giants an' all. Said it was odds on he'd sent a messenger off ter them already. Told us ter be very careful of drawin' attention ter ourselves as we got nearer in case there was Death Eaters around."

Hagrid paused for a long draft of tea.

"Go on!" said Harry urgently.

"Found 'em," said Hagrid baldly. "Went over a ridge one nigh' an' there they was, spread ou' underneath us. Little fires burnin' below an' huge shadows … It was like watchin' bits o' the mountain movin'."

"How big are they?" asked Ron in a hushed voice.

" 'Bout twenty feet," said Hagrid casually. "Some o' the bigger ones mighta bin twenty-five."

"And how many were there?" asked Harry.

"I reckon abou' seventy or eighty," said Hagrid.

"Is that all?" said Hermione.

"Yep," said Hagrid sadly, "eighty left, an' there was loads once, musta bin a hundred diff'rent tribes from all over the world. But they've bin dyin' out fer ages. Wizards killed a few, o' course, but mostly they killed each other, an' now they're dyin' out faster than ever. They're

not made ter live bunched up together like tha'. Dumb-ledore says it's our fault, it was the wizards who forced 'em to go an' made 'em live a good long way from us an' they had no choice but ter stick together fer their own protection."

"So," said Harry, "you saw them and then what?"

"Well, we waited till morning, didn' want ter go sneakin' up on 'em in the dark, fer our own safety," said Hagrid. " 'Bout three in the mornin' they fell asleep jus' where they was sittin'. We didn' dare sleep. Fer one thing, we wanted ter make sure none of 'em woke up an' came up where we were, an' fer another, the snorin' was unbelievable. Caused an avalanche near mornin'.

"Anyway, once it was light we wen' down ter see 'em."

"Just like that?" said Ron, looking awestruck. "You just walked right into a giant camp?"

"Well, Dumbledore'd told us how ter do it," said Hagrid. "Give the Gurg gifts, show some respect, yeh know."

"Give the what gifts?" asked Harry.

"Oh, the Gurg — means the chief."

"How could you tell which one was the Gurg?" asked Ron.

Hagrid grunted in amusement.

"No problem," he said. "He was the biggest, the ugliest, an' the laziest. Sittin' there waitin' ter be brought food by the others. Dead goats an' such like. Name o' Karkus. I'd put him at twenty-two, twenty-three feet, an' the weight of a couple o' bull elephants. Skin like rhino hide an' all."

"And you just walked up to him?" said Hermione breathlessly.

“Well … down ter him, where he was lyin’ in the valley. They was in this dip between four pretty high mountains, see, beside a moun-tain lake, an’ Karkus was lyin’ by the lake roarin’ at the others ter feed him an’ his wife. Olympe an’ I went down the mountainside —”

“But didn’t they try and kill you when they saw you?” asked Ron incredulously.

“It was def’nitely on some of their minds,” said Hagrid, shrugging, “but we did what Dumbledore told us ter do, which was ter hold our gift up high an’ keep our eyes on the Gurg an’ ignore the others. So tha’s what we did. An’ the rest of ’em went quiet an’ watched us pass an’ we got right up ter Karkus’s feet an’ we bowed an’ put our present down in front o’ him.”

“What do you give a giant?” asked Ron eagerly. “Food?”

“Nah, he can get food all righ’ fer himself,” said Hagrid. “We took him magic. Giants like magic, jus’ don’t like us usin’ it against ’em. Anyway, that firs’ day we gave him a branch o’ Gubraithian fire.”

Hermione said “wow” softly, but Harry and Ron both frowned in puzzlement.

“A branch of — ?”

“Everlasting fire,” said Hermione irritably, “you ought to know that by now, Professor Flitwick’s mentioned it at least twice in class!”

“Well anyway,” said Hagrid quickly, intervening before Ron could answer back, “Dumbledore’d bewitched this branch to burn ever-more, which isn’ somethin’ any wizard could do, an’ so I lies it down in the snow by Karkus’s feet and says, ‘A gift to the Gurg of the giants from Albus Dumbledore, who sends his respectful greetings.’ ”

“And what did Karkus say?” asked Harry eagerly.

“Nothin’,” said Hagrid. “Didn’ speak English.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Didn’ matter,” said Hagrid imperturbably, “Dumbledore had warned us tha’ migh’ happen. Karkus knew enough to yell fer a cou-ple o’ giants who knew our lingo an’ they translated fer us.”

“And did he like the present?” asked Ron.

“Oh yeah, it went down a storm once they understood what it was,” said Hagrid, turning his dragon steak over to press the cooler side to his swollen eye. “Very pleased. So then I said, ‘Albus Dumble-dore asks the Gurg to speak with his messenger when he returns to-morrow with another gift.’ ”

“Why couldn’t you speak to them that day?” asked Hermione.

“Dumbledore wanted us ter take it very slow,” said Hagrid. “Let ’em see we kept our promises. We’ll come back tomorrow with another present, an’ then we do come back with another present — gives a good impression, see? An’ gives them time ter test out the firs’ present an’ find out it’s a good one, an’ get ’em eager fer more. In any case, gi-ants like Karkus — overload ’em with information an’ they’ll kill yeh jus’ to simplify things. So we bowed outta the way an’ went off an’ found ourselves a nice little cave ter spend that night in, an’ the fol-lowin’ mornin’ we went back an’ this time we found Karkus sittin’ up waitin’ fer us lookin’ all eager.”

“And you talked to him?”

“Oh yeah. Firs’ we presented him with a nice battle helmet — goblin-made an’ indestructible, yeh know — an’ then we sat down an’ we talked.”

“What did he say?”

“Not much,” said Hagrid. “Listened mostly. But there were good signs. He’d heard o’ Dumbledore, heard he’d argued against the killin’ of the last giants in Britain. Karkus seemed ter be quite int’rested in what Dumbledore had ter say. An’ a few o’ the others, ’specially the ones who had some English, they gathered round an’ listened too. We were hopeful when we left that day. Promised ter come back next day with another present.

“But that night it all wen’ wrong.”

“What d’you mean?” said Ron quickly.

“Well, like I say, they’re not meant ter live together, giants,” said Hagrid sadly. “Not in big groups like that. They can’ help themselves, they half kill each other every few weeks. The men fight each other an’ the women fight each other, the remnants of the old tribes fight each other, an’ that’s even without squabbles over food an’ the best fires an’ sleepin’ spots. Yeh’d think, seein’ as how their whole race is abou’ fin-ished, they’d lay off each other, but …”

Hagrid sighed deeply

“That night a fight broke out, we saw it from the mouth of our cave, lookin’ down on the valley. Went on fer hours, yeh wouldn’ be-lieve the noise. An’ when the sun came up the snow was scarlet an’ his head was lyin’ at the bottom o’ the lake.”

“Whose head?” gasped Hermione.

“Karkus’s,” said Hagrid heavily. “There was a new Gurg, Golgo-math.” He sighed deeply. “Well, we hadn’ bargained on a new Gurg two days after we’d made friendly contact with the firs’ one, an’ we had a funny feelin’ Golgomath wouldn’ be so keen ter listen to us, but we had ter try.”

“You went to speak to him?” asked Ron incredulously. “After you’d watched him rip off another giant’s head?”

“ ’Course we did,” said Hagrid, “we hadn’ gone all that way ter give up after two days! We wen’ down with the next present we’d meant ter give ter Karkus.

“I knew it was no go before I’d opened me mouth. He was sitting there wearin’ Karkus’s helmet, leerin’ at us as we got nearer. He’s mas-sive, one o’ the biggest ones there. Black hair an’ matchin’ teeth an’ a necklace o’ bones. Human-lookin’ bones, some of ’em. Well, I gave it a go — held out a great roll o’ dragon skin — an’ said A gift fer the Gurg of the giants —’ Nex’ thing I knew, I was hangin’ upside down in the air by me feet, two of his mates had grabbed me.”

Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth.

“How did you get out of that?” asked Harry.

“Wouldn’ta done if Olympe hadn’ bin there,” said Hagrid. “She pulled out her wand an’ did some o’ the fastes’ spellwork I’ve ever seen. Ruddy marvelous. Hit the two holdin’ me right in the eyes with Con-junctivitus Curses an’ they dropped me straightaway — bu’ we were in trouble then, ’cause we’d used magic against ’em, an’ that’s what gi-ants hate abou’ wizards. We had ter leg it an’ we knew there was no way we was going ter be able ter march inter camp again.”

“Blimey, Hagrid,” said Ron quietly.

“So how come it’s taken you so long to get home if you were only there for three days?” asked Hermione.

“We didn’ leave after three days!” said Hagrid, looking outraged. “Dumbledore was relyin’ on us!”

“But you’ve just said there was no way you could go back!”

“Not by daylight, we couldn’, no. We just had ter rethink a bit. Spent a couple o’ days lyin’ low up in the cave an’ watchin’. An’ wha’ we saw wasn’ good.”

"Did he rip off more heads?" asked Hermione, sounding squeamish.

"No," said Hagrid. "I wish he had."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean we soon found out he didn' object ter all wizards — just us."

"Death Eaters?" said Harry quickly.

"Yep," said Hagrid darkly. "Couple of 'em were visitin' him ev'ry day, bringin' gifts ter the Gurg, an' he wasn' dangling them upside down."

"How d'you know they were Death Eaters?" said Ron.

"Because I recognized one of 'em," Hagrid growled. "Macnair, remember him? Bloke they sent ter kill Buckbeak? Maniac, he is. Likes killin' as much as Golgomath, no wonder they were gettin' on so well."

"So Macnair's persuaded the giants to join You-Know-Who?" said Hermione desperately.

"Hold yer hippogriffs, I haven' finished me story yet!" said Hagrid indignantly, who, considering he had not wanted to tell them anything in the first place, now seemed to be rather enjoying himself. "Me an' Olympe talked it over an' we agreed, jus' 'cause the Gurg looked like favorin' You-Know-Who didn' mean all of 'em would. We had ter try an' persuade some o' the others, the ones who hadn' wanted Golgomath as Gurg."

"How could you tell which ones they were?" asked Ron.

"Well, they were the ones bein' beaten to a pulp, weren' they?" said Hagrid patiently. "The ones with any sense were keepin' outta Golgomath's way, hidin' out in caves roun' the gully jus' like we were. So we decided we'd go pokin' round the caves by night an' see if we couldn' persuade a few o' them."

“You went poking around dark caves looking for giants?” said Ron with awed respect in his voice.

“Well, it wasn’ the giants who worried us most,” said Hagrid. “We were more concerned abou’ the Death Eaters. Dumbledore had told us before we wen’ not ter tangle with ’em if we could avoid it, an’ the trou-ble was they knew we was around — ’spect Golgomath told him abou’ us. At night when the giants were sleepin’ an’ we wanted ter be creepin’ inter the caves, Macnair an’ the other one were sneakin’ round the mountains lookin’ fer us. I was hard put to stop Olympe jumpin’ out at them,” said Hagrid, the corners of his mouth lifting his wild beard. “She was rarin’ ter attack ’em. … she’s somethin’ when she’s roused, Olympe. … Fiery, yeh know … ’spect it’s the French in her …”

Hagrid gazed misty-eyed into the fire. Harry allowed him thirty seconds’ reminiscence before clearing his throat loudly.

“So what happened? Did you ever get near any of the other giants?”

“What? Oh … oh yeah, we did. Yeah, on the third night after Karkus was killed, we crept outta the cave we’d bin hidin’ in and headed back down inter the gully, keepin’ our eyes skinned fer the Death Eaters. Got inside a few o’ the caves, no go — then, in abou’ the sixth one, we found three giants hidin’.”

“Cave must’ve been cramped,” said Ron.

“Wasn’ room ter swing a kneazle,” said Hagrid.

“Didn’t they attack you when they saw you?” asked Hermione.

“Probably woulda done if they’d bin in any condition,” said Ha-grid, “but they was badly hurt, all three o’ them. Golgomath’s lot had beaten ’em unconscious; they’d woken up an’ crawled inter the near-est shelter they could find. Anyway, one o’ them had a bit of English an’ ’e translated fer the others, an’ what we had ter say didn’ seem ter

go down too badly. So we kep' goin' back, visitin' the wounded. … I reckon we had abou' six or seven o' them convinced at one poin'."

"Six or seven?" said Ron eagerly. "Well that's not bad — are they going to come over here and start fighting You-Know-Who with us?"

But Hermione said, "What do you mean 'at one point,' Hagrid?"

Hagrid looked at her sadly.

"Golgomath's lot raided the caves. The ones tha' survived didn' wan' no more ter to do with us after that."

"So … so there aren't any giants coming?" said Ron, looking disappointed.

"Nope," said Hagrid, heaving a deep sigh as he turned over his steak again and applied the cooler side to his face, "but we did wha' we meant ter do, we gave 'em Dumbledore's message an' some o' them heard it an' I 'spect some o' them'll remember it. Jus' maybe, them that don' want ter stay around Golgomath'll move outta the mountains, an' there's gotta be a chance they'll remember Dumbledore's friendly to 'em. … Could be they'll come …"

Snow was filling up the window now. Harry became aware that the knees of his robes were soaked through; Fang was drooling with his head in Harry's lap.

"Hagrid?" said Hermione quietly after a while.

"Mmm?"

"Did you … was there any sign of … did you hear anything about your … your … mother while you were there?"

Hagrid's unobscured eye rested upon her, and Hermione looked rather scared.

"I'm sorry … I … forget it —"

"Dead," Hagrid grunted. "Died years ago. They told me."

"Oh … I'm … I'm really sorry," said Hermione in a very small voice.

Hagrid shrugged his massive shoulders. "No need," he said shortly. "Can' remember her much. Wasn' a great mother."

They were silent again. Hermione glanced nervously at Harry and Ron, plainly wanting them to speak.

"But you still haven't explained how you got in this state, Hagrid," Ron said, gesturing toward Hagrid's bloodstained face.

"Or why you're back so late," said Harry. "Sirius says Madame Maxime got back ages ago —"

"Who attacked you?" said Ron.

"I haven' bin attacked!" said Hagrid emphatically. "I —"

But the rest of his words were drowned in a sudden outbreak of rapping on the door. Hermione gasped; her mug slipped through her fingers and smashed on the floor; Fang yelped. All four of them stared at the window beside the doorway. The shadow of somebody small and squat rippled across the thin curtain.

"It's her!" Ron whispered.

"Get under here!" Harry said quickly; seizing the Invisibility Cloak he whirled it over himself and Hermione while Ron tore around the table and dived beneath the cloak as well. Huddled together they backed away into a corner. Fang was barking madly at the door. Ha-grid looked thoroughly confused.

"Hagrid, hide our mugs!"

Hagrid seized Harry's and Ron's mugs and shoved them under the cushion in Fang's basket. Fang was now leaping up at the door; Hagrid pushed him out of the way with his foot and pulled it open.

Professor Umbridge was standing in the doorway wearing her green tweed cloak and a matching hat with earflaps. Lips pursed, she leaned back so as to see Hagrid's face; she barely reached his navel.

"So," she said slowly and loudly, as though speaking to somebody deaf. "You're Hagrid, are you?"

Without waiting for an answer she strolled into the room, her bulging eyes rolling in every direction.

"Get away," she snapped, waving her handbag at Fang, who had bounded up to her and was attempting to lick her face.

"Er — I don' want ter be rude," said Hagrid, staring at her, "but who the ruddy hell are you?"

"My name is Dolores Umbridge."

Her eyes were sweeping the cabin. Twice they stared directly into the corner where Harry stood, sandwiched between Ron and Her-mione.

"Dolores Umbridge?" Hagrid said, sounding thoroughly confused. "I thought you were one o' them Ministry — don' you work with Fudge?"

"I was Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, yes," said Umbridge, now pacing around the cabin, taking in every tiny detail within, from the haversack against the wall to the abandoned traveling cloak. "I am now the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher —"

"Tha's brave of yeh," said Hagrid, "there's not many'd take tha' job anymore —"

“— and Hogwarts High Inquisitor,” said Umbridge, giving no sign that she had heard him.

“Wha’s that?” said Hagrid, frowning.

“Precisely what I was going to ask,” said Umbridge, pointing at the broken shards of china on the floor that had been Hermione’s mug.

“Oh,” said Hagrid, with a most unhelpful glance toward the corner where Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood hidden, “oh, tha’ was … was Fang. He broke a mug. So I had ter use this one instead.”

Hagrid pointed to the mug from which he had been drinking, one hand still clamped over the dragon steak pressed to his eye. Umbridge stood facing him now, taking in every detail of his appearance instead of the cabin’s.

“I heard voices,” she said quietly.

“I was talkin’ ter Fang,” said Hagrid stoutly.

“And was he talking back to you?”

“Well … in a manner o’ speakin’,” said Hagrid, looking uncomfortable. “I sometimes say Fang’s near enough human —”

“There are three sets of footprints in the snow leading from the cas-tle doors to your cabin,” said Umbridge sleekly.

Hermione gasped; Harry clapped a hand over her mouth. Luckily, Fang was sniffing loudly around the hem of Professor Umbridge’s robes, and she did not appear to have heard.

“Well, I on’y jus’ got back,” said Hagrid, waving an enormous hand at the haversack. “Maybe someone came ter call earlier an’ I missed em.

“There are no footsteps leading away from your cabin door.”

“Well I … I don’ know why that’d be. …” said Hagrid, tugging nervously at his beard and again glancing toward the corner where Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood, as though asking for help. “Erm …”

Umbridge wheeled around and strode the length of the cabin, looking around carefully. She bent and peered under the bed. She opened Hagrid’s cupboards. She passed within two inches of where Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood pressed against the wall; Harry ac-tually pulled in his stomach as she walked by. After looking carefully inside the enormous cauldron Hagrid used for cooking she wheeled around again and said, “What has happened to you? How did you sustain those injuries?”

Hagrid hastily removed the dragon steak from his face, which in Harry’s opinion was a mistake, because the black-and-purple bruising all around his eye was now clearly visible, not to mention the large amount of fresh and congealed blood on his face. “Oh, I … had a bit of an accident,” he said lamely.

“What sort of accident?”

“I-I tripped.”

“You tripped,” she repeated coolly.

“Yeah, tha’s right. Over … over a friends broomstick. I don’ fly, meself. Well, look at the size o’ me, I don’ reckon there’s a broomstick that’d hold me. Friend o’ mine breeds Abraxan horses, I dunno if you’ve ever seen ’em, big beasts, winged, yeh know, I’ve had a bit of a ride on one o’ them an’ it was —”

“Where have you been?” asked Umbridge, cutting coolly through Hagrid’s babbling.

“Where’ve I … ?”

"Been, yes," she said. "Term started more than two months ago. Another teacher has had to cover your classes. None of your colleagues has been able to give me any information as to your whereabouts. You left no address. Where have you been?"

There was a pause in which Hagrid stared at her with his newly uncovered eye. Harry could almost hear his brain working furiously.

"I — I've been away for me health," he said.

"For your health," said Umbridge. Her eyes traveled over Hagrid's discolored and swollen face; dragon blood dripped gently onto his waistcoat in the silence. "I see."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, "bit o' — o' fresh air, yeh know —"

"Yes, as gamekeeper fresh air must be so difficult to come by," said Umbridge sweetly. The small patch of Hagrid's face that was not black or purple flushed.

"Well — change o' scene, yeh know —"

"Mountain scenery?" said Umbridge swiftly.

She knows, Harry thought desperately.

"Mountains?" Hagrid repeated, clearly thinking fast. "Nope, South of France fer me. Bit o' sun an' … an' sea."

"Really?" said Umbridge. "You don't have much of a tan."

"Yeah … well … sensitive skin," said Hagrid, attempting an ingratiating smile. Harry noticed that two of his teeth had been knocked out. Umbridge looked at him coldly; his smile faltered. Then she hoisted her handbag a little higher into the crook of her arm and said, "I shall, of course, be informing the Minister of your late return."

"Righ'," said Hagrid, nodding.

“You ought to know too that as High Inquisitor it is my unfortu-nate but necessary duty to inspect my fellow teachers. So I daresay we shall meet again soon enough.”

She turned sharply and marched back to the door.

“You’re inspectin’ us?” Hagrid echoed blankly, looking after her.

“Oh yes,” said Umbridge softly, looking back at him with her hand on the door handle. “The Ministry is determined to weed out unsat-isfactory teachers, Hagrid. Good night.”

She left, closing the door behind her with a snap. Harry made to pull off the Invisibility Cloak but Hermione seized his wrist.

“Not yet,” she breathed in his ear. “She might not be gone yet.”

Hagrid seemed to be thinking the same way; he stumped across the room and pulled back the curtain an inch or so.

“She’s goin’ back ter the castle,” he said in a low voice. “Blimey … inspectin’ people, is she?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, pulling the cloak off. “Trelawney’s on probation already. …”

“Um … what sort of thing are you planning to do with us in class, Hagrid?” asked Hermione.

“Oh, don’ you worry abou’ that, I’ve got a great load o’ lessons planned,” said Hagrid enthusiastically, scooping up his dragon steak from the table and slapping it over his eye again. “I’ve bin keepin’ a couple o’ creatures saved fer yer O.W.L. year, you wait, they’re some-thin’ really special.”

“Erm … special in what way?” asked Hermione tentatively.

"I'm not sayin'," said Hagrid happily. "I don' want ter spoil the surprise."

"Look, Hagrid," said Hermione urgently, dropping all pretense, "Professor Umbridge won't be at all happy if you bring anything to class that's too dangerous —"

"Dangerous?" said Hagrid, looking genially bemused. "Don' be silly, I wouldn' give yeh anythin' dangerous! I mean, all righ', they can look after themselves —"

"Hagrid, you've got to pass Umbridge's inspection, and to do that it would really be better if she saw you teaching us how to look after porlocks, how to tell the difference between knarls and hedgehogs, stuff like that!" said Hermione earnestly.

"But tha's not very interestin', Hermione," said Hagrid. "The stuff I've got's much more impressive, I've bin bringin' 'em on fer years, I reckon I've got the on'y domestic herd in Britain —"

"Hagrid … please …" said Hermione, a note of real desperation in her voice. "Umbridge is looking for any excuse to get rid of teach-ers she thinks are too close to Dumbledore. Please, Hagrid, teach us something dull that's bound to come up in our O.W.L. …"

But Hagrid merely yawned widely and cast a one-eyed look of longing toward the vast bed in the corner.

"Lis'en, it's bin a long day an' it's late," he said, patting Hermione gently on the shoulder, so that her knees gave way and hit the floor with a thud. "Oh — sorry —" He pulled her back up by the neck of her robes. "Look, don' you go worryin' abou' me, I promise yeh I've got really good stuff planned fer yer lessons now I'm back. … Now you lot had better get back up to the castle, an' don' forget ter wipe yer footprints out behind yeh!"

“I dunno if you got through to him,” said Ron a short while later when, having checked that the coast was clear, they walked back up to the castle through the thickening snow, leaving no trace behind them due to the Obliteration Charm Hermione was performing as they went.

“Then I’ll go back again tomorrow,” said Hermione determinedly. “I’ll plan his lessons for him if I have to. I don’t care if she throws out Trelawney but she’s not taking Hagrid!”

Chapter 21 The Eye of the Snake

Hermione plowed her way back to Hagrid's cabin through two feet of snow on Sunday morning. Harry and Ron wanted to go with her, but their mountain of homework had reached an alarm-ing height again, so they grudgingly remained in the common room, trying to ignore the gleeful shouts drifting up from the grounds out-side, where students were enjoying themselves skating on the frozen lake, tobogganing, and worst of all, bewitching snowballs to zoom up to Gryffindor Tower and rap hard on the windows.

"Oy!" bellowed Ron, finally losing patience and sticking his head out of the window, "I am a prefect and if one more snowball hits this window — OUCH!"

He withdrew his head sharply, his face covered in snow.

"It's Fred and George," he said bitterly, slamming the window be-hind him. "Gits …"

Hermione returned from Hagrid's just before lunch, shivering slightly, her robes damp to the knees.

"So?" said Ron, looking up when she entered. "Got all his lessons planned for him?"

"Well, I tried," she said dully, sinking into a chair beside Harry. She pulled out her wand and gave it a complicated little wave so that hot air streamed out of the tip; she then pointed this at her robes, which began to steam as they dried out. "He wasn't even there when I ar-rived, I was knocking for at least half an hour. And then he came stumping out of the forest —"

Harry groaned. The Forbidden Forest was teeming with the kind of creatures most likely to get Hagrid the sack. "What's he keeping in there? Did he say?" asked Harry.

“No,” said Hermione miserably. “He says he wants them to be a surprise. I tried to explain about Umbridge, but he just doesn’t get it. He kept saying nobody in their right mind would rather study knarls than chimaeras — oh I don’t think he’s got a chimaera,” she added at the appalled look on Harry and Ron’s faces, “but that’s not for lack of trying from what he said about how hard it is to get eggs. … I don’t know how many times I told him he’d be better off following Grubbly-Plank’s plan, I honestly don’t think he listened to half of what I said. He’s in a bit of a funny mood, you know. He still won’t say how he got all those injuries. …”

Hagrid’s reappearance at the staff table at breakfast next day was not greeted by enthusiasm from all students. Some, like Fred, George, and Lee, roared with delight and sprinted up the aisle between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables to wring Hagrid’s enormous hand; others, like Parvati and Lavender, exchanged gloomy looks and shook their heads. Harry knew that many of them preferred Professor Grubbly-Plank’s lessons, and the worst of it was that a very small, unbiased part of him knew that they had good reason: Grubbly-Plank’s idea of an interesting class was not one where there was a risk that somebody might have their head ripped off.

It was with a certain amount of apprehension that Harry, Ron, and Hermione headed down to Hagrid’s on Tuesday, heavily muffled against the cold. Harry was worried, not only about what Hagrid might have decided to teach them, but also about how the rest of the class, particularly Malfoy and his cronies, would behave if Umbridge was watching them.

However, the High Inquisitor was nowhere to be seen as they struggled through the snow toward Hagrid, who stood waiting for them on the edge of the forest. He did not present a reassuring sight; the bruises that had been purple on Saturday night were now tinged with green and yellow and some of his cuts still seemed to be bleeding. Harry could not understand this: Had Hagrid perhaps been attacked by some creature whose venom prevented the wounds it inflicted

from healing? As though to complete the ominous picture, Hagrid was carrying what looked like half a dead cow over his shoulder.

“We’re workin’ in here today!” Hagrid called happily to the approaching students, jerking his head back at the dark trees behind him. “Bit more sheltered! Anyway, they prefer the dark. …”

“What prefers the dark?” Harry heard Malfoy say sharply to Crabbe and Goyle, a trace of panic in his voice. “What did he say prefers the dark — did you hear?”

Harry remembered the only occasion on which Malfoy had entered the forest before now; he had not been very brave then either. He smiled to himself; after the Quidditch match anything that caused Malfoy discomfort was all right with him.

“Ready?” said Hagrid happily, looking around at the class. “Right, well, I’ve bin savin’ a trip inter the forest fer yer fifth year. Thought we’d go an’ see these creatures in their natural habitat. Now, what we’re studyin’ today is pretty rare, I reckon I’m probably the on’y person in Britain who’s managed ter train ’em —”

“And you’re sure they’re trained, are you?” said Malfoy, the panic in his voice even more pronounced now. “Only it wouldn’t be the first time you’d brought wild stuff to class, would it?”

The Slytherins murmured agreement and a few Gryffindors looked as though they thought Malfoy had a fair point too.

“ ’Course they’re trained,” said Hagrid, scowling and hoisting the dead cow a little higher on his shoulder.

“So what happened to your face, then?” demanded Malfoy.

“Mind yer own business!” said Hagrid, angrily. “Now if yeh’ve finished askin’ stupid questions, follow me!”

He turned and strode straight into the forest. Nobody seemed much disposed to follow. Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione, who sighed but nodded, and the three of them set off after Hagrid, leading the rest of the class.

They walked for about ten minutes until they reached a place where the trees stood so closely together that it was as dark as twilight and there was no snow on the ground at all. Hagrid deposited his half a cow with a grunt on the ground, stepped back, and turned to face his class again, most of whom were creeping toward him from tree to tree, peering around nervously as though expecting to be set upon at any moment.

"Gather roun', gather roun'," said Hagrid encouragingly. "Now, they'll be attracted by the smell o' the meat but I'm goin' ter give 'em a call anyway, 'cause they'll like ter know it's me. …"

He turned, shook his shaggy head to get the hair out of his face, and gave an odd, shrieking cry that echoed through the dark trees like the call of some monstrous bird. Nobody laughed; most of them looked too scared to make a sound.

Hagrid gave the shrieking cry again. A minute passed in which the class continued to peer nervously over their shoulders and around trees for a first glimpse of whatever it was that was coming. And then, as Hagrid shook his hair back for a third time and expanded his enormous chest, Harry nudged Ron and pointed into the black space between two gnarled yew trees.

A pair of blank, white, shining eyes were growing larger through the gloom and a moment later the dragonish face, neck, and then skeletal body of a great, black, winged horse emerged from the darkness. It looked around at the class for a few seconds, swishing its long black tail, then bowed its head and began to tear flesh from the dead cow with its pointed fangs.

A great wave of relief broke over Harry. Here at last was proof that he had not imagined these creatures, that they were real: Hagrid knew about them too. He looked eagerly at Ron, but Ron was still staring around into the trees and after a few seconds he whispered, “Why doesn’t Hagrid call again?”

Most of the rest of the class were wearing expressions as confused and nervously expectant as Ron’s and were still gazing everywhere but at the horse standing feet from them. There were only two other peo-ple who seemed to be able to see them: a stringy Slytherin boy standing just behind Goyle was watching the horse eating with an expression of great distaste on his face, and Neville, whose eyes were following the swishing progress of the long black tail.

“Oh, an’ here comes another one!” said Hagrid proudly, as a second black horse appeared out of the dark trees, folded its leathery wings closer to its body, and dipped its head to gorge on the meat. “Now … put yer hands up, who can see ’em?”

Immensely pleased to feel that he was at last going to understand the mystery of these horses, Harry raised his hand. Hagrid nodded at him.

“Yeah … yeah, I knew you’d be able ter, Harry,” he said seriously. “An’ you too, Neville, eh? An’ —”

“Excuse me,” said Malfoy in a sneering voice, “but what exactly are we supposed to be seeing?”

For answer, Hagrid pointed at the cow carcass on the ground. The whole class stared at it for a few seconds, then several people gasped and Parvati squealed. Harry understood why: Bits of flesh stripping themselves away from the bones and vanishing into thin air had to look very odd indeed.

“What’s doing it?” Parvati demanded in a terrified voice, retreating behind the nearest tree. “What’s eating it?”

"Thestrals," said Hagrid proudly and Hermione gave a soft "oh!" of comprehension at Harry's shoulder. "Hogwarts has got a whole herd of 'em in here. Now, who knows — ?"

"But they're really, really unlucky!" interrupted Parvati, looking alarmed. "They're supposed to bring all sorts of horrible misfortune on people who see them. Professor Trelawney told me once —"

"No, no, no," said Hagrid, chuckling, "tha's jus' superstition, that is, they aren' unlucky, they're dead clever an' useful! 'Course, this lot don' get a lot o' work, it's mainly jus' pullin' the school carriages unless Dumbledore's takin' a long journey an' don' want ter Apparate — an' here's another couple, look —"

Two more horses came quietly out of the trees, one of them passing very close to Parvati, who shivered and pressed herself closer to the tree, saying, "I think I felt something, I think it's near me!"

"Don' worry, it won' hurt yeh," said Hagrid patiently. "Righ', now, who can tell me why some o' you can see them an' some can't?"

Hermione raised her hand.

"Go on then," said Hagrid, beaming at her.

"The only people who can see thestrals," she said, "are people who have seen death."

"Tha's exactly right," said Hagrid solemnly, "ten points ter Gryffin-dor. Now, thestrals —"

"Hem, hem."

Professor Umbridge had arrived. She was standing a few feet away from Harry, wearing her green hat and cloak again, her clipboard at the ready. Hagrid, who had never heard Umbridge's fake cough be-

fore, was gazing in some concern at the closest thestral, evidently under the impression that it had made the sound.

"Hem, hem."

"Oh hello!" Hagrid said, smiling, having located the source of the noise.

"You received the note I sent to your cabin this morning?" said Umbridge, in the same loud, slow voice she had used with him earlier, as though she was addressing somebody both foreign and very slow. "Telling you that I would be inspecting your lesson?"

"Oh yeah," said Hagrid brightly. "Glad yeh found the place all righ'! Well, as you can see — or, I dunno — can you? We're doin' thestrals today —"

"I'm sorry?" said Umbridge loudly, cupping her hand around her ear and frowning. "What did you say?"

Hagrid looked a little confused.

"Er — thestrals!" he said loudly. "Big — er — winged horses, yeh know!"

He flapped his gigantic arms hopefully. Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows at him and muttered as she made a note on her clipboard, " 'has … to … resort … to … crude … sign … language …' "

"Well … anyway …" said Hagrid, turning back to the class and looking slightly flustered. "Erm … what was I sayin'?"

" 'Appears … to … have … poor … short … term … memory …' " muttered Umbridge, loudly enough for everyone to hear her. Draco Malfoy looked as though Christmas had come a month early; Hermione, on the other hand, had turned scarlet with suppressed rage.

“Oh yeah,” said Hagrid, throwing an uneasy glance at Umbridge’s clipboard, but plowing on valiantly. “Yeah, I was gonna tell yeh how come we got a herd. Yeah, so, we started off with a male an’ five fe-males. This one,” he patted the first horse to have appeared, “name o’ Tenebrus, he’s my special favorite, firs’ one born here in the forest —”

“Are you aware,” Umbridge said loudly, interrupting him, “that the Ministry of Magic has classified thestrals as ‘dangerous’?”

Harry’s heart sank like a stone, but Hagrid merely chuckled.

“Thestrals aren’ dangerous! All righ, they might take a bite outta you if yeh really annoy them —”

“ ‘Shows … signs … of … pleasure … at … idea … of … vio-lence … ‘ ” muttered Umbridge, scribbling on her clipboard again.

“No — come on!” said Hagrid, looking a little anxious now. “I mean, a dog’ll bite if yeh bait it, won’ it — but thestrals have jus’ got a bad reputation because o’ the death thing — people used ter think they were bad omens, didn’ they? Jus’ didn’ understand, did they?”

Umbridge did not answer; she finished writing her last note, then looked up at Hagrid and said, again very loudly and slowly, “Please continue teaching as usual. I am going to walk” — she mimed walk-ing — Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson were having silent fits of laughter — “among the students” — she pointed around at individual mem-bers of the class — “and ask them questions.” She pointed at her mouth to indicate talking.

Hagrid stared at her, clearly at a complete loss to understand why she was acting as though he did not understand normal English. Hermione had tears of fury in her eyes now.

“You hag, you evil hag!” she whispered, as Umbridge walked to-ward Pansy Parkinson. “I know what you’re doing, you awful, twisted,

vicious —”

“Erm … anyway,” said Hagrid, clearly struggling to regain the flow of his lesson, “so — thestrals. Yeah. Well, there’s loads o’ good stuff abou’ them. …”

“Do you find,” said Professor Umbridge in a ringing voice to Pansy Parkinson, “that you are able to understand Professor Hagrid when he talks?”

Just like Hermione, Pansy had tears in her eyes, but these were tears of laughter; indeed, her answer was almost incoherent because she was trying to suppress her giggles. “No … because … well … it sounds … like grunting a lot of the time. …”

Umbridge scribbled on her clipboard. The few unbruised bits of Hagrid’s face flushed, but he tried to act as though he had not heard Pansy’s answer.

“Er … yeah … good stuff abou’ thestrals. Well, once they’re tamed, like this lot, yeh’ll never be lost again. ‘Mazin’ senses o’ direc-tion, jus’ tell ’em where yeh want ter go —”

“Assuming they can understand you, of course,” said Malfoy loudly, and Pansy Parkinson collapsed in a fit of renewed giggles. Pro-fessor Umbridge smiled indulgently at them and then turned to Neville.

“You can see the thestrals, Longbottom, can you?” she said.

Neville nodded.

“Whom did you see die?” she asked, her tone indifferent.

“My … my grandad,” said Neville.

“And what do you think of them?” she said, waving her stubby hand at the horses, who by now had stripped a great deal of the car-cass

down to bone.

“Erm,” said Neville nervously, with a glance at Hagrid. “Well, they’re … er … okay. …”

“ ‘Students … are … too … intimidated … to … admit … they … are … frightened. …’ ” muttered Umbridge, making another note on her clipboard.

“No!” said Neville, looking upset, “no, I’m not scared of them — !”

“It’s quite all right,” said Umbridge, patting Neville on the shoul-der with what she evidently intended to be an understanding smile, though it looked more like a leer to Harry. “Well, Hagrid,” she turned to look up at him again, speaking once more in that loud, slow voice, “I think I’ve got enough to be getting along with. … You will re-ceive” — she mimed taking something from the air in front of her — “the results of your inspection” — she pointed at the clipboard — “in ten days’ time.” She held up ten stubby little fingers, then, her smile wider and more toadlike than ever before beneath her green hat, she bustled from their midst, leaving Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson in fits of laughter, Hermione actually shaking with fury, and Neville looking confused and upset.

“That foul, lying, twisting old gargoyle!” stormed Hermione half an hour later, as they made their way back up to the castle through the channels they had made earlier in the snow. “You see what she’s up to? It’s her thing about half-breeds all over again — she’s trying to make out Hagrid’s some kind of dim-witted troll, just because he had a gi-antess for a mother — and oh, it’s not fair, that really wasn’t a bad les-son at all — I mean, all right, if it had been Blast-Ended Skrewts again, but thestrals are fine — in fact, for Hagrid, they’re really good!”

“Umbridge said they’re dangerous,” said Ron.

"Well, it's like Hagrid said, they can look after themselves," said Hermione impatiently, "and I suppose a teacher like Grubbly-Plank wouldn't usually show them to us before N.E.W.T. level, but, well, they are very interesting, aren't they? The way some people can see them and some can't! I wish I could."

"Do you?" Harry asked her quietly.

She looked horrorstruck.

"Oh Harry — I'm sorry — no, of course I don't — that was a re-ally stupid thing to say —"

"It's okay," he said quickly, "don't worry. …"

"I'm surprised so many people could see them," said Ron. "Three in a class —"

"Yeah, Weasley, we were just wondering," said a malicious voice nearby. Unheard by any of them in the muffling snow, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were walking along right behind them. "D'you reckon if you saw someone snuff it you'd be able to see the Quaffle better?"

He, Crabbe, and Goyle roared with laughter as they pushed past on their way to the castle and then broke into a chorus of "Weasley Is Our King." Ron's ears turned scarlet.

"Ignore them, just ignore them," intoned Hermione, pulling out her wand and performing the charm to produce hot air again, so that she could melt them an easier path through the untouched snow between them and the greenhouses.

December arrived, bringing with it more snow and a positive avalanche of homework for the fifth years. Ron and Hermione's prefect duties also became more and more onerous as Christmas approached. They were called upon to supervise the decoration of the

castle ("You try putting up tinsel when Peeves has got the other end and is trying to strangle you with it," said Ron), to watch over first and second years spending their break times inside because of the bit-ter cold ("And they're cheeky little snotrags, you know, we definitely weren't that rude when we were in first year," said Ron), and to patrol the corridors in shifts with Argus Filch, who suspected that the holi-day spirit might show itself in an outbreak of wizard duels ("He's got dung for brains, that one," said Ron furiously). They were so busy that Hermione had stopped knitting elf hats and was fretting that she was down to her last three.

"All those poor elves I haven't set free yet, having to stay over dur-ing Christmas because there aren't enough hats!"

Harry, who had not had the heart to tell her that Dobby was taking everything she made, bent lower over his History of Magic essay. In any case, he did not want to think about Christmas. For the first time in his school career, he very much wanted to spend the holidays away from Hogwarts. Between his Quidditch ban and worry about whether or not Hagrid was going to be put on probation, he felt highly resent-ful toward the place at the moment. The only thing he really looked forward to were the D.A. meetings, and they would have to stop over the holidays, as nearly everybody in the D.A. would be spending the time with their families. Hermione was going skiing with her parents, something that greatly amused Ron, who had never before heard of Muggles strapping narrow strips of wood to their feet to slide down mountains. Ron, meanwhile, was going home to the Burrow. Harry endured several days of jealousy before Ron said, in response to Harry asking how Ron was going to get home for Christmas, "But you're coming too! Didn't I say? Mum wrote and told me to invite you weeks ago!

Hermione rolled her eyes, but Harry's spirits soared: The thought of Christmas at the Burrow was truly wonderful, only slightly marred by Harry's guilty feeling that he would not be able to spend the holi-day with Sirius. He wondered whether he could possibly persuade Mrs.

Weasley to invite his godfather for the festivities too, but apart from the fact that he doubted whether Dumbledore would permit Sir-ius to leave Grimmauld Place, he could not help but feel that Mrs. Weasley might not want him; they were so often at loggerheads. Sir-ius had not contacted Harry at all since his last appearance in the fire, and although Harry knew that with Umbridge on the constant watch it would be unwise to attempt to contact him, he did not like to think of Sirius alone in his mother's old house, perhaps pulling a lonely cracker with Kreacher.

Harry arrived early in the Room of Requirement for the last D.A. meeting before the holidays and was very glad he had, because when the lamps burst into light he saw that Dobby had taken it upon him-self to decorate the place for Christmas. He could tell the elf had done it, because nobody else would have strung a hundred golden baubles from the ceiling, each showing a picture of Harry's face and bearing the legend HAVE A VERY HARRY CHRISTMAS!

Harry had only just managed to get the last of them down before the door creaked open and Luna Lovegood entered, looking dreamy as always.

"Hello," she said vaguely, looking around at what remained of the decorations. "These are nice, did you put them up?"

"No," said Harry, "it was Dobby the house-elf."

"Mistletoe," said Luna dreamily, pointing at a large clump of white berries placed almost over Harry's head. He jumped out from under it. "Good thinking," said Luna very seriously. "It's often infested with nargles."

Harry was saved the necessity of asking what nargles were by the arrival of Angelina, Katie, and Alicia. All three of them were breath-less and looked very cold.

“Well,” said Angelina dully, pulling off her cloak and throwing it into a corner, “we’ve replaced you.”

“Replaced me?” said Harry blankly.

“You and Fred and George,” she said impatiently. “We’ve got an-other Seeker!”

“Who?” said Harry quickly.

“Ginny Weasley,” said Katie.

Harry gaped at her.

“Yeah, I know,” said Angelina, pulling out her wand and flexing her arm. “But she’s pretty good, actually. Nothing on you, of course,” she said, throwing him a very dirty look, “but as we can’t have you …”

Harry bit back the retort he was longing to utter: Did she imagine for a second that he did not regret his expulsion from the team a hun-dred times more than she did?

“And what about the Beaters?” he asked, trying to keep his voice even.

“Andrew Kirke,” said Alicia without enthusiasm, “and Jack Sloper. Neither of them are brilliant, but compared with the rest of the idiots who turned up …”

The arrival of Ron, Hermione, and Neville brought this depressing discussion to an end and within five minutes, the room was full enough to prevent him seeing Angelina’s burning, reproachful looks.

“Okay,” he said, calling them all to order. “I thought this evening we should just go over the things we’ve done so far, because it’s the last meeting before the holidays and there’s no point starting anything new right before a three-week break —”

“We’re not doing anything new?” said Zacharias Smith, in a disgruntled whisper loud enough to carry through the room. “If I’d known that, I wouldn’t have come. …”

“We’re all really sorry Harry didn’t tell you, then,” said Fred loudly.

Several people sniggered. Harry saw Cho laughing and felt the familiar swooping sensation in his stomach, as though he had missed a step going downstairs.

“We can practice in pairs,” said Harry. “We’ll start with the Impediment Jinx, just for ten minutes, then we can get out the cushions and try Stunning again.”

They all divided up obediently; Harry partnered Neville as usual. The room was soon full of intermittent cries of “Impedimenta!” People froze for a minute or so, during which their partners would stare aimlessly around the room watching other pairs at work, then would unfreeze and take their turn at the jinx.

Neville had improved beyond all recognition. After a while, when Harry had unfrozen three times in a row, he had Neville join Ron and Hermione again so that he could walk around the room and watch the others. When he passed Cho she beamed at him; he resisted the temp-tation to walk past her several more times.

After ten minutes on the Impediment Jinx, they laid out cushions all over the floor and started practicing Stunning again. Space was really too confined to allow them all to work this spell at once; half the group observed the others for a while, then swapped over. Harry felt himself positively swelling with pride as he watched them all. True, Neville did Stun Padma Patil rather than Dean, at whom he had been aiming, but it was a much closer miss than usual, and everybody else had made enormous progress.

At the end of an hour, Harry called a halt.

"You're getting really good," he said, beaming around at them. "When we get back from the holidays we can start doing some of the big stuff — maybe even Patronuses."

There was a murmur of excitement. The room began to clear in the usual twos and threes; most people wished Harry a Happy Christmas as they went. Feeling cheerful, he collected up the cushions with Ron and Hermione and stacked them neatly away. Ron and Hermione left before he did; he hung back a little, because Cho was still there and he was hoping to receive a Merry Christmas from her.

"No, you go on," he heard her say to her friend Marietta, and his heart gave a jolt that seemed to take it into the region of his Adam's apple.

He pretended to be straightening the cushion pile. He was quite sure they were alone now and waited for her to speak. Instead, he heard a hearty sniff.

He turned and saw Cho standing in the middle of the room, tears pouring down her face.

"Wha — ?"

He didn't know what to do. She was simply standing there, crying silently.

"What's up?" he said feebly.

She shook her head and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I'm — sorry," she said thickly. "I suppose … it's just … learning all this stuff. … It just makes me … wonder whether … if he'd known it all … he'd still be alive. …"

Harry's heart sank right back past its usual spot and settled somewhere around his navel. He ought to have known. She wanted to talk about Cedric.

“He did know this stuff,” Harry said heavily. “He was really good at it, or he could never have got to the middle of that maze. But if Voldemort really wants to kill you, you don’t stand a chance.”

She hiccuped at the sound of Voldemort’s name, but stared at Harry without flinching.

“You survived when you were just a baby,” she said quietly.

“Yeah, well,” said Harry wearily, moving toward the door, “I dunno why, nor does anyone else, so it’s nothing to be proud of.”

“Oh don’t go!” said Cho, sounding tearful again. “I’m really sorry to get all upset like this. … I didn’t mean to. …”

She hiccuped again. She was very pretty even when her eyes were red and puffy. Harry felt thoroughly miserable. He’d have been so pleased just with a Merry Christmas. …“I know it must be horrible for you,” she said, mopping her eyes on her sleeve again. “Me mentioning Cedric, when you saw him die. … I suppose you just want to forget about it. …”

Harry did not say anything to this; it was quite true, but he felt heartless saying it.

“You’re a r-really good teacher, you know,” said Cho, with a watery smile. “I’ve never been able to Stun anything before.”

“Thanks,” said Harry awkwardly.

They looked at each other for a long moment. Harry felt a burning desire to run from the room and, at the same time, a complete inability to move his feet.

“Mistletoe,” said Cho quietly, pointing at the ceiling over his head.

“Yeah,” said Harry. His mouth was very dry. “It’s probably full of nargles, though.”

“What are nargles?”

“No idea,” said Harry. She had moved closer. His brain seemed to have been Stunned. “You’d have to ask Loony. Luna, I mean.”

Cho made a funny noise halfway between a sob and a laugh. She was even nearer him now. He could have counted the freckles on her nose.

“I really like you, Harry.”

He could not think. A tingling sensation was spreading throughout him, paralyzing his arms, legs, and brain.

She was much too close. He could see every tear clinging to her eyelashes. …He returned to the common room half an hour later to find Hermione and Ron in the best seats by the fire; nearly everybody else had gone to bed. Hermione was writing a very long letter; she had al-ready filled half a roll of parchment, which was dangling from the edge of the table. Ron was lying on the hearthrug, trying to finish his Transfiguration homework.

“What kept you?” he asked, as Harry sank into the armchair next to Hermione’s.

Harry did not answer. He was in a state of shock. Half of him wanted to tell Ron and Hermione what had just happened, but the other half wanted to take the secret with him to the grave.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Hermione asked, peering at him over the tip of her quill.

Harry gave a halfhearted shrug. In truth, he didn’t know whether he was all right or not. “What’s up?” said Ron, hoisting himself up on his

elbow to get a clearer view of Harry. “What’s happened?”

Harry didn’t quite know how to set about telling them, and still wasn’t sure whether he wanted to. Just as he had decided not to say anything, Hermione took matters out of his hands.

“Is it Cho?” she asked in a businesslike way. “Did she corner you after the meeting?”

Numbly surprised, Harry nodded. Ron sniggered, breaking off when Hermione caught his eye.

“So — er — what did she want?” he asked in a mock casual voice.

“She —” Harry began, rather hoarsely; he cleared his throat and tried again. “She — er —”

“Did you kiss?” asked Hermione briskly.

Ron sat up so fast that he sent his ink bottle flying all over the rug. Disregarding this completely he stared avidly at Harry.

“Well?” he demanded.

Harry looked from Ron’s expression of mingled curiosity and hilar-ity to Hermione’s slight frown, and nodded.

“HA!”

Ron made a triumphant gesture with his fist and went into a rau-cous peal of laughter that made several timid-looking second years over beside the window jump. A reluctant grin spread over Harry’s face as he watched Ron rolling around on the hearthrug. Hermione gave Ron a look of deep disgust and returned to her letter.

“Well?” Ron said finally, looking up at Harry. “How was it?”

Harry considered for a moment.

"Wet," he said truthfully.

Ron made a noise that might have indicated jubilation or disgust, it was hard to tell.

"Because she was crying," Harry continued heavily.

"Oh," said Ron, his smile fading slightly. "Are you that bad at kissing?"

"Dunno," said Harry, who hadn't considered this, and immediately felt rather worried. "Maybe I am."

"Of course you're not," said Hermione absently, still scribbling away at her letter.

"How do you know?" said Ron in a sharp voice.

"Because Cho spends half her time crying these days," said Hermione vaguely. "She does it at mealtimes, in the loos, all over the place."

"You'd think a bit of kissing would cheer her up," said Ron, grinning.

"Ron," said Hermione in a dignified voice, dipping the point of her quill into her ink pot, "you are the most insensitive wart I have ever had the misfortune to meet."

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Ron indignantly. "What sort of person cries while someone's kissing them?"

"Yeah," said Harry, slightly desperately, "who does?"

Hermione looked at the pair of them with an almost pitying expression on her face.

"Don't you understand how Cho's feeling at the moment?" she asked.

"No," said Harry and Ron together.

Hermione sighed and laid down her quill.

"Well, obviously, she's feeling very sad, because of Cedric dying. Then I expect she's feeling confused because she liked Cedric and now she likes Harry, and she can't work out who she likes best. Then she'll be feeling guilty, thinking it's an insult to Cedric's memory to be kiss-ing Harry at all, and she'll be worrying about what everyone else might say about her if she starts going out with Harry. And she prob-ably can't work out what her feelings toward Harry are anyway, be-cause he was the one who was with Cedric when Cedric died, so that's all very mixed up and painful. Oh, and she's afraid she's going to be thrown off the Ravenclaw Quidditch team because she's been flying so badly."

A slightly stunned silence greeted the end of this speech, then Ron said, "One person can't feel all that at once, they'd explode."

"Just because you've got the emotional range of a teaspoon doesn't mean we all have," said Hermione nastily, picking up her quill again.

"She was the one who started it," said Harry. "I wouldn't've — she just sort of came at me — and next thing she's crying all over me — I didn't know what to do —"

"Don't blame you, mate," said Ron, looking alarmed at the very thought.

"You just had to be nice to her," said Hermione, looking up anx-iously. "You were, weren't you?"

"Well," said Harry, an unpleasant heat creeping up his face, "I sort of — patted her on the back a bit."

Hermione looked as though she was restraining herself from rolling her eyes with extreme difficulty.

“Well, I suppose it could have been worse,” she said. “Are you go-ing to see her again?”

“I’ll have to, won’t I?” said Harry. “We’ve got D.A. meetings, haven’t we?”

“You know what I mean,” said Hermione impatiently.

Harry said nothing. Hermione’s words opened up a whole new vista of frightening possibilities. He tried to imagine going somewhere with Cho — Hogsmeade, perhaps — and being alone with her for hours at a time. Of course, she would have been expecting him to ask her out after what had just happened. … The thought made his stomach clench painfully.

“Oh well,” said Hermione distantly, buried in her letter once more, “you’ll have plenty of opportunities to ask her. …”

“What if he doesn’t want to ask her?” said Ron, who had been watching Harry with an unusually shrewd expression on his face.

“Don’t be silly,” said Hermione vaguely, “Harry’s liked her for ages, haven’t you, Harry?”

He did not answer. Yes, he had liked Cho for ages, but whenever he had imagined a scene involving the two of them it had always featured a Cho who was enjoying herself, as opposed to a Cho who was sob-bing uncontrollably into his shoulder.

“Who’re you writing the novel to anyway?” Ron asked Hermione, trying to read the bit of parchment now trailing on the floor. Hermione hitched it up out of sight.

“Viktor.”

“Krum?”

“How many other Viktors do we know?”

Ron said nothing, but looked disgruntled. They sat in silence for another twenty minutes, Ron finishing his Transfiguration essay with many snorts of impatience and crossings-out, Hermione writing steadily to the very end of the parchment, rolling it up carefully and sealing it, and Harry staring into the fire, wishing more than anything that Sirius’s head would appear there and give him some advice about girls. But the fire merely crackled lower and lower, until the red-hot embers crumbled into ash and, looking around, Harry saw that they were, yet again, the last in the common room.

“Well, ’night,” said Hermione, yawning widely, and she set off up the girls’ staircase.

“What does she see in Krum?” Ron demanded as he and Harry climbed the boys’ stairs.

“Well,” said Harry, considering the matter, “I s’pose he’s older, isn’t he … and he’s an international Quidditch player. …”

“Yeah, but apart from that,” said Ron, sounding aggravated. “I mean he’s a grouchy git, isn’t he?”

“Bit grouchy, yeah,” said Harry, whose thoughts were still on Cho.

They pulled off their robes and put on pajamas in silence; Dean, Seamus, and Neville were already asleep. Harry put his glasses on his bedside table and got into bed but did not pull the hangings closed around his four-poster; instead he stared at the patch of starry sky vis-ible through the window next to Neville’s bed. If he had known, this time last night, that in twenty-four hours’ time he would have kissed Cho Chang …“ ’Night,” grunted Ron, from somewhere to his right.

“ ’Night,” said Harry.

Maybe next time … if there was a next time … she'd be a bit happier. He ought to have asked her out; she had probably been expecting it and was now really angry with him … or was she lying in bed, still crying about Cedric? He did not know what to think. Hermione's explanation had made it all seem more complicated rather than easier to understand.

That's what they should teach us here, he thought, turning over onto his side, how girls' brains work … it'd be more useful than Divination anyway. …Neville snuffled in his sleep. An owl hooted somewhere out in the night.

Harry dreamed he was back in the D.A. room. Cho was accusing him of luring her there under false pretenses; she said that he had promised her a hundred and fifty Chocolate Frog cards if she showed up. Harry protested. … Cho shouted, "Cedric gave me loads of Choco-late Frog cards, look!" And she pulled out fistfuls of cards from inside her robes and threw them into the air, and then turned into Hermione, who said, "You did promise her, you know, Harry. … I think you'd better give her something else instead. … How about your Firebolt?" And Harry was protesting that he could not give Cho his Firebolt because Umbridge had it, and anyway the whole thing was ridiculous, he'd only come to the D.A. room to put up some Christmas baubles shaped like Dobby's head. …The dream changed. …

His body felt smooth, powerful, and flexible. He was gliding be-tween shining metal bars, across dark, cold stone. … He was flat against the floor, sliding along on his belly. … It was dark, yet he could see objects around him shimmering in strange, vibrant colors. … He was turning his head. … At first glance, the corridor was empty … but no … a man was sitting on the floor ahead, his chin drooping onto his chest, his outline gleaming in the dark. …Harry put out his tongue. … He tasted the man's scent on the air. … He was alive but drowsing … sitting in front of a door at the end of the corridor …Harry longed to bite the man … but he must master the impulse. … He had more important work to do. …But the man was stirring … a silvery cloak fell

from his legs as he jumped to his feet; and Harry saw his vibrant, blurred outline tower-ing above him, saw a wand withdrawn from a belt. … He had no choice. … He reared high from the floor and struck once, twice, three times, plunging his fangs deeply into the man's flesh, feeling his ribs splinter beneath his jaws, feeling the warm gush of blood. …The man was yelling in pain … then he fell silent. … He slumped backward against the wall. … Blood was splattering onto the floor. …His forehead hurt terribly. … It was aching fit to burst. …"Harry! HARRY!"

He opened his eyes. Every inch of his body was covered in icy sweat; his bedcovers were twisted all around him like a straitjacket; he felt as though a white-hot poker was being applied to his forehead.

"Harry!"

Ron was standing over him looking extremely frightened. There were more figures at the foot of Harry's bed. He clutched his head in his hands; the pain was blinding him. … He rolled right over and vomited over the edge of the mattress.

"He's really ill," said a scared voice. "Should we call someone?"

"Harry! Harry!"

He had to tell Ron, it was very important that he tell him. … Tak-ing great gulps of air, Harry pushed himself up in bed, willing himself not to throw up again, the pain half-blinding him.

"Your dad," he panted, his chest heaving. "Your dad's … been attacked. …"

"What?" said Ron uncomprehendingly.

"Your dad! He's been bitten, it's serious, there was blood everywhere. …"

“I’m going for help,” said the same scared voice, and Harry heard footsteps running out of the dormitory.

“Harry, mate,” said Ron uncertainly, “you … you were just dreaming. …”

“No!” said Harry furiously; it was crucial that Ron understand. “It wasn’t a dream … not an ordinary dream. … I was there, I saw it. … I did it. …”

He could hear Seamus and Dean muttering but did not care. The pain in his forehead was subsiding slightly, though he was still sweat-ing and shivering feverishly. He retched again and Ron leapt backward out of the way.

“Harry, you’re not well,” he said shakily. “Neville’s gone for help. …”

“I’m fine!” Harry choked, wiping his mouth on his pajamas and shaking uncontrollably. “There’s nothing wrong with me, it’s your dad you’ve got to worry about — we need to find out where he is — he’s bleeding like mad — I was — it was a huge snake. …”

He tried to get out of bed but Ron pushed him back into it; Dean and Seamus were still whispering somewhere nearby. Whether one minute passed or ten, Harry did not know; he simply sat there shak-ing, feeling the pain recede very slowly from his scar. … Then there were hurried footsteps coming up the stairs, and he heard Neville’s voice again.

“Over here, Professor …”

Professor McGonagall came hurrying into the dormitory in her tar-tan dressing gown, her glasses perched lopsidedly on the bridge of her bony nose.

“What is it, Potter? Where does it hurt?”

He had never been so pleased to see her; it was a member of the Order of the Phoenix he needed now, not someone fussing over him and prescribing useless potions.

"It's Ron's dad," he said, sitting up again. "He's been attacked by a snake and it's serious, I saw it happen."

"What do you mean, you saw it happen?" said Professor McGonagall, her dark eyebrows contracting.

"I don't know. … I was asleep and then I was there. …"

"You mean you dreamed this?"

"No!" said Harry angrily. Would none of them understand? "I was having a dream at first about something completely different, something stupid … and then this interrupted it. It was real, I didn't imagine it, Mr. Weasley was asleep on the floor and he was attacked by a gigantic snake, there was a load of blood, he collapsed, someone's got to find out where he is. …"

Professor McGonagall was gazing at him through her lopsided spectacles as though horrified at what she was seeing.

"I'm not lying, and I'm not mad!" Harry told her, his voice rising to a shout. "I tell you, I saw it happen!"

"I believe you, Potter," said Professor McGonagall curtly. "Put on your dressing-gown — we're going to see the headmaster."

Chapter 22 St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries

Harry was so relieved that she was taking him seriously that he did not hesitate, but jumped out of bed at once, pulled on his dressing gown, and pushed his glasses back onto his nose.

“Weasley, you ought to come too,” said Professor McGonagall.

They followed Professor McGonagall past the silent figures of Neville, Dean, and Seamus, out of the dormitory, down the spiral stairs into the common room, through the portrait hole, and off along the Fat Lady’s moonlit corridor. Harry felt as though the panic inside him might spill over at any moment; he wanted to run, to yell for Dumbledore. Mr. Weasley was bleeding as they walked along so sedately, and what if those fangs (Harry tried hard not to think “my fangs”) had been poisonous? They passed Mrs. Norris, who turned her lamplike eyes upon them and hissed faintly, but Professor McGona-gall said, “Shoo!” Mrs. Norris slunk away into the shadows, and in a few minutes they had reached the stone gargoyle guarding the en-trance to Dumbledore’s office.

“Fizzing Whizbee,” said Professor McGonagall.

The gargoyle sprang to life and leapt aside; the wall behind it split in two to reveal a stone staircase that was moving continuously up-ward like a spiral escalator. The three of them stepped onto the mov-ing stairs; the wall closed behind them with a thud, and they were moving upward in tight circles until they reached the highly polished oak door with the brass knocker shaped like a griffin.

Though it was now well past midnight, there were voices coming from inside the room, a positive babble of them. It sounded as though Dumbledore was entertaining at least a dozen people.

Professor McGonagall rapped three times with the griffin knocker, and the voices ceased abruptly as though someone had switched them all off. The door opened of its own accord and Professor McGonagall led Harry and Ron inside.

The room was in half darkness; the strange silver instruments standing on tables were silent and still rather than whirring and emitting puffs of smoke as they usually did. The portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses covering the walls were all snoozing in their frames. Behind the door, a magnificent red-and-gold bird the size of a swan dozed on its perch with its head under its wing.

"Oh, it's you, Professor McGonagall … and … ah."

Dumbledore was sitting in a high-backed chair behind his desk; he leaned forward into the pool of candlelight illuminating the papers laid out before him. He was wearing a magnificently embroidered purple-and-gold dressing gown over a snowy-white nightshirt, but seemed wide awake, his penetrating light-blue eyes fixed intently upon Professor McGonagall.

"Professor Dumbledore, Potter has had a … well, a nightmare," said Professor McGonagall. "He says …"

"It wasn't a nightmare," said Harry quickly.

Professor McGonagall looked around at Harry, frowning slightly.

"Very well, then, Potter, you tell the headmaster about it."

"I … well, I was asleep. …" said Harry and even in his terror and his desperation to make Dumbledore understand he felt slightly irri-tated that the headmaster was not looking at him, but examining his own interlocked fingers. "But it wasn't an ordinary dream … it was real. … I saw it happen. …" He took a deep breath, "Ron's dad — Mr. Weasley — has been attacked by a giant snake."

The words seemed to reverberate in the air after he had said them, slightly ridiculous, even comic. There was a pause in which Dumbledore leaned back and stared meditatively at the ceiling. Ron looked from Harry to Dumbledore, white-faced and shocked.

“How did you see this?” Dumbledore asked quietly, still not look-ing at Harry.

“Well … I don’t know,” said Harry, rather angrily — what did it matter? “Inside my head, I suppose —”

“You misunderstand me,” said Dumbledore, still in the same calm tone. “I mean … can you remember — er — where you were positioned as you watched this attack happen? Were you perhaps standing beside the victim, or else looking down on the scene from above?”

This was such a curious question that Harry gaped at Dumbledore; it was almost as though he knew …“I was the snake,” he said. “I saw it all from the snake’s point of view. …”

Nobody else spoke for a moment, then Dumbledore, now looking at Ron, who was still whey-faced, said in a new and sharper voice, “Is Arthur seriously injured?”

“Yes,” said Harry emphatically — why were they all so slow on the uptake, did they not realize how much a person bled when fangs that long pierced their side? And why could Dumbledore not do him the courtesy of looking at him?

But Dumbledore stood up so quickly that Harry jumped, and addressed one of the old portraits hanging very near the ceiling.

“Everard?” he said sharply. “And you too, Dilys!”

A sallow-faced wizard with short, black bangs and an elderly witch with long silver ringlets in the frame beside him, both of whom

seemed to have been in the deepest of sleeps, opened their eyes immediately.

“You were listening?” said Dumbledore.

The wizard nodded, the witch said, “Naturally.”

“The man has red hair and glasses,” said Dumbledore. “Everard, you will need to raise the alarm, make sure he is found by the right people —”

Both nodded and moved sideways out of their frames, but instead of emerging in neighboring pictures (as usually happened at Hogwarts), neither reappeared; one frame now contained nothing but a backdrop of dark curtain, the other a handsome leather armchair. Harry noticed that many of the other headmasters and mistresses on the walls, though snoring and drooling most convincingly, kept sneaking peeks at him under their eyelids, and he suddenly understood who had been talking when they had knocked.

“Everard and Dilys were two of Hogwarts’s most celebrated Heads,” Dumbledore said, now sweeping around Harry, Ron, and Professor McGonagall and approaching the magnificent sleeping bird on his perch beside the door. “Their renown is such that both have portraits hanging in other important Wizarding institutions. As they are free to move between their own portraits they can tell us what may be happening elsewhere. …”

“But Mr. Weasley could be anywhere!” said Harry.

“Please sit down, all three of you,” said Dumbledore, as though Harry had not spoken. “Everard and Dilys may not be back for several minutes. … Professor McGonagall, if you could draw up extra chairs …”

Professor McGonagall pulled her wand from the pocket of her dressing gown and waved it; three chairs appeared out of thin air,

straight-backed and wooden, quite unlike the comfortable chintz armchairs that Dumbledore had conjured back at Harry's hearing. Harry sat down, watching Dumbledore over his shoulder. Dumbledore was now stroking Fawkes's plumed golden head with one finger. The phoenix awoke immediately. He stretched his beautiful head high and observed Dumbledore through bright, dark eyes.

"We will need," said Dumbledore very quietly to the bird, "a warning."

There was a flash of fire and the phoenix had gone.

Dumbledore now swooped down upon one of the fragile silver instruments whose function Harry had never known, carried it over to his desk, sat down facing them again, and tapped it gently with the tip of his wand.

The instrument tinkled into life at once with rhythmic clinking noises. Tiny puffs of pale green smoke issued from the minuscule sil-ver tube at the top. Dumbledore watched the smoke closely, his brow furrowed, and after a few seconds, the tiny puffs became a steady stream of smoke that thickened and coiled in the air. … A serpent's head grew out of the end of it, opening its mouth wide. Harry wondered whether the instrument was confirming his story: He looked eagerly at Dumbledore for a sign that he was right, but Dumbledore did not look up.

"Naturally, naturally," murmured Dumbledore apparently to him-self, still observing the stream of smoke without the slightest sign of surprise. "But in essence divided?"

Harry could make neither head nor tail of this question. The smoke serpent, however, split itself instantly into two snakes, both coiling and undulating in the dark air. With a look of grim satisfaction Dumbledore gave the instrument another gentle tap with his wand: The clinking noise slowed and died, and the smoke serpents grew faint, became a formless haze, and vanished.

Dumbledore replaced the instrument upon its spindly little table; Harry saw many of the old headmasters in the portraits follow him with their eyes, then, realizing that Harry was watching them, hastily pretend to be sleeping again. Harry wanted to ask what the strange sil-ver instrument was for, but before he could do so, there was a shout from the top of the wall to their right; the wizard called Everard had reappeared in his portrait, panting slightly.

"Dumbledore!"

"What news?" said Dumbledore at once.

"I yelled until someone came running," said the wizard, who was mopping his brow on the curtain behind him, "said I'd heard something moving downstairs — they weren't sure whether to believe me but went down to check — you know there are no portraits down there to watch from. Anyway, they carried him up a few minutes later. He doesn't look good, he's covered in blood, I ran along to Elfrida Cragg's portrait to get a good view as they left —"

"Good," said Dumbledore as Ron made a convulsive movement, "I take it Dilys will have seen him arrive, then —"

And moments later, the silver-ringletted witch had reappeared in her picture too; she sank, coughing, into her armchair and said, "Yes, they've taken him to St. Mungo's, Dumbledore. … They carried him past under my portrait. … He looks bad. …"

"Thank you," said Dumbledore. He looked around at Professor McGonagall.

"Minerva, I need you to go and wake the other Weasley children."

"Of course. …"

Professor McGonagall got up and moved swiftly to the door; Harry cast a sideways glance at Ron, who was now looking terrified.

“And Dumbledore — what about Molly?” said Professor McGona-gall, pausing at the door.

“That will be a job for Fawkes when he has finished keeping a lookout for anybody approaching,” said Dumbledore. “But she may already know … that excellent clock of hers …”

Harry knew Dumbledore was referring to the clock that told, not the time, but the whereabouts and conditions of the various Weasley family members, and with a pang he thought that Mr. Weasley’s hand must, even now, be pointing at “mortal peril.” But it was very late. … Mrs. Weasley was probably asleep, not watching the clock. … And he felt cold as he remembered Mrs. Weasley’s boggart turning into Mr. Weasley’s lifeless body, his glasses askew, blood running down his face. … But Mr. Weasley wasn’t going to die. … He couldn’t. … Dumbledore was now rummaging in a cupboard behind Harry and Ron. He emerged from it carrying a blackened old kettle, which he placed carefully upon his desk. He raised his wand and murmured “Portus”; for a moment the kettle trembled, glowing with an odd blue light, then it quivered to a rest, as solidly black as ever.

Dumbledore marched over to another portrait, this time of a clever-looking wizard with a pointed beard, who had been painted wearing the Slytherin colors of green and silver and was apparently sleeping so deeply that he could not hear Dumbledore’s voice when he attempted to rouse him.

“Phineas. Phineas.”

And now the subjects of the portraits lining the room were no longer pretending to be asleep; they were shifting around in their frames, the better to watch what was happening. When the clever-looking wizard continued to feign sleep, some of them shouted his name too.

“Phineas! Phineas! PHINEAS!”

He could not pretend any longer; he gave a theatrical jerk and opened his eyes wide.

“Did someone call?”

“I need you to visit your other portrait again, Phineas,” said Dumbledore. “I’ve got another message.”

“Visit my other portrait?” said Phineas in a reedy voice, giving a long, fake yawn (his eyes traveling around the room and focusing upon Harry). “Oh no, Dumbledore, I am too tired tonight. …”

Something about Phineas’s voice was familiar to Harry. Where had he heard it before? But before he could think, the portraits on the surrounding walls broke into a storm of protest.

“Insubordination, sir!” roared a corpulent, red-nosed wizard, brandishing his fists. “Dereliction of duty!”

“We are honor-bound to give service to the present Headmaster of Hogwarts!” cried a frail-looking old wizard whom Harry recognized as Dumbledore’s predecessor, Armando Dippet. “Shame on you, Phineas!”

“Shall I persuade him, Dumbledore?” called a gimlet-eyed witch, raising an unusually thick wand that looked not unlike a birch rod.

“Oh, very well,” said the wizard called Phineas, eyeing this wand slightly apprehensively, “though he may well have destroyed my picture by now, he’s done most of the family —”

“Sirius knows not to destroy your portrait,” said Dumbledore, and Harry realized immediately where he had heard Phineas’s voice before: issuing from the apparently empty frame in his bedroom in Grim-mauld Place. “You are to give him the message that Arthur Weasley has been gravely injured and that his wife, children, and Harry Potter will be arriving at his house shortly. Do you understand?”

“Arthur Weasley, injured, wife and children and Harry Potter coming to stay,” recited Phineas in a bored voice. “Yes, yes … very well. …”

He sloped away into the frame of the portrait and disappeared from view at the very moment that the study door opened again. Fred, George, and Ginny were ushered inside by Professor McGonagall, all three of them looking disheveled and shocked, still in their night things.

“Harry — what’s going on?” asked Ginny, who looked frightened. “Professor McGonagall says you saw Dad hurt —”

“Your father has been injured in the course of his work for the Or-der of the Phoenix,” said Dumbledore before Harry could speak. “He has been taken to St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and In-juries. I am sending you back to Sirius’s house, which is much more convenient for the hospital than the Burrow. You will meet your mother there.”

“How’re we going?” asked Fred, looking shaken. “Floo powder?”

“No,” said Dumbledore, “Floo powder is not safe at the moment, the Network is being watched. You will be taking a Portkey.” He indi-cated the old kettle lying innocently on his desk. “We are just waiting for Phineas Nigellus to report back. … I wish to be sure that the coast is clear before sending you —”

There was a flash of flame in the very middle of the office, leaving behind a single golden feather that floated gently to the floor.

“It is Fawkes’s warning,” said Dumbledore, catching the feather as it fell. “She must know you’re out of your beds. … Minerva, go and head her off — tell her any story —”

Professor McGonagall was gone in a swish of tartan.

“He says he’ll be delighted,” said a bored voice behind Dumble-dore; the wizard called Phineas had reappeared in front of his Slytherin banner. “My great-great-grandson has always had odd taste in houseguests. …”

“Come here, then,” Dumbledore said to Harry and the Weasleys. “And quickly, before anyone else joins us …”

Harry and the others gathered around Dumbledore’s desk.

“You have all used a Portkey before?” asked Dumbledore, and they nodded, each reaching out to touch some part of the blackened kettle. “Good. On the count of three then … one … two …”

It happened in a fraction of a second: In the infinitesimal pause before Dumbledore said “three,” Harry looked up at him — they were very close together — and Dumbledore’s clear blue gaze moved from the Portkey to Harry’s face.

At once, Harry’s scar burned white-hot, as though the old wound had burst open again — and unbidden, unwanted, but terrifyingly strong, there rose within Harry a hatred so powerful he felt, for that instant, that he would like nothing better than to strike — to bite — to sink his fangs into the man before him —“… three.”

He felt a powerful jerk behind his navel, the ground vanished from beneath his feet, his hand was glued to the kettle; he was banging into the others as all sped forward in a swirl of colors and a rush of wind, the kettle pulling them onward and then —His feet hit the ground so hard that his knees buckled, the kettle clattered to the ground and somewhere close at hand a voice said, “Back again, the blood traitor brats, is it true their father’s dying … ?”

“OUT!” roared a second voice.

Harry scrambled to his feet and looked around; they had arrived in the gloomy basement kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

The only sources of light were the fire and one guttering candle, which illuminated the remains of a solitary supper. Kreacher was disappearing through the door to the hall, looking back at them malevolently as he hitched up his loincloth; Sirius was hurrying toward them all, looking anxious. He was unshaven and still in his day clothes; there was also a slightly Mundungus-like whiff of stale drink about him.

"What's going on?" he said, stretching out a hand to help Ginny up. "Phineas Nigellus said Arthur's been badly injured —"

"Ask Harry," said Fred.

"Yeah, I want to hear this for myself," said George.

The twins and Ginny were staring at him. Kreacher's footsteps had stopped on the stairs outside.

"It was —" Harry began; this was even worse than telling McGonagall and Dumbledore. "I had a — a kind of — vision. …"

And he told them all that he had seen, though he altered the story so that it sounded as though he had watched from the sidelines as the snake attacked, rather than from behind the snake's own eyes. … Ron, who was still very white, gave him a fleeting look, but did not speak. When Harry had finished, Fred, George, and Ginny continued to stare at him for a moment. Harry did not know whether he was imagining it or not, but he fancied there was something accusatory in their looks. Well, if they were going to blame him for just seeing the attack, he was glad he had not told them that he had been inside the snake at the time. …"Is Mum here?" said Fred, turning to Sirius.

"She probably doesn't even know what's happened yet," said Sirius. "The important thing was to get you away before Umbridge could interfere. I expect Dumbledore's letting Molly know now."

“We’ve got to go to St. Mungo’s,” said Ginny urgently. She looked around at her brothers; they were of course still in their pajamas. “Sirius, can you lend us cloaks or anything — ?”

“Hang on, you can’t go tearing off to St. Mungo’s!” said Sirius.

“ ’Course we can go to St. Mungo’s if we want,” said Fred, with a mulish expression, “he’s our dad!”

“And how are you going to explain how you knew Arthur was attacked before the hospital even let his wife know?”

“What does that matter?” said George hotly.

“It matters because we don’t want to draw attention to the fact that Harry is having visions of things that are happening hundreds of miles away!” said Sirius angrily. “Have you any idea what the Ministry would make of that information?”

Fred and George looked as though they could not care less what the Ministry made of anything. Ron was still white-faced and silent. Ginny said, “Somebody else could have told us. … We could have heard it somewhere other than Harry. …”

“Like who?” said Sirius impatiently. “Listen, your dad’s been hurt while on duty for the Order and the circumstances are fishy enough without his children knowing about it seconds after it happened, you could seriously damage the Order’s —”

“We don’t care about the dumb Order!” shouted Fred.

“It’s our dad dying we’re talking about!” yelled George.

“Your father knew what he was getting into, and he won’t thank you for messing things up for the Order!” said Sirius angrily in his turn. “This is how it is — this is why you’re not in the Order — you don’t understand — there are things worth dying for!”

“Easy for you to say, stuck here!” bellowed Fred. “I don’t see you risking your neck!”

The little color remaining in Sirius’s face drained from it. He looked for a moment as though he would quite like to hit Fred, but when he spoke, it was in a voice of determined calm. “I know it’s hard, but we’ve all got to act as though we don’t know anything yet. We’ve got to stay put, at least until we hear from your mother, all right?”

Fred and George still looked mutinous. Ginny, however, took a few steps over to the nearest chair and sank into it. Harry looked at Ron, who made a funny movement somewhere between a nod and shrug, and they sat down too. The twins glared at Sirius for another minute, then took seats on either side of Ginny.

“That’s right,” said Sirius encouragingly, “come on, let’s all … let’s all have a drink while we’re waiting. Accio Butterbeer!”

He raised his wand as he spoke and half a dozen bottles came flying toward them out of the pantry, skidded along the table, scattering the debris of Sirius’s meal, and stopped neatly in front of the six of them. They all drank, and for a while the only sounds were those of the crack-ling of the kitchen fire and the soft thud of their bottles on the table.

Harry was only drinking to have something to do with his hands. His stomach was full of horrible hot, bubbling guilt. They would not be here if it were not for him; they would all still be asleep in bed. And it was no good telling himself that by raising the alarm he had ensured that Mr. Weasley was found, because there was also the inescapable business of it being he who had attacked Mr. Weasley in the first place. …Don’t be stupid, you haven’t got fangs, he told himself, trying to keep calm, though the hand on his butterbeer bottle was shaking. You were lying in bed, you weren’t attacking anyone. …But then, what just happened in Dumbledore’s office? he asked him-self. I felt like I wanted to attack Dumbledore too. …He put the bottle down on

the table a little harder than he meant to, so that it slopped over onto the table. No one took any notice. Then a burst of fire in midair illuminated the dirty plates in front of them and as they gave cries of shock, a scroll of parchment fell with a thud onto the table, accompanied by a single golden phoenix tail feather.

"Fawkes!" said Sirius at once, snatching up the parchment. "That's not Dumbledore's writing — it must be a message from your mother — here —"

He thrust the letter into George's hand, who ripped it open and read aloud, "Dad is still alive. I am setting out for St. Mungo's now. Stay where you are. I will send news as soon as I can. Mum."

George looked around the table.

"Still alive …" he said slowly. "But that makes it sound …"

He did not need to finish the sentence. It sounded to Harry too as though Mr. Weasley was hovering somewhere between life and death. Still exceptionally pale, Ron stared at the back of his mother's letter as though it might speak words of comfort to him. Fred pulled the parchment out of George's hands and read it for himself, then looked up at Harry, who felt his hand shaking on his butterbeer bottle again and clenched it more tightly to stop the trembling.

If Harry had ever sat through a longer night than this one he could not remember it. Sirius suggested once that they all go to bed, but without any real conviction, and the Weasleys' looks of disgust were answer enough. They mostly sat in silence around the table, watching the candle wick sinking lower and lower into liquid wax, now and then raising bottles to their lips, speaking only to check the time, to wonder aloud what was happening, and to reassure one another that if there was bad news, they would know straightaway, for Mrs. Weasley must long since have arrived at St. Mungo's.

Fred fell into a doze, his head sagging sideways onto his shoulder. Ginny was curled like a cat on her chair, but her eyes were open; Harry could see them reflecting the firelight. Ron was sitting with his head in his hands, whether awake or asleep it was impossible to tell. And he and Sirius looked at each other every so often, intruders upon the family grief, waiting … waiting …And then, at ten past five in the morning by Ron's watch, the kitchen door swung open and Mrs. Weasley entered the kitchen. She was extremely pale, but when they all turned to look at her, Fred, Ron, and Harry half-rising from their chairs, she gave a wan smile.

"He's going to be all right," she said, her voice weak with tiredness. "He's sleeping. We can all go and see him later. Bill's sitting with him now, he's going to take the morning off work."

Fred fell back into his chair with his hands over his face. George and Ginny got up, walked swiftly over to their mother, and hugged her. Ron gave a very shaky laugh and downed the rest of his butterbeer in one.

"Breakfast!" said Sirius loudly and joyfully, jumping to his feet. "Where's that accursed house-elf? Kreacher! KREACHER!"

But Kreacher did not answer the summons.

"Oh, forget it, then," muttered Sirius, counting the people in front of him. "So it's breakfast for — let's see — seven … Bacon and eggs, I think, and some tea, and toast —"

Harry hurried over to the stove to help. He did not want to intrude upon the Weasleys' happiness, and he dreaded the moment when Mrs. Weasley would ask him to recount his vision. However, he had barely taken plates from the dresser when Mrs. Weasley lifted them out of his hands and pulled him into a hug.

"I don't know what would have happened if it hadn't been for you, Harry," she said in a muffled voice. "They might not have found Arthur

for hours, and then it would have been too late, but thanks to you he's alive and Dumbledore's been able to think up a good cover story for Arthur being where he was, you've no idea what trouble he would have been in otherwise, look at poor Sturgis. …"

Harry could hardly stand her gratitude, but fortunately she soon released him to turn to Sirius and thank him for looking after her children through the night. Sirius said that he was very pleased to have been able to help, and hoped they would all stay with him as long as Mr. Weasley was in hospital.

"Oh, Sirius, I'm so grateful. … They think he'll be there a little while and it would be wonderful to be nearer … Of course, that might mean we're here for Christmas. …"

"The more the merrier!" said Sirius with such obvious sincerity that Mrs. Weasley beamed at him, threw on an apron, and began to help with breakfast.

"Sirius," Harry muttered, unable to stand it a moment longer. "Can I have a quick word? Er — now?"

He walked into the dark pantry and Sirius followed. Without preamble Harry told his godfather every detail of the vision he had had, including the fact that he himself had been the snake who had attacked Mr. Weasley.

When he paused for breath, Sirius said, "Did you tell Dumbledore this?"

"Yes," said Harry impatiently, "but he didn't tell me what it meant. Well, he doesn't tell me anything anymore. …"

"I'm sure he would have told you if it was anything to worry about," said Sirius steadily.

“But that’s not all,” said Harry in a voice only a little above a whis-per. “Sirius, I … I think I’m going mad. … Back in Dumbledore’s office, just before we took the Portkey … for a couple of seconds there I thought I was a snake, I felt like one — my scar really hurt when I was looking at Dumbledore — Sirius, I wanted to attack him —”

He could only see a sliver of Sirius’s face; the rest was in darkness.

“It must have been the aftermath of the vision, that’s all,” said Sir-ius. “You were still thinking of the dream or whatever it was and —”

“It wasn’t that,” said Harry, shaking his head. “It was like some-thing rose up inside me, like there’s a snake inside me —”

“You need to sleep,” said Sirius firmly. “You’re going to have break-fast and then go upstairs to bed, and then you can go and see Arthur after lunch with the others. You’re in shock, Harry; you’re blaming yourself for something you only witnessed, and it’s lucky you did wit-ness it or Arthur might have died. Just stop worrying. …”

He clapped Harry on the shoulder and left the pantry, leaving Harry standing alone in the dark.

Everyone but Harry spent the rest of the morning sleeping. He went up to the bedroom he had shared with Ron over the summer, but while Ron crawled into bed and was asleep within minutes, Harry sat fully clothed, hunched against the cold metal bars of the bedstead, keeping himself deliberately uncomfortable, determined not to fall into a doze, terrified that he might become the serpent again in his sleep and awake to find that he had attacked Ron, or else slithered through the house after one of the others. …When Ron woke up, Harry pretended to have enjoyed a refreshing nap too. Their trunks arrived from Hogwarts while they were eating lunch, so that they could dress as Muggles for the trip to St. Mungo’s. Everybody except Harry was riotously happy and talkative as they changed out of their robes into jeans and sweatshirts, and they greeted Tonks and Mad-Eye, who had turned up to escort them across Lon-don, gleefully laughing at

the bowler hat Mad-Eye was wearing at an angle to conceal his magical eye and assuring him, truthfully, that Tonks, whose hair was short and bright pink again, would attract far less attention on the underground.

Tonks was very interested in Harry's vision of the attack on Mr. Weasley, something he was not remotely interested in discussing.

"There isn't any Seer blood in your family, is there?" she inquired curiously, as they sat side by side on a train rattling toward the heart of the city.

"No," said Harry, thinking of Professor Trelawney and feeling insulted.

"No," said Tonks musingly, "no, I suppose it's not really prophecy you're doing, is it? I mean, you're not seeing the future, you're seeing the present. … It's odd, isn't it? Useful, though …"

Harry did not answer; fortunately they got out at the next stop, a station in the very heart of London, and in the bustle of leaving the train he was able to allow Fred and George to get between himself and Tonks, who was leading the way. They all followed her up the escala-tor, Moody clunking along at the back of the group, his bowler tilted low and one gnarled hand stuck in between the buttons of his coat, clutching his wand. Harry thought he sensed the concealed eye star-ing hard at him; trying to deflect more questions about his dream he asked Mad-Eye where St. Mungo's was hidden.

"Not far from here," grunted Moody as they stepped out into the wintry air on a broad store-lined street packed with Christmas shop-pers. He pushed Harry a little ahead of him and stumped along just behind; Harry knew the eye was rolling in all directions under the tilted hat. "Wasn't easy to find a good location for a hospital. Nowhere in Diagon Alley was big enough and we couldn't have it underground like the Ministry — unhealthy. In the end they managed to get hold of a building up here. Theory was sick wizards could come and go and just blend in with the crowd. …"

He seized Harry's shoulder to prevent them being separated by a gaggle of shoppers plainly intent on nothing but making it into a nearby shop full of electrical gadgets.

"Here we go," said Moody a moment later.

They had arrived outside a large, old-fashioned, red brick department store called Purge and Dowse Ltd. The place had a shabby, mis-erable air; the window displays consisted of a few chipped dummies with their wigs askew, standing at random and modeling fashions at least ten years out of date. Large signs on all the dusty doors read CLOSED FOR REFURBISHMENT. Harry distinctly heard a large woman laden with plastic shopping bags say to her friend as they passed, "It's never open, that place. …"

"Right," said Tonks, beckoning them forward to a window display-ing nothing but a particularly ugly female dummy whose false eye-lashes were hanging off and who was modeling a green nylon pinafore dress. "Everybody ready?"

They nodded, clustering around her; Moody gave Harry another shove between the shoulder blades to urge him forward and Tonks leaned close to the glass, looking up at the very ugly dummy and said, her breath steaming up the glass, "Wotcher … We're here to see Arthur Weasley."

For a split second, Harry thought how absurd it was for Tonks to expect the dummy to hear her talking that quietly through a sheet of glass, when there were buses rumbling along behind her and all the racket of a street full of shoppers. Then he reminded himself that dum-mies could not hear anyway. Next second his mouth opened in shock as the dummy gave a tiny nod, beckoned its jointed finger, and Tonks had seized Ginny and Mrs. Weasley by the elbows, stepped right through the glass and vanished.

Fred, George, and Ron stepped after them; Harry glanced around at the jostling crowd; not one of them seemed to have a glance to spare

for window displays as ugly as Purge and Dowse Ltd.'s, nor did any of them seem to have noticed that six people had just melted into thin air in front of them.

"C'mon," growled Moody, giving Harry yet another poke in the back and together they stepped forward through what felt like a sheet of cool water, emerging quite warm and dry on the other side.

There was no sign of the ugly dummy or the space where she had stood. They had arrived in what seemed to be a crowded reception area where rows of witches and wizards sat upon rickety wooden chairs, some looking perfectly normal and perusing out-of-date copies of Witch Weekly, others sporting gruesome disfigurements such as ele-phant trunks or extra hands sticking out of their chests. The room was scarcely less quiet than the street outside, for many of the patients were making very peculiar noises. A sweaty-faced witch in the center of the front row, who was fanning herself vigorously with a copy of the Daily Prophet, kept letting off a high-pitched whistle as steam came pouring out of her mouth, and a grubby-looking warlock in the corner clanged like a bell every time he moved, and with each clang his head vibrated horribly, so that he had to seize himself by the ears and hold it steady.

Witches and wizards in lime-green robes were walking up and down the rows, asking questions and making notes on clipboards like Umbridge's. Harry noticed the emblem embroidered on their chests: a wand and bone, crossed.

"Are they doctors?" he asked Ron quietly.

"Doctors?" said Ron, looking startled. "Those Muggle nutters that cut people up? Nah, they're Healers."

"Over here!" called Mrs. Weasley over the renewed clanging of the warlock in the corner, and they followed her to the queue in front of a plump blonde witch seated at a desk marked inquiries. The wall be-hind her was covered in notices and posters saying things like A

CLEAN CAULDRON KEEPS POTIONS FROM BECOMING POISONS and ANTIDOTES ARE ANTI-DON'TS UNLESS APPROVED BY A QUALIFIED HEALER.

There was also a large portrait of a witch with long silver ringlets that was labelledDILYS DERWENT

ST. MUNGO'S HEALER 1722–1741HEADMISTRESS OF HOGWARTS SCHOOL OFWITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY, I74I–I768Dilys was eyeing the Weasley party as though counting them; when Harry caught her eye she gave a tiny wink, walked sideways out of her portrait, and vanished.

Meanwhile, at the front of the queue, a young wizard was perform-ing an odd on-the-spot jig and trying, in between yelps of pain, to explain his predicament to the witch behind the desk.

"It's these — ouch — shoes my brother gave me — ow — they're eating my — OUCH — feet — look at them, there must be some kind of — AARGH — jinx on them and I can't — AAAAARGH — get them off —"

He hopped from one foot to the other as though dancing on hot coals.

"The shoes don't prevent you reading, do they?" said the blonde witch irritably, pointing at a large sign to the left of her desk. "You want Spell Damage, fourth floor. Just like it says on the floor guide. Next!"

The wizard hobbled and pranced sideways out of the way, the Weasley party moved forward a few steps and Harry read the floor guide:ARTIFACT ACCIDENTS. … . … .… Ground Floor(Cauldron explosion, wand backfiring, broom crashes, etc.)CREATURE-INDUCED INJURIES. …… First Floor(Bites, stings, burns, embedded spines, etc.)MAGICAL BUGS. … . … . … . … . . Second Floor(Contagious maladies, e.g., dragon pox, vanishing sickness, scrofungulus)POTION AND PLANT POISONING. … .Third Floor(Rashes, regurgitation, uncontrollable giggling, etc.)SPELL

DAMAGE. … . … . … . … . . Fourth Floor(Unliftable jinxes, hexes, and incorrectly applied charms, etc.)VISITORS' TEAROOM AND HOSPITAL SHOP. … .Fifth FloorIf you are unsure where to go, incapable of normal speech, or unable to remember why you are here, our Welcome Witch will be pleased to help.

A very old, stooped wizard with a hearing trumpet had shuffled to the front of the queue now.

“I'm here to see Broderick Bode!” he wheezed.

“Ward forty-nine, but I'm afraid you're wasting your time,” said the witch dismissively “He's completely addled, you know, still thinks he's a teapot. … Next!”

A harassed-looking wizard was holding his small daughter tightly by the ankle while she flapped around his head using the immensely large, feathery wings that had sprouted right out the back of her romper suit.

“Fourth floor,” said the witch in a bored voice, without asking, and the man disappeared through the double doors beside the desk, hold-ing his daughter like an oddly shaped balloon. “Next!”

Mrs. Weasley moved forward to the desk.

“Hello,” she said. “My husband, Arthur Weasley, was supposed to be moved to a different ward this morning, could you tell us — ?”

“Arthur Weasley?” said the witch, running her finger down a long list in front of her. “Yes, first floor, second door on the right, Dai Llewellyn ward.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Come on, you lot.”

They followed through the double doors and along the narrow cor-ridor beyond, which was lined with more portraits of famous Healers

and lit by crystal bubbles full of candles that floated up on the ceiling, looking like giant soapsuds. More witches and wizards in lime-green robes walked in and out of the doors they passed; a foul-smelling yellow gas wafted into the passageway as they passed one door, and every now and then they heard distant wailing. They climbed a flight of stairs and entered the “Creature-Induced Injuries” corridor, where the second door on the right bore the words “DANGEROUS” DAI LLEWELLYN WARD: SERIOUS BITES. Underneath this was a card in a brass holder on which had been handwritten Healer-in-Charge: Hippocrates Smeth-wyck, Trainee Healer: Augustus Pye.

“We’ll wait outside, Molly,” Tonks said. “Arthur won’t want too many visitors at once. … It ought to be just the family first.”

Mad-Eye growled his approval of this idea and set himself with his back against the corridor wall, his magical eye spinning in all directions. Harry drew back too, but Mrs. Weasley reached out a hand and pushed him through the door, saying, “Don’t be silly, Harry, Arthur wants to thank you. …”

The ward was small and rather dingy as the only window was narrow and set high in the wall facing the door. Most of the light came from more shining crystal bubbles clustered in the middle of the ceiling. The walls were of panelled oak and there was a portrait of a rather vicious-looking wizard on the wall, captioned URQUHART RACKHARROW, 1612–1697, INVENTOR OF THE ENTRAIL-EXPELLING CURSE.

There were only three patients. Mr. Weasley was occupying the bed at the far end of the ward beside the tiny window. Harry was pleased and relieved to see that he was propped up on several pillows and reading the Daily Prophet by the solitary ray of sunlight falling onto his bed. He looked around as they walked toward him and, seeing whom it was, beamed.

“Hello!” he called, throwing the Prophet aside. “Bill just left, Molly, had to get back to work, but he says he’ll drop in on you later. …”

“How are you, Arthur?” asked Mrs. Weasley, bending down to kiss his cheek and looking anxiously into his face. “You’re still looking a bit peaky. …”

“I feel absolutely fine,” said Mr. Weasley brightly, holding out his good arm to give Ginny a hug. “If they could only take the bandages off, I’d be fit to go home.”

“Why can’t they take them off, Dad?” asked Fred.

“Well, I start bleeding like mad every time they try,” said Mr. Weasley cheerfully, reaching across for his wand, which lay on his bed-side cabinet, and waving it so that six extra chairs appeared at his bed-side to seat them all. “It seems there was some rather unusual kind of poison in that snake’s fangs that keeps wounds open. … They’re sure they’ll find an antidote, though, they say they’ve had much worse cases than mine, and in the meantime I just have to keep taking a Blood-Replenishing Potion every hour. But that fellow over there,” he said, dropping his voice and nodding toward the bed opposite in which a man lay looking green and sickly and staring at the ceiling. “Bitten by a werewolf, poor chap. No cure at all.”

“A werewolf?” whispered Mrs. Weasley, looking alarmed. “Is he safe in a public ward? Shouldn’t he be in a private room?”

“It’s two weeks till full moon,” Mr. Weasley reminded her quietly. “They’ve been talking to him this morning, the Healers, you know, trying to persuade him he’ll be able to lead an almost normal life. I said to him — didn’t mention names, of course — but I said I knew a werewolf personally, very nice man, who finds the condition quite easy to manage. …”

“What did he say?” asked George.

“Said he’d give me another bite if I didn’t shut up,” said Mr. Weasley sadly. “And that woman over there,” he indicated the only other occupied bed, which was right beside the door, “won’t tell the Healers what bit her, which makes us all think it must have been something she was handling illegally. Whatever it was took a real chunk out of her leg, very nasty smell when they take off the dressings.”

“So, you going to tell us what happened, Dad?” asked Fred, pulling his chair closer to the bed.

“Well, you already know, don’t you?” said Mr. Weasley, with a significant smile at Harry. “It’s very simple — I’d had a very long day, dozed off, got sneaked up on, and bitten.”

“Is it in the Prophet, you being attacked?” asked Fred, indicating the newspaper Mr. Weasley had cast aside.

“No, of course not,” said Mr. Weasley, with a slightly bitter smile, “the Ministry wouldn’t want everyone to know a dirty great serpent got —”

“Arthur!” said Mrs. Weasley warningly.

“— got — er — me,” Mr. Weasley said hastily, though Harry was quite sure that was not what he had meant to say.

“So where were you when it happened, Dad?” asked George.

“That’s my business,” said Mr. Weasley, though with a small smile. He snatched up the Daily Prophet, shook it open again and said, “I was just reading about Willy Widdershins’s arrest when you arrived. You know Willy turned out to be behind those regurgitating toilets last summer? One of his jinxes backfired, the toilet exploded, and they found him lying unconscious in the wreckage covered from head to foot in —”

“When you say you were ‘on duty,’ ” Fred interrupted in a low voice, “what were you doing?”

“You heard your father,” whispered Mrs. Weasley, “we are not discussing this here! Go on about Willy Widdershins, Arthur —”

“Well, don’t ask me how, but he actually got off on the toilet charge,” said Mr. Weasley grimly. “I can only suppose gold changed hands —”

“You were guarding it, weren’t you?” said George quietly. “The weapon? The thing You-Know-Who’s after?”

“George, be quiet!” snapped Mrs. Weasley.

“Anyway,” said Mr. Weasley in a raised voice, “this time Willy’s been caught selling biting doorknobs to Muggles, and I don’t think he’ll be able to worm his way out of it because according to this arti-cle, two Muggles have lost fingers and are now in St. Mungo’s for emergency bone regrowth and memory modification. Just think of it, Muggles in St. Mungo’s! I wonder which ward they’re in?”

And he looked eagerly around as though hoping to see a signpost.

“Didn’t you say You-Know-Who’s got a snake, Harry?” asked Fred, looking at his father for a reaction. “A massive one? You saw it the night he returned, didn’t you?”

“That’s enough,” said Mrs. Weasley crossly. “Mad-Eye and Tonks are outside, Arthur, they want to come and see you. And you lot can wait outside,” she added to her children and Harry. “You can come and say good-bye afterward. Go on. …”

They trooped back into the corridor. Mad-Eye and Tonks went in and closed the door of the ward behind them. Fred raised his eyebrows.

“Fine,” he said coolly, rummaging in his pockets, “be like that. Don’t tell us anything.”

“Looking for these?” said George, holding out what looked like a tangle of flesh-colored string.

“You read my mind,” said Fred, grinning. “Let’s see if St. Mungo’s puts Imperturbable Charms on its ward doors, shall we?”

He and George disentangled the string and separated five Extendable Ears from each other. Fred and George handed them around. Harry hesitated to take one.

“Go on, Harry, take it! You saved Dad’s life, if anyone’s got the right to eavesdrop on him it’s you. …”

Grinning in spite of himself, Harry took the end of the string and inserted it into his ear as the twins had done.

“Okay, go!” Fred whispered.

The flesh-colored strings wriggled like long skinny worms, then snaked under the door. For a few seconds Harry could hear nothing, then he heard Tonks whispering as clearly as though she were standing right beside him.

“… they searched the whole area but they couldn’t find the snake anywhere, it just seems to have vanished after it attacked you, Arthur. … But You-Know-Who can’t have expected a snake to get in, can he?”

“I reckon he sent it as a lookout,” growled Moody, “ ’cause he’s not had any luck so far, has he? No, I reckon he’s trying to get a clearer pic-ture of what he’s facing and if Arthur hadn’t been there the beast would’ve had much more time to look around. So Potter says he saw it all happen?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Weasley. She sounded rather uneasy. “You know, Dumbledore seems almost to have been waiting for Harry to see something like this. …”

“Yeah, well,” said Moody, “there’s something funny about the Potter kid, we all know that.”

“Dumbledore seemed worried about Harry when I spoke to him this morning,” whispered Mrs. Weasley.

“ ’Course he’s worried,” growled Moody. “The boy’s seeing things from inside You-Know-Who’s snake. … Obviously, Potter doesn’t realize what that means, but if You-Know-Who’s possessing him —”

Harry pulled the Extendable Ear out of his own, his heart ham-mering very fast and heat rushing up his face. He looked around at the others. They were all staring at him, the strings still trailing from their ears, looking suddenly fearful.

Chapter 23 Christmas on the Closed Ward

Was this why Dumbledore would no longer meet Harry's eyes? Did he expect to see Voldemort staring out of them, afraid, perhaps, that their vivid green might turn suddenly to scarlet, with catlike slits for pupils? Harry remembered how the snakelike face of Voldemort had once forced itself out of the back of Professor Quir-rell's head, and he ran his hand over the back of his own, wondering what it would feel like if Voldemort burst out of his skull. …He felt dirty, contaminated, as though he were carrying some deadly germ, unworthy to sit on the underground train back from the hospital with innocent, clean people whose minds and bodies were free of the taint of Voldemort. … He had not merely seen the snake, he had been the snake, he knew it now. …And then a truly terrible thought occurred to him, a memory bob-bing to the surface of his mind, one that made his insides writhe and squirm like serpents. …"What's he after apart from followers?"

"Stuff he can only get by stealth … like a weapon. Something he didn't have last time."

I'm the weapon, Harry thought, and it was as though poison were pumping through his veins, chilling him, bringing him out in a sweat as he swayed with the train through the dark tunnel. I'm the one Voldemort's trying to use, that's why they've got guards around me everywhere I go, it's not for my protection, it's for other people's, only it's not working, they can't have someone on me all the time at Hogwarts. … I did attack Mr. Weasley last night, it was me, Voldemort made me do it and he could be inside me, listening to my thoughts right now. …"Are you all right, Harry, dear?" whispered Mrs. Weasley, leaning across Ginny to speak to him as the train rattled along through its dark tunnel. "You don't look very well. Are you feeling sick?"

They were all watching him. He shook his head violently and stared up at an advertisement for home insurance.

“Harry, dear, are you sure you’re all right?” said Mrs. Weasley in a worried voice, as they walked around the unkempt patch of grass in the middle of Grimmauld Place. “You look ever so pale. … Are you sure you slept this morning? You go upstairs to bed right now, and you can have a couple of hours’ sleep before dinner, all right?”

He nodded; here was a ready-made excuse not to talk to any of the others, which was precisely what he wanted, so when she opened the front door he proceeded straight past the troll’s leg umbrella stand and up the stairs and hurried into his and Ron’s bedroom.

Here he began to pace up and down, past the two beds and Phineas Nigellus’s empty portrait, his brain teeming and seething with ques-tions and ever more dreadful ideas. …How had he become a snake? Perhaps he was an Animagus. … No, he couldn’t be, he would know. … perhaps Voldemort was an Animagus. … Yes, thought Harry, that would fit, he would turn into a snake of course … and when he’s possessing me, then we both trans-form. … That still doesn’t explain how come I got to London and back to my bed in the space of about five minutes, though. … But then Voldemort’s about the most powerful wizard in the world, apart from Dumbledore, it’s probably no problem at all to him to transport people like that. …And then, with a terrible stab of panic he thought, but this is in-sane — if Voldemort’s possessing me, I’m giving him a clear view into the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix right now! He’ll know who’s in the Order and where Sirius is … and I’ve heard loads of stuff I shouldn’t have, everything Sirius told me the first night I was here. …There was only one thing for it: He would have to leave Grim-mauld Place straightaway. He would spend Christmas at Hogwarts without the others, which would keep them safe over the holidays at least. … But no, that wouldn’t do, there were still plenty of people at Hogwarts to maim and injure, what if it was Seamus, Dean, or Neville next time? He stopped his pacing and stood staring at Phineas Nigel-lus’s empty frame. A leaden sensation was settling in the pit of his stomach. He had no alternative: He was going to have to return to Privet Drive, cut himself off from other wizards entirely. …Well, if he had to do it, he

thought, there was no point hanging around. Trying with all his might not to think how the Dursleys were going to react when they found him on their doorstep six months ear-lier than they had expected, he strode over to his trunk, slammed the lid shut and locked it, then glanced around automatically for Hedwig before remembering that she was still at Hogwarts — well, her cage would be one less thing to carry — he seized one end of his trunk and had dragged it halfway toward the door when a sneaky voice said, "Running away, are we?"

He looked around. Phineas Nigellus had appeared upon the canvas of his portrait and was leaning against the frame, watching Harry with an amused expression on his face.

"Not running away, no," said Harry shortly, dragging his trunk a few more feet across the room.

"I thought," said Phineas Nigellus, stroking his pointed beard, "that to belong in Gryffindor House you were supposed to be brave? It looks to me as though you would have been better off in my own house. We Slytherins are brave, yes, but not stupid. For instance, given the choice, we will always choose to save our own necks."

"It's not my own neck I'm saving," said Harry tersely, tugging the trunk over a patch of particularly uneven, moth-eaten carpet right in front of the door.

"Oh I see," said Phineas Nigellus, still stroking his beard. "This is no cowardly flight — you are being noble."

Harry ignored him. His hand was on the doorknob when Phineas Nigellus said lazily, "I have a message for you from Albus Dumbledore."

Harry spun around.

"What is it?"

“Stay where you are.”

“I haven’t moved!” said Harry, his hand still upon the doorknob. “So what’s the message?”

“I have just given it to you, dolt,” said Phineas Nigellus smoothly. “Dumbledore says, ‘Stay where you are.’ ”

“Why?” said Harry eagerly, dropping the end of his trunk. “Why does he want me to stay? What else did he say?”

“Nothing whatsoever,” said Phineas Nigellus, raising a thin black eyebrow as though he found Harry impertinent.

Harry’s temper rose to the surface like a snake rearing from long grass. He was exhausted, he was confused beyond measure, he had ex-perienced terror, relief, and then terror again in the last twelve hours, and still Dumbledore did not want to talk to him!

“So that’s it, is it?” he said loudly. “Stay there? That’s all anyone could tell me after I got attacked by those dementors too! Just stay put while the grown-ups sort it out, Harry! We won’t bother telling you anything, though, because your tiny little brain might not be able to cope with it!”

“You know,” said Phineas Nigellus, even more loudly than Harry, “this is precisely why I loathed being a teacher! Young people are so infernally convinced that they are absolutely right about everything. Has it not occurred to you, my poor puffed-up popinjay, that there might be an excellent reason why the headmaster of Hogwarts is not confiding every tiny detail of his plans to you? Have you never paused, while feeling hard-done-by, to note that following Dumbledore’s or-ders has never yet led you into harm? No. No, like all young people, you are quite sure that you alone feel and think, you alone recognize danger, you alone are the only one clever enough to realize what the Dark Lord may be planning. …”

“He is planning something to do with me, then?” said Harry swiftly.

“Did I say that?” said Phineas Nigellus, idly examining his silk gloves. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have better things to do than to listen to adolescent agonizing. … Good day to you. …”

And he strolled into his frame and out of sight.

“Fine, go then!” Harry bellowed at the empty frame. “And tell Dumbledore thanks for nothing!”

The empty canvas remained silent. Fuming, Harry dragged his trunk back to the foot of his bed, then threw himself facedown upon the moth-eaten covers, his eyes shut, his body heavy and aching. …He felt he had journeyed miles and miles. … It seemed impossible that less than twenty-four hours ago Cho Chang had been approach-ing him under the mistletoe. … He was so tired. … He was scared to sleep … yet he did not know how long he could fight it. … Dum-bledore had told him to stay. … That must mean he was allowed to sleep. … But he was scared. … What if it happened again … ?

He was sinking into shadows. …It was as though a film in his head had been waiting to start. He was walking down a deserted corridor toward a plain black door, past rough stone walls, torches, and an open doorway onto a flight of stone steps leading downstairs on the left. …He reached the black door but could not open it. … He stood gaz-ing at it, desperate for entry. … Something he wanted with all his heart lay beyond. … A prize beyond his dreams. … If only his scar would stop prickling … then he would be able to think more clearly. …“Harry,” said Ron’s voice, from far, far away, “Mum says dinner’s ready, but she’ll save you something if you want to stay in bed. …”

Harry opened his eyes, but Ron had already left the room.

He doesn’t want to be on his own with me, Harry thought. Not after what he heard Moody say …He supposed none of them would want him there anymore now that they knew what was inside him. …He

would not go down to dinner; he would not inflict his company upon them. He turned over onto his other side and after a while dropped back off to sleep, waking much later in the early hours of the morning, with his insides aching with hunger, and Ron snoring in the next bed. Squinting around the room he saw the dark outline of Phineas Nigellus standing again in his portrait and it occurred to Harry that Dumbledore had probably set Phineas Nigellus to watch over him, in case he attacked somebody else.

The feeling of being unclean intensified. He half wished he had not obeyed Dumbledore and stayed. … If this was how life was going to be in Grimmauld Place from now on, maybe he would be better off in Privet Drive after all.

Everybody else spent the following morning putting up Christmas decorations. Harry could not remember Sirius ever being in such a good mood; he was actually singing carols, apparently delighted that he was to have company over Christmas. Harry could hear his voice echoing up through the floor in the cold and empty drawing room where he was sitting alone, watching the sky outside the windows growing whiter, threatening snow, all the time feeling a savage pleasure that he was giving the others the opportunity to keep talking about him, as they were bound to be doing. When he heard Mrs. Weasley calling his name softly up the stairs around lunchtime he retreated farther upstairs and ignored her.

It was around six o'clock in the evening that the doorbell rang and Mrs. Black started screaming again. Assuming that Mundungus or some other Order member had come to call, Harry merely settled himself more comfortably against the wall of Buckbeak the hippogriff's room where he was hiding, trying to ignore how hungry he felt as he fed Buckbeak dead rats. It came as a slight shock when some-body hammered hard on the door a few minutes later.

"I know you're in there," said Hermione's voice. "Will you please come out? I want to talk to you."

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked her, pulling open the door, as Buckbeak resumed his scratching at the straw-strewn floor for any fragments of rat he might have dropped. “I thought you were skiing with your mum and dad.”

“Well, to tell the truth, skiing’s not really my thing,” said Hermi-one. “So I’ve come for Christmas.” There was snow in her hair and her face was pink with cold. “But don’t tell Ron that, I told him it’s really good because he kept laughing so much. Anyway, Mum and Dad are a bit disappointed, but I’ve told them that everyone who’s serious about the exams is staying at Hogwarts to study. They want me to do well, they’ll understand. Anyway,” she said briskly, “let’s go to your bedroom, Ron’s mum’s lit a fire in there and she’s sent up sandwiches.”

Harry followed her back to the second floor. When he entered the bedroom he was rather surprised to see both Ron and Ginny waiting for them, sitting on Ron’s bed.

“I came on the Knight Bus,” said Hermione airily, pulling off her jacket before Harry had time to speak. “Dumbledore told me what had happened first thing this morning, but I had to wait for term to end officially before setting off. Umbridge is already livid that you lot disappeared right under her nose, even though Dumbledore told her Mr. Weasley was in St. Mungo’s, and he’d given you all permission to visit. So …”

She sat down next to Ginny, and the two girls and Ron looked up at Harry.

“How’re you feeling?” asked Hermione.

“Fine,” said Harry stiffly.

“Oh, don’t lie, Harry,” she said impatiently. “Ron and Ginny say you’ve been hiding from everyone since you got back from St. Mungo’s.”

“They do, do they?” said Harry, glaring at Ron and Ginny. Ron looked down at his feet but Ginny seemed quite unabashed.

“Well, you have!” she said. “And you won’t look at any of us!”

“It’s you lot who won’t look at me!” said Harry angrily.

“Maybe you’re taking it in turns to look and keep missing each other,” suggested Hermione, the corners of her mouth twitching.

“Very funny,” snapped Harry, turning away.

“Oh, stop feeling all misunderstood,” said Hermione sharply. “Look, the others have told me what you overheard last night on the Extendable Ears —”

“Yeah?” growled Harry, his hands deep in his pockets as he watched the snow now falling thickly outside. “All been talking about me, have you? Well, I’m getting used to it. …”

“We wanted to talk to you, Harry,” said Ginny, “but as you’ve been hiding ever since we got back —”

“I didn’t want anyone to talk to me,” said Harry, who was feeling more and more nettled.

“Well, that was a bit stupid of you,” said Ginny angrily, “seeing as you don’t know anyone but me who’s been possessed by You-Know-Who, and I can tell you how it feels.”

Harry remained quite still as the impact of these words hit him. Then he turned on the spot to face her.

“I forgot,” he said.

“Lucky you,” said Ginny coolly.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, and he meant it. “So … so do you think I’m being possessed, then?”

“Well, can you remember everything you’ve been doing?” Ginny asked. “Are there big blank periods where you don’t know what you’ve been up to?”

Harry racked his brains.

“No,” he said.

“Then You-Know-Who hasn’t ever possessed you,” said Ginny simply. “When he did it to me, I couldn’t remember what I’d been doing for hours at a time. I’d find myself somewhere and not know how I got there.”

Harry hardly dared believe her, yet his heart was lightening almost in spite of himself.

“That dream I had about your dad and the snake, though —”

“Harry, you’ve had these dreams before,” Hermione said. “You had flashes of what Voldemort was up to last year.”

“This was different,” said Harry, shaking his head. “I was inside that snake. It was like I was the snake. … What if Voldemort some-how transported me to London — ?”

“One day,” said Hermione, sounding thoroughly exasperated, “you’ll read Hogwarts, A History, and perhaps that will remind you that you can’t Apparate or Disapparate inside Hogwarts. Even Volde-mort couldn’t just make you fly out of your dormitory, Harry.”

“You didn’t leave your bed, mate,” said Ron. “I saw you thrashing around in your sleep about a minute before we could wake you up. …”

Harry started pacing up and down the room again, thinking. What they were all saying was not only comforting, it made sense. … Without really thinking he took a sandwich from the plate on the bed and crammed it hungrily into his mouth. …I'm not the weapon after all, thought Harry. His heart swelled with happiness and relief, and he felt like joining in as they heard Sirius tramping past their door toward Buckbeak's room, singing "God Rest Ye Merry, Hippogriffs" at the top of his voice.

How could he have dreamed of returning to Privet Drive for Christmas? Sirius's delight at having the house full again, and especially at having Harry back, was infectious. He was no longer their sullen host of the summer; now he seemed determined that everyone should enjoy themselves as much, if not more, than they would have done at Hogwarts, and he worked tirelessly in the run-up to Christmas Day, cleaning and decorating with their help, so that by the time they all went to bed on Christmas Eve the house was barely recognizable. The tarnished chandeliers were no longer hung with cobwebs but with garlands of holly and gold and silver streamers; magical snow glittered in heaps over the threadbare carpets; a great Christmas tree, obtained by Mundungus and decorated with live fairies, blocked Sirius's family tree from view; and even the stuffed elf heads on the hall wall wore Fa-ther Christmas hats and beards.

Harry awoke on Christmas morning to find a stack of presents at the foot of his bed and Ron already halfway through opening his own, rather larger, pile.

"Good haul this year," he informed Harry through a cloud of pa-per. "Thanks for the Broom Compass, it's excellent, beats Hermi-one's — she's got me a homework planner —"

Harry sorted through his presents and found one with Hermione's handwriting on it. She had given him too a book that resembled a diary, except that it said things like "Do it today or later you'll pay!" every time he opened a page.

Sirius and Lupin had given Harry a set of excellent books entitled Practical Defensive Magic and Its Use Against the Dark Arts, which had superb, moving color illustrations of all the counterjinxes and hexes it described. Harry flicked through the first volume eagerly; he could see it was going to be highly useful in his plans for the D.A. Hagrid had sent a furry brown wallet that had fangs, which were presumably sup-posed to be an antitheft device, but unfortunately prevented Harry putting any money in without getting his fingers ripped off. Tonks's present was a small, working model of a Firebolt, which Harry watched fly around the room, wishing he still had his full-size version; Ron had given him an enormous box of Every-Flavor Beans; Mr. and Mrs. Weasley the usual hand-knitted jumper and some mince pies; and Dobby, a truly dreadful painting that Harry suspected had been done by the elf himself. He had just turned it upside down to see whether it looked better that way when, with a loud crack, Fred and George Apparated at the foot of his bed.

"Merry Christmas," said George. "Don't go downstairs for a bit."

"Why not?" said Ron.

"Mum's crying again," said Fred heavily. "Percy sent back his Christmas jumper."

"Without a note," added George. "Hasn't asked how Dad is or vis-ited him or anything. …"

"We tried to comfort her," said Fred, moving around the bed to look at Harry's portrait. "Told her Percy's nothing more than a hu-mongous pile of rat droppings —"

"— didn't work," said George, helping himself to a Chocolate Frog. "So Lupin took over. Best let him cheer her up before we go down for breakfast, I reckon."

"What's that supposed to be anyway?" asked Fred, squinting at Dobby's painting. "Looks like a gibbon with two black eyes."

"It's Harry!" said George, pointing at the back of the picture. "Says so on the back!"

"Good likeness," said Fred, grinning. Harry threw his new home-work diary at him; it hit the wall opposite and fell to the floor where it said happily, "If you've dotted the i's and crossed the t's then you may do whatever you please!"

They got up and dressed; they could hear various inhabitants of the house calling "Merry Christmas" to each other. On their way down-stairs they met Hermione. "Thanks for the book, Harry!" she said happily. "I've been wanting that New Theory of Numerology for ages! And that perfume is really unusual, Ron."

"No problem," said Ron. "Who's that for anyway?" he added, nod-ding at the neatly wrapped present she was carrying.

"Kreacher," said Hermione brightly.

"It had better not be clothes!" said Ron warningly. "You know what Sirius said, Kreacher knows too much, we can't set him free!"

"It isn't clothes," said Hermione, "although if I had my way I'd cer-tainly give him something to wear other than that filthy old rag. No, it's a patchwork quilt, I thought it would brighten up his bedroom."

"What bedroom?" said Harry, dropping his voice to a whisper as they were passing the portrait of Sirius's mother.

"Well, Sirius says it's not so much a bedroom, more a kind of — den," said Hermione. "Apparently he sleeps under the boiler in that cupboard off the kitchen."

Mrs. Weasley was the only person in the basement when they ar-rived there. She was standing at the stove and sounded as though she had a bad head cold when she wished them Merry Christmas, and they all averted their eyes.

“So, this is Kreacher’s bedroom?” said Ron, strolling over to a dingy door in the corner opposite the pantry which Harry had never seen open.

“Yes,” said Hermione, now sounding a little nervous. “Er … I think we’d better knock …”

Ron rapped the door with his knuckles but there was no reply.

“He must be sneaking around upstairs,” he said, and without fur-ther ado pulled open the door. “Urgh.”

Harry peered inside. Most of the cupboard was taken up with a very large and old-fashioned boiler, but in the foot’s space underneath the pipes Kreacher had made himself something that looked like a nest. A jumble of assorted rags and smelly old blankets were piled on the floor and the small dent in the middle of it showed where Kreacher curled up to sleep every night. Here and there among the material were stale bread crusts and moldy old bits of cheese. In a far corner glinted small objects and coins that Harry guessed Kreacher had saved, magpielike, from Sirius’s purge of the house, and he had also managed to retrieve the silver-framed family photographs that Sirius had thrown away over the summer. Their glass might be shat-tered, but still the little black-and-white people inside them peered haughtily up at him, including — he felt a little jolt in his stomach — the dark, heavy-lidded woman whose trial he had witnessed in Dum-bledore’s Pensieve: Bellatrix Lestrange. By the looks of it, hers was Kreacher’s favorite photograph; he had placed it to the fore of all the others and had mended the glass clumsily with Spellotape.

“I think I’ll just leave his present here,” said Hermione, laying the package neatly in the middle of the depression in the rags and blankets and closing the door quietly. “He’ll find it later, that’ll be fine. …”

“Come to think of it,” said Sirius, emerging from the pantry carry-ing a large turkey as they closed the cupboard door, “has anyone actually

seen Kreacher lately?"

"I haven't seen him since the night we came back here," said Harry. "You were ordering him out of the kitchen."

"Yeah …" said Sirius, frowning. "You know, I think that's the last time I saw him, too. … He must be hiding upstairs somewhere. …"

"He couldn't have left, could he?" said Harry. "I mean, when you said 'out,' maybe he thought you meant, get out of the house?"

"No, no, house-elves can't leave unless they're given clothes, they're tied to their family's house," said Sirius.

"They can leave the house if they really want to," Harry contra-dicted him. "Dobby did, he left the Malfoys' to give me warnings two years ago. He had to punish himself afterward, but he still managed it."

Sirius looked slightly disconcerted for a moment, then said, "I'll look for him later, I expect I'll find him upstairs crying his eyes out over my mother's old bloomers or something. … Of course, he might have crawled into the airing cupboard and died. … But I mustn't get my hopes up. …"

Fred, George, and Ron laughed; Hermione, however, looked reproachful.

Once they had had their Christmas lunch, the Weasleys and Harry and Hermione were planning to pay Mr. Weasley another visit, es-corted by Mad-Eye and Lupin. Mundungus turned up in time for Christmas pudding and trifle, having managed to "borrow" a car for the occasion, as the Underground did not run on Christmas Day. The car, which Harry doubted very much had been taken with the knowl-edge or consent of its owner, had had a similar Enlarging Spell put upon it as the Weasleys' old Ford Anglia; although normally propor-tioned outside, ten people with Mundungus driving were able to fit into it quite comfortably. Mrs. Weasley hesitated at the point of get-

ting inside; Harry knew that her disapproval of Mundungus was battling with her dislike of traveling without magic; finally the cold outside and her children's pleading triumphed, and she settled herself into the backseat between Fred and Bill with good grace.

The journey to St. Mungo's was quite quick, as there was very little traffic on the roads. A small trickle of witches and wizards were creep-ing furtively up the otherwise deserted street to visit the hospital. Harry and the others got out of the car, and Mundungus drove off around the corner to wait for them; they strolled casually toward the window where the dummy in green nylon stood, then, one by one, stepped through the glass.

The reception area looked pleasantly festive: The crystal orbs that illuminated St. Mungo's had been turned to red and gold so that they became gigantic, glowing Christmas baubles; holly hung around every doorway, and shining white Christmas trees covered in magical snow and icicles glittered in every corner, each topped with a gleaming gold star. It was less crowded than the last time they had been there, al-though halfway across the room Harry found himself shunted aside by a witch with a walnut jammed up her left nostril.

"Family argument, eh?" smirked the blonde witch behind the desk. "You're the third I've seen today … Spell Damage, fourth floor …"

They found Mr. Weasley propped up in bed with the remains of his turkey dinner on a tray in his lap and a rather sheepish expression on his face.

"Everything all right, Arthur?" asked Mrs. Weasley, after they had all greeted Mr. Weasley and handed over their presents.

"Fine, fine," said Mr. Weasley, a little too heartily. "You — er — haven't seen Healer Smethwyck, have you?"

"No," said Mrs. Weasley suspiciously, "why?"

“Nothing, nothing,” said Mr. Weasley airily, starting to unwrap his pile of gifts. “Well, everyone had a good day? What did you all get for Christmas? Oh, Harry — this is absolutely wonderful —”

For he had just opened Harry’s gift of fuse-wire and screwdrivers. Mrs. Weasley did not seem entirely satisfied with Mr. Weasley’s answer. As her husband leaned over to shake Harry’s hand, she peered at the bandaging under his nightshirt.

“Arthur,” she said, with a snap in her voice like a mousetrap, “you’ve had your bandages changed. Why have you had your ban-dages changed a day early, Arthur? They told me they wouldn’t need doing until tomorrow.”

“What?” said Mr. Weasley, looking rather frightened and pulling the bed covers higher up his chest. “No, no — it’s nothing — it’s — I —”

He seemed to deflate under Mrs. Weasley’s piercing gaze.

“Well — now don’t get upset, Molly, but Augustus Pye had an idea. … He’s the Trainee Healer, you know, lovely young chap and very interested in … um … complementary medicine. … I mean, some of these old Muggle remedies … well, they’re called stitches, Molly, and they work very well on — on Muggle wounds —”

Mrs. Weasley let out an ominous noise somewhere between a shriek and a snarl. Lupin strolled away from the bed and over to the werewolf, who had no visitors and was looking rather wistfully at the crowd around Mr. Weasley; Bill muttered something about getting himself a cup of tea and Fred and George leapt up to accompany him, grinning.

“Do you mean to tell me,” said Mrs. Weasley, her voice growing louder with every word and apparently unaware that her fellow visitors were scurrying for cover, “that you have been messing about with Muggle remedies?”

“Not messing about, Molly, dear,” said Mr. Weasley imploringly. “It was just — just something Pye and I thought we’d try — only, most unfortunately — well, with these particular kinds of wounds — it doesn’t seem to work as well as we’d hoped —”

“Meaning?”

“Well … well, I don’t know whether you know what — what stitches are?”

“It sounds as though you’ve been trying to sew your skin back together,” said Mrs. Weasley with a snort of mirthless laughter, “but even you, Arthur, wouldn’t be that stupid —”

“I fancy a cup of tea too,” said Harry, jumping to his feet.

Hermione, Ron, and Ginny almost sprinted to the door with him. As it swung closed behind them, they heard Mrs. Weasley shriek, “WHAT DO YOU MEAN, THAT’S THE GENERAL IDEA?”

“Typical Dad,” said Ginny, shaking her head as they set off up the corridor. “Stitches … I ask you …”

“Well, you know, they do work well on non-magical wounds,” said Hermione fairly. “I suppose something in that snake’s venom dissolves them or something. … I wonder where the tearoom is?”

“Fifth floor,” said Harry, remembering the sign over the Welcome Witch’s desk.

They walked along the corridor through a set of double doors and found a rickety staircase lined with more portraits of brutal-looking Healers. As they climbed it, the various Healers called out to them, diagnosing odd complaints and suggesting horrible remedies. Ron was seriously affronted when a medieval wizard called out that he clearly had a bad case of spattergroit.

“And what’s that supposed to be?” he asked angrily, as the Healer pursued him through six more portraits, shoving the occupants out of the way.

“ ’Tis a most grievous affliction of the skin, young master, that will leave you pockmarked and more gruesome even than you are now —”

“Watch who you’re calling gruesome!” said Ron, his ears turning red.

“The only remedy is to take the liver of a toad, bind it tight about your throat, stand naked by the full moon in a barrel of eels’ eyes —”

“I have not got spattergroit!”

“But the unsightly blemishes upon your visage, young master —”

“They’re freckles!” said Ron furiously. “Now get back in your own picture and leave me alone!”

He rounded on the others, who were all keeping determinedly straight faces.

“What floor’s this?”

“I think it’s the fifth,” said Hermione.

“Nah, it’s the fourth,” said Harry, “one more —”

But as he stepped onto the landing he came to an abrupt halt, star-ing at the small window set into the double doors that marked the start of a corridor signposted SPELL DAMAGE. A man was peering out at them all with his nose pressed against the glass. He had wavy blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a broad vacant smile that revealed daz-zlingly white teeth.

“Blimey!” said Ron, also staring at the man.

"Oh my goodness," said Hermione suddenly, sounding breathless. "Professor Lockhart!"

Their ex-Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher pushed open the doors and moved toward them, wearing a long lilac dressing gown.

"Well, hello there!" he said. "I expect you'd like my autograph, would you?"

"Hasn't changed much, has he?" Harry muttered to Ginny, who grinned.

"Er — how are you, Professor?" said Ron, sounding slightly guilty. It had been Ron's malfunctioning wand that had damaged Professor Lockhart's memory so badly that he had landed here in the first place, though, as Lockhart had been attempting to permanently wipe Harry and Ron's memories at the time, Harry's sympathy was limited.

"I'm very well indeed, thank you!" said Lockhart exuberantly, pulling a rather battered peacock-feather quill from his pocket. "Now, how many autographs would you like? I can do joined-up writing now, you know!"

"Er — we don't want any at the moment, thanks," said Ron, rais-ing his eyebrows at Harry, who asked, "Professor, should you be wan-dering around the corridors? Shouldn't you be in a ward?"

The smile faded slowly from Lockhart's face. For a few moments he gazed intently at Harry, then he said, "Haven't we met?"

"Er … yeah, we have," said Harry. "You used to teach us at Hog-warts, remember?"

"Teach?" repeated Lockhart, looking faintly unsettled. "Me? Did I?"

And then the smile reappeared upon his face so suddenly it was rather alarming. "Taught you everything you know, I expect, did I?

Well, how about those autographs, then? Shall we say a round dozen, you can give them to all your little friends then and nobody will be left out!”

But just then a head poked out of a door at the far end of the cor-ridor and a voice said, “Gilderoy, you naughty boy, where have you wandered off to?”

A motherly looking Healer wearing a tinsel wreath in her hair came bustling up the corridor, smiling warmly at Harry and the others.

“Oh Gilderoy, you’ve got visitors! How lovely, and on Christmas Day too! Do you know, he never gets visitors, poor lamb, and I can’t think why, he’s such a sweetie, aren’t you?”

“We’re doing autographs!” Gilderoy told the Healer with another glittering smile. “They want loads of them, won’t take no for an an-swer! I just hope we’ve got enough photographs!”

“Listen to him,” said the Healer, taking Lockhart’s arm and beam-ing fondly at him as though he were a precocious two-year-old. “He was rather well known a few years ago; we very much hope that this liking for giving autographs is a sign that his memory might be com-ing back a little bit. Will you step this way? He’s in a closed ward, you know, he must have slipped out while I was bringing in the Christmas presents, the door’s usually kept locked … not that he’s dangerous! But,” she lowered her voice to a whisper, “bit of a danger to himself, bless him. … Doesn’t know who he is, you see, wanders off and can’t remember how to get back. … It is nice of you to have come to see him —”

“Er,” said Ron, gesturing uselessly at the floor above, “actually, we were just — er —”

But the Healer was smiling expectantly at them, and Ron’s feeble mutter of “going to have a cup of tea” trailed away into nothingness.

They looked at one another rather hopelessly and then followed Lock-hart and his Healer along the corridor.

“Let’s not stay long,” Ron said quietly.

The Healer pointed her wand at the door of the Janus Thickey ward and muttered “Alohomora.” The door swung open and she led the way inside, keeping a firm grasp on Gilderoy’s arm until she had settled him into an armchair beside his bed.

“This is our long-term resident ward,” she informed Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny in a low voice. “For permanent spell damage, you know. Of course, with intensive remedial potions and charms and a bit of luck, we can produce some improvement. … Gilderoy does seem to be getting back some sense of himself, and we’ve seen a real improvement in Mr. Bode, he seems to be regaining the power of speech very well, though he isn’t speaking any language we recognize yet. … Well, I must finish giving out the Christmas presents, I’ll leave you all to chat. …”

Harry looked around; this ward bore unmistakable signs of being a permanent home to its residents. They had many more personal effects around their beds than in Mr. Weasley’s ward; the wall around Gilderoy’s headboard, for instance, was papered with pictures of himself, all beaming toothily and waving at the new arrivals. He had autographed many of them to himself in disjointed, childish writing. The moment he had been deposited in his chair by the Healer, Gilderoy pulled a fresh stack of photographs toward him, seized a quill, and started signing them all feverishly.

“You can put them in envelopes,” he said to Ginny, throwing the signed pictures into her lap one by one as he finished them. “I am not forgotten, you know, no, I still receive a very great deal of fan mail. … Gladys Gudgeon writes weekly. … I just wish I knew why. …” He paused, looking faintly puzzled, then beamed again and returned to

his signing with renewed vigor. “I suspect it is simply my good looks. …”

A sallow-skinned, mournful-looking wizard lay in the bed oppo-site, staring at the ceiling; he was mumbling to himself and seemed quite unaware of anything around him. Two beds along was a woman whose entire head was covered in fur; Harry remembered something similar happening to Hermione during their second year, although fortunately the damage, in her case, had not been permanent. At the far end of the ward flowery curtains had been drawn around two beds to give the occupants and their visitors some privacy.

“Here you are, Agnes,” said the Healer brightly to the furry-faced woman, handing her a small pile of Christmas presents. “See, not for-gotten, are you? And your son’s sent an owl to say he’s visiting tonight, so that’s nice, isn’t it?”

Agnes gave several loud barks.

“And look, Broderick, you’ve been sent a potted plant and a lovely calendar with a different fancy hippogriff for each month, they’ll brighten things up, won’t they?” said the Healer, bustling along to the mumbling man, setting a rather ugly plant with long, swaying tenta-cles on the bedside cabinet and fixing the calendar to the wall with her wand. “And — oh, Mrs. Longbottom, are you leaving already?”

Harry’s head spun round. The curtains had been drawn back from the two beds at the end of the ward and two visitors were walking back down the aisle between the beds: a formidable-looking old witch wearing a long green dress, a moth-eaten fox fur, and a pointed hat decorated with what was unmistakably a stuffed vulture and, trailing behind her looking thoroughly depressed — Neville.

With a sudden rush of understanding, Harry realized who the people in the end beds must be. He cast around wildly for some means of distracting the others so that Neville could leave the ward unnoticed and unquestioned, but Ron had looked up at the sound of the name

“Longbottom” too, and before Harry could stop him had called, “Neville!”

Neville jumped and cowered as though a bullet had narrowly missed him.

“It’s us, Neville!” said Ron brightly, getting to his feet. “Have you seen? Lockhart’s here! Who’ve you been visiting?”

“Friends of yours, Neville, dear?” said Neville’s grandmother graciously, bearing down upon them all.

Neville looked as though he would rather be anywhere in the world but here. A dull purple flush was creeping up his plump face and he was not making eye contact with any of them.

“Ah, yes,” said his grandmother, looking closely at Harry and stick-ing out a shriveled, clawlike hand for him to shake. “Yes, yes, I know who you are, of course. Neville speaks most highly of you.”

“Er — thanks,” said Harry, shaking hands. Neville did not look at him, but stared at his own feet, the color deepening in his face all the while.

“And you two are clearly Weasleys,” Mrs. Longbottom continued, proffering her hand regally to Ron and Ginny in turn. “Yes, I know your parents — not well, of course — but fine people, fine people … and you must be Hermione Granger?”

Hermione looked rather startled that Mrs. Longbottom knew her name, but shook hands all the same.

“Yes, Neville’s told me all about you. Helped him out of a few sticky spots, haven’t you? He’s a good boy,” she said, casting a sternly appraising look down her rather bony nose at Neville, “but he hasn’t got his father’s talent, I’m afraid to say. …” And she jerked her head in

the direction of the two beds at the end of the ward, so that the stuffed vulture on her hat trembled alarmingly.

“What?” said Ron, looking amazed (Harry wanted to stamp on Ron’s foot, but that sort of thing was much harder to bring off unno-ticed when you were wearing jeans rather than robes). “Is that your dad down the end, Neville?”

“What’s this?” said Mrs. Longbottom sharply. “Haven’t you told your friends about your parents, Neville?”

Neville took a deep breath, looked up at the ceiling, and shook his head. Harry could not remember ever feeling sorrier for anyone, but he could not think of any way of helping Neville out of the situation.

“Well, it’s nothing to be ashamed of!” said Mrs. Longbottom an-grily. “You should be proud, Neville, proud! They didn’t give their health and their sanity so their only son would be ashamed of them, you know!”

“I’m not ashamed,” said Neville very faintly, still looking anywhere but at Harry and the others. Ron was now standing on tiptoe to look over at the inhabitants of the two beds.

“Well, you’ve got a funny way of showing it!” said Mrs. Longbot-tom. “My son and his wife,” she said, turning haughtily to Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, “were tortured into insanity by You-Know-Who’s followers.”

Hermione and Ginny both clapped their hands over their mouths. Ron stopped craning his neck to catch a glimpse of Neville’s parents and looked mortified.

“They were Aurors, you know, and very well respected within the Wizarding community,” Mrs. Longbottom went on. “Highly gifted, the pair of them. I — yes, Alice dear, what is it?”

Neville's mother had come edging down the ward in her nightdress. She no longer had the plump, happy-looking face Harry had seen in Moody's old photograph of the original Order of the Phoenix. Her face was thin and worn now, her eyes seemed overlarge, and her hair, which had turned white, was wispy and dead-looking. She did not seem to want to speak, or perhaps she was not able to, but she made timid motions toward Neville, holding something in her outstretched hand.

"Again?" said Mrs. Longbottom, sounding slightly weary. "Very well, Alice dear, very well — Neville, take it, whatever it is. …"

But Neville had already stretched out his hand, into which his mother dropped an empty Droobles Blowing Gum wrapper.

"Very nice, dear," said Neville's grandmother in a falsely cheery voice, patting his mother on the shoulder. But Neville said quietly, "Thanks Mum."

His mother tottered away, back up the ward, humming to herself. Neville looked around at the others, his expression defiant, as though daring them to laugh, but Harry did not think he'd ever found anything less funny in his life.

"Well, we'd better get back," sighed Mrs. Longbottom, drawing on long green gloves. "Very nice to have met you all. Neville, put that wrapper in the bin, she must have given you enough of them to paper your bedroom by now. …"

But as they left, Harry was sure he saw Neville slip the wrapper into his pocket.

The door closed behind them.

"I never knew," said Hermione, who looked tearful.

"Nor did I," said Ron rather hoarsely.

“Nor me,” whispered Ginny.

They all looked at Harry.

“I did,” he said glumly. “Dumbledore told me but I promised I wouldn’t mention it … that’s what Bellatrix Lestrange got sent to Azkaban for, using the Cruciatus Curse on Neville’s parents until they lost their minds.”

“Bellatrix Lestrange did that?” whispered Hermione, horrified. “That woman Kreacher’s got a photo of in his den?”

There was a long silence, broken by Lockhart’s angry voice. “Look, I didn’t learn joined-up writing for nothing, you know!”

Chapter 24 Occlumency

Kreacher, it transpired, had been lurking in the attic. Sirius said he had found him up there, covered in dust, no doubt looking for more relics of the Black family to hide in his cupboard. Though Sirius seemed satisfied with this story, it made Harry uneasy. Kreacher seemed to be in a better mood on his reappearance, his bitter muttering had subsided somewhat, and he submitted to orders more docilely than usual, though once or twice Harry caught the house-elf staring avidly at him, always looking quickly away when he saw that Harry had noticed.

Harry did not mention his vague suspicions to Sirius, whose cheerfulness was evaporating fast now that Christmas was over. As the date of their departure back to Hogwarts drew nearer, he became more and more prone to what Mrs. Weasley called “fits of the sullens,” in which he would become taciturn and grumpy, often withdrawing to Buck-beak’s room for hours at a time. His gloom seeped through the house, oozing under doorways like some noxious gas, so that all of them be-came infected by it.

Harry did not want to leave Sirius all alone again with only Kreacher for company. In fact, for the first time in his life, he was not looking forward to returning to Hogwarts. Going back to school would mean placing himself once again under the tyranny of Dolores Umbridge, who had no doubt managed to force through another dozen decrees in their absence. Then there was no Quidditch to look forward to now that he had been banned; there was every likelihood that their burden of homework would increase as the exams drew even nearer; Dumble-dore remained as remote as ever; in fact, if it had not been for the D.A., Harry felt he might have gone to Sirius and begged him to let him leave Hogwarts and remain in Grimmauld Place.

Then, on the very last day of the holidays, something happened that made Harry positively dread his return to school.

“Harry dear,” said Mrs. Weasley, poking her head into his and Ron’s bedroom, where the pair of them were playing wizard chess watched by Hermione, Ginny, and Crookshanks, “could you come down to the kitchen? Professor Snape would like a word with you.”

Harry did not immediately register what she had said; one of his castles was engaged in a violent tussle with a pawn of Ron’s, and he was egging it on enthusiastically.

“Squash him — squash him, he’s only a pawn, you idiot — sorry, Mrs. Weasley, what did you say?”

“Professor Snape, dear. In the kitchen. He’d like a word.”

Harry’s mouth fell open in horror. He looked around at Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, all of whom were gaping back at him. Crook-shanks, whom Hermione had been restraining with difficulty for the past quarter of an hour, leapt gleefully upon the board and set the pieces running for cover, squealing at the top of their voices.

“Snape?” said Harry blankly.

“Professor Snape, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley reprovingly. “Now come on, quickly, he says he can’t stay long.”

“What’s he want with you?” said Ron, looking unnerved as Mrs. Weasley withdrew from the room.

“You haven’t done anything, have you?”

“No!” said Harry indignantly, racking his brains to think what he could have done that would make Snape pursue him to Grimmauld Place. Had his last piece of homework perhaps earned a T?

He pushed open the kitchen door a minute or two later to find Sir-ius and Snape both seated at the long kitchen table, glaring in oppo-site

directions. The silence between them was heavy with mutual dislike. A letter lay open on the table in front of Sirius.

"Er," said Harry to announce his presence.

Snape looked around at him, his face framed between curtains of greasy black hair.

"Sit down, Potter."

"You know," said Sirius loudly, leaning back on his rear chair legs and speaking to the ceiling, "I think I'd prefer it if you didn't give or-ders here, Snape. It's my house, you see."

An ugly flush suffused Snape's pallid face. Harry sat down in a chair beside Sirius, facing Snape across the table.

"I was supposed to see you alone, Potter," said Snape, the familiar sneer curling his mouth, "but Black —"

"I'm his godfather," said Sirius, louder than ever.

"I am here on Dumbledore's orders," said Snape, whose voice, by contrast, was becoming more and more quietly waspish, "but by all means stay, Black, I know you like to feel … involved."

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Sirius, letting his chair fall back onto all four legs with a loud bang.

"Merely that I am sure you must feel — ah — frustrated by the fact that you can do nothing useful," Snape laid a delicate stress on the word, "for the Order."

It was Sirius's turn to flush. Snape's lip curled in triumph as he turned to Harry.

"The headmaster has sent me to tell you, Potter, that it is his wish for you to study Occlumency this term."

“Study what?” said Harry blankly.

Snape’s sneer became more pronounced.

“Occlumency, Potter. The magical defense of the mind against external penetration. An obscure branch of magic, but a highly useful one.

Harry’s heart began to pump very fast indeed. Defense against external penetration? But he was not being possessed, they had all agreed on that. …“Why do I have to study Occlu — thing?” he blurted out.

“Because the headmaster thinks it a good idea,” said Snape smoothly. “You will receive private lessons once a week, but you will not tell anybody what you are doing, least of all Dolores Umbridge. You understand?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “Who’s going to be teaching me?”

Snape raised an eyebrow.

“I am,” he said.

Harry had the horrible sensation that his insides were melting. Ex-tra lessons with Snape — what on earth had he done to deserve this? He looked quickly around at Sirius for support.

“Why can’t Dumbledore teach Harry?” asked Sirius aggressively. “Why you?”

“I suppose because it is a headmaster’s privilege to delegate less enjoyable tasks,” said Snape silkily. “I assure you I did not beg for the job.” He got to his feet. “I will expect you at six o’clock on Monday evening, Potter. My office. If anybody asks, you are taking Remedial Potions. Nobody who has seen you in my classes could deny you need them.”

He turned to leave, his black traveling cloak billowing behind him.

“Wait a moment,” said Sirius, sitting up straighter in his chair.

Snape turned back to face them, sneering.

“I am in rather a hurry, Black … unlike you, I do not have unlim-ited leisure time. …”

“I’ll get to the point, then,” said Sirius, standing up. He was rather taller than Snape who, Harry noticed, had balled his fist in the pocket of his cloak over what Harry was sure was the handle of his wand. “If I hear you’re using these Occlumency lessons to give Harry a hard time, you’ll have me to answer to.”

“How touching,” Snape sneered. “But surely you have noticed that Potter is very like his father?”

“Yes, I have,” said Sirius proudly.

“Well then, you’ll know he’s so arrogant that criticism simply bounces off him,” Snape said sleekly.

Sirius pushed his chair roughly aside and strode around the table toward Snape, pulling out his wand as he went; Snape whipped out his own. They were squaring up to each other, Sirius looking livid, Snape calculating, his eyes darting from Sirius’s wand tip to his face.

“Sirius!” said Harry loudly, but Sirius appeared not to hear him.

“I’ve warned you, Snivellus,” said Sirius, his face barely a foot from Snape’s, “I don’t care if Dumbledore thinks you’ve reformed, I know better —”

“Oh, but why don’t you tell him so?” whispered Snape. “Or are you afraid he might not take the advice of a man who has been hiding in-side his mother’s house for six months very seriously?”

“Tell me, how is Lucius Malfoy these days? I expect he’s delighted his lapdog’s working at Hogwarts, isn’t he?”

“Speaking of dogs,” said Snape softly, “did you know that Lucius Malfoy recognized you last time you risked a little jaunt outside? Clever idea, Black, getting yourself seen on a safe station platform … gave you a cast-iron excuse not to leave your hidey-hole in future, didn’t it?”

Sirius raised his wand.

“NO!” Harry yelled, vaulting over the table and trying to get in between them, “Sirius, don’t —”

“Are you calling me a coward?” roared Sirius, trying to push Harry out of the way, but Harry would not budge.

“Why, yes, I suppose I am,” said Snape.

“Harry — get — out — of — it!” snarled Sirius, pushing him out of the way with his free hand.

The kitchen door opened and the entire Weasley family, plus Hermione, came inside, all looking very happy, with Mr. Weasley walking proudly in their midst dressed in a pair of striped pajamas covered by a mackintosh.

“Cured!” he announced brightly to the kitchen at large. “Com-pletely cured!”

He and all the other Weasleys froze on the threshold, gazing at the scene in front of them, which was also suspended in mid-action, both Sirius and Snape looking toward the door with their wands pointing into each other’s faces and Harry immobile between them, a hand stretched out to each of them, trying to force them apart.

“Merlin’s beard,” said Mr. Weasley, the smile sliding off his face, “what’s going on here?”

Both Sirius and Snape lowered their wands. Harry looked from one to the other. Each wore an expression of utmost contempt, yet the unexpected entrance of so many witnesses seemed to have brought them to their senses. Snape pocketed his wand and swept back across the kitchen, passing the Weasleys without comment. At the door he looked back.

“Six o’clock Monday evening, Potter.”

He was gone. Sirius glared after him, his wand at his side.

“But what’s been going on?” asked Mr. Weasley again.

“Nothing, Arthur,” said Sirius, who was breathing heavily as though he had just run a long distance. “Just a friendly little chat between two old school friends. …” With what looked like an enormous effort, he smiled. “So … you’re cured? That’s great news, really great. …”

“Yes, isn’t it?” said Mrs. Weasley, leading her husband forward into a chair. “Healer Smethwyck worked his magic in the end, found an antidote to whatever that snake’s got in its fangs, and Arthur’s learned his lesson about dabbling in Muggle medicine, haven’t you, dear?” she added, rather menacingly.

“Yes, Molly dear,” said Mr. Weasley meekly.

That night’s meal should have been a cheerful one with Mr. Weasley back amongst them; Harry could tell Sirius was trying to make it so, yet when his godfather was not forcing himself to laugh loudly at Fred and George’s jokes or offering everyone more food, his face fell back into a moody, brooding expression. Harry was separated from him by Mundungus and Mad-Eye, who had dropped in to offer Mr. Weasley their congratulations; he wanted to talk to Sirius, to tell him that he should not listen to a word Snape said, that Snape was goading him

deliberately and that the rest of them did not think Sir-ius was a coward for doing as Dumbledore told him and remaining in Grimmauld Place, but he had no opportunity to do so, and wondered occasionally, eyeing the ugly look on Sirius's face, whether he would have dared to even if he had the chance. Instead he told Ron and Hermione under his voice about having to take Occlumency lessons with Snape.

"Dumbledore wants to stop you having those dreams about Volde-mort," said Hermione at once. "Well, you won't be sorry not to have them anymore, will you?"

"Extra lessons with Snape?" said Ron, sounding aghast. "I'd rather have the nightmares!"

They were to return to Hogwarts on the Knight Bus the following day, escorted once again by Tonks and Lupin, both of whom were eat-ing breakfast in the kitchen when Harry, Ron, and Hermione arrived there next morning. The adults seemed to have been midway through a whispered conversation when the door opened; all of them looked around hastily and fell silent.

After a hurried breakfast they pulled on jackets and scarves against the chilly gray January morning. Harry had an unpleasant constricted sensation in his chest; he did not want to say good-bye to Sirius. He had a bad feeling about this parting; he did not know when they would next see each other and felt that it was incumbent upon him to say something to Sirius to stop him doing anything stupid — Harry was worried that Snape's accusation of cowardice had stung Sirius so badly he might even now be planning some foolhardy trip beyond Grimmauld Place. Before he could think of what to say, however, Sir-ius had beckoned him to his side.

"I want you to take this," he said quietly, thrusting a badly wrapped package roughly the size of a paperback book into Harry's hands.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

“A way of letting me know if Snape’s giving you a hard time. No, don’t open it in here!” said Sirius, with a wary look at Mrs. Weasley, who was trying to persuade the twins to wear hand-knitted mittens. “I doubt Molly would approve — but I want you to use it if you need me, all right?”

“Okay,” said Harry, stowing the package away in the inside pocket of his jacket, but he knew he would never use whatever it was. It would not be he, Harry, who lured Sirius from his place of safety, no matter how foully Snape treated him in their forthcoming Occlu-mency classes.

“Let’s go, then,” said Sirius, clapping Harry on the shoulder and smiling grimly, and before Harry could say anything else, they were heading upstairs, stopping before the heavily chained and bolted front door, surrounded by Weasleys.

“Good-bye, Harry, take care,” said Mrs. Weasley, hugging him.

“See you Harry, and keep an eye out for snakes for me!” said Mr. Weasley genially, shaking his hand.

“Right — yeah,” said Harry distractedly. It was his last chance to tell Sirius to be careful; he turned, looked into his godfather’s face and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could do so Sirius was giving him a brief, one-armed hug. He said gruffly, “Look after yourself, Harry,” and next moment Harry found himself being shunted out into the icy winter air, with Tonks (today heavily disguised as a tall, tweedy woman with iron-gray hair) chivvying him down the steps.

The door of number twelve slammed shut behind them. They fol-lowed Lupin down the front steps. As he reached the pavement, Harry looked around. Number twelve was shrinking rapidly as those on ei-ther side of it stretched sideways, squeezing it out of sight; one blink later, it had gone.

“Come on, the quicker we get on the bus the better,” said Tonks, and Harry thought there was nervousness in the glance she threw around the square. Lupin flung out his right arm.

BANG.

A violently purple, triple-decker bus had appeared out of thin air in front of them, narrowly avoiding the nearest lamppost, which jumped backward out of its way.

A thin, pimply, jug-eared youth in a purple uniform leapt down onto the pavement and said, “Welcome to the —”

“Yes, yes, we know, thank you,” said Tonks swiftly. “On, on, get on — And she shoved Harry forward toward the steps, past the conduc-tor, who goggled at Harry as he passed.

“ ’Ere — it’s ’Arry — !”

“If you shout his name I will curse you into oblivion,” muttered Tonks menacingly, now shunting Ginny and Hermione forward.

“I’ve always wanted to go on this thing,” said Ron happily, joining Harry on board and looking around.

It had been evening the last time Harry had traveled by Knight Bus and its three decks had been full of brass bedsteads. Now, in the early morning, it was crammed with an assortment of mismatched chairs grouped haphazardly around windows. Some of these appeared to have fallen over when the bus stopped abruptly in Grimmauld Place; a few witches and wizards were still getting to their feet, grumbling, and somebody’s shopping bag had slid the length of the bus; an un-pleasant mixture of frog spawn, cockroaches, and custard creams was scattered all over the floor.

“Looks like we’ll have to split up,” said Tonics briskly, looking around for empty chairs. “Fred, George, and Ginny, if you just take those

seats at the back … Remus can stay with you. …"

She, Harry, Ron, and Hermione proceeded up to the very top deck, where there were two chairs at the very front of the bus and two at the back. Stan Shunpike, the conductor, followed Harry and Ron eagerly to the back. Heads turned as Harry passed and when he sat down, he saw all the faces flick back to the front again.

As Harry and Ron handed Stan eleven Sickles each, the bus set off again, swaying ominously. It rumbled around Grimmauld Square, weaving on and off the pavement, then, with another tremendous BANG, they were all flung backward; Ron's chair toppled right over and Pigwidgeon, who had been on his lap, burst out of his cage and flew twittering wildly up to the front of the bus where he fluttered down upon Hermione's shoulder instead. Harry, who had narrowly avoided falling by seizing a candle bracket, looked out of the window: they were now speeding down what appeared to be a motorway.

"Just outside Birmingham," said Stan happily, answering Harry's unasked question as Ron struggled up from the floor. "You keepin' well, then, 'Arry? I seen your name in the paper loads over the summer, but it weren't never nuffink very nice. … I said to Ern, I said, ''e didn't seem like a nutter when we met 'im, just goes to show, dunnit?' "

He handed over their tickets and continued to gaze, enthralled, at Harry; apparently Stan did not care how nutty somebody was if they were famous enough to be in the paper. The Knight Bus swayed alarmingly, overtaking a line of cars on the inside. Looking toward the front of the bus Harry saw Hermione cover her eyes with her hands, Pigwidgeon still swaying happily on her shoulder.

BANG.

Chairs slid backward again as the Knight Bus jumped from the Birmingham motorway to a quiet country lane full of hairpin bends. Hedgerows on either side of the road were leaping out of their way as

they mounted the verges. From here they moved to a main street in the middle of a busy town, then to a viaduct surrounded by tall hills, then to a windswept road between high-rise flats, each time with a loud BANG.

"I've changed my mind," muttered Ron, picking himself up from the floor for the sixth time, "I never want to ride on here again."

"Listen, it's 'Ogwarts stop after this," said Stan brightly, swaying toward them. "That bossy woman up front 'oo got on with you, she's given us a little tip to move you up the queue. We're just gonna let Madam Marsh off first, though —" There was more retching from downstairs, followed by a horrible spattering sound. "She's not feeling 'er best.

A few minutes later the Knight Bus screeched to a halt outside a small pub, which squeezed itself out of the way to avoid a collision. They could hear Stan ushering the unfortunate Madam Marsh out of the bus and the relieved murmurings of her fellow passengers on the second deck. The bus moved on again, gathering speed, until — BANG.

They were rolling through a snowy Hogsmeade. Harry caught a glimpse of the Hog's Head down its side street, the severed boar's head sign creaking in the wintry wind. Flecks of snow hit the large window at the front of the bus. At last they rolled to a halt outside the gates to Hogwarts.

Lupin and Tonks helped them off the bus with their luggage and then got off to say good-bye. Harry glanced up at the three decks of the Knight Bus and saw all the passengers staring down at them, noses flat against the windows.

"You'll be safe once you're in the grounds," said Tonks, casting a careful eye around at the deserted road. "Have a good term, okay?"

“Look after yourselves,” said Lupin, shaking hands all round and reaching Harry last. “And listen …” He lowered his voice while the rest of them exchanged last-minute good-byes with Tonks, “Harry, I know you don’t like Snape, but he is a superb Occlumens and we all — Sirius included — want you to learn to protect yourself, so work hard, all right?”

“Yeah, all right,” said Harry heavily, looking up into Lupin’s prematurely lined face. “See you, then …”

The six of them struggled up the slippery drive toward the castle dragging their trunks. Hermione was already talking about knitting a few elf hats before bedtime. Harry glanced back when they reached the oak front doors; the Knight Bus had already gone, and he half-wished, given what was coming the following day, that he was still on board.

Harry spent most of the next day dreading the evening. His morning Potions lesson did nothing to dispel his trepidation, as Snape was as unpleasant as ever, and Harry’s mood was further lowered by the fact that members of the D.A. were continually approaching him in the corridors between classes, asking hopefully whether there would be a meeting that night.

“I’ll let you know when the next one is,” Harry said over and over again, “but I can’t do it tonight, I’ve got to go to — er — Remedial Potions. …”

“You take Remedial Potions?” asked Zacharias Smith superciliously, having cornered Harry in the entrance hall after lunch. “Good Lord, you must be terrible, Snape doesn’t usually give extra lessons, does he?”

As Smith strode away in an annoyingly buoyant fashion, Ron glared after him.

“Shall I jinx him? I can still get him from here,” he said, raising his wand and taking aim between Smith’s shoulder blades.

“Forget it,” said Harry dismally. “It’s what everyone’s going to think, isn’t it? That I’m really stup —”

“Hi, Harry,” said a voice behind him. He turned around and found Cho standing there.

“Oh,” said Harry as his stomach leapt uncomfortably. “Hi.”

“We’ll be in the library, Harry,” said Hermione firmly, and she seized Ron above the elbow and dragged him off toward the marble staircase.

“Had a good Christmas?” asked Cho.

“Yeah, not bad,” said Harry.

“Mine was pretty quiet,” said Cho. For some reason, she was look-ing rather embarrassed. “Erm … there’s another Hogsmeade trip next month, did you see the notice?”

“What? Oh no, I haven’t checked the notice board since I got back. …”

“Yes, it’s on Valentine’s Day. …”

“Right,” said Harry, wondering why she was telling him this. “Well, I suppose you want to — ?”

“Only if you do,” she said eagerly.

Harry stared. He had been about to say “I suppose you want to know when the next D.A. meeting is?” but her response did not seem to fit.

“I — er —” he said.

“Oh, it’s okay if you don’t,” she said, looking mortified. “Don’t worry. I-I’ll see you around.”

She walked away. Harry stood staring after her, his brain working frantically. Then something clunked into place.

“Cho! Hey — CHO!”

He ran after her, catching her halfway up the marble staircase.

“Er — d’you want to come into Hogsmeade with me on Valen-tine’s Day?”

“Oooh, yes!” she said, blushing crimson and beaming at him.

“Right … well … that’s settled then,” said Harry, and feeling that the day was not going to be a complete loss after all, he headed off to the library to pick up Ron and Hermione before their afternoon lessons, walking in a rather bouncy way himself.

By six o’clock that evening, however, even the glow of having successfully asked out Cho Chang was insufficient to lighten the ominous feelings that intensified with every step Harry took toward Snape’s office.

He paused outside the door when he reached it, wishing he were almost anywhere else, then, taking a deep breath, knocked, and entered.

It was a shadowy room lined with shelves bearing hundreds of glass jars in which floated slimy bits of animals and plants, suspended in variously colored potions. In a corner stood the cupboard full of ingredients that Snape had once accused Harry — not without reason — of robbing. Harry’s attention was drawn toward the desk, however, where a shallow stone basin engraved with runes and symbols lay in a pool of candlelight. Harry recognized it at once — Dum-

bledore's Pensieve. Wondering what on earth it was doing here, he jumped when Snape's cold voice came out of the corner.

"Shut the door behind you, Potter."

Harry did as he was told with the horrible feeling that he was imprisoning himself as he did so. When he turned back to face the room Snape had moved into the light and was pointing silently at the chair opposite his desk. Harry sat down and so did Snape, his cold black eyes fixed unblinkingly upon Harry, dislike etched in every line of his face.

"Well, Potter, you know why you are here," he said. "The head-master has asked me to teach you Occlumency. I can only hope that you prove more adept at it than Potions."

"Right," said Harry tersely.

"This may not be an ordinary class, Potter," said Snape, his eyes narrowed malevolently, "but I am still your teacher and you will therefore call me 'sir' or 'Professor' at all times."

"Yes … sir," said Harry.

"Now, Occlumency. As I told you back in your dear godfather's kitchen, this branch of magic seals the mind against magical intrusion and influence."

"And why does Professor Dumbledore think I need it, sir?" said Harry, looking directly into Snape's dark, cold eyes and wondering whether he would answer.

Snape looked back at him for a moment and then said contemptuously, "Surely even you could have worked that out by now, Potter? The Dark Lord is highly skilled at Legilimency —"

"What's that? Sir?"

“It is the ability to extract feelings and memories from another person’s mind —”

“He can read minds?” said Harry quickly, his worst fears confirmed.

“You have no subtlety, Potter,” said Snape, his dark eyes glittering. “You do not understand fine distinctions. It is one of the shortcomings that makes you such a lamentable potion-maker.”

Snape paused for a moment, apparently to savor the pleasure of insulting Harry, before continuing, “Only Muggles talk of ‘mind reading.’ The mind is not a book, to be opened at will and examined at leisure. Thoughts are not etched on the inside of skulls, to be perused by any invader. The mind is a complex and many-layered thing, Potter … or at least, most minds are. …” He smirked. “It is true, however, that those who have mastered Legilimency are able, under certain conditions, to delve into the minds of their victims and to interpret their findings correctly. The Dark Lord, for instance, almost always knows when somebody is lying to him. Only those skilled at Occlumency are able to shut down those feelings and memories that contradict the lie, and so utter falsehoods in his presence without detection.”

Whatever Snape said, Legilimency sounded like mind reading to Harry and he did not like the sound of it at all.

“So he could know what we’re thinking right now? Sir?”

“The Dark Lord is at a considerable distance and the walls and grounds of Hogwarts are guarded by many ancient spells and charms to ensure the bodily and mental safety of those who dwell within them,” said Snape. “Time and space matter in magic, Potter. Eye contact is often essential to Legilimency.”

“Well then, why do I have to learn Occlumency?”

Snape eyed Harry, tracing his mouth with one long, thin finger as he did so.

“The usual rules do not seem to apply with you, Potter. The curse that failed to kill you seems to have forged some kind of connection between you and the Dark Lord. The evidence suggests that at times, when your mind is most relaxed and vulnerable — when you are asleep, for instance — you are sharing the Dark Lord’s thoughts and emotions. The headmaster thinks it inadvisable for this to continue. He wishes me to teach you how to close your mind to the Dark Lord.”

Harry’s heart was pumping fast again. None of this added up.

“But why does Professor Dumbledore want to stop it?” he asked abruptly. “I don’t like it much, but it’s been useful, hasn’t it? I mean … I saw that snake attack Mr. Weasley and if I hadn’t, Professor Dumbledore wouldn’t have been able to save him, would he? Sir?”

Snape stared at Harry for a few moments, still tracing his mouth with his finger. When he spoke again, it was slowly and deliberately, as though he weighed every word.

“It appears that the Dark Lord has been unaware of the connection between you and himself until very recently. Up till now it seems that you have been experiencing his emotions and sharing his thoughts without his being any the wiser. However, the vision you had shortly before Christmas —”

“The one with the snake and Mr. Weasley?”

“Do not interrupt me, Potter,” said Snape in a dangerous voice. “As I was saying … the vision you had shortly before Christmas represented such a powerful incursion upon the Dark Lord’s thoughts —”

“I saw inside the snake’s head, not his!”

“I thought I just told you not to interrupt me, Potter?”

But Harry did not care if Snape was angry; at last he seemed to be getting to the bottom of this business. He had moved forward in his chair so that, without realizing it, he was perched on the very edge, tense as though poised for flight.

"How come I saw through the snake's eyes if it's Voldemort's thoughts I'm sharing?"

"Do not say the Dark Lord's name!" spat Snape.

There was a nasty silence. They glared at each other across the Pensieve.

"Professor Dumbledore says his name," said Harry quietly.

"Dumbledore is an extremely powerful wizard," Snape muttered. "While he may feel secure enough to use the name … the rest of us …" He rubbed his left forearm, apparently unconsciously, on the spot where Harry knew the Dark Mark was burned into his skin.

"I just wanted to know," Harry began again, forcing his voice back to politeness, "why —"

"You seem to have visited the snake's mind because that was where the Dark Lord was at that particular moment," snarled Snape. "He was possessing the snake at the time and so you dreamed you were in-side it too. …"

"And Vol — he — realized I was there?"

"It seems so," said Snape coolly.

"How do you know?" said Harry urgently. "Is this just Professor Dumbledore guessing, or — ?"

"I told you," said Snape, rigid in his chair, his eyes slits, "to call me 'sir.' "

“Yes, sir,” said Harry impatiently, “but how do you know — ?”

“It is enough that we know,” said Snape repressively. “The impor-tant point is that the Dark Lord is now aware that you are gaining access to his thoughts and feelings. He has also deduced that the process is likely to work in reverse; that is to say, he has realized that he might be able to access your thoughts and feelings in return —”

“And he might try and make me do things?” asked Harry. “Sir?” he added hurriedly.

“He might,” said Snape, sounding cold and unconcerned. “Which brings us back to Occlumency.”

Snape pulled out his wand from an inside pocket of his robes and Harry tensed in his chair, but Snape merely raised the wand to his temple and placed its tip into the greasy roots of his hair. When he withdrew it, some silvery substance came away, stretching from tem-ple to wand like a thick gossamer strand, which broke as he pulled the wand away from it and fell gracefully into the Pensieve, where it swirled silvery white, neither gas nor liquid. Twice more Snape raised the wand to his temple and deposited the silvery substance into the stone basin, then, without offering any explanation of his behavior, he picked up the Pensieve carefully, removed it to a shelf out of their way and returned to face Harry with his wand held at the ready.

“Stand up and take out your wand, Potter.”

Harry got to his feet feeling nervous. They faced each other with the desk between them.

“You may use your wand to attempt to disarm me, or defend your-self in any other way you can think of,” said Snape.

“And what are you going to do?” Harry asked, eyeing Snape’s wand apprehensively.

“I am about to attempt to break into your mind,” said Snape softly. “We are going to see how well you resist. I have been told that you have already shown aptitude at resisting the Imperius Curse. … You will find that similar powers are needed for this. … Brace yourself, now. … Legilimens!”

Snape had struck before Harry was ready, before Harry had even begun to summon any force of resistance: the office swam in front of his eyes and vanished, image after image was racing through his mind like a flickering film so vivid it blinded him to his surroundings. … He was five, watching Dudley riding a new red bicycle, and his heart was bursting with jealousy. … He was nine, and Ripper the bulldog was chasing him up a tree and the Dursleys were laughing be-low on the lawn. … He was sitting under the Sorting Hat, and it was telling him he would do well in Slytherin. … Hermione was lying in the hospital wing, her face covered with thick black hair. … A hun-dred dementors were closing in on him beside the dark lake. … Cho Chang was drawing nearer to him under the mistletoe. …No, said a voice in Harry’s head, as the memory of Cho drew nearer, you’re not watching that, you’re not watching it, it’s private —He felt a sharp pain in his knee. Snape’s office had come back into view and he realized that he had fallen to the floor; one of his knees had collided painfully with the leg of Snape’s desk. He looked up at Snape, who had lowered his wand and was rubbing his wrist. There was an angry weal there, like a scorch mark.

“Did you mean to produce a Stinging Hex?” asked Snape coolly.

“No,” said Harry bitterly, getting up from the floor.

“I thought not,” said Snape contemptuously. “You let me get in too far. You lost control.”

“Did you see everything I saw?” Harry asked, unsure whether he wanted to hear the answer.

"Flashes of it," said Snape, his lip curling. "To whom did the dog belong?"

"My Aunt Marge," Harry muttered, hating Snape.

"Well, for a first attempt that was not as poor as it might have been," said Snape, raising his wand once more. "You managed to stop me eventually, though you wasted time and energy shouting. You must remain focused. Repel me with your brain and you will not need to resort to your wand."

"I'm trying," said Harry angrily, "but you're not telling me how!"

"Manners, Potter," said Snape dangerously. "Now, I want you to close your eyes."

Harry threw him a filthy look before doing as he was told. He did not like the idea of standing there with his eyes shut while Snape faced him, carrying a wand.

"Clear your mind, Potter," said Snape's cold voice. "Let go of all emotion. …"

But Harry's anger at Snape continued to pound through his veins like venom. Let go of his anger? He could as easily detach his legs. …"You're not doing it, Potter. … You will need more discipline than this. … Focus, now. …"

Harry tried to empty his mind, tried not to think, or remember, or feel. …"Let's go again … on the count of three … one — two — three — Legilimens!"

A great black dragon was rearing in front of him. … His father and mother were waving at him out of an enchanted mirror. … Cedric Diggory was lying on the ground with blank eyes staring at him. …"NOOOOOOO!"

He was on his knees again, his face buried in his hands, his brain aching as though someone had been trying to pull it from his skull.

“Get up!” said Snape sharply. “Get up! You are not trying, you are making no effort, you are allowing me access to memories you fear, handing me weapons!”

Harry stood up again, his heart thumping wildly as though he had really just seen Cedric dead in the graveyard. Snape looked paler than usual, and angrier, though not nearly as angry as Harry was.

“I — am — making — an — effort,” he said through clenched teeth.

“I told you to empty yourself of emotion!”

“Yeah? Well, I’m finding that hard at the moment,” Harry snarled.

“Then you will find yourself easy prey for the Dark Lord!” said Snape savagely. “Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked this easily — weak people, in other words — they stand no chance against his powers! He will penetrate your mind with absurd ease, Potter!”

“I am not weak,” said Harry in a low voice, fury now pumping through him so that he thought he might attack Snape in a moment.

“Then prove it! Master yourself!” spat Snape. “Control your anger, discipline your mind! We shall try again! Get ready, now! Legilimens!”

He was watching Uncle Vernon hammering the letter box shut. … A hundred dementors were drifting across the lake in the grounds toward him. … He was running along a windowless passage with Mr. Weasley. … They were drawing nearer to the plain black door at the end of the corridor. … Harry expected to go through it … but Mr. Weasley led him off to the left, down a flight of stone steps. …“I KNOW! I KNOW!”

He was on all fours again on Snape's office floor, his scar was prickling unpleasantly, but the voice that had just issued from his mouth was triumphant. He pushed himself up again to find Snape staring at him, his wand raised. It looked as though, this time, Snape had lifted the spell before Harry had even tried to fight back.

"What happened then, Potter?" he asked, eyeing Harry intently.

"I saw — I remembered," Harry panted. "I've just realized …"

"Realized what?" asked Snape sharply.

Harry did not answer at once; he was still savoring the moment of blinding realization as he rubbed his forehead. …He had been dreaming about a windowless corridor ending in a locked door for months, without once realizing that it was a real place. Now, seeing the memory again, he knew that all along he had been dreaming about the corridor down which he had run with Mr. Weasley on the twelfth of August as they hurried to the courtrooms in the Ministry. It was the corridor leading to the Department of Mys-teries, and Mr. Weasley had been there the night that he had been at-tacked by Voldemort's snake. …He looked up at Snape.

"What's in the Department of Mysteries?"

"What did you say?" Snape asked quietly and Harry saw, with deep satisfaction, that Snape was unnerved.

"I said, what's in the Department of Mysteries, sir?" Harry said.

"And why," said Snape slowly, "would you ask such a thing?"

"Because," said Harry, watching Snape closely for a reaction, "that corridor I've just seen — I've been dreaming about it for months — I've just recognized it — it leads to the Department of Mysteries … and I think Voldemort wants something from —"

"I have told you not to say the Dark Lord's name!"

They glared at each other. Harry's scar seared again, but he did not care. Snape looked agitated. When he spoke again he sounded as though he was trying to appear cool and unconcerned.

"There are many things in the Department of Mysteries, Potter, few of which you would understand and none of which concern you, do I make myself plain?"

"Yes," Harry said, still rubbing his prickling scar, which was be-coming more painful.

"I want you back here same time on Wednesday, and we will con-tinue work then."

"Fine," said Harry. He was desperate to get out of Snape's office and find Ron and Hermione.

"You are to rid your mind of all emotion every night before sleep — empty it, make it blank and calm, you understand?"

"Yes," said Harry, who was barely listening.

"And be warned, Potter … I shall know if you have not prac-ticed …"

"Right," Harry mumbled. He picked up his schoolbag, swung it over his shoulder, and hurried toward the office door. As he opened it he glanced back at Snape, who had his back to Harry and was scoop-ing his own thoughts out of the Pensieve with the tip of his wand and replacing them carefully inside his own head. Harry left without an-other word, closing the door carefully behind him, his scar still throb-bing painfully.

Harry found Ron and Hermione in the library, where they were working on Umbridge's most recent ream of homework. Other stu-dents, nearly all of them fifth years, sat at lamp-lit tables nearby,

noses close to books, quills scratching feverishly, while the sky outside the mullioned windows grew steadily blacker. The only other sound was the slight squeaking of one of Madam Pince's shoes as the librarian prowled the aisles menacingly, breathing down the necks of those touching her precious books.

Harry felt shivery; his scar was still aching, he felt almost feverish. When he sat down opposite Ron and Hermione he caught sight of himself in the window opposite. He was very white, and his scar seemed to be showing up more clearly than usual.

"How did it go?" Hermione whispered, and then, looking con-cerned, "Are you all right, Harry?"

"Yeah … fine … I dunno," said Harry impatiently, wincing as pain shot through his scar again. "Listen … I've just realized some-thing. …"

And he told them what he had just seen and deduced.

"So … so, are you saying …" whispered Ron, as Madam Pince swept past, squeaking slightly, "that the weapon — the thing You-Know-Who's after — is in the Ministry of Magic?"

"In the Department of Mysteries, it's got to be," Harry whispered. "I saw that door when your dad took me down to the courtrooms for my hearing and it's definitely the same one he was guarding when the snake bit him."

Hermione let out a long, slow sigh. "Of course," she breathed.

"Of course what?" said Ron rather impatiently.

"Ron, think about it. … Sturgis Podmore was trying to get through a door at the Ministry of Magic. … It must have been that one, it's too much of a coincidence!"

“How come Sturgis was trying to break in when he’s on our side?” said Ron.

“Well, I don’t know,” Hermione admitted. “That is a bit odd. …”

“So what’s in the Department of Mysteries?” Harry asked Ron. “Has your dad ever mentioned anything about it?”

“I know they call the people who work in there ‘Unspeakables,’ ” said Ron, frowning. “Because no one really seems to know what they do in there. … Weird place to have a weapon …”

“It’s not weird at all, it makes perfect sense,” said Hermione. “It will be something top secret that the Ministry has been developing, I ex-pect. … Harry, are you sure you’re all right?”

For Harry had just run both his hands hard over his forehead as though trying to iron it.

“Yeah … fine …” he said, lowering his hands, which were trem-bling. “I just feel a bit … I don’t like Occlumency much. …”

“I expect anyone would feel shaky if they’d had their mind attacked over and over again,” said Hermione sympathetically. “Look, let’s get back to the common room, we’ll be a bit more comfortable there. …”

But the common room was packed and full of shrieks of laughter and excitement; Fred and George were demonstrating their latest bit of joke shop merchandise.

“Headless Hats!” shouted George, as Fred waved a pointed hat dec-orated with a fluffy pink feather at the watching students. “Two Galleons each — watch Fred, now!”

Fred swept the hat onto his head, beaming. For a second he merely looked rather stupid, then both hat and head vanished.

Several girls screamed, but everyone else was roaring with laughter.

"And off again!" shouted George, and Fred's hand groped for a moment in what seemed to be thin air over his shoulder; then his head reappeared as he swept the pink-feathered hat from it again.

"How do those hats work, then?" said Hermione, distracted from her homework and watching Fred and George. "I mean, obviously it's some kind of Invisibility Spell, but it's rather clever to have extended the field of invisibility beyond the boundaries of the charmed object. … I'd imagine the charm wouldn't have a very long life though. …"

Harry did not answer; he was still feeling ill.

"I'm going to have to do this tomorrow," he muttered, pushing the books he had just taken out of his bag back inside it.

"Well, write it in your homework planner then!" said Hermione encouragingly. "So you don't forget!"

Harry and Ron exchanged looks as he reached into his bag, withdrew the planner and opened it tentatively.

"Don't leave it till later, you big second-rater!" chided the book as Harry scribbled down Umbridge's homework. Hermione beamed at it.

"I think I'll go to bed," said Harry, stuffing the homework planner back into his bag and making a mental note to drop it in the fire the first opportunity he got.

He walked across the common room, dodging George, who tried to put a Headless Hat on him, and reached the peace and cool of the stone staircase to the boys' dormitories. He was feeling sick again, just as he had the night he had had the vision of the snake, but thought that if he could just lie down for a while he would be all right.

He opened the door of his dormitory and was one step inside it when he experienced pain so severe he thought that someone must have sliced into the top of his head. He did not know where he was, whether he was standing or lying down, he did not even know his own name. …Maniacal laughter was ringing in his ears. … He was happier than he had been in a very long time. … Jubilant, ecstatic, triumphant … A wonderful, wonderful thing had happened. …"Harry? HARRY!"

Someone had hit him around the face. The insane laughter was punctuated with a cry of pain. The happiness was draining out of him, but the laughter continued. …He opened his eyes and as he did so, he became aware that the wild laughter was coming out of his own mouth. The moment he realized this, it died away; Harry lay panting on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, the scar on his forehead throbbing horribly. Ron was bending over him, looking very worried.

"What happened?" he said.

"I … dunno …" Harry gasped, sitting up again. "He's really happy … really happy …"

"You-Know-Who is?"

"Something good's happened," mumbled Harry. He was shaking as badly as he had done after seeing the snake attack Mr. Weasley and felt very sick. "Something he's been hoping for."

The words came, just as they had back in the Gryffindor changing room, as though a stranger was speaking them through Harry's mouth, yet he knew they were true. He took deep breaths, willing himself not to vomit all over Ron. He was very glad that Dean and Seamus were not here to watch this time.

"Hermione told me to come and check on you," said Ron in a low voice, helping Harry to his feet. "She says your defenses will be low

at the moment, after Snape's been fiddling around with your mind. … Still, I suppose it'll help in the long run, won't it?"

He looked doubtfully at Harry as he helped him toward bed. Harry nodded without any conviction and slumped back on his pillows, aching all over from having fallen to the floor so often that evening, his scar still prickling painfully. He could not help feeling that his first foray into Occlumency had weakened his mind's resistance rather than strengthening it, and he wondered, with a feeling of great trepidation, what had happened to make Lord Voldemort the happiest he had been in fourteen years.

Chapter 25 The Beetle at Bay

Harry's question was answered the very next morning. When Hermione's Daily Prophet arrived she smoothed it out, gazed for a moment at the front page, and then gave a yelp that caused every-one in the vicinity to stare at her.

"What?" said Harry and Ron together.

For an answer she spread the newspaper on the table in front of them and pointed at ten black-and-white photographs that filled the whole of the front page, nine showing wizards' faces and the tenth, a witch's. Some of the people in the photographs were silently jeering; others were tapping their fingers on the frame of their pictures, look-ing insolent. Each picture was captioned with a name and the crime for which the person had been sent to Azkaban.

Antonin Dolohov, read the legend beneath a wizard with a long, pale, twisted face who was sneering up at Harry, convicted of the bru-tal murders of Gideon and Fabian Prewett.

Augustus Rookwood, said the caption beneath a pockmarked man with greasy hair who was leaning against the edge of his picture, looking bored, convicted of leaking Ministry of Magic Secrets to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

But Harry's eyes were drawn to the picture of the witch. Her face had leapt out at him the moment he had seen the page. She had long, dark hair that looked unkempt and straggly in the picture, though he had seen it sleek, thick, and shining. She glared up at him through heavily lidded eyes, an arrogant, disdainful smile playing around her thin mouth. Like Sirius, she retained vestiges of great good looks, but something — perhaps Azkaban — had taken most of her beauty.

Bellatrix Lestrange, convicted of the torture and permanent incapaci-tation of Frank and Alice Longbottom.

Hermione nudged Harry and pointed at the headline over the pictures, which Harry, concentrating on Bellatrix, had not yet read.

MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN

MINISTRY FEARS BLACK IS “RALLYING POINT”

FOR OLD DEATH EATERS

“Black?” said Harry loudly. “Not — ?”

“Shhh!” whispered Hermione desperately. “Not so loud — just read it!”

The Ministry of Magic announced late last night that there has been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

Speaking to reporters in his private office, Cor-nelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, confirmed that ten high-security prisoners escaped in the early hours of yesterday evening, and that he has already informed the Muggle Prime Minister of the dangerous nature of these individuals.

“We find ourselves, most unfortunately, in the same position we were two and a half years ago when the murderer Sirius Black escaped,” said Fudge last night. “Nor do we think the two breakouts are unrelated. An escape of this magnitude suggests outside help, and we must remember that Black, as the first person ever to break out of Azkaban, would be ideally placed to help others follow in his footsteps. We think it likely that these individuals, who include Black’s cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange, have rallied around Black as their leader. We are, however, doing all we can to round up the criminals and beg the magical commu-nity to remain alert and cautious. On no account should any of these individuals be approached.”

“There you are, Harry,” said Ron, looking awestruck. “That’s why he was happy last night. …”

“I don’t believe this,” snarled Harry, “Fudge is blaming the break-out on Sirius?”

“What other options does he have?” said Hermione bitterly. “He can hardly say, ‘Sorry everyone, Dumbledore warned me this might happen, the Azkaban guards have joined Lord Voldemort’ — stop whimpering, Ron — ‘and now Voldemort’s worst supporters have broken out too.’ I mean, he’s spent a good six months telling everyone you and Dumbledore are liars, hasn’t he?”

Hermione ripped open the newspaper and began to read the report inside while Harry looked around the Great Hall. He could not understand why his fellow students were not looking scared or at least discussing the terrible piece of news on the front page, but very few of them took the newspaper every day like Hermione. There they all were, talking about homework and Quidditch and who knew what other rubbish, and outside these walls ten more Death Eaters had swollen Voldemort’s ranks. …He glanced up at the staff table. It was a different story here: Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall were deep in conversation, both looking extremely grave. Professor Sprout had the Prophet propped against a bottle of ketchup and was reading the front page with such concentration that she was not noticing the gentle drip of egg yolk falling into her lap from her stationary spoon. Meanwhile, at the far end of the table, Professor Umbridge was tucking into a bowl of porridge. For once her pouchy toad’s eyes were not sweeping the Great Hall looking for misbehaving students. She scowled as she gulped down her food and every now and then she shot a malevolent glance up the table to where Dumbledore and McGonagall were talk-ing so intently.

“Oh my —” said Hermione wonderingly, still staring at the newspaper.

“What now?” said Harry quickly; he was feeling jumpy.

“It’s … horrible,” said Hermione, looking shaken. She folded back page ten of the newspaper and handed it back to Harry and Ron.

TRAGIC DEMISE OF

MINISTRY OF MAGIC WORKER

St. Mungo's Hospital promised a full inquiry last night after Ministry of Magic worker Broderick Bode, 49, was discovered dead in his bed, strangled by a potted-plant. Healers called to the scene were unable to revive Mr. Bode, who had been injured in a workplace accident some weeks prior to his death.

Healer Miriam Strout, who was in charge of Mr. Bode's ward at the time of the incident, has been suspended on full pay and was unavailable for comment yesterday, but a spokeswizard for the hospital said in a statement, "St. Mungo's deeply regrets the death of Mr. Bode, whose health was improving steadily prior to this tragic accident.

"We have strict guidelines on the decorations per-mitted on our wards but it appears that Healer Strout, busy over the Christmas period, overlooked the dangers of the plant on Mr. Bode's bedside table. As his speech and mobility improved, Healer Strout en-couraged Mr. Bode to look after the plant himself, unaware that it was not an innocent Flitterbloom, but a cutting of Devil's Snare, which, when touched by the convalescent Mr. Bode, throttled him instantly.

"St. Mungo's is as yet unable to account for the presence of the plant on the ward and asks any witch or wizard with information to come forward."

"Bode …" said Ron. "Bode. It rings a bell. …"

"We saw him," Hermione whispered. "In St. Mungo's, remember? He was in the bed opposite Lockhart's, just lying there, staring at the ceiling. And we saw the Devil's Snare arrive. She — the Healer — said it was a Christmas present. …"

Harry looked back at the story. A feeling of horror was rising like bile in his throat.

"How come we didn't recognize Devil's Snare … ? We've seen it before … we could've stopped this from happening …"

"Who expects Devil's Snare to turn up in a hospital disguised as a potted plant?" said Ron sharply. "It's not our fault, whoever sent it to the bloke is to blame! They must be a real prat, why didn't they check what they were buying?"

"Oh come on, Ron!" said Hermione shakily, "I don't think anyone could put Devil's Snare in a pot and not realize it tries to kill whoever touches it? This — this was murder. … A clever murder, as well. … If the plant was sent anonymously, how's anyone ever going to find out who did it?"

Harry was not thinking about Devil's Snare. He was remembering taking the lift down to the ninth level of the Ministry on the day of his hearing, and the sallow-faced man who had got in on the Atrium level.

"I met Bode," he said slowly. "I saw him at the Ministry with your dad …"

Ron's mouth fell open.

"I've heard Dad talk about him at home! He was an Unspeak-able — he worked in the Department of Mysteries!"

They looked at one another for a moment, then Hermione pulled the newspaper back toward her, closed it, glared for a moment at the pictures of the ten escaped Death Eaters on the front, then leapt to her feet.

"Where are you going?" said Ron, startled.

“To send a letter,” said Hermione, swinging her bag onto her shoulder. “It … well, I don’t know whether … but it’s worth trying … and I’m the only one who can …”

“I hate it when she does that,” grumbled Ron as he and Harry got up from the table and made their own, slower way out of the Great Hall. “Would it kill her to tell us what she’s up to for once? It’d take her about ten more seconds — hey, Hagrid!”

Hagrid was standing beside the doors into the entrance hall, wait-ing for a crowd of Ravenclaws to pass. He was still as heavily bruised as he had been on the day he had come back from his mission to the giants and there was a new cut right across the bridge of his nose.

“All righ’, you two?” he said, trying to muster a smile but managing only a kind of pained grimace.

“Are you okay, Hagrid?” asked Harry, following him as he lum-bered after the Ravenclaws.

“Fine, fine,” said Hagrid with a feeble assumption of airiness; he waved a hand and narrowly missed concussing a frightened-looking Professor Vector, who was passing. “Jus’ busy, yeh know, usual stuff — lessons ter prepare — couple o’ salamanders got scale rot — an’ I’m on probation,” he mumbled.

“You’re on probation?” said Ron very loudly, so that many students passing looked around curiously. “Sorry — I mean — you’re on pro-bation?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid. “ ’S’no more’n I expected, ter tell yeh the truth. Yeh migh’ not’ve picked up on it, bu’ that inspection didn’ go too well, yeh know … anyway,” he sighed deeply. “Bes’ go an rub a bit more chili powder on them salamanders or their tails’ll be hangin’ off ’em next. See yeh, Harry … Ron …”

He trudged away, out the front doors and down the stone steps into the damp grounds. Harry watched him go, wondering how much more bad news he could stand.

The fact that Hagrid was now on probation became common knowledge within the school over the next few days, but to Harry's indignation, hardly anybody appeared to be upset about it; indeed, some people, Draco Malfoy prominent among them, seemed positively gleeful. As for the freakish death of an obscure Department of Mysteries employee in St. Mungo's, Harry, Ron, and Hermione seemed to be the only people who knew or cared. There was only one topic of conversation in the corridors now: the ten escaped Death Eaters, whose story had finally filtered through the school from those few people who read the newspapers. Rumors were flying that some of the convicts had been spotted in Hogsmeade, that they were supposed to be hiding out in the Shrieking Shack and that they were going to break into Hogwarts, just as Sirius Black had done.

Those who came from Wizarding families had grown up hearing the names of these Death Eaters spoken with almost as much fear as Voldemort's; the crimes they had committed during the days of Voldemort's reign of terror were legendary. There were relatives of their victims among the Hogwarts students, who now found themselves the unwilling objects of a gruesome sort of reflected fame as they walked the corridors: Susan Bones, who had an uncle, aunt, and cousins who had all died at the hands of one of the ten, said miserably during Herbology that she now had a good idea what it felt like to be Harry.

"And I don't know how you stand it, it's horrible," she said bluntly, dumping far too much dragon manure on her tray of Screechsnap seedlings, causing them to wriggle and squeak in discomfort.

It was true that Harry was the subject of much renewed muttering and pointing in the corridors these days, yet he thought he detected a slight difference in the tone of the whisperers' voices. They sounded

curious rather than hostile now, and once or twice he was sure he over-heard snatches of conversation that suggested that the speakers were not satisfied with the Prophet's version of how and why ten Death Eaters had managed to break out of Azkaban fortress. In their confu-sion and fear, these doubters now seemed to be turning to the only other explanation available to them, the one that Harry and Dumble-dore had been expounding since the previous year.

It was not only the students' mood that had changed. It was now quite common to come across two or three teachers conversing in low, urgent whispers in the corridors, breaking off their conversations the moment they saw students approaching.

"They obviously can't talk freely in the staffroom anymore," said Hermione in a low voice, as she, Harry, and Ron passed Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout huddled together outside the Charms classroom one day. "Not with Umbridge there."

"Reckon they know anything new?" said Ron, gazing back over his shoulder at the three teachers.

"If they do, we're not going to hear about it, are we?" said Harry an-grily. "Not after Decree … What number are we on now?"

For new signs had appeared on the house notice boards the morn-ing after news of the Azkaban breakout:— BY ORDER OF —

THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTSTeachers are hereby banned from giving students any infor-mation that is not strictly related to the subjects they are paid to teach.

The above is in accordance withEducational Decree Number Twenty-six.

Signed:

Dolores Jane Umbridge

HIGH INQUISITOR

This latest decree had been the subject of a great number of jokes among the students. Lee Jordan had pointed out to Umbridge that by the terms of the new rule she was not allowed to tell Fred and George off for playing Exploding Snap in the back of the class.

“Exploding Snap’s got nothing to do with Defense Against the Dark Arts, Professor! That’s not information relating to your subject!”

When Harry next saw Lee, the back of his hand was bleeding rather badly. Harry recommended essence of murtlap.

Harry had thought that the breakout from Azkaban might have humbled Umbridge a little, that she might have been abashed at the catastrophe that had occurred right under her beloved Fudge’s nose. It seemed, however, to have only intensified her furious desire to bring every aspect of life at Hogwarts under her personal control. She seemed determined at the very least to achieve a sacking before long, and the only question was whether it would be Professor Trelawney or Hagrid who went first.

Every single Divination and Care of Magical Creatures lesson was now conducted in the presence of Umbridge and her clipboard. She lurked by the fire in the heavily perfumed tower room, interrupting Professor Trelawney’s increasingly hysterical talks with difficult questions about Ornithomancy and Heptomology, insisting that she predict students’ answers before they gave them and demanding that she demonstrate her skill at the crystal ball, the tea leaves, and the rune stones in turn. Harry thought that Professor Trelawney might soon crack under the strain; several times he passed her in the corridors (in itself a very unusual occurrence as she generally remained in her tower room), muttering wildly to herself, wringing her hands, and shooting terrified glances over her shoulder, all the time giving off a powerful smell of cooking sherry. If he had not been so worried about Hagrid, he would have felt sorry for her — but if one of

them was to be ousted out of a job, there could be only one choice for Harry as to who should remain.

Unfortunately, Harry could not see that Hagrid was putting up a better show than Trelawney. Though he seemed to be following Hermione's advice and had shown them nothing more frightening than a crup, a creature indistinguishable from a Jack Russell terrier except for its forked tail, since before Christmas, he also seemed to have lost his nerve. He was oddly distracted and jumpy in lessons, losing the thread of what he was saying while talking to the class, answering questions wrongly and glancing anxiously at Umbridge all the time. He was also more distant with Harry, Ron, and Hermione than he had ever been before, expressly forbidding them to visit him after dark.

"If she catches yeh, it'll be all of our necks on the line," he told them flatly, and with no desire to do anything that jeopardized his job further, they abstained from walking down to his hut in the evenings. It seemed to Harry that Umbridge was steadily depriving him of everything that made his life at Hogwarts worth living: visits to Hagrid's house, letters from Sirius, his Firebolt, and Quidditch. He took his revenge the only way he had: redoubling his efforts for the D.A.

Harry was pleased to see that all of them, even Zacharias Smith, had been spurred to work harder than ever by the news that ten more Death Eaters were now on the loose, but in nobody was this improvement more pronounced than in Neville. The news of his parents' attacker's escape had wrought a strange and even slightly alarming change in him. He had not once mentioned his meeting with Harry, Ron, and Hermione on the closed ward in St. Mungo's, and taking their lead from him, they had kept quiet about it too. Nor had he said anything on the subject of Bellatrix and her fellow torturers' escape; in fact, he barely spoke during D.A. meetings anymore, but worked relentlessly on every new jinx and countercurse Harry taught them, his plump face screwed up in concentration, apparently indifferent to injuries or accidents, working harder than anyone else in the room. He was improving so fast it was quite unnerving and when Harry taught

them the Shield Charm, a means of deflecting minor jinxes so that they rebounded upon the attacker, only Hermione mastered the charm faster than Neville.

In fact Harry would have given a great deal to be making as much progress at Occlumency as Neville was making during D.A. meetings. Harry's sessions with Snape, which had started badly enough, were not improving; on the contrary, Harry felt he was getting worse with every lesson.

Before he had started studying Occlumency, his scar had prickled occasionally, usually during the night, or else following one of those strange flashes of Voldemort's thoughts or moods that he experienced every now and then. Nowadays, however, his scar hardly ever stopped prickling, and he often felt lurches of annoyance or cheerfulness that were unrelated to what was happening to him at the time, which were always accompanied by a particularly painful twinge from his scar. He had the horrible impression that he was slowly turning into a kind of aerial that was tuned in to tiny fluctuations in Voldemort's mood, and he was sure he could date this increased sensitivity firmly from his first Occlumency lesson with Snape. What was more, he was now dream-ing about walking down the corridor toward the entrance to the Department of Mysteries almost every night, dreams that always cul-minated in him standing longingly in front of the plain black door.

"Maybe it's a bit like an illness," said Hermione, looking concerned when Harry confided in her and Ron. "A fever or something. It has to get worse before it gets better."

"It's lessons with Snape that are making it worse," said Harry flatly. "I'm getting sick of my scar hurting, and I'm getting bored walking down that corridor every night." He rubbed his forehead angrily. "I just wish the door would open, I'm sick of standing staring at it —"

“That’s not funny,” said Hermione sharply. “Dumbledore doesn’t want you to have dreams about that corridor at all, or he wouldn’t have asked Snape to teach you Occlumency. You’re just going to have to work a bit harder in your lessons.”

“I am working!” said Harry, nettled. “You try it sometime, Snape trying to get inside your head, it’s not a bundle of laughs, you know!”

“Maybe …” said Ron slowly.

“Maybe what?” said Hermione rather snappishly.

“Maybe it’s not Harry’s fault he can’t close his mind,” said Ron darkly.

“What do you mean?” said Hermione.

“Well, maybe Snape isn’t really trying to help Harry. …”

Harry and Hermione stared at him. Ron looked darkly and meaningfully from one to the other.

“Maybe,” he said again in a lower voice, “he’s actually trying to open Harry’s mind a bit wider … make it easier for You-Know —”

“Shut up, Ron,” said Hermione angrily. “How many times have you suspected Snape, and when have you ever been right? Dumble-dore trusts him, he works for the Order, that ought to be enough.”

“He used to be a Death Eater,” said Ron stubbornly. “And we’ve never seen proof that he really swapped sides. …”

“Dumbledore trusts him,” Hermione repeated. “And if we can’t trust Dumbledore, we can’t trust anyone.”

With so much to worry about and so much to do — startling amounts of homework that frequently kept the fifth years working until past midnight, secret D.A. meetings, and regular classes with Snape — January seemed to be passing alarmingly fast. Before Harry knew it,

February had arrived, bringing with it wetter and warmer weather and the prospect of the second Hogsmeade visit of the year. Harry had had very little time to spare on conversations with Cho since they had agreed to visit the village together, but suddenly found himself facing a Valentine's Day spent entirely in her company.

On the morning of the fourteenth he dressed particularly carefully. He and Ron arrived at breakfast just in time for the arrival of the post owls. Hedwig was not there — not that he had expected her — but Hermione was tugging a letter from the beak of an unfamiliar brown owl as they sat down.

"And about time! If it hadn't come today …" she said eagerly, tear-ing open the envelope and pulling out a small piece of parchment. Her eyes sped from left to right as she read through the message and a grimly pleased expression spread across her face.

"Listen, Harry," she said, looking up at him. "This is really impor-tant. … Do you think you could meet me in the Three Broomsticks around midday?"

"Well … I dunno," said Harry dubiously. "Cho might be expect-ing me to spend the whole day with her. We never said what we were going to do."

"Well, bring her along if you must," said Hermione urgently. "But will you come?"

"Well … all right, but why?"

"I haven't got time to tell you now, I've got to answer this quickly —"

And she hurried out of the Great Hall, the letter clutched in one hand and a piece of uneaten toast in the other.

"Are you coming?" Harry asked Ron, but he shook his head, look-ing glum.

“I can’t come into Hogsmeade at all, Angelina wants a full day’s training. Like it’s going to help — we’re the worst team I’ve ever seen. You should see Sloper and Kirke, they’re pathetic, even worse than I am.” He heaved a great sigh. “I dunno why Angelina won’t just let me resign. …”

“It’s because you’re good when you’re on form, that’s why,” said Harry irritably.

He found it very hard to be sympathetic to Ron’s plight when he himself would have given almost anything to be playing in the forthcoming match against Hufflepuff. Ron seemed to notice Harry’s tone, because he did not mention Quidditch again during breakfast, and there was a slight frostiness in the way they said good-bye to each other shortly afterward. Ron departed for the Quidditch pitch and Harry, after attempting to flatten his hair while staring at his reflection in the back of a teaspoon, proceeded alone to the entrance hall to meet Cho, feeling very apprehensive and wondering what on earth they were going to talk about.

She was waiting for him a little to the side of the oak front doors, looking very pretty with her hair tied back in a long ponytail. Harry’s feet seemed to be too big for his body as he walked toward her, and he was suddenly horribly aware of his arms and how stupid they looked swinging at his sides.

“Hi,” said Cho slightly breathlessly.

“Hi,” said Harry.

They stared at each other for a moment, then Harry said, “Well — er — shall we go, then?”

“Oh — yes …”

They joined the queue of people being signed out by Filch, occasionally catching each other’s eye and grinning shiftily, but not talking

to each other. Harry was relieved when they reached the fresh air, find-ing it easier to walk along in silence than just stand there looking awk-ward. It was a fresh, breezy sort of day and as they passed the Quidditch stadium, Harry glimpsed Ron and Ginny skimming over the stands and felt a horrible pang that he was not up there with them. …"You really miss it, don't you?" said Cho.

He looked around and saw her watching him.

"Yeah," sighed Harry. "I do."

"Remember the first time we played against each other, in the third year?" she asked him.

"Yeah," said Harry, grinning. "You kept blocking me."

"And Wood told you not to be a gentleman and knock me off my broom if you had to," said Cho, smiling reminiscently. "I heard he got taken on by Pride of Portree, is that right?"

"Nah, it was Puddlemere United, I saw him at the World Cup last year."

"Oh, I saw you there too, remember? We were on the same camp-site. It was really good, wasn't it?"

The subject of the Quidditch World Cup carried them all the way down the drive and out through the gates. Harry could hardly believe how easy it was to talk to her, no more difficult, in fact, than talking to Ron and Hermione, and he was just starting to feel confident and cheerful when a large gang of Slytherin girls passed them, including Pansy Parkinson.

"Potter and Chang!" screeched Pansy to a chorus of snide giggles. "Urgh, Chang, I don't think much of your taste. … At least Diggory was good-looking!"

They sped up, talking and shrieking in a pointed fashion with many exaggerated glances back at Harry and Cho, leaving an embarrassed silence in their wake. Harry could think of nothing else to say about Quidditch, and Cho, slightly flushed, was watching her feet.

"So … where d'you want to go?" Harry asked as they entered Hogsmeade. The High Street was full of students ambling up and down, peering into the shop windows and messing about together on the pavements.

"Oh … I don't mind," said Cho, shrugging. "Um … shall we just have a look in the shops or something?"

They wandered toward Dervish and Banges. A large poster had been stuck up in the window and a few Hogsmeaders were looking at it. They moved aside when Harry and Cho approached and Harry found himself staring once more at the ten pictures of the escaped Death Eaters. The poster ("By Order of the Ministry of Magic") of-fered a thousand-Galleon reward to any witch or wizard with infor-mation relating to the recapture of any of the convicts pictured.

"It's funny, isn't it," said Cho in a low voice, also gazing up at the pictures of the Death Eaters. "Remember when that Sirius Black escaped, and there were dementors all over Hogsmeade looking for him? And now ten Death Eaters are on the loose and there aren't dementors anywhere. …"

"Yeah," said Harry, tearing his eyes away from Bellatrix Lestrange's face to glance up and down the High Street. "Yeah, it is weird. …"

He was not sorry that there were no dementors nearby, but now he came to think of it, their absence was highly significant. They had not only let the Death Eaters escape, they were not bothering to look for them. … It looked as though they really were outside Ministry con-trol now.

The ten escaped Death Eaters were staring out of every shop window he and Cho passed. It started to rain as they passed Scrivenshaft's; cold, heavy drops of water kept hitting Harry's face and the back of his neck.

"Um … d'you want to get a coffee?" said Cho tentatively, as the rain began to fall more heavily.

"Yeah, all right," said Harry, looking around. "Where — ?"

"Oh, there's a really nice place just up here, haven't you ever been to Madam Puddifoot's?" she said brightly, and she led him up a side road and into a small tea shop that Harry had never noticed before. It was a cramped, steamy little place where everything seemed to have been decorated with frills or bows. Harry was reminded unpleasantly of Umbridge's office.

"Cute, isn't it?" said Cho happily.

"Er … yeah," said Harry untruthfully.

"Look, she's decorated it for Valentine's Day!" said Cho, indicating a number of golden cherubs that were hovering over each of the small, circular tables, occasionally throwing pink confetti over the occupants.

"Aaah …"

They sat down at the last remaining table, which was situated in the steamy window. Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain, was sitting about a foot and a half away with a pretty blonde girl. They were holding hands. The sight made Harry feel uncomfortable, particularly when, looking around the tea shop, he saw that it was full of nothing but couples, all of them holding hands. Perhaps Cho would expect him to hold her hand.

“What can I get you, m’dears?” said Madam Puddifoot, a very stout woman with a shiny black bun, squeezing between their table and Roger Davies’s with great difficulty.

“Two coffees, please,” said Cho.

In the time it took for their coffees to arrive, Roger Davies and his girlfriend started kissing over their sugar bowl. Harry wished they wouldn’t; he felt that Davies was setting a standard with which Cho would soon expect him to compete. He felt his face growing hot and tried staring out of the window, but it was so steamed up he could not see the street outside. To postpone the moment when he had to look at Cho he stared up at the ceiling as though examining the paintwork and received a handful of confetti in the face from their hovering cherub.

After a few more painful minutes Cho mentioned Umbridge; Harry seized on the subject with relief and they passed a few happy moments abusing her, but the subject had already been so thoroughly canvassed during D.A. meetings it did not last very long. Silence fell again. Harry was very conscious of the slurping noises coming from the table next door and cast wildly around for something else to say.

“Er … listen, d’you want to come with me to the Three Broom-sticks at lunchtime? I’m meeting Hermione Granger there.”

Cho raised her eyebrows.

“You’re meeting Hermione Granger? Today?”

“Yeah. Well, she asked me to, so I thought I would. D’you want to come with me? She said it wouldn’t matter if you did.”

“Oh … well … that was nice of her.”

But Cho did not sound as though she thought it was nice at all; on the contrary, her tone was cold and all of a sudden she looked rather forbidding.

A few more minutes passed in total silence, Harry drinking his cof-fee so fast that he would soon need a fresh cup. Next door, Roger Davies and his girlfriend seemed glued together by the lips.

Cho's hand was lying on the table beside her coffee, and Harry was feeling a mounting pressure to take hold of it. Just do it, he told him-self, as a fount of mingled panic and excitement surged up inside his chest. Just reach out and grab it. … Amazing how much more difficult it was to extend his arm twelve inches and touch her hand than to snatch a speeding Snitch from midair …But just as he moved his hand forward, Cho took hers off the table. She was now watching Roger Davies kissing his girlfriend with a mildly interested expression.

"He asked me out, you know," she said in a quiet voice. "A couple of weeks ago. Roger. I turned him down, though."

Harry, who had grabbed the sugar bowl to excuse his sudden lung-ing movement across the table, could not think why she was telling him this. If she wished she were sitting at the table next door being heartily kissed by Roger Davies, why had she agreed to come out with him?

He said nothing. Their cherub threw another handful of confetti over them; some of it landed in the last cold dregs of coffee Harry had been about to drink.

"I came in here with Cedric last year," said Cho.

In the second or so it took for him to take in what she had said, Harry's insides had become glacial. He could not believe she wanted to talk about Cedric now, while kissing couples surrounded them and a cherub floated over their heads.

Cho's voice was rather higher when she spoke again.

"I've been meaning to ask you for ages. … Did Cedric — did he m-m-mention me at all before he died?"

This was the very last subject on earth Harry wanted to discuss, and least of all with Cho.

"Well — no —" he said quietly. "There — there wasn't time for him to say anything. Erm … so … d'you … d'you get to see a lot of Quidditch in the holidays? You support the Tornados, right?"

His voice sounded falsely bright and cheery. To his horror, he saw that her eyes were swimming with tears again, just as they had been af-ter the last D.A. meeting before Christmas.

"Look," he said desperately, leaning in so that nobody else could overhear, "let's not talk about Cedric right now. … Let's talk about something else. …"

But this, apparently, was quite the wrong thing to say.

"I thought," she said, tears spattering down onto the table. "I thought you'd u-u-understand! I need to talk about it! Surely you n-need to talk about it t-too! I mean, you saw it happen, d-didn't you?"

Everything was going nightmarishly wrong; Roger Davies' girl-friend had even unglued herself to look around at Cho crying.

"Well — I have talked about it," Harry said in a whisper, "to Ron and Hermione, but —"

"Oh, you'll talk to Hermione Granger!" she said shrilly, her face now shining with tears, and several more kissing couples broke apart to stare. "But you won't talk to me! P-perhaps it would be best if we just … just p-paid and you went and met up with Hermione G-Granger, like you obviously want to!"

Harry stared at her, utterly bewildered, as she seized a frilly napkin and dabbed at her shining face with it.

“Cho?” he said weakly, wishing Roger would seize his girlfriend and start kissing her again to stop her goggling at him and Cho.

“Go on, leave!” she said, now crying into the napkin. “I don’t know why you asked me out in the first place if you’re going to make arrangements to meet other girls right after me. … How many are you meeting after Hermione?”

“It’s not like that!” said Harry, and he was so relieved at finally understanding what she was annoyed about that he laughed, which he realized a split second too late was a mistake.

Cho sprang to her feet. The whole tearoom was quiet, and everybody was watching them now.

“I’ll see you around, Harry,” she said dramatically, and hiccuping slightly she dashed to the door, wrenched it open, and hurried off into the pouring rain.

“Cho!” Harry called after her, but the door had already swung shut behind her with a tuneful tinkle.

There was total silence within the tea shop. Every eye was upon Harry. He threw a Galleon down onto the table, shook pink confetti out of his eyes, and followed Cho out of the door.

It was raining hard now, and she was nowhere to be seen. He sim-ply did not understand what had happened; half an hour ago they had been getting along fine.

“Women!” he muttered angrily, sloshing down the rain-washed street with his hands in his pockets. “What did she want to talk about Cedric for anyway? Why does she always want to drag up a subject that makes her act like a human hosepipe?”

He turned right and broke into a splashy run, and within minutes he was turning into the doorway of the Three Broomsticks. He knew he was too early to meet Hermione, but he thought it likely there would be someone in here with whom he could spend the intervening time. He shook his wet hair out of his eyes and looked around. Hagrid was sitting alone in a corner, looking morose.

“Hi, Hagrid!” he said, when he had squeezed through the crammed tables and pulled up a chair beside him.

Hagrid jumped and looked down at Harry as though he barely recognized him. Harry saw that he had two fresh cuts on his face and sev-eral new bruises.

“Oh, it’s you, Harry,” said Hagrid. “You all righ’?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” lied Harry; in fact, next to this battered and mournful-looking Hagrid, he felt he did not have much to complain about. “Er — are you okay?”

“Me?” said Hagrid. “Oh yeah, I’m grand, Harry, grand. …”

He gazed into the depths of his pewter tankard, which was the size of a large bucket, and sighed. Harry did not know what to say to him. They sat side by side in silence for a moment. Then Hagrid said abruptly, “In the same boat, you an’ me, aren’ we, Harry?”

“Er —” said Harry.

“Yeah … I’ve said it before. … Both outsiders, like,” said Hagrid, nodding wisely. “An’ both orphans. Yeah … both orphans.”

He took a great swig from his tankard.

“Makes a diff’rence, havin’ a decent family,” he said. “Me dad was decent. An’ your mum an’ dad were decent. If they’d lived, life woulda bin diff’rent, eh?”

“Yeah … I s’pose,” said Harry cautiously. Hagrid seemed to be in a very strange mood.

“Family,” said Hagrid gloomily. “Whatever yeh say, blood’s im-portant. …”

And he wiped a trickle of it out of his eye.

“Hagrid,” said Harry, unable to stop himself, “where are you get-ting all these injuries?”

“Eh?” said Hagrid, looking startled. “Wha’ injuries?”

“All those!” said Harry, pointing at Hagrid’s face.

“Oh … tha’s jus’ normal bumps an’ bruises, Harry,” said Hagrid dismissively. “I got a rough job.”

He drained his tankard, set it back upon the table, and got to his feet.

“I’ll be seein’ yeh, Harry. … Take care now. …”

And he lumbered out of the pub looking wretched and then disap-peared into the torrential rain. Harry watched him go, feeling miser-able. Hagrid was unhappy and he was hiding something, but he seemed determined not to accept help. What was going on? But be-fore Harry could think about the matter any further, he heard a voice calling his name.

“Harry! Harry, over here!”

Hermione was waving at him from the other side of the room. He got up and made his way toward her through the crowded pub. He was still a few tables away when he realized that Hermione was not alone; she was sitting at a table with the unlikeliest pair of drinking mates he could ever have imagined: Luna Lovegood and none other than Rita

Skeeter, ex-journalist on the Daily Prophet and one of Hermione's least favorite people in the world.

"You're early!" said Hermione, moving along to give him room to sit down. "I thought you were with Cho, I wasn't expecting you for another hour at least!"

"Cho?" said Rita at once, twisting around in her seat to stare avidly at Harry. "A girl?"

She snatched up her crocodile-skin handbag and groped within it.

"It's none of your business if Harry's been with a hundred girls," Hermione told Rita coolly. "So you can put that away right now."

Rita had been on the point of withdrawing an acid-green quill from her bag. Looking as though she had been forced to swallow Stinksap, she snapped her bag shut again.

"What are you up to?" Harry asked, sitting down and staring from Rita to Luna to Hermione.

"Little Miss Perfect was just about to tell me when you arrived," said Rita, taking a large slurp of her drink. "I suppose I'm allowed to talk to him, am I?" she shot at Hermione.

"Yes, I suppose you are," said Hermione coldly.

Unemployment did not suit Rita. The hair that had once been set in elaborate curls now hung lank and unkempt around her face. The scarlet paint on her two-inch talons was chipped and there were a cou-ple of false jewels missing from her winged glasses. She took another great gulp of her drink and said out of the corner of her mouth, "Pretty girl, is she, Harry?"

"One more word about Harry's love life and the deal's off and that's a promise," said Hermione irritably.

“What deal?” said Rita, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. “You haven’t mentioned a deal yet, Miss Prissy, you just told me to turn up. Oh, one of these days …” She took a deep shuddering breath.

“Yes, yes, one of these days you’ll write more horrible stories about Harry and me,” said Hermione indifferently. “Find someone who cares, why don’t you?”

“They’ve run plenty of horrible stories about Harry this year without my help,” said Rita, shooting a sideways look at him over the top of her glass and adding in a rough whisper, “How has that made you feel, Harry? Betrayed? Distraught? Misunderstood?”

“He feels angry, of course,” said Hermione in a hard, clear voice. “Because he’s told the Minister of Magic the truth and the Minister’s too much of an idiot to believe him.”

“So you actually stick to it, do you, that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back?” said Rita, lowering her glass and subjecting Harry to a piercing stare while her finger strayed longingly to the clasp of the crocodile bag. “You stand by all this garbage Dumbledore’s been telling everybody about You-Know-Who returning and you being the sole witness — ?”

“I wasn’t the sole witness,” snarled Harry. “There were a dozen-odd Death Eaters there as well. Want their names?”

“I’d love them,” breathed Rita, now fumbling in her bag once more and gazing at him as though he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. “A great bold headline: ‘Potter Accuses …’ A subheading: ‘Harry Potter Names Death Eaters Still Among Us.’ And then, beneath a nice big photograph of you: ‘Disturbed teenage survivor of You-Know-Who’s attack, Harry Potter, 15, caused outrage yesterday by accusing re-spectable and prominent members of the Wizarding community of being Death Eaters. …’ ”

The Quick-Quotes Quill was actually in her hand and halfway to her mouth when the rapturous expression died out of her face.

"But of course," she said, lowering the quill and looking daggers at Hermione, "Little Miss Perfect wouldn't want that story out there, would she?"

"As a matter of fact," said Hermione sweetly, "that's exactly what Little Miss Perfect does want."

Rita stared at her. So did Harry. Luna, on the other hand, sang, "Weasley Is Our King" dreamily under her breath and stirred her drink with a cocktail onion on a stick.

"You want me to report what he says about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" Rita asked Hermione in a hushed voice.

"Yes, I do," said Hermione. "The true story. All the facts. Exactly as Harry reports them. He'll give you all the details, he'll tell you the names of the undiscovered Death Eaters he saw there, he'll tell you what Voldemort looks like now — oh, get a grip on yourself," she added contemptuously, throwing a napkin across the table, for at the sound of Voldemort's name, Rita had jumped so badly that she had slopped half her glass of firewhisky down herself.

Rita blotted the front of her grubby raincoat, still staring at Hermione. Then she said baldly, "The Prophet wouldn't print it. In case you haven't noticed, nobody believes his cock-and-bull story. Everyone thinks he's delusional. Now, if you let me write the story from that angle —"

"We don't need another story about how Harry's lost his marbles!" said Hermione angrily. "We've had plenty of those already, thank you! I want him given the opportunity to tell the truth!"

"There's no market for a story like that," said Rita coldly.

“You mean the Prophet won’t print it because Fudge won’t let them,” said Hermione irritably.

Rita gave Hermione a long, hard look. Then, leaning forward across the table toward her, she said in a businesslike tone, “All right, Fudge is leaning on the Prophet, but it comes to the same thing. They won’t print a story that shows Harry in a good light. Nobody wants to read it. It’s against the public mood. This last Azkaban breakout has got people quite worried enough. People just don’t want to believe You-Know-Who’s back.”

“So the Daily Prophet exists to tell people what they want to hear, does it?” said Hermione scathingly.

Rita sat up straight again, her eyebrows raised, and drained her glass of firewhisky.

“The Prophet exists to sell itself, you silly girl,” she said coldly.

“My dad thinks it’s an awful paper,” said Luna, chipping into the conversation unexpectedly. Sucking on her cocktail onion, she gazed at Rita with her enormous, protuberant, slightly mad eyes. “He publishes important stories that he thinks the public needs to know. He doesn’t care about making money.”

Rita looked disparagingly at Luna.

“I’m guessing your father runs some stupid little village news-letter?” she said. “ ‘Twenty-five Ways to Mingle with Muggles’ and the dates of the next Bring-and-Fly Sale?”

“No,” said Luna, dipping her onion back into her gillywater, “he’s the editor of The Quibbler.”

Rita snorted so loudly that people at a nearby table looked around in alarm.

" 'Important stories he thinks the public needs to know'?" she said witheringly. "I could manure my garden with the contents of that rag."

"Well, this is your chance to raise the tone of it a bit, isn't it?" said Hermione pleasantly. "Luna says her father's quite happy to take Harry's interview. That's who'll be publishing it."

Rita stared at them both for a moment and then let out a great whoop of laughter.

"The Quibbler!" she said, cackling. "You think people will take him seriously if he's published in The Quibbler?"

"Some people won't," said Hermione in a level voice. "But the Daily Prophet's version of the Azkaban breakout had some gaping holes in it. I think a lot of people will be wondering whether there isn't a better explanation of what happened, and if there's an alternative story available, even if it is published in a" — she glanced sideways at Luna, "in a — well, an unusual magazine — I think they might be rather keen to read it."

Rita did not say anything for a while, but eyed Hermione shrewdly, her head a little to one side.

"All right, let's say for a moment I'll do it," she said abruptly. "What kind of fee am I going to get?"

"I don't think Daddy exactly pays people to write for the maga-zine," said Luna dreamily. "They do it because it's an honor, and, of course, to see their names in print."

Rita Skeeter looked as though the taste of Stinksap was strong in her mouth again as she rounded on Hermione. "I'm supposed to do this for free?"

"Well, yes," said Hermione calmly, taking a sip of her drink. "Other-wise, as you very well know, I will inform the authorities that you are

an unregistered Animagus. Of course, the Prophet might give you rather a lot for an insider's account of life in Azkaban. …"

Rita looked as though she would have liked nothing better than to seize the paper umbrella sticking out of Hermione's drink and thrust it up her nose.

"I don't suppose I've got any choice, have I?" said Rita, her voice shaking slightly. She opened her crocodile bag once more, withdrew a piece of parchment, and raised her Quick-Quotes Quill.

"Daddy will be pleased," said Luna brightly. A muscle twitched in Rita's jaw.

"Okay, Harry?" said Hermione, turning to him. "Ready to tell the public the truth?"

"I suppose," said Harry, watching Rita balancing the Quick-Quotes Quill at the ready on the parchment between them.

"Fire away, then, Rita," said Hermione serenely, fishing a cherry out of the bottom of her glass.

Chapter 26 Seen and Unforeseen

Luna said vaguely that she did not know how soon Rita's interview with Harry would appear in The Quibbler, that her father was expecting a lovely long article on recent sightings of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. "And, of course, that'll be a very important story, so Harry's might have to wait for the following issue," said Luna.

Harry had not found it an easy experience to talk about the night when Voldemort had returned. Rita had pressed him for every little detail, and he had given her everything he could remember, knowing that this was his one big opportunity to tell the world the truth. He wondered how people would react to the story. He guessed that it would confirm a lot of people in the view that he was completely insane, not least because his story would be appearing alongside utter rubbish about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. But the breakout of Bellatrix Lestrange and her fellow Death Eaters had given Harry a burning desire to do something, whether it worked or not. …"Can't wait to see what Umbridge thinks of you going public," said Dean, sounding awestruck at dinner on Monday night. Seamus was shoveling down large amounts of chicken-and-ham pie on Dean's other side, but Harry knew he was listening.

"It's the right thing to do, Harry," said Neville, who was sitting opposite him. He was rather pale, but went on in a low voice, "It must have been … tough … talking about it. … Was it?"

"Yeah," mumbled Harry, "but people have got to know what Voldemort's capable of, haven't they?"

"That's right," said Neville, nodding, "and his Death Eaters too … People should know. …"

Neville left his sentence hanging and returned to his baked potato. Seamus looked up, but when he caught Harry's eye he looked quickly

back at his plate again. After a while Dean, Seamus, and Neville departed for the common room, leaving Harry and Hermione at the table waiting for Ron, who had not yet had dinner because of Quid-ditch practice.

Cho Chang walked into the hall with her friend Marietta. Harry's stomach gave an unpleasant lurch, but she did not look over at the Gryffindor table and sat down with her back to him.

"Oh, I forgot to ask you," said Hermione brightly, glancing over at the Ravenclaw table, "what happened on your date with Cho? How come you were back so early?"

"Er … well, it was …" said Harry, pulling a dish of rhubarb crumble toward him and helping himself to seconds, "a complete fi-asco, now you mention it."

And he told her what had happened in Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop.

"… so then," he finished several minutes later, as the final bit of crumble disappeared, "she jumps up, right, and says 'I'll see you around, Harry,' and runs out of the place!" He put down his spoon and looked at Hermione. "I mean, what was all that about? What was going on?"

Hermione glanced over at the back of Cho's head and sighed. "Oh, Harry," she said sadly. "Well, I'm sorry, but you were a bit tactless."

"Me, tactless?" said Harry, outraged. "One minute we were getting on fine, next minute she was telling me that Roger Davies asked her out, and how she used to go and snog Cedric in that stupid tea shop — how was I supposed to feel about that?"

"Well, you see," said Hermione, with the patient air of one ex-plaining that one plus one equals two to an overemotional toddler, "you shouldn't have told her that you wanted to meet me halfway through your date."

“But, but,” spluttered Harry, “but — you told me to meet you at twelve and to bring her along, how was I supposed to do that without telling her — ?”

“You should have told her differently” said Hermione, still with that maddeningly patient air. “You should have said it was really annoying, but I’d made you promise to come along to the Three Broomsticks, and you really didn’t want to go, you’d much rather spend the whole day with her, but unfortunately you thought you really ought to meet me and would she please, please come along with you, and hopefully you’d be able to get away more quickly? And it might have been a good idea to mention how ugly you think I am too,” Hermi-one added as an afterthought.

“But I don’t think you’re ugly,” said Harry, bemused.

Hermione laughed.

“Harry, you’re worse than Ron. … Well, no, you’re not,” she sighed, as Ron himself came stumping into the Hall splattered with mud and looking grumpy. “Look — you upset Cho when you said you were going to meet me, so she tried to make you jealous. It was her way of trying to find out how much you liked her.”

“Is that what she was doing?” said Harry as Ron dropped onto the bench opposite them and pulled every dish within reach toward himself. “Well, wouldn’t it have been easier if she’d just asked me whether I liked her better than you?”

“Girls don’t often ask questions like that,” said Hermione.

“Well, they should!” said Harry forcefully. “Then I could’ve just told her I fancy her, and she wouldn’t have had to get herself all worked up again about Cedric dying!”

“I’m not saying what she did was sensible,” said Hermione, as Ginny joined them, just as muddy as Ron and looking equally dis-gruntled.

“I’m just trying to make you see how she was feeling at the time.”

“You should write a book,” Ron told Hermione as he cut up his potatoes, “translating mad things girls do so boys can understand them.”

“Yeah,” said Harry fervently, looking over at the Ravenclaw table. Cho had just got up; still not looking at him, she left the Great Hall. Feeling rather depressed, he looked back at Ron and Ginny. “So, how was Quidditch practice?”

“It was a nightmare,” said Ron in a surly voice.

“Oh come on,” said Hermione, looking at Ginny, “I’m sure it wasn’t that —”

“Yes, it was,” said Ginny. “It was appalling. Angelina was nearly in tears by the end of it.”

Ron and Ginny went off for baths after dinner; Harry and Her-mione returned to the busy Gryffindor common room and their usual pile of homework. Harry had been struggling with a new star chart for Astronomy for half an hour when Fred and George turned up.

“Ron and Ginny not here?” asked Fred, looking around as he pulled up a chair and, when Harry shook his head, he said, “Good. We were watching their practice. They’re going to be slaughtered. They’re complete rubbish without us.”

“Come on, Ginny’s not bad,” said George fairly, sitting down next to Fred. “Actually, I dunno how she got so good, seeing how we never let her play with us. …”

“She’s been breaking into your broom shed in the garden since the age of six and taking each of your brooms out in turn when you weren’t looking,” said Hermione from behind her tottering pile of An-cient Rune books.

“Oh,” said George, looking mildly impressed. “Well — that’d ex-plain it.”

“Has Ron saved a goal yet?” asked Hermione, peering over the top of Magical Hieroglyphs and Logograms.

“Well, he can do it if he doesn’t think anyone’s watching him,” said Fred, rolling his eyes. “So all we have to do is ask the crowd to turn their backs and talk among themselves every time the Quaffle goes up his end on Saturday.”

He got up again and moved restlessly to the window, staring out across the dark grounds.

“You know, Quidditch was about the only thing in this place worth staying for.”

Hermione cast him a stern look.

“You’ve got exams coming!”

“Told you already, we’re not fussed about N.E.W.T.s,” said Fred. “The Snackboxes are ready to roll, we found out how to get rid of those boils, just a couple of drops of murtlap essence sorts them, Lee put us onto it. …”

George yawned widely and looked out disconsolately at the cloudy night sky.

“I dunno if I even want to watch this match. If Zacharias Smith beats us I might have to kill myself.”

“Kill him, more like,” said Fred firmly.

“That’s the trouble with Quidditch,” said Hermione absentmind-edly, once again bent over her Rune translation, “it creates all this bad feeling and tension between the Houses.”

She looked up to find her copy of Spellman's Syllabary and caught Fred, George, and Harry looking at her with expressions of mingled disgust and incredulity on their faces.

"Well, it does!" she said impatiently. "It's only a game, isn't it?"

"Hermione," said Harry, shaking his head, "you're good on feelings and stuff, but you just don't understand about Quidditch."

"Maybe not," she said darkly, returning to her translation again, "but at least my happiness doesn't depend on Ron's goalkeeping ability."

And though Harry would rather have jumped off the Astronomy Tower than admit it to her, by the time he had watched the game the following Saturday he would have given any number of Galleons not to care about Quidditch either.

The very best thing you could say about the match was that it was short; the Gryffindor spectators had to endure only twenty-two minutes of agony. It was hard to say what the worst thing was: Harry thought it was a close-run contest between Ron's fourteenth failed save, Sloper missing the Bludger but hitting Angelina in the mouth with his bat, and Kirke shrieking and falling backward off his broom as Zacha-rias Smith zoomed at him carrying the Quaffle. The miracle was that Gryffindor only lost by ten points: Ginny managed to snatch the Snitch from right under Hufflepuff Seeker Summerby's nose, so that the final score was two hundred and forty versus two hundred and thirty.

"Good catch," Harry told Ginny back in the common room, where the atmosphere closely resembled that of a particularly dismal funeral.

"I was lucky," she shrugged. "It wasn't a very fast Snitch and Summerby's got a cold, he sneezed and closed his eyes at exactly the wrong moment. Anyway, once you're back on the team —"

"Ginny, I've got a lifelong ban."

“You’re banned as long as Umbridge is in the school,” Ginny corrected him. “There’s a difference. Anyway, once you’re back, I think I’ll try out for Chaser. Angelina and Alicia are both leaving next year and I prefer goal-scoring to Seeking anyway.”

Harry looked over at Ron, who was hunched in a corner, staring at his knees, a bottle of butterbeer clutched in his hand.

“Angelina still won’t let him resign,” Ginny said, as though reading Harry’s mind. “She says she knows he’s got it in him.”

Harry liked Angelina for the faith she was showing in Ron, but at the same time thought it would really be kinder to let him leave the team. Ron had left the pitch to another booming chorus of “Weasley Is Our King” sung with great gusto by the Slytherins, who were now favorites to win the Quidditch Cup.

Fred and George wandered over.

“I haven’t got the heart to take the mickey out of him, even,” said Fred, looking over at Ron’s crumpled figure. “Mind you … when he missed the fourteenth …”

He made wild motions with his arms as though doing an upright doggy-paddle.

“Well, I’ll save it for parties, eh?”

Ron dragged himself up to bed shortly after this. Out of respect for his feelings, Harry waited a while before going up to the dormitory himself, so that Ron could pretend to be asleep if he wanted to. Sure enough, when Harry finally entered the room Ron was snoring a little too loudly to be entirely plausible.

Harry got into bed, thinking about the match. It had been im-mensely frustrating watching from the sidelines. He was quite im-pressed by Ginny’s performance but he felt that if he had been playing he could

have caught the Snitch sooner. … There had been a mo-ment when it had been fluttering near Kirke's ankle; if she hadn't hes-itated, she might have been able to scrape a win for Gryffindor. …Umbridge had been sitting a few rows below Harry and Hermione. Once or twice she had turned squatly in her seat to look at him, her wide toad's mouth stretched in what he thought had been a gloating smile. The memory of it made him feel hot with anger as he lay there in the dark. After a few minutes, however, he remembered that he was supposed to be emptying his mind of all emotion before he slept, as Snape kept instructing him at the end of every Occlumency lesson.

He tried for a moment or two, but the thought of Snape on top of memories of Umbridge merely increased his sense of grumbling re-sentment, and he found himself focusing instead on how much he loathed the pair of them. Slowly, Ron's snores died away, replaced by the sound of deep, slow breathing. It took Harry much longer to get to sleep; his body was tired, but it took his brain a long time to close down.

He dreamed that Neville and Professor Sprout were waltzing around the Room of Requirement while Professor McGonagall played the bagpipes. He watched them happily for a while, then de-cided to go and find the other members of the D.A. …But when he left the room he found himself facing, not the tapes-try of Barnabas the Barmy, but a torch burning in its bracket on a stone wall. He turned his head slowly to the left. There, at the far end of the windowless passage, was a plain, black door.

He walked toward it with a sense of mounting excitement. He had the strangest feeling that this time he was going to get lucky at last, and find the way to open it. … He was feet from it and saw with a leap of excitement that there was a glowing strip of faint blue light down the right-hand side. … The door was ajar. … He stretched out his hand to push it wide and —Ron gave a loud, rasping, genuine snore, and Harry awoke abruptly with his right hand stretched in front of him in the darkness, to open a door that was hundreds of miles away. He let

it fall with a feeling of mingled disappointment and guilt. He knew he should not have seen the door, but at the same time, felt so consumed with curiosity about what was behind it that he could not help feeling annoyed with Ron. … If he could have saved his snore for just another minute …* * *

They entered the Great Hall for breakfast at exactly the same moment as the post owls on Monday morning. Hermione was not the only person eagerly awaiting her Daily Prophet: Nearly everyone was eager for more news about the escaped Death Eaters, who, despite many re-ported sightings, had still not been caught. She gave the delivery owl a Knut and unfolded the newspaper eagerly while Harry helped himself to orange juice; as he had only received one note during the entire year he was sure, when the first owl landed with a thud in front of him, that it had made a mistake.

“Who’re you after?” he asked it, languidly removing his orange juice from underneath its beak and leaning forward to see the recipi-ent’s name and address:Harry Potter

Great Hall

Hogwarts School

Frowning, he made to take the letter from the owl, but before he could do so, three, four, five more owls had fluttered down beside it and were jockeying for position, treading in the butter, knocking over the salt, and each attempting to give him their letters first.

“What’s going on?” Ron asked in amazement, as the whole of Gryffindor table leaned forward to watch as another seven owls landed amongst the first ones, screeching, hooting, and flapping their wings.

“Harry!” said Hermione breathlessly, plunging her hands into the feathery mass and pulling out a screech owl bearing a long,

cylindrical package. “I think I know what this means — open this one first!”

Harry ripped off the brown packaging. Out rolled a tightly furled copy of March’s edition of The Quibbler. He unrolled it to see his own face grinning sheepishly at him from the front cover. In large red letters across his picture were the words:HARRY POTTER SPEAKS OUT AT LAST:THE TRUTH ABOUT HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMEDAND THE NIGHT I SAW HIM RETURN“It’s good, isn’t it?” said Luna, who had drifted over to the Gryffindor table and now squeezed herself onto the bench between Fred and Ron. “It came out yesterday, I asked Dad to send you a free copy. I expect all these,” she waved a hand at the assembled owls still scrabbling around on the table in front of Harry, “are letters from readers.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Hermione eagerly, “Harry, d’you mind if we — ?”

“Help yourself,” said Harry, feeling slightly bemused.

Ron and Hermione both started ripping open envelopes.

“This one’s from a bloke who thinks you’re off your rocker,” said Ron, glancing down his letter. “Ah well …”

“This woman recommends you try a good course of Shock Spells at St. Mungo’s,” said Hermione, looking disappointed and crumpling up a second.

“This one looks okay, though,” said Harry slowly, scanning a long letter from a witch in Paisley. “Hey, she says she believes me!”

“This one’s in two minds,” said Fred, who had joined in the letter-opening with enthusiasm. “Says you don’t come across as a mad person, but he really doesn’t want to believe You-Know-Who’s back so he doesn’t know what to think now. … Blimey, what a waste of parchment …”

“Here’s another one you’ve convinced, Harry!” said Hermione excitedly. “ ‘Having read your side of the story I am forced to the conclusion that the Daily Prophet has treated you very unfairly. … Little though I want to think that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned, I am forced to accept that you are telling the truth. …’ Oh this is wonderful!”

“Another one who thinks you’re barking,” said Ron, throwing a crumpled letter over his shoulder, “but this one says you’ve got her converted, and she now thinks you’re a real hero — she’s put in a pho-tograph too — wow —”

“What is going on here?” said a falsely sweet, girlish voice.

Harry looked up with his hands full of envelopes. Professor Umbridge was standing behind Fred and Luna, her bulging toad’s eyes scanning the mess of owls and letters on the table in front of Harry. Behind her he saw many of the students watching them avidly.

“Why have you got all these letters, Mr. Potter?” she asked slowly.

“Is that a crime now?” said Fred loudly. “Getting mail?”

“Be careful, Mr. Weasley, or I shall have to put you in detention,” said Umbridge. “Well, Mr. Potter?”

Harry hesitated, but he did not see how he could keep what he had done quiet; it was surely only a matter of time before a copy of The Quibbler came to Umbridge’s attention.

“People have written to me because I gave an interview,” said Harry. “About what happened to me last June.”

For some reason he glanced up at the staff table as he said this. He had the strangest feeling that Dumbledore had been watching him a second before, but when he looked, Dumbledore seemed to be absorbed in conversation with Professor Flitwick.

“An interview?” repeated Umbridge, her voice thinner and higher than ever. “What do you mean?”

“I mean a reporter asked me questions and I answered them,” said Harry. “Here —”

And he threw the copy of The Quibbler at her. She caught it and stared down at the cover. Her pale, doughy face turned an ugly, patchy violet.

“When did you do this?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

“Last Hogsmeade weekend,” said Harry.

She looked up at him, incandescent with rage, the magazine shak-ing in her stubby fingers.

“There will be no more Hogsmeade trips for you, Mr. Potter,” she whispered. “How you dare … how you could …” She took a deep breath. “I have tried again and again to teach you not to tell lies. The message, apparently, has still not sunk in. Fifty points from Gryffin-dor and another week’s worth of detentions.”

She stalked away, clutching The Quibbler to her chest, the eyes of many students following her.

By mid-morning enormous signs had been put up all over the school, not just on House notice boards, but in the corridors and class-rooms too.

— BY ORDER OF —

THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTSAny student found in possession of the magazine The Quib-bler will be expelled.

The above is in accordance withEducational Decree Number Twenty-seven.

Signed:

Dolores Jane Umbridge

HIGH INQUISITOR

For some reason, every time Hermione caught sight of one of these signs she beamed with pleasure.

“What exactly are you so happy about?” Harry asked her.

“Oh Harry, don’t you see?” Hermione breathed. “If she could have done one thing to make absolutely sure that every single person in this school will read your interview, it was banning it!”

And it seemed that Hermione was quite right. By the end of that day, though Harry had not seen so much as a corner of The Quibbler anywhere in the school, the whole place seemed to be quoting the interview at each other; Harry heard them whispering about it as they queued up outside classes, discussing it over lunch and in the back of lessons, while Hermione even reported that every occupant of the cu-bicles in the girls’ toilets had been talking about it when she nipped in there before Ancient Runes.

“And then they spotted me, and obviously they know I know you, so they were bombarding me with questions,” Hermione told Harry, her eyes shining, “and Harry, I think they believe you, I really do, I think you’ve finally got them convinced!”

Meanwhile Professor Umbridge was stalking the school, stopping students at random and demanding that they turn out their books and pockets. Harry knew she was looking for copies of The Quibbler, but the students were several steps ahead of her. The pages carrying Harry’s interview had been bewitched to resemble extracts from text-books if anyone but themselves read it, or else wiped magically blank until they wanted to peruse it again. Soon it seemed that every single person in the school had read it.

The teachers were, of course, forbidden from mentioning the interview by Educational Decree Number Twenty-six, but they found ways to express their feelings about it all the same. Professor Sprout awarded Gryffindor twenty points when Harry passed her a watering can; a beaming Professor Flitwick pressed a box of squeaking sugar mice on him at the end of Charms, said "Shh!" and hurried away; and Professor Trelawney broke into hysterical sobs during Divination and announced to the startled class, and a very disapproving Umbridge, that Harry was not going to suffer an early death after all, but would live to a ripe old age, become Minister of Magic, and have twelve children.

But what made Harry happiest was Cho catching up with him as he was hurrying along to Transfiguration the next day. Before he knew what had happened her hand was in his and she was breathing in his ear, "I'm really, really sorry. That interview was so brave … it made me cry."

He was sorry to hear she had shed even more tears over it, but very glad they were on speaking terms again, and even more pleased when she gave him a swift kiss on the cheek and hurried off again. And un-believably, no sooner had he arrived outside Transfiguration than something just as good happened: Seamus stepped out of the queue to face him.

"I just wanted to say," he mumbled, squinting at Harry's left knee, "I believe you. And I've sent a copy of that magazine to me mam."

If anything more was needed to complete Harry's happiness, it was Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle's reactions. He saw them with their heads together later that afternoon in the library, together with a weedy-looking boy Hermione whispered was called Theodore Nott. They looked around at Harry as he browsed the shelves for the book he needed on Partial Vanishment, and Goyle cracked his knuckles threat-eningly and Malfoy whispered something undoubtedly

malevolent to Crabbe. Harry knew perfectly well why they were acting like this: He had named all of their fathers as Death Eaters.

“And the best bit is,” whispered Hermione gleefully as they left the library, “they can’t contradict you, because they can’t admit they’ve read the article!”

To cap it all, Luna told him over dinner that no copy of The Quib-bler had ever sold out faster.

“Dad’s reprinting!” she told Harry, her eyes popping excitedly. “He can’t believe it, he says people seem even more interested in this than the Crumple-Horned Snorkacks!”

Harry was a hero in the Gryffindor common room that night; dar-ingly, Fred and George had put an Enlargement Charm on the front cover of The Quibbler and hung it on the wall, so that Harry’s giant head gazed down upon the proceedings, occasionally saying things like “The Ministry are morons” and “Eat dung, Umbridge” in a booming voice. Hermione did not find this very amusing; she said it interfered with her concentration, and ended up going to bed early out of irritation. Harry had to admit that the poster was not quite as funny after an hour or two, especially when the talking spell had started to wear off, so that it merely shouted disconnected words like “Dung” and “Umbridge” at more and more frequent intervals in a progressively higher voice. In fact it started to make his head ache and his scar began prickling uncomfortably again. To disappointed moans from the many people who were sitting around him, asking him to re-live his interview for the umpteenth time, he announced that he too needed an early night.

The dormitory was empty when he reached it. He rested his fore-head for a moment against the cool glass of the window beside his bed; it felt soothing against his scar. Then he undressed and got into bed, wishing his headache would go away. He also felt slightly sick. He rolled over onto his side, closed his eyes, and fell asleep almost at

once. …He was standing in a dark, curtained room lit by a single branch of candles. His hands were clenched on the back of a chair in front of him. They were long-fingered and white as though they had not seen sunlight for years and looked like large, pale spiders against the dark velvet of the chair.

Beyond the chair, in a pool of light cast upon the floor by the can-dles, knelt a man in black robes.

“I have been badly advised, it seems,” said Harry, in a high, cold voice that pulsed with anger.

“Master, I crave your pardon. …” croaked the man kneeling on the floor. The back of his head glimmered in the candlelight. He seemed to be trembling.

“I do not blame you, Rookwood,” said Harry in that cold, cruel voice.

He relinquished his grip upon the chair and walked around it, closer to the man cowering upon the floor, until he stood directly over him in the darkness, looking down from a far greater height than usual.

“You are sure of your facts, Rookwood?” asked Harry.

“Yes, My Lord, yes … I used to work in the department after — after all. …”

“Avery told me Bode would be able to remove it.”

“Bode could never have taken it, Master. … Bode would have known he could not. … Undoubtedly that is why he fought so hard against Malfoy’s Imperius Curse. …”

“Stand up, Rookwood,” whispered Harry.

The kneeling man almost fell over in his haste to obey. His face was pockmarked; the scars were thrown into relief by the candlelight. He

remained a little stooped when standing, as though halfway through a bow, and he darted terrified looks up at Harry's face.

"You have done well to tell me this," said Harry. "Very well … I have wasted months on fruitless schemes, it seems. … But no matter … We begin again, from now. You have Lord Voldemort's gratitude, Rookwood. …"

"My Lord … yes, My Lord," gasped Rookwood, his voice hoarse with relief.

"I shall need your help. I shall need all the information you can give me."

"Of course, My Lord, of course … anything …"

"Very well … you may go. Send Avery to me."

Rookwood scurried backward, bowing, and disappeared through a door.

Left alone in the dark room, Harry turned toward the wall. A cracked, age-spotted mirror hung on the wall in the shadows. Harry moved toward it. His reflection grew larger and clearer in the darkness. … A face whiter than a skull … red eyes with slits for pupils …"NOOOOOOOOO!"

"What?" yelled a voice nearby.

Harry flailed around madly, became entangled in the hangings, and fell out of his bed. For a few seconds he did not know where he was; he was convinced that he was about to see the white, skull-like face looming at him out of the dark again, then Ron's voice spoke very near to him.

"Will you stop acting like a maniac, and I can get you out of here!"

Ron wrenched the hangings apart, and Harry stared up at him in the moonlight, as he lay flat on his back, his scar searing with pain. Ron looked as though he had just been getting ready for bed; one arm was out of his robes.

“Has someone been attacked again?” asked Ron, pulling Harry roughly to his feet. “Is it Dad? Is it that snake?”

“No — everyone’s fine —” gasped Harry, whose forehead felt as though it was on fire again. “Well … Avery isn’t. … He’s in trouble. … He gave him the wrong information. … He’s really angry. …”

Harry groaned and sank, shaking, onto his bed, rubbing his scar.

“But Rookwood’s going to help him now. … He’s on the right track again. …”

“What are you talking about?” said Ron, sounding scared. “D’you mean … did you just see You-Know-Who?”

“I was You-Know-Who,” said Harry, and he stretched out his hands in the darkness and held them up to his face to check that they were no longer deathly white and long-fingered. “He was with Rook-wood, he’s one of the Death Eaters who escaped from Azkaban, re-member? Rookwood’s just told him Bode couldn’t have done it. …”

“Done what?”

“Remove something. … He said Bode would have known he couldn’t have done it. … Bode was under the Imperius Curse. … I think he said Malfoy’s dad put it on him. …”

“Bode was bewitched to remove something?” Ron said. “But — Harry, that’s got to be —”

“The weapon,” Harry finished the sentence for him. “I know.”

The dormitory door opened; Dean and Seamus came in. Harry swung his legs back into bed. He did not want to look as though anything odd had just happened, seeing as Seamus had only just stopped thinking Harry was a nutter.

"Did you say," murmured Ron, putting his head close to Harry's on the pretense of helping himself to water from the jug on his bedside table, "that you were You-Know-Who?"

"Yeah," said Harry quietly.

Ron took an unnecessarily large gulp of water. Harry saw it spill over his chin onto his chest.

"Harry," he said, as Dean and Seamus clattered around noisily, pulling off their robes, and talking, "you've got to tell —"

"I haven't got to tell anyone," said Harry shortly. "I wouldn't have seen it at all if I could do Occlumency. I'm supposed to have learned to shut this stuff out. That's what they want."

By "they" he meant Dumbledore. He got back into bed and rolled over onto his side with his back to Ron and after a while he heard Ron's mattress creak as he lay back down too. His scar began to burn; he bit hard on his pillow to stop himself making a noise. Somewhere, he knew, Avery was being punished. …Harry and Ron waited until break next morning to tell Hermione ex-actly what had happened. They wanted to be absolutely sure they could not be overheard. Standing in their usual corner of the cool and breezy courtyard, Harry told her every detail of the dream he could remember. When he had finished, she said nothing at all for a few moments, but stared with a kind of painful intensity at Fred and George, who were both headless and selling their magical hats from under their cloaks on the other side of the yard.

"So that's why they killed him," she said quietly, withdrawing her gaze from Fred and George at last. "When Bode tried to steal this weapon,

something funny happened to him. I think there must be defensive spells on it, or around it, to stop people from touching it. That's why he was in St. Mungo's, his brain had gone all funny and he couldn't talk. But remember what the Healer told us? He was recov-ering. And they couldn't risk him getting better, could they? I mean, the shock of whatever happened when he touched that weapon prob-ably made the Imperius Curse lift. Once he'd got his voice back, he'd explain what he'd been doing, wouldn't he? They would have known he'd been sent to steal the weapon. Of course, it would have been easy for Lucius Malfoy to put the curse on him. Never out of the Ministry, is he?"

"He was even hanging around that day I had my hearing," said Harry. "In the — hang on …" he said slowly. "He was in the De-partment of Mysteries corridor that day! Your dad said he was proba-bly trying to sneak down and find out what happened in my hearing, but what if —"

"Sturgis," gasped Hermione, looking thunderstruck.

"Sorry?" said Ron, looking bewildered.

"Sturgis Podmore," said Hermione, breathlessly. "Arrested for try-ing to get through a door. Lucius Malfoy got him too. I bet he did it the day you saw him there, Harry. Sturgis had Moody's Invisibility Cloak, right? So what if he was standing guard by the door, invisible, and Malfoy heard him move, or guessed he was there, or just did the Imperius Curse on the off chance that a guard was there? So when Sturgis next had an opportunity — probably when it was his turn on guard duty again — he tried to get into the department to steal the weapon for Voldemort — Ron, be quiet — but he got caught and sent to Azkaban. …"

She gazed at Harry.

"And now Rookwood's told Voldemort how to get the weapon?"

“I didn’t hear all the conversation, but that’s what it sounded like,” said Harry. “Rookwood used to work there. … Maybe Voldemort’ll send Rookwood to do it?”

Hermione nodded, apparently still lost in thought. Then, quite abruptly, she said, “But you shouldn’t have seen this at all, Harry.”

“What?” he said, taken aback.

“You’re supposed to be learning how to close your mind to this sort of thing,” said Hermione, suddenly stern.

“I know I am,” said Harry. “But —”

“Well, I think we should just try and forget what you saw,” said Hermione firmly. “And you ought to put in a bit more effort on your Occlumency from now on.”

Harry was so angry with her that he did not talk to her for the rest of the day, which proved to be another bad one. When people were not discussing the escaped Death Eaters in the corridors today, they were laughing at Gryffindor’s abysmal performance in their match against Hufflepuff; the Slytherins were singing “Weasley Is Our King” so loudly and frequently that by sundown Filch had banned it from the corridors out of sheer irritation.

The week did not improve as it progressed: Harry received two more D’s in Potions, was still on tenterhooks that Hagrid might get the sack, and could not stop himself from dwelling on the dream in which he had seen Voldemort, though he did not bring it up with Ron and Hermione again because he did not want another telling-off from Hermione. He wished very much that he could have talked to Sirius about it, but that was out of the question, so he tried to push the matter to the back of his mind.

Unfortunately, the back of his mind was no longer the secure place it had once been.

“Get up, Potter.”

A couple of weeks after his dream of Rookwood, Harry was to be found, yet again, kneeling on the floor of Snape’s office, trying to clear his head. He had just been forced, yet again, to relive a stream of very early memories he had not even realized he still had, most of them concerning humiliations Dudley and his gang had inflicted upon him in primary school.

“That last memory,” said Snape. “What was it?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry, getting wearily to his feet. He was find-ing it increasingly difficult to disentangle separate memories from the rush of images and sound that Snape kept calling forth. “You mean the one where my cousin tried to make me stand in the toilet?”

“No,” said Snape softly. “I mean the one concerning a man kneel-ing in the middle of a darkened room. …”

“It’s … nothing,” said Harry.

Snape’s dark eyes bored into Harry’s. Remembering what Snape had said about eye contact being crucial to Legilimency, Harry blinked and looked away.

“How do that man and that room come to be inside your head, Potter?” said Snape.

“It —” said Harry, looking everywhere but at Snape, “it was — just a dream I had.”

“A dream,” repeated Snape.

There was a pause during which Harry stared fixedly at a large dead frog suspended in a purple liquid in its jar.

“You do know why we are here, don’t you, Potter?” said Snape in a low, dangerous voice. “You do know why I am giving up my evenings to this tedious job?”

“Yes,” said Harry stiffly.

“Remind me why we are here, Potter.”

“So I can learn Occlumency,” said Harry, now glaring at a dead eel.

“Correct, Potter. And dim though you may be” — Harry looked back at Snape, hating him — “I would have thought that after two months’ worth of lessons you might have made some progress. How many other dreams about the Dark Lord have you had?”

“Just that one,” lied Harry.

“Perhaps,” said Snape, his dark, cold eyes narrowing slightly, “perhaps you actually enjoy having these visions and dreams, Potter. Maybe they make you feel special — important?”

“No, they don’t,” said Harry, his jaw set and his fingers clenched tightly around the handle of his wand.

“That is just as well, Potter,” said Snape coldly, “because you are neither special nor important, and it is not up to you to find out what the Dark Lord is saying to his Death Eaters.”

“No — that’s your job, isn’t it?” Harry shot at him.

He had not meant to say it; it had burst out of him in temper. For a long moment they stared at each other, Harry convinced he had gone too far. But there was a curious, almost satisfied expression on Snape’s face when he answered.

“Yes, Potter,” he said, his eyes glinting. “That is my job. Now, if you are ready, we will start again. …”

He raised his wand. “One — two — three — Legilimens!”

A hundred dementors were swooping toward Harry across the lake in the grounds. … He screwed up his face in concentration. … They were coming closer. … He could see the dark holes beneath their hoods … yet he could also see Snape standing in front of him, his eyes fixed upon Harry’s face, muttering under his breath. … And somehow, Snape was growing clearer, and the dementors were grow-ing fainter …Harry raised his own wand.

“Protego!”

Snape staggered; his wand flew upward, away from Harry — and suddenly Harry’s mind was teeming with memories that were not his — a hook-nosed man was shouting at a cowering woman, while a small dark-haired boy cried in a corner. … A greasy-haired teenager sat alone in a dark bedroom, pointing his wand at the ceiling, shooting down flies. … A girl was laughing as a scrawny boy tried to mount a bucking broomstick —“ENOUGH!”

Harry felt as though he had been pushed hard in the chest; he took several staggering steps backward, hit some of the shelves covering Snape’s walls and heard something crack. Snape was shaking slightly, very white in the face.

The back of Harry’s robes were damp. One of the jars behind him had broken when he fell against it; the pickled slimy thing within was swirling in its draining potion.

“Reparo!” hissed Snape, and the jar sealed itself once more. “Well, Potter … that was certainly an improvement. …” Panting slightly, Snape straightened the Pensieve in which he had again stored some of his thoughts before starting the lesson, almost as though checking that they were still there. “I don’t remember telling you to use a Shield Charm … but there is no doubt that it was effective. …”

Harry did not speak; he felt that to say anything might be danger-ous. He was sure he had just broken into Snape's memories, that he had just seen scenes from Snape's childhood, and it was unnerving to think that the crying little boy who had watched his parents shouting was ac-tually standing in front of him with such loathing in his eyes. …"Let's try again, shall we?" said Snape.

Harry felt a thrill of dread: He was about to pay for what had just happened, he was sure of it. They moved back into position with the desk between them, Harry feeling he was going to find it much harder to empty his mind this time. …"On the count of three, then," said Snape, raising his wand once more. "One — two —"

Harry did not have time to gather himself together and attempt to clear his mind, for Snape had already cried "Legilimens!"

He was hurtling along the corridor toward the Department of Mys-teries, past the blank stone walls, past the torches — the plain black door was growing ever larger; he was moving so fast he was going to collide with it, he was feet from it and he could see that chink of faint blue light again —The door had flown open! He was through it at last, inside a black-walled, black-floored circular room lit with blue-flamed candles, and there were more doors all around him — he needed to go on — but which door ought he to take — ?

"POTTER!"

Harry opened his eyes. He was flat on his back again with no memory of having gotten there; he was also panting as though he re-ally had run the length of the Department of Mysteries corridor, really had sprinted through the black door and found the circular room. …"Explain yourself!" said Snape, who was standing over him, look-ing furious.

"I … dunno what happened," said Harry truthfully, standing up. There was a lump on the back of his head from where he had hit the ground

and he felt feverish. "I've never seen that before. I mean, I told you, I've dreamed about the door … but it's never opened before. …"

"You are not working hard enough!"

For some reason, Snape seemed even angrier than he had done two minutes before, when Harry had seen into his own memories.

"You are lazy and sloppy, Potter, it is small wonder that the Dark Lord —"

"Can you tell me something, sir?" said Harry, firing up again. "Why do you call Voldemort the Dark Lord, I've only ever heard Death Eaters call him that —"

Snape opened his mouth in a snarl — and a woman screamed from somewhere outside the room.

Snape's head jerked upward; he was gazing at the ceiling.

"What the — ?" he muttered.

Harry could hear a muffled commotion coming from what he thought might be the entrance hall. Snape looked around at him, frowning.

"Did you see anything unusual on your way down here, Potter?"

Harry shook his head. Somewhere above them, the woman screamed again. Snape strode to his office door, his wand still held at the ready, and swept out of sight. Harry hesitated for a moment, then followed.

The screams were indeed coming from the entrance hall; they grew louder as Harry ran toward the stone steps leading up from the dungeons. When he reached the top he found the entrance hall packed. Students had come flooding out of the Great Hall, where dinner was still in progress, to see what was going on. Others had crammed

them-selves onto the marble staircase. Harry pushed forward through a knot of tall Slytherins and saw that the onlookers had formed a great ring, some of them looking shocked, others even frightened. Professor McGonagall was directly opposite Harry on the other side of the hall; she looked as though what she was watching made her feel faintly sick.

Professor Trelawney was standing in the middle of the entrance hall with her wand in one hand and an empty sherry bottle in the other, looking utterly mad. Her hair was sticking up on end, her glasses were lopsided so that one eye was magnified more than the other; her in-numerable shawls and scarves were trailing haphazardly from her shoulders, giving the impression that she was falling apart at the seams. Two large trunks lay on the floor beside her, one of them up-side down; it looked very much as though it had been thrown down the stairs after her. Professor Trelawney was staring, apparently terri-fied, at something Harry could not see but that seemed to be standing at the foot of the stairs.

“No!” she shrieked. “NO! This cannot be happening. … It cannot … I refuse to accept it!”

“You didn’t realize this was coming?” said a high girlish voice, sounding callously amused, and Harry, moving slightly to his right, saw that Trelawney’s terrifying vision was nothing other than Professor Umbridge. “Incapable though you are of predicting even tomorrow’s weather, you must surely have realized that your pitiful performance during my inspections, and lack of any improvement, would make it inevitable you would be sacked?”

“You c-can’t!” howled Professor Trelawney, tears streaming down her face from behind her enormous lenses, “you c-can’t sack me! I’ve b-been here sixteen years! H-Hogwarts is m-my h-home!”

“It was your home,” said Professor Umbridge, and Harry was re-volted to see the enjoyment stretching her toadlike face as she

watched Professor Trelawney sink, sobbing uncontrollably, onto one of her trunks, “until an hour ago, when the Minister of Magic countersigned the order for your dismissal. Now kindly remove yourself from this hall. You are embarrassing us.”

But she stood and watched, with an expression of gloating enjoy-ment, as Professor Trelawney shuddered and moaned, rocking back-ward and forward on her trunk in paroxysms of grief. Harry heard a sob to his left and looked around. Lavender and Parvati were both cry-ing silently, their arms around each other. Then he heard footsteps. Professor McGonagall had broken away from the spectators, marched straight up to Professor Trelawney and was patting her firmly on the back while withdrawing a large handkerchief from within her robes.

“There, there, Sibyll … Calm down. … Blow your nose on this. … It’s not as bad as you think, now. … You are not going to have to leave Hogwarts. …”

“Oh really, Professor McGonagall?” said Umbridge in a deadly voice, taking a few steps forward. “And your authority for that state-ment is … ?”

“That would be mine,” said a deep voice.

The oak front doors had swung open. Students beside them scut-tled out of the way as Dumbledore appeared in the entrance. What he had been doing out in the grounds Harry could not imagine, but there was something impressive about the sight of him framed in the doorway against an oddly misty night. Leaving the doors wide behind him, he strode forward through the circle of onlookers toward the place where Professor Trelawney sat, tearstained and trembling, upon her trunk, Professor McGonagall alongside her.

“Yours, Professor Dumbledore?” said Umbridge with a singularly unpleasant little laugh. “I’m afraid you do not understand the posi-tion. I have here” — she pulled a parchment scroll from within her

robes — "an Order of Dismissal signed by myself and the Minister of Magic. Under the terms of Educational Decree Number Twenty-three, the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts has the power to inspect, place upon probation, and sack any teacher she — that is to say, I — feel is not performing up to the standard required by the Ministry of Magic. I have decided that Professor Trelawney is not up to scratch. I have dis-missed her."

To Harry's very great surprise, Dumbledore continued to smile. He looked down at Professor Trelawney, who was still sobbing and chok-ing on her trunk, and said, "You are quite right, of course, Professor Umbridge. As High Inquisitor you have every right to dismiss my teachers. You do not, however, have the authority to send them away from the castle. I am afraid," he went on, with a courteous little bow, "that the power to do that still resides with the headmaster, and it is my wish that Professor Trelawney continue to live at Hogwarts."

At this, Professor Trelawney gave a wild little laugh in which a hic-cup was barely hidden.

"No — no, I'll g-go, Dumbledore! I sh-shall l-leave Hogwarts and s-seek my fortune elsewhere —"

"No," said Dumbledore sharply. "It is my wish that you remain, Sibyll."

He turned to Professor McGonagall.

"Might I ask you to escort Sibyll back upstairs, Professor McGonagall?"

"Of course," said McGonagall. "Up you get, Sibyll. …"

Professor Sprout came hurrying forward out of the crowd and grabbed Professor Trelawney's other arm. Together they guided her past Umbridge and up the marble stairs. Professor Flitwick went scur-rying after them, his wand held out before him; he squeaked, "Loco-motor trunks!" and Professor Trelawney's luggage rose into the air

and proceeded up the staircase after her, Professor Flitwick bringing up the rear.

Professor Umbridge was standing stock-still, staring at Dumble-dore, who continued to smile benignly.

“And what,” she said in a whisper that nevertheless carried all around the entrance hall, “are you going to do with her once I appoint a new Divination teacher who needs her lodgings?”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem,” said Dumbledore pleasantly. “You see, I have already found us a new Divination teacher, and he will pre-fer lodgings on the ground floor.”

“You’ve found — ?” said Umbridge shrilly. “You’ve found? Might I remind you, Dumbledore, that under Educational Decree Twenty-two —”

“— the Ministry has the right to appoint a suitable candidate if — and only if — the headmaster is unable to find one,” said Dumble-dore. “And I am happy to say that on this occasion I have succeeded. May I introduce you?”

He turned to face the open front doors, through which night mist was now drifting. Harry heard hooves. There was a shocked murmur around the hall and those nearest the doors hastily moved even farther backward, some of them tripping over in their haste to clear a path for the newcomer.

Through the mist came a face Harry had seen once before on a dark, dangerous night in the Forbidden Forest: white-blond hair and astonishingly blue eyes, the head and torso of a man joined to the palomino body of a horse.

“This is Firenze,” said Dumbledore happily to a thunderstruck Umbridge. “I think you’ll find him suitable.”

Chapter 27 The Centaur and The Sneak

"I'll bet you wish you hadn't given up Divination now, don't you, Hermione?" asked Parvati, smirking.

It was breakfast time a few days after the sacking of Professor Trelawney, and Parvati was curling her eyelashes around her wand and examining the effect in the back of her spoon. They were to have their first lesson with Firenze that morning.

"Not really," said Hermione indifferently, who was reading the Daily Prophet. "I've never really liked horses."

She turned a page of the newspaper, scanning its columns.

"He's not a horse, he's a centaur!" said Lavender, sounding shocked.

"A gorgeous centaur …" sighed Parvati.

"Either way, he's still got four legs," said Hermione coolly. "Any-way, I thought you two were all upset that Trelawney had gone?"

"We are!" Lavender assured her. "We went up to her office to see her, we took her some daffodils — not the honking ones that Sprout's got, nice ones. …"

"How is she?" asked Harry.

"Not very good, poor thing," said Lavender sympathetically. "She was crying and saying she'd rather leave the castle forever than stay here if Umbridge is still here, and I don't blame her. Umbridge was horrible to her, wasn't she?"

"I've got a feeling Umbridge has only just started being horrible," said Hermione darkly.

“Impossible,” said Ron, who was tucking into a large plate of eggs and bacon. “She can’t get any worse than she’s been already.”

“You mark my words, she’s going to want revenge on Dumbledore for appointing a new teacher without consulting her,” said Hermione, closing the newspaper. “Especially another part-human. You saw the look on her face when she saw Firenze. …”

After breakfast Hermione departed for her Arithmancy class and Harry and Ron followed Parvati and Lavender into the entrance hall, heading for Divination.

“Aren’t we going up to North Tower?” asked Ron, looking puzzled, as Parvati bypassed the marble staircase.

Parvati looked scornfully over her shoulder at him.

“How d’you expect Firenze to climb that ladder? We’re in class-room eleven now, it was on the notice board yesterday.”

Classroom eleven was situated in the ground-floor corridor leading off the entrance hall on the opposite side to the Great Hall. Harry knew it to be one of those classrooms that were never used regularly, and that it therefore had the slightly neglected feeling of a cupboard or storeroom. When he entered it right behind Ron, and found him-self right in the middle of a forest clearing, he was therefore momen-tarily stunned.

“What the — ?”

The classroom floor had become springily mossy and trees were growing out of it; their leafy branches fanned across the ceiling and windows, so that the room was full of slanting shafts of soft, dappled, green light. The students who had already arrived were sitting on the earthy floor with their backs resting against tree trunks or boulders, arms wrapped around their knees or folded tightly across their

chests, looking rather nervous. In the middle of the room, where there were no trees, stood Firenze.

“Harry Potter,” he said, holding out a hand when Harry entered.

“Er — hi,” said Harry, shaking hands with the centaur, who sur-veyed him unblinkingly through those astonishingly blue eyes but did not smile. “Er — good to see you …”

“And you,” said the centaur, inclining his white-blond head. “It was foretold that we would meet again.”

Harry noticed that there was the shadow of a hoof-shaped bruise on Firenze’s chest. As he turned to join the rest of the class upon the floor, he saw that they were all looking at him with awe, apparently deeply impressed that he was on speaking terms with Firenze, whom they seemed to find intimidating.

When the door was closed and the last student had sat down upon a tree stump beside the wastepaper basket, Firenze gestured around the room.

“Professor Dumbledore has kindly arranged this classroom for us,” said Firenze, when everyone had settled down, “in imitation of my natural habitat. I would have preferred to teach you in the Forbidden Forest, which was — until Monday — my home … but this is not possible.”

“Please — er — sir —” said Parvati breathlessly, raising her hand, “why not? We’ve been in there with Hagrid, we’re not frightened!”

“It is not a question of your bravery,” said Firenze, “but of my po-sition. I can no longer return to the forest. My herd has banished me.”

“Herd?” said Lavender in a confused voice, and Harry knew she was thinking of cows. “What — oh!” Comprehension dawned on her face. “There are more of you?” she said, stunned.

“Did Hagrid breed you, like the thestrals?” asked Dean eagerly.

Firenze turned his head very slowly to face Dean, who seemed to realize at once that he had said something very offensive.

“I didn’t — I meant — sorry,” he finished in a hushed voice.

“Centaurs are not the servants or playthings of humans,” said Firenze quietly. There was a pause, then Parvati raised her hand again.

“Please, sir … why have the other centaurs banished you?”

“Because I have agreed to work for Professor Dumbledore,” said Firenze. “They see this as a betrayal of our kind.”

Harry remembered how, nearly four years ago, the centaur Bane had shouted at Firenze for allowing Harry to ride to safety upon his back, calling him a “common mule.” He wondered whether it had been Bane who had kicked Firenze in the chest.

“Let us begin,” said Firenze. He swished his long palomino tail, raised his hand toward the leafy canopy overhead then lowered it slowly, and as he did so, the light in the room dimmed, so that they now seemed to be sitting in a forest clearing by twilight, and stars emerged upon the ceiling. There were oohs and gasps, and Ron said audibly, “Blimey!”

“Lie back upon the floor,” said Firenze in his calm voice, “and observe the heavens. Here is written, for those who can see, the fortune of our races.”

Harry stretched out on his back and gazed upward at the ceiling. A twinkling red star winked at him from overhead.

“I know that you have learned the names of the planets and their moons in Astronomy,” said Firenze’s calm voice, “and that you have mapped the stars’ progress through the heavens. Centaurs have

unrav-eled the mysteries of these movements over centuries. Our findings teach us that the future may be glimpsed in the sky above us. …"

"Professor Trelawney did Astrology with us!" said Parvati excitedly, raising her hand in front of her so that it stuck up in the air as she lay on her back. "Mars causes accidents and burns and things like that, and when it makes an angle to Saturn, like now" — she drew a right angle in the air above her — "that means that people need to be extra careful when handling hot things —"

"That," said Firenze calmly, "is human nonsense."

Parvati's hand fell limply to her side.

"Trivial hurts, tiny human accidents," said Firenze, as his hooves thudded over the mossy floor. "These are of no more significance than the scurryings of ants to the wide universe, and are unaffected by planetary movements."

"Professor Trelawney —" began Parvati, in a hurt and indignant voice.

"— is a human," said Firenze simply. "And is therefore blinkered and fettered by the limitations of your kind."

Harry turned his head very slightly to look at Parvati. She looked very offended, as did several of the people surrounding her.

"Sibyll Trelawney may have Seen, I do not know," continued Firenze, and Harry heard the swishing of his tail again as he walked up and down before them, "but she wastes her time, in the main, on the self-flattering nonsense humans call fortune-telling. I, however, am here to explain the wisdom of centaurs, which is impersonal and im-partial. We watch the skies for the great tides of evil or change that are sometimes marked there. It may take ten years to be sure of what we are seeing."

Firenze pointed to the red star directly above Harry.

“In the past decade, the indications have been that Wizard-kind is living through nothing more than a brief calm between two wars. Mars, bringer of battle, shines brightly above us, suggesting that the fight must break out again soon. How soon, centaurs may attempt to divine by the burning of certain herbs and leaves, by the observation of fume and flame. …”

It was the most unusual lesson Harry had ever attended. They did indeed burn sage and mallowsweet there on the classroom floor, and Firenze told them to look for certain shapes and symbols in the pungent fumes, but he seemed perfectly unconcerned that not one of them could see any of the signs he described, telling them that humans were hardly ever good at this, that it took centaurs years and years to become competent, and finished by telling them that it was foolish to put too much faith in such things anyway, because even centaurs sometimes read them wrongly. He was nothing like any human teacher Harry had ever had. His priority did not seem to be to teach them what he knew, but rather to impress upon them that nothing, not even centaurs’ knowledge, was foolproof.

“He’s not very definite on anything, is he?” said Ron in a low voice, as they put out their mallowsweet fire. “I mean, I could do with a few more details about this war we’re about to have, couldn’t you?”

The bell rang right outside the classroom door and everyone jumped; Harry had completely forgotten that they were still inside the castle, quite convinced that he was really in the forest. The class filed out, looking slightly perplexed; Harry and Ron were on the point of following them when Firenze called, “Harry Potter, a word, please.”

Harry turned. The centaur advanced a little toward him. Ron hesitated.

“You may stay,” Firenze told him. “But close the door, please.”

Ron hastened to obey.

“Harry Potter, you are a friend of Hagrid’s, are you not?” said the centaur.

“Yes,” said Harry.

“Then give him a warning from me. His attempt is not working. He would do better to abandon it.”

“His attempt is not working?” Harry repeated blankly.

“And he would do better to abandon it,” said Firenze, nodding. “I would warn Hagrid myself, but I am banished — it would be unwise for me to go too near the forest now — Hagrid has troubles enough, without a centaurs’ battle.”

“But — what’s Hagrid attempting to do?” said Harry nervously.

Firenze looked at Harry impassively.

“Hagrid has recently rendered me a great service,” said Firenze, “and he has long since earned my respect for the care he shows all liv-ing creatures. I shall not betray his secret. But he must be brought to his senses. The attempt is not working. Tell him, Harry Potter. Good day to you.”

The happiness Harry had felt in the aftermath of The Quibbler interview had long since evaporated. As a dull March blurred into a squally April, his life seemed to have become one long series of worries and problems again.

Umbridge had continued attending all Care of Magical Creatures lessons, so it had been very difficult to deliver Firenze’s warning to Ha-grid. At last Harry had managed it by pretending he had lost his copy of Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them and doubling back after class one day. When he passed on Firenze’s message, Hagrid

gazed at him for a moment through his puffy, blackened eyes, apparently taken aback. Then he seemed to pull himself together.

"Nice bloke, Firenze," he said gruffly, "but he don' know what he's talkin' abou' on this. The attemp's comin' on fine."

"Hagrid, what're you up to?" asked Harry seriously. "Because you've got to be careful, Umbridge has already sacked Trelawney and if you ask me, she's on a roll. If you're doing anything you shouldn't be —"

"There's things more importan' than keepin' a job," said Hagrid, though his hands shook slightly as he said this and a basin full of knarl droppings crashed to the floor. "Don' worry abou' me, Harry, jus' get along now, there's a good lad. …"

Harry had no choice but to leave Hagrid mopping up the dung all over his floor, but he felt thoroughly dispirited as he trudged back up to the castle.

Meanwhile, as the teachers and Hermione persisted in reminding them, the O.W.L.s were drawing ever nearer. All the fifth years were suffering from stress to some degree, but Hannah Abbott became the first to receive a Calming Draught from Madam Pomfrey after she burst into tears during Herbology and sobbed that she was too stupid to take exams and wanted to leave school now.

If it had not been for the D.A. lessons, Harry thought he would have been extremely unhappy. He sometimes felt that he was living for the hours he spent in the Room of Requirement, working hard but thoroughly enjoying himself at the same time, swelling with pride as he looked around at his fellow D.A. members and saw how far they had come. Indeed, Harry sometimes wondered how Umbridge was going to react when all the members of the D.A. received "Outstanding" in their Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L.s.

They had finally started work on Patronuses, which everybody had been very keen to practice, though as Harry kept reminding them,

producing a Patronus in the middle of a brightly lit classroom when they were not under threat was very different to producing it when confronted by something like a dementor.

“Oh, don’t be such a killjoy,” said Cho brightly, watching her sil-very swan-shaped Patronus soar around the Room of Requirement during their last lesson before Easter. “They’re so pretty!”

“They’re not supposed to be pretty, they’re supposed to protect you,” said Harry patiently. “What we really need is a boggart or some-thing; that’s how I learned, I had to conjure a Patronus while the bog-gart was pretending to be a dementor —”

“But that would be really scary!” said Lavender, who was shooting puffs of silver vapor out of the end of her wand. “And I still — can’t — do it!” she added angrily.

Neville was having trouble too. His face was screwed up in concen-tration, but only feeble wisps of silver smoke issued from his wand tip.

“You’ve got to think of something happy,” Harry reminded him.

“I’m trying,” said Neville miserably, who was trying so hard his round face was actually shining with sweat.

“Harry, I think I’m doing it!” yelled Seamus, who had been brought along to his first ever D.A. meeting by Dean. “Look — ah — it’s gone. … But it was definitely something hairy, Harry!”

Hermione’s Patronus, a shining silver otter, was gamboling around her.

“They are sort of nice, aren’t they?” she said, looking at it fondly.

The door of the Room of Requirement opened and then closed again; Harry looked around to see who had entered, but there did not seem to be anybody there. It was a few moments before he realized that

the people close to the door had fallen silent. Next thing he knew, something was tugging at his robes somewhere near the knee. He looked down and saw, to his very great astonishment, Dobby the house-elf peering up at him from beneath his usual eight hats.

“Hi, Dobby!” he said. “What are you — what’s wrong?”

For the elf’s eyes were wide with terror and he was shaking. The members of the D.A. closest to Harry had fallen silent now: Everybody in the room was watching Dobby. The few Patronuses people had managed to conjure faded away into silver mist, leaving the room looking much darker than before.

“Harry Potter, sir …” squeaked the elf, trembling from head to foot, “Harry Potter, sir … Dobby has come to warn you … but the house-elves have been warned not to tell …”

He ran headfirst at the wall: Harry, who had some experience of Dobby’s habits of self-punishment, made to seize him, but Dobby merely bounced off the stone, cushioned by his eight hats. Hermione and a few of the other girls let out squeaks of fear and sympathy.

“What’s happened, Dobby?” Harry asked, grabbing the elf’s tiny arm and holding him away from anything with which he might seek to hurt himself.

“Harry Potter … she … she …”

Dobby hit himself hard on the nose with his free fist: Harry seized that too.

“Who’s ‘she,’ Dobby?”

But he thought he knew — surely only one “she” could induce such fear in Dobby? The elf looked up at him, slightly cross-eyed, and mouthed wordlessly.

“Umbridge?” asked Harry, horrified.

Dobby nodded, then tried to bang his head off Harry’s knees; Harry held him at bay.

“What about her? Dobby — she hasn’t found out about this — about us — about the D.A.?”

He read the answer in the elf’s stricken face. His hands held fast by Harry, the elf tried to kick himself and fell to the floor.

“Is she coming?” Harry asked quietly.

Dobby let out a howl, and began beating his bare feet hard on the floor. “Yes, Harry Potter, yes!”

Harry straightened up and looked around at the motionless, terri-fied people gazing at the thrashing elf.

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?” Harry bellowed. “RUN!”

They all pelted toward the exit at once, forming a scrum at the door, then people burst through; Harry could hear them sprinting along the corridors and hoped they had the sense not to try and make it all the way to their dormitories. It was only ten to nine, if they just took refuge in the library or the Owlery, which were both nearer —“Harry, come on!” shrieked Hermione from the center of the knot of people now fighting to get out.

He scooped up Dobby, who was still attempting to do himself seri-ous injury, and ran with the elf in his arms to join the back of the queue.

“Dobby — this is an order — get back down to the kitchen with the other elves, and if she asks you whether you warned me, lie and say no!” said Harry. “And I forbid you to hurt yourself!” he added, dropping the elf as he made it over the threshold at last and slamming the door behind him.

“Thank you, Harry Potter!” squeaked Dobby, and he streaked off. Harry glanced left and right, the others were all moving so fast that he caught only glimpses of flying heels at either end of the corridor before they vanished. He started to run right; there was a boys’ bathroom up ahead, he could pretend he’d been in there all the time if he could just reach it —“AAARGH!”

Something caught him around the ankles and he fell spectacularly, skidding along on his front for six feet before coming to a halt. Someone behind him was laughing. He rolled over onto his back and saw Malfoy concealed in a niche beneath an ugly dragon-shaped vase.

“Trip Jinx, Potter!” he said. “Hey, Professor — PROFESSOR! I’ve got one!”

Umbridge came bustling around the far corner, breathless but wearing a delighted smile.

“It’s him!” she said jubilantly at the sight of Harry on the floor. “Excellent, Draco, excellent, oh, very good — fifty points to Slytherin! I’ll take him from here. … Stand up, Potter!”

Harry got to his feet, glaring at the pair of them. He had never seen Umbridge looking so happy. She seized his arm in a vicelike grip and turned, beaming broadly, to Malfoy. “You hop along and see if you can round up anymore of them, Draco,” she said. “Tell the others to look in the library — anybody out of breath — check the bathrooms, Miss Parkinson can do the girls’ ones — off you go — and you,” she added in her softest, most dangerous voice, as Malfoy walked away. “You can come with me to the headmaster’s office, Potter.”

They were at the stone gargoyle within minutes. Harry wondered how many of the others had been caught. He thought of Ron — Mrs. Weasley would kill him — and of how Hermione would feel if she was expelled before she could take her O.W.L.s. And it had been Seamus’s very first meeting … and Neville had been getting so good. …“Fizzing Whizbee,” sang Umbridge, and the stone gargoyle jumped

aside, the wall behind split open, and they ascended the moving stone staircase. They reached the polished door with the griffin knocker, but Umbridge did not bother to knock, she strode straight inside, still holding tight to Harry.

The office was full of people. Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, his expression serene, the tips of his long fingers together. Pro-fessor McGonagall stood rigidly beside him, her face extremely tense. Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, was rocking backward and for-ward on his toes beside the fire, apparently immensely pleased with the situation. Kingsley Shacklebolt and a tough-looking wizard Harry did not recognize with very short, wiry hair were positioned on either side of the door like guards, and the freckled, bespectacled form of Percy Weasley hovered excitedly beside the wall, a quill and a heavy scroll of parchment in his hands, apparently poised to take notes.

The portraits of old headmasters and mistresses were not sham-ming sleep tonight. All of them were watching what was happening below, alert and serious. As Harry entered, a few flitted into neigh-boring frames and whispered urgently into their neighbors' ears.

Harry pulled himself free of Umbridge's grasp as the door swung shut behind them. Cornelius Fudge was glaring at him with a kind of vicious satisfaction upon his face.

"Well," he said. "Well, well, well …"

Harry replied with the dirtiest look he could muster. His heart drummed madly inside him, but his brain was oddly cool and clear.

"He was heading back to Gryffindor Tower," said Umbridge. There was an indecent excitement in her voice, the same callous pleasure Harry had heard as she watched Professor Trelawney dissolving with misery in the entrance hall. "The Malfoy boy cornered him."

"Did he, did he?" said Fudge appreciatively. "I must remember to tell Lucius. Well, Potter … I expect you know why you are here?"

Harry fully intended to respond with a defiant “yes”: His mouth had opened and the word was half formed when he caught sight of Dumbledore’s face. Dumbledore was not looking directly at Harry; his eyes were fixed upon a point just over his shoulder, but as Harry stared at him, he shook his head a fraction of an inch to each side.

Harry changed direction mid-word.

“Yeh — no.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Fudge.

“No,” said Harry, firmly.

“You don’t know why you are here?”

“No, I don’t,” said Harry.

Fudge looked incredulously from Harry to Professor Umbridge; Harry took advantage of his momentary inattention to steal another quick look at Dumbledore, who gave the carpet the tiniest of nods and the shadow of a wink.

“So you have no idea,” said Fudge in a voice positively sagging with sarcasm, “why Professor Umbridge has brought you to this office? You are not aware that you have broken any school rules?”

“School rules?” said Harry. “No.”

“Or Ministry decrees?” amended Fudge angrily.

“Not that I’m aware of,” said Harry blandly.

His heart was still hammering very fast. It was almost worth telling these lies to watch Fudge’s blood pressure rising, but he could not see how on earth he would get away with them. If somebody had tipped off Umbridge about the D.A. then he, the leader, might as well be packing his trunk right now.

“So it’s news to you, is it,” said Fudge, his voice now thick with anger, “that an illegal student organization has been discovered within this school?”

“Yes, it is,” said Harry, hoisting an unconvincing look of innocent surprise onto his face.

“I think, Minister,” said Umbridge silkily from beside him, “we might make better progress if I fetch our informant.”

“Yes, yes, do,” said Fudge, nodding, and he glanced maliciously at Dumbledore as Umbridge left the room. “There’s nothing like a good witness, is there, Dumbledore?”

“Nothing at all, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore gravely, inclining his head.

There was a wait of several minutes, in which nobody looked at each other, then Harry heard the door open behind him. Umbridge moved past him into the room, gripping by the shoulder Cho’s curly-haired friend Marietta, who was hiding her face in her hands.

“Don’t be scared, dear, don’t be frightened,” said Professor Umbridge softly, patting her on the back, “it’s quite all right, now. You have done the right thing. The minister is very pleased with you. He’ll be telling your mother what a good girl you’ve been. Marietta’s mother, Minister,” she added, looking up at Fudge, “is Madam Edgecombe from the Department of Magical Transportation. Floo Network of-fice — she’s been helping us police the Hogwarts fires, you know.”

“Jolly good, jolly good!” said Fudge heartily. “Like mother, like daughter, eh? Well, come on, now, dear, look up, don’t be shy, let’s hear what you’ve got to — galloping gargoyles!”

As Marietta raised her head, Fudge leapt backward in shock, nearly landing himself in the fire. He cursed and stamped on the hem of his

cloak, which had started to smoke, and Marietta gave a wail and pulled the neck of her robes right up to her eyes, but not before the whole room had seen that her face was horribly disfigured by a series of close-set purple pustules that had spread across her nose and cheeks to form the word "SNEAK."

"Never mind the spots now, dear," said Umbridge impatiently, "just take your robes away from your mouth and tell the Minister —"

But Marietta gave another muffled wail and shook her head frantically.

"Oh, very well, you silly girl, I'll tell him," snapped Umbridge. She hitched her sickly smile back onto her face and said, "Well, Minister, Miss Edgecombe here came to my office shortly after dinner this evening and told me she had something she wanted to tell me. She said that if I proceeded to a secret room on the seventh floor, sometimes known as the Room of Requirement, I would find out something to my advantage. I questioned her a little further and she admitted that there was to be some kind of meeting there. Unfortunately at that point this hex," she waved impatiently at Marietta's con-cealed face, "came into operation and upon catching sight of her face in my mirror the girl became too distressed to tell me any more."

"Well, now," said Fudge, fixing Marietta with what he evidently imagined was a kind and fatherly look. "It is very brave of you, my dear, coming to tell Professor Umbridge, you did exactly the right thing. Now, will you tell me what happened at this meeting? What was its purpose? Who was there?"

But Marietta would not speak. She merely shook her head again, her eyes wide and fearful.

"Haven't we got a counterjinx for this?" Fudge asked Umbridge impatiently, gesturing at Marietta's face. "So she can speak freely?"

“I have not yet managed to find one,” Umbridge admitted grudg-ingly, and Harry felt a surge of pride in Hermione’s jinxing ability. “But it doesn’t matter if she won’t speak, I can take up the story from here.

“You will remember, Minister, that I sent you a report back in Oc-tober that Potter had met a number of fellow students in the Hog’s Head in Hogsmeade —”

“And what is your evidence for that?” cut in Professor McGonagall.

“I have testimony from Willy Widdershins, Minerva, who hap-pened to be in the bar at the time. He was heavily bandaged, it is true, but his hearing was quite unimpaired,” said Umbridge smugly. “He heard every word Potter said and hastened straight to the school to re-port to me —”

“Oh, so that’s why he wasn’t prosecuted for setting up all those regurgitating toilets!” said Professor McGonagall, raising her eye-brows. “What an interesting insight into our justice system!”

“Blatant corruption!” roared the portrait of the corpulent, red-nosed wizard on the wall behind Dumbledore’s desk. “The Ministry did not cut deals with petty criminals in my day, no sir, they did not!”

“Thank you, Fortescue, that will do,” said Dumbledore softly.

“The purpose of Potter’s meeting with these students,” continued Professor Umbridge, “was to persuade them to join an illegal society, whose aim was to learn spells and curses the Ministry has decided are inappropriate for school-age —”

“I think you’ll find you’re wrong there, Dolores,” said Dumbledore quietly, peering at her over the half-moon spectacles perched halfway down his crooked nose.

Harry stared at him. He could not see how Dumbledore was going to talk him out of this one; if Willy Widdershins had indeed heard every

word he said in the Hog's Head there was simply no escaping it.

"Oho!" said Fudge, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet again. "Yes, do let's hear the latest cock-and-bull story designed to pull Potter out of trouble! Go on, then, Dumbledore, go on — Willy Widdershins was lying, was he? Or was it Potter's identical twin in the Hog's Head that day? Or is there the usual simple explanation involving a reversal of time, a dead man coming back to life, and a couple of invisible dementors?"

Percy Weasley let out a hearty laugh.

"Oh, very good, Minister, very good!"

Harry could have kicked him. Then he saw, to his astonishment, that Dumbledore was smiling gently too.

"Cornelius, I do not deny — and nor, I am sure, does Harry — that he was in the Hog's Head that day, nor that he was trying to re-cruit students to a Defense Against the Dark Arts group. I am merely pointing out that Dolores is quite wrong to suggest that such a group was, at that time, illegal. If you remember, the Ministry decree banning all student societies was not put into effect until two days after Harry's Hogsmeade meeting, so he was not breaking any rules in the Hog's Head at all."

Percy looked as though he had been struck in the face by something very heavy. Fudge remained motionless in mid-bounce, his mouth hanging open.

Umbridge recovered first.

"That's all very fine, Headmaster," she said, smiling sweetly. "But we are now nearly six months on from the introduction of Educational Decree Number Twenty-four. If the first meeting was not illegal, all those that have happened since most certainly are."

“Well,” said Dumbledore, surveying her with polite interest over the top of his interlocked fingers, “they certainly would be, if they had continued after the decree came into effect. Do you have any evidence that these meetings continued?”

As Dumbledore spoke, Harry heard a rustle behind him and rather thought Kingsley whispered something. He could have sworn too that he felt something brush against his side, a gentle something like a draft or bird wings, but looking down he saw nothing there.

“Evidence?” repeated Umbridge with that horrible wide toadlike smile. “Have you not been listening, Dumbledore? Why do you think Miss Edgecombe is here?”

“Oh, can she tell us about six months’ worth of meetings?” said Dumbledore, raising his eyebrows. “I was under the impression that she was merely reporting a meeting tonight.”

“Miss Edgecombe,” said Umbridge at once, “tell us how long these meetings have been going on, dear. You can simply nod or shake your head, I’m sure that won’t make the spots worse. Have they been happening regularly over the last six months?”

Harry felt a horrible plummeting in his stomach. This was it, they had hit a dead end of solid evidence that not even Dumbledore would be able to shift aside. …“Just nod or shake your head, dear,” Umbridge said coaxingly to Marietta. “Come on, now, that won’t activate the jinx further. …”

Everyone in the room was gazing at the top of Marietta’s face. Only her eyes were visible between the pulled up robes and her curly fringe. Perhaps it was a trick of the firelight, but her eyes looked oddly blank. And then — to Harry’s utter amazement — Marietta shook her head.

Umbridge looked quickly at Fudge and then back at Marietta.

“I don’t think you understood the question, did you, dear? I’m ask-ing whether you’ve been going to these meetings for the past six months? You have, haven’t you?”

Again, Marietta shook her head.

“What do you mean by shaking your head, dear?” said Umbridge in a testy voice.

“I would have thought her meaning was quite clear,” said Professor McGonagall harshly. “There have been no secret meetings for the past six months. Is that correct, Miss Edgecombe?”

Marietta nodded.

“But there was a meeting tonight!” said Umbridge furiously. “There was a meeting, Miss Edgecombe, you told me about it, in the Room of Requirement! And Potter was the leader, was he not, Potter organized it, Potter — why are you shaking your head, girl?”

“Well, usually when a person shakes their head,” said McGonagall coldly, “they mean ‘no.’ So unless Miss Edgecombe is using a form of sign language as yet unknown to humans —”

Professor Umbridge seized Marietta, pulled her around to face her, and began shaking her very hard. A split second later Dumbledore was on his feet, his wand raised. Kingsley started forward and Umbridge leapt back from Marietta, waving her hands in the air as though they had been burned.

“I cannot allow you to manhandle my students, Dolores,” said Dumbledore, and for the first time, he looked angry.

“You want to calm yourself, Madam Umbridge,” said Kingsley in his deep, slow voice. “You don’t want to get yourself into trouble now.”

“No,” said Umbridge breathlessly, glancing up at the towering fig-ure of Kingsley. “I mean, yes — you’re right, Shacklebolt — I — I forgot myself.”

Marietta was standing exactly where Umbridge had released her. She seemed neither perturbed by Umbridge’s sudden attack, nor relieved by her release. She was still clutching her robe up to her oddly blank eyes, staring straight ahead of her. A sudden suspicion connected to Kingsley’s whisper and the thing he had felt shoot past him sprang into Harry’s mind.

“Dolores,” said Fudge, with the air of trying to settle something once and for all, “the meeting tonight — the one we know definitely happened —”

“Yes,” said Umbridge, pulling herself together, “yes … well, Miss Edgecombe tipped me off and I proceeded at once to the seventh floor, accompanied by certain trustworthy students, so as to catch those in the meeting red-handed. It appears that they were forewarned of my arrival, however, because when we reached the seventh floor they were running in every direction. It does not matter, however. I have all their names here, Miss Parkinson ran into the Room of Re-quirement for me to see if they had left anything behind. … We needed evidence and the room provided …”

And to Harry’s horror, she withdrew from her pocket the list of names that had been pinned upon the Room of Requirement’s wall and handed it to Fudge.

“The moment I saw Potter’s name on the list, I knew what we were dealing with,” she said softly.

“Excellent,” said Fudge, a smile spreading across his face. “Excellent, Dolores. And … by thunder …”

He looked up at Dumbledore, who was still standing beside Mari-etta, his wand held loosely in his hand.

"See what they've named themselves?" said Fudge quietly. "Dumbledore's Army."

Dumbledore reached out and took the piece of parchment from Fudge. He gazed at the heading scribbled by Hermione months before and for a moment seemed unable to speak. Then he looked up, smiling.

"Well, the game is up," he said simply. "Would you like a written confession from me, Cornelius — or will a statement before these witnesses suffice?"

Harry saw McGonagall and Kingsley look at each other. There was fear in both faces. He did not understand what was going on, and neither, apparently, did Fudge.

"Statement?" said Fudge slowly. "What — I don't — ?"

"Dumbledore's Army, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, still smiling as he waved the list of names before Fudge's face. "Not Potter's Army. Dumbledore's Army."

"But — but —"

Understanding blazed suddenly in Fudge's face. He took a horrified step backward, yelped, and jumped out of the fire again.

"You?" he whispered, stamping again on his smoldering cloak.

"That's right," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

"You organized this?"

"I did," said Dumbledore.

"You recruited these students for — for your army?"

"Tonight was supposed to be the first meeting," said Dumbledore, nodding. "Merely to see whether they would be interested in joining me. I see now that it was a mistake to invite Miss Edgecombe, of course."

Marietta nodded. Fudge looked from her to Dumbledore, his chest swelling.

"Then you have been plotting against me!" he yelled.

"That's right," said Dumbledore cheerfully.

"NO!" shouted Harry.

Kingsley flashed a look of warning at him, McGonagall widened her eyes threateningly, but it had suddenly dawned upon Harry what Dumbledore was about to do, and he could not let it happen.

"No — Professor Dumbledore!"

"Be quiet, Harry, or I am afraid you will have to leave my office," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Yes, shut up, Potter!" barked Fudge, who was still ogling Dumbledore with a kind of horrified delight. "Well, well, well — I came here tonight expecting to expel Potter and instead —"

"Instead you get to arrest me," said Dumbledore, smiling. "It's like losing a Knut and finding a Galleon, isn't it?"

"Weasley!" cried Fudge, now positively quivering with delight, "Weasley, have you written it all down, everything he's said, his confession, have you got it?"

"Yes, sir, I think so, sir!" said Percy eagerly, whose nose was splattered with ink from the speed of his note-taking.

“The bit about how he’s been trying to build up an army against the Ministry, how he’s been working to destabilize me?”

“Yes, sir, I’ve got it, yes!” said Percy, scanning his notes joyfully.

“Very well, then,” said Fudge, now radiant with glee. “Duplicate your notes, Weasley, and send a copy to the Daily Prophet at once. If we send a fast owl we should make the morning edition!” Percy dashed from the room, slamming the door behind him, and Fudge turned back to Dumbledore. “You will now be escorted back to the Ministry, where you will be formally charged and then sent to Azka-ban to await trial!”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore gently, “yes. Yes, I thought we might hit that little snag.”

“Snag?” said Fudge, his voice still vibrating with joy. “I see no snag, Dumbledore!”

“Well,” said Dumbledore apologetically, “I’m afraid I do.”

“Oh really?”

“Well — it’s just that you seem to be laboring under the delusion that I am going to — what is the phrase? ‘Come quietly’ I am afraid I am not going to come quietly at all, Cornelius. I have absolutely no intention of being sent to Azkaban. I could break out, of course — but what a waste of time, and frankly, I can think of a whole host of things I would rather be doing.”

Umbridge’s face was growing steadily redder, she looked as though she was being filled with boiling water. Fudge stared at Dumbledore with a very silly expression on his face, as though he had just been stunned by a sudden blow and could not quite believe it had hap-pened. He made a small choking noise and then looked around at Kingsley and the man with short gray hair, who alone of everyone in the room had remained entirely silent so far. The latter gave Fudge a

reassuring nod and moved forward a little, away from the wall. Harry saw his hand drift, almost casually, toward his pocket.

“Don’t be silly, Dawlish,” said Dumbledore kindly. “I’m sure you are an excellent Auror, I seem to remember that you achieved ‘Out-standing’ in all your N.E.W.T.s, but if you attempt to — er — ‘bring me in’ by force, I will have to hurt you.”

The man called Dawlish blinked, looking rather foolish. He looked toward Fudge again, but this time seemed to be hoping for a clue as to what to do next.

“So,” sneered Fudge, recovering himself, “you intend to take on Dawlish, Shacklebolt, Dolores, and myself single-handed, do you, Dumbledore?”

“Merlin’s beard, no,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “Not unless you are foolish enough to force me to.”

“He will not be single-handed!” said Professor McGonagall loudly, plunging her hand inside her robes.

“Oh yes he will, Minerva!” said Dumbledore sharply. “Hogwarts needs you!”

“Enough of this rubbish!” said Fudge, pulling out his own wand. “Dawlish! Shacklebolt! Take him!”

A streak of silver light flashed around the room. There was a bang like a gunshot, and the floor trembled. A hand grabbed the scruff of Harry’s neck and forced him down on the floor as a second silver flash went off — several of the portraits yelled, Fawkes screeched, and a cloud of dust filled the air. Coughing in the dust, Harry saw a dark fig-ure fall to the ground with a crash in front of him. There was a shriek and a thud and somebody cried, “No!” Then the sound of breaking glass, frantically scuffling footsteps, a groan — and silence.

Harry struggled around to see who was half-strangling him and saw Professor McGonagall crouched beside him. She had forced both him and Marietta out of harm's way. Dust was still floating gently down through the air onto them. Panting slightly, Harry saw a very tall fig-ure moving toward them.

"Are you all right?" said Dumbledore.

"Yes!" said Professor McGonagall, getting up and dragging Harry and Marietta with her.

The dust was clearing. The wreckage of the office loomed into view: Dumbledore's desk had been overturned, all of the spindly ta-bles had been knocked to the floor, their silver instruments in pieces. Fudge, Umbridge, Kingsley, and Dawlish lay motionless on the floor. Fawkes the phoenix soared in wide circles above them, singing softly.

"Unfortunately, I had to hex Kingsley too, or it would have looked very suspicious," said Dumbledore in a low voice. "He was remark-ably quick on the uptake, modifying Miss Edgecombe's memory like that while everyone was looking the other way — thank him for me, won't you, Minerva?

"Now, they will all awake very soon and it will be best if they do not know that we had time to communicate — you must act as though no time has passed, as though they were merely knocked to the ground, they will not remember —"

"Where will you go, Dumbledore?" whispered Professor McGona-gall. "Grimmauld Place?"

"Oh no," said Dumbledore with a grim smile. "I am not leaving to go into hiding. Fudge will soon wish he'd never dislodged me from Hogwarts, I promise you. …"

"Professor Dumbledore …" Harry began.

He did not know what to say first: how sorry he was that he had started the D.A. in the first place and caused all this trouble, or how terrible he felt that Dumbledore was leaving to save him from expulsion? But Dumbledore cut him off before he could say another word.

“Listen to me, Harry,” he said urgently, “you must study Occlu-mency as hard as you can, do you understand me? Do everything Pro-fessor Snape tells you and practice it particularly every night before sleeping so that you can close your mind to bad dreams — you will understand why soon enough, but you must promise me —”

The man called Dawlish was stirring. Dumbledore seized Harry’s wrist.

“Remember — close your mind —”

But as Dumbledore’s fingers closed over Harry’s skin, a pain shot through the scar on his forehead, and he felt again that terrible, snake-like longing to strike Dumbledore, to bite him, to hurt him —“— you will understand,” whispered Dumbledore.

Fawkes circled the office and swooped low over him. Dumbledore released Harry, raised his hand, and grasped the phoenix’s long golden tail. There was a flash of fire and the pair of them had gone.

“Where is he?” yelled Fudge, pushing himself up from the ground. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know!” shouted Kingsley, also leaping to his feet.

“Well, he can’t have Disapparated!” cried Umbridge. “You can’t inside this school —”

“The stairs!” cried Dawlish, and he flung himself upon the door, wrenched it open, and disappeared, followed closely by Kingsley and Umbridge. Fudge hesitated, then got to his feet slowly, brushing dust from his front. There was a long and painful silence.

“Well, Minerva,” said Fudge nastily, straightening his torn shirt-sleeve, “I’m afraid this is the end of your friend Dumbledore.”

“You think so, do you?” said Professor McGonagall scornfully.

Fudge seemed not to hear her. He was looking around at the wrecked office. A few of the portraits hissed at him; one or two even made rude hand gestures.

“You’d better get those two off to bed,” said Fudge, looking back at Professor McGonagall with a dismissive nod toward Harry and Marietta.

She said nothing, but marched Harry and Marietta to the door. As it swung closed behind them, Harry heard Phineas Nigellus’s voice.

“You know, Minister, I disagree with Dumbledore on many counts … but you cannot deny he’s got style. …”

Chapter 28 Snape's Worst Memory

— BY ORDER OF —

The Ministry of Magic

Dolores Jane Umbridge (High Inquisitor) has replaced Al-bus Dumbledore as Head of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The above is in accordance withEducational Decree Number Twenty-eight.

Signed:

Cornelius Oswald Fudge

MINISTER OF MAGIC

The notices had gone up all over the school overnight, but they did not explain how every single person within the castle seemed to know that Dumbledore had overcome two Aurors, the High Inquisitor, the Minister of Magic, and his Junior Assistant to escape. No matter where Harry went within the castle next day, the sole topic of conversation was Dumbledore's flight, and though some of the details might have gone awry in the retelling (Harry overheard one second-year girl assuring another that Fudge was now lying in St. Mungo's with a pumpkin for a head), it was surprising how accurate the rest of their information was. Everybody seemed aware, for instance, that Harry and Marietta were the only students to have witnessed the scene in Dumbledore's office, and as Marietta was now in the hospital wing, Harry found himself besieged with requests to give a firsthand account wherever he went.

"Dumbledore will be back before long," said Ernie Macmillan confidently on the way back from Herbology after listening intently to Harry's story. "They couldn't keep him away in our second year and

they won't be able to this time. The Fat Friar told me …" He dropped his voice conspiratorially, so that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had to lean closer to him to hear, "… that Umbridge tried to get back into his office last night after they'd searched the castle and grounds for him. Couldn't get past the gargoyle. The Head's office has sealed itself against her." Ernie smirked. "Apparently she had a right little tantrum. …"

"Oh, I expect she really fancied herself sitting up there in the Head's office," said Hermione viciously, as they walked up the stone steps into the entrance hall. "Lording it over all the other teachers, the stupid puffed-up, power-crazy old —"

"Now, do you really want to finish that sentence, Granger?"

Draco Malfoy had slid out from behind the door, followed by Crabbe and Goyle. His pale, pointed face was alight with malice.

"Afraid I'm going to have to dock a few points from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff," he drawled.

"It's only teachers that can dock points from Houses, Malfoy," said Ernie at once.

"Yeah, we're prefects too, remember?" snarled Ron.

"I know prefects can't dock points, Weasel King," sneered Malfoy; Crabbe and Goyle sniggered. "But members of the Inquisitorial Squad —"

"The what?" said Hermione sharply.

"The Inquisitorial Squad, Granger," said Malfoy, pointing toward a tiny silver I upon his robes just beneath his prefect's badge. "A select group of students who are supportive of the Ministry of Magic, hand-picked by Professor Umbridge. Anyway, members of the Inquisitorial Squad do have the power to dock points. … So, Granger, I'll have five

from you for being rude about our new headmistress. … Macmillan, five for contradicting me. … Five because I don't like you, Potter … Weasley, your shirt's untucked, so I'll have another five for that. … Oh yeah, I forgot, you're a Mudblood, Granger, so ten for that. …"

Ron pulled out his wand, but Hermione pushed it away, whisper-ing, "Don't!"

"Wise move, Granger," breathed Malfoy. "New Head, new times … Be good now, Potty … Weasel King …"

He strode away, laughing heartily with Crabbe and Goyle.

"He was bluffing," said Ernie, looking appalled. "He can't be al-lowed to dock points … that would be ridiculous. … It would com-pletely undermine the prefect system. …"

But Harry, Ron, and Hermione had turned automatically toward the giant hourglasses set in niches along the wall behind them, which recorded the House points. Gryffindor and Ravenclaw had been neck and neck in the lead that morning. Even as they watched, stones flew upward, reducing the amounts in the lower bulbs. In fact, the only glass that seemed unchanged was the emerald-filled one of Slytherin.

"Noticed, have you?" said Fred's voice.

He and George had just come down the marble staircase and joined Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ernie in front of the hourglasses.

"Malfoy just docked us all about fifty points," said Harry furiously, as they watched several more stones fly upward from the Gryffindor hourglass.

"Yeah, Montague tried to do us during break," said George.

"What do you mean, 'tried'?" said Ron quickly.

“He never managed to get all the words out,” said Fred, “due to the fact that we forced him headfirst into that Vanishing Cabinet on the first floor.”

Hermione looked very shocked.

“But you’ll get into terrible trouble!”

“Not until Montague reappears, and that could take weeks, I dunno where we sent him,” said Fred coolly. “Anyway … we’ve de-cided we don’t care about getting into trouble anymore.”

“Have you ever?” asked Hermione.

“ ’Course we have,” said George. “Never been expelled, have we?”

“We’ve always known where to draw the line,” said Fred.

“We might have put a toe across it occasionally,” said George.

“But we’ve always stopped short of causing real mayhem,” said Fred.

“But now?” said Ron tentatively.

“Well, now —” said George.

“— what with Dumbledore gone —” said Fred.

“— we reckon a bit of mayhem —” said George.

“— is exactly what our dear new Head deserves,” said Fred.

“You mustn’t!” whispered Hermione. “You really mustn’t! She’d love a reason to expel you!”

“You don’t get it, Hermione, do you?” said Fred, smiling at her. “We don’t care about staying anymore. We’d walk out right now if we weren’t determined to do our bit for Dumbledore first. So anyway,” he

checked his watch, "phase one is about to begin. I'd get in the Great Hall for lunch if I were you, that way the teachers will see you can't have had anything to do with it."

"Anything to do with what?" said Hermione anxiously.

"You'll see," said George. "Run along, now."

Fred and George turned away and disappeared in the swelling crowd descending the stairs toward lunch. Looking highly discon-certed, Ernie muttered something about unfinished Transfiguration homework and scurried away.

"I think we should get out of here, you know," said Hermione nervously. "Just in case …"

"Yeah, all right," said Ron, and the three of them moved toward the doors to the Great Hall, but Harry had barely glimpsed today's ceiling of scudding white clouds when somebody tapped him on the shoulder and, turning, he found himself almost nose to nose with Filch, the caretaker. He took several hasty steps backward; Filch was best viewed at a distance.

"The headmistress would like to see you, Potter," he leered.

"I didn't do it," said Harry stupidly, thinking of whatever Fred and George were planning. Filch's jowls wobbled with silent laughter.

"Guilty conscience, eh?" he wheezed. "Follow me. …"

Harry glanced back at Ron and Hermione, who were both looking worried. He shrugged and followed Filch back into the entrance hall, against the tide of hungry students.

Filch seemed to be in an extremely good mood; he hummed creak-ily under his breath as they climbed the marble staircase. As they

reached the first landing he said, “Things are changing around here, Potter.”

“I’ve noticed,” said Harry coldly.

“Yerse … I’ve been telling Dumbledore for years and years he’s too soft with you all,” said Filch, chuckling nastily. “You filthy little beasts would never have dropped Stinkpellets if you’d known I had it in my power to whip you raw, would you, now? Nobody would have thought of throwing Fanged Frisbees down the corridors if I could’ve strung you up by the ankles in my office, would they? But when Educational Decree Twenty-nine comes in, Potter, I’ll be allowed to do them things. … And she’s asked the Minister to sign an order for the expulsion of Peeves. … Oh, things are going to be very different around here with her in charge. …”

Umbridge had obviously gone to some lengths to get Filch on her side, Harry thought, and the worst of it was that he would probably prove an important weapon; his knowledge of the school’s secret passageways and hiding places was probably second only to the Weasley twins.

“Here we are,” he said, leering down at Harry as he rapped three times upon Professor Umbridge’s door and pushed it open. “The Potter boy to see you, ma’am.”

Umbridge’s office, so very familiar to Harry from his many detentions, was the same as usual except for the large wooden block lying across the front of her desk on which golden letters spelled the word HEADMISTRESS; also his Firebolt, and Fred’s and George’s Cleansweeps, which he saw with a pang were now chained and padlocked to a stout iron peg in the wall behind the desk. Umbridge was sitting behind the desk, busily scribbling upon some of her pink parchment, but looked up and smiled widely at their entrance.

“Thank you, Argus,” she said sweetly.

“Not at all, ma’am, not at all,” said Filch, bowing as low as his rheumatism would permit, and exiting backward.

“Sit,” said Umbridge curtly, pointing toward a chair, and Harry sat. She continued to scribble for a few moments. He watched some of the foul kittens gamboling around the plates over her head, wondering what fresh horror she had in store for him.

“Well now,” she said finally, setting down her quill and looking like a toad about to swallow a particularly juicy fly. “What would you like to drink?”

“What?” said Harry, quite sure he had misheard her.

“To drink, Mr. Potter,” she said, smiling still more widely. “Tea? Coffee? Pumpkin juice?”

As she named each drink, she gave her short wand a wave, and a cup or glass of it appeared upon her desk.

“Nothing, thank you,” said Harry.

“I wish you to have a drink with me,” she said, her voice becoming more dangerously sweet. “Choose one.”

“Fine … tea then,” said Harry, shrugging.

She got up and made quite a performance of adding milk with her back to him. She then bustled around the desk with it, smiling in sinisterly sweet fashion.

“There,” she said, handing it to him. “Drink it before it gets cold, won’t you? Well, now, Mr. Potter … I thought we ought to have a lit-tle chat, after the distressing events of last night.”

He said nothing. She settled herself back into her seat and waited. When several long moments had passed in silence, she said gaily,

"You're not drinking up!"

He raised the cup to his lips and then, just as suddenly, lowered it. One of the horrible painted kittens behind Umbridge had great round blue eyes just like Mad-Eye Moody's magical one, and it had just occurred to Harry what Mad-Eye would say if he ever heard that Harry had drunk anything offered by a known enemy.

"What's the matter?" said Umbridge, who was still watching him. "Do you want sugar?"

"No," said Harry.

He raised the cup to his lips again and pretended to take a sip, though keeping his mouth tightly closed. Umbridge's smile widened.

"Good," she whispered. "Very good. Now then …" She leaned forward a little. "Where is Albus Dumbledore?"

"No idea," said Harry promptly.

"Drink up, drink up," she said, still smiling. "Now, Mr. Potter, let us not play childish games. I know that you know where he has gone. You and Dumbledore have been in this together from the beginning. Consider your position, Mr. Potter. …"

"I don't know where he is."

Harry pretended to drink again.

"Very well," said Umbridge, looking displeased. "In that case, you will kindly tell me the whereabouts of Sirius Black."

Harry's stomach turned over and his hand holding the teacup shook so that the cup rattled in its saucer. He tilted the cup to his mouth with his lips pressed together, so that some of the hot liquid trickled down onto his robes.

“I don’t know,” he said a little too quickly.

“Mr. Potter,” said Umbridge, “let me remind you that it was I who almost caught the criminal Black in the Gryffindor fire in October. I know perfectly well it was you he was meeting and if I had had any proof neither of you would be at large today, I promise you. I repeat, Mr. Potter … Where is Sirius Black?”

“No idea,” said Harry loudly. “Haven’t got a clue.”

They stared at each other so long that Harry felt his eyes watering. Then she stood up.

“Very well, Potter, I will take your word for it this time, but be warned: The might of the Ministry stands behind me. All channels of communication in and out of this school are being monitored. A Floo Network Regulator is keeping watch over every fire in Hogwarts — except my own, of course. My Inquisitorial Squad is opening and reading all owl post entering and leaving the castle. And Mr. Filch is observing all secret passages in and out of the castle. If I find a shred of evidence …”

BOOM!

The very floor of the office shook; Umbridge slipped sideways, clutching her desk for support, looking shocked.

“What was — ?”

She was gazing toward the door; Harry took the opportunity to empty his almost full cup of tea into the nearest vase of dried flowers. He could hear people running and screaming several floors below.

“Back to lunch with you, Potter!” cried Umbridge, raising her wand and dashing out of the office. Harry gave her a few seconds’ start then hurried after her to see what the source of all the uproar was.

It was not difficult to find. One floor down, pandemonium reigned. Somebody (and Harry had a very shrewd idea who) had set off what seemed to be an enormous crate of enchanted fireworks.

Dragons comprised entirely of green-and-gold sparks were soaring up and down the corridors, emitting loud fiery blasts and bangs as they went. Shocking-pink Catherine wheels five feet in diameter were whizzing lethally through the air like so many flying saucers. Rockets with long tails of brilliant silver stars were ricocheting off the walls. Sparklers were writing swearwords in midair of their own accord. Fire-crackers were exploding like mines everywhere Harry looked, and in-stead of burning themselves out, fading from sight, or fizzling to a halt, these pyrotechnical miracles seemed to be gaining in energy and momentum the longer he watched.

Filch and Umbridge were standing, apparently transfixed with hor-ror, halfway down the stairs. As Harry watched, one of the larger Catherine wheels seemed to decide that what it needed was more room to maneuver; it whirled toward Umbridge and Filch with a sin-ister wheeeeeeeeee. Both adults yelled with fright and ducked and it soared straight out of the window behind them and off across the grounds. Meanwhile, several of the dragons and a large purple bat that was smoking ominously took advantage of the open door at the end of the corridor to escape toward the second floor.

“Hurry, Filch, hurry!” shrieked Umbridge. “They’ll be all over the school unless we do something — Stupefy!”

A jet of red light shot out of the end of her wand and hit one of the rockets. Instead of freezing in midair, it exploded with such force that it blasted a hole in a painting of a soppy-looking witch in the middle of a meadow — she ran for it just in time, reappearing seconds later squashed into the painting next door, where a couple of wizards play-ing cards stood up hastily to make room for her.

“Don’t Stun them, Filch!” shouted Umbridge angrily, for all the world as though it had been his suggestion.

“Right you are, Headmistress!” wheezed Filch, who was a Squib and could no more have Stunned the fireworks than swallowed them. He dashed to a nearby cupboard, pulled out a broom, and began swatting at the fireworks in midair; within seconds the head of the broom was ablaze.

Harry had seen enough. Laughing, he ducked down low, ran to a door he knew was concealed behind a tapestry a little way along the corridor and slipped through it to find Fred and George hiding just behind it, listening to Umbridge’s and Filch’s yells and quaking with suppressed mirth.

“Impressive,” Harry said quietly, grinning. “Very impressive … You’ll put Dr. Filibuster out of business, no problem. …”

“Cheers,” whispered George, wiping tears of laughter from his face. “Oh, I hope she tries Vanishing them next. … They multiply by ten every time you try. …”

The fireworks continued to burn and to spread all over the school that afternoon. Though they caused plenty of disruption, particularly the firecrackers, the other teachers did not seem to mind them very much.

“Dear, dear,” said Professor McGonagall sardonically, as one of the dragons soared around her classroom, emitting loud bangs and exhal-ing flame. “Miss Brown, would you mind running along to the headmistress and informing her that we have an escaped firework in our classroom?”

The upshot of it all was that Professor Umbridge spent her first afternoon as headmistress running all over the school answering the summonses of the other teachers, none of whom seemed able to rid their rooms of the fireworks without her. When the final bell rang and

the students were heading back to Gryffindor Tower with their bags, Harry saw, with immense satisfaction, a disheveled and soot-blackened Umbridge tottering sweaty-faced from Professor Flitwick's classroom.

"Thank you so much, Professor!" said Professor Flitwick in his squeaky little voice. "I could have got rid of the sparklers myself, of course, but I wasn't sure whether I had the authority. …"

Beaming, he closed his classroom door in her snarling face.

Fred and George were heroes that night in the Gryffindor common room. Even Hermione fought her way through the excited crowd around them to congratulate them.

"They were wonderful fireworks," she said admiringly.

"Thanks," said George, looking both surprised and pleased. "Weasleys' Wildfire Whiz-Bangs. Only thing is, we used our whole stock, we're going to have to start again from scratch now. …"

"It was worth it, though," said Fred, who was taking orders from clamoring Gryffindors. "If you want to add your name to the waiting list, Hermione, it's five Galleons for your Basic Blaze box and twenty for the Deflagration Deluxe. …"

Hermione returned to the table where Harry and Ron were sitting staring at their schoolbags as though hoping their homework might spring out of it and start doing itself.

"Oh, why don't we have a night off?" said Hermione brightly, as a silver-tailed Weasley rocket zoomed past the window. "After all, the Easter holidays start on Friday, we'll have plenty of time then. …"

"Are you feeling all right?" Ron asked, staring at her in disbelief.

“Now you mention it,” said Hermione happily, “d’you know … I think I’m feeling a bit … rebellious.”

Harry could still hear the distant bangs of escaped firecrackers when he and Ron went up to bed an hour later, and as he got undressed a sparkler floated past the tower, still resolutely spelling out the word POO.

He got into bed, yawning. With his glasses off, the occasional firework still passing the window became blurred, looking like sparkling clouds, beautiful and mysterious against the black sky. He turned onto his side, wondering how Umbridge was feeling about her first day in Dumbledore’s job, and how Fudge would react when he heard that the school had spent most of the day in a state of advanced disruption. … Smiling to himself, he closed his eyes. …The whizzes and bangs of escaped fireworks in the grounds seemed to be growing more distant … or perhaps he, Harry, was simply speeding away from them. …He had fallen right into the corridor leading to the Department of Mysteries. He was speeding toward the plain black door. … Let it open. … Let it open. …It did. He was inside the circular room lined with doors. … He crossed it, placed his hand upon an identical door, and it swung inward. …Now he was in a long, rectangular room full of an odd, mechanical clicking. There were dancing flecks of light on the walls but he did not pause to investigate. … He had to go on. …There was a door at the far end. … It too opened at his touch. …And now he was in a dimly lit room as high and wide as a church, full of nothing but rows and rows of towering shelves, each laden with small, dusty, spun-glass spheres. … Now Harry’s heart was beating fast with excitement. … He knew where to go. … He ran forward, but his footsteps made no noise in the enormous, deserted room. …There was something in this room he wanted very, very much. …Something he wanted. … or somebody else wanted. …His scar was hurting. …

BANG! Harry awoke instantly, confused and angry. The dark dormitory was full of the sound of laughter.

“Cool!” said Seamus, who was silhouetted against the window.

“I think one of those Catherine wheels hit a rocket and it’s like they mated, come and see!”

Harry heard Ron and Dean scramble out of bed for a better look. He lay quite still and silent while the pain in his scar subsided and dis-appointment washed over him. He felt as though a wonderful treat had been snatched from him at the very last moment. … He had got so close that time. …Glittering, pink-and-silver winged piglets were now soaring past the windows of Gryffindor Tower. Harry lay and listened to the ap-preciative whoops of Gryffindors in the dormitories below them. His stomach gave a sickening jolt as he remembered that he had Occlu-mency the following evening. …Harry spent the whole of the next day dreading what Snape was going to say if he found out how much farther into the Department of Mys-teries he had penetrated during his last dream. With a surge of guilt he realized that he had not practiced Occlumency once since their last lesson: There had been too much going on since Dumbledore had left. He was sure he would not have been able to empty his mind even if he had tried. He doubted, however, whether Snape would accept that excuse. … He attempted a little last-minute practice during classes that day, but it was no good, Hermione kept asking him what was wrong whenever he fell silent trying to rid himself of all thought and emo-tion and, after all, the best moment to empty his brain was not while teachers were firing review questions at the class.

Resigned to the worst, he set off for Snape’s office after dinner. Halfway across the entrance hall, however, Cho came hurrying up to him.

“Over here,” said Harry, glad of a reason to postpone his meeting with Snape and beckoning her across to the corner of the entrance hall where the giant hourglasses stood. Gryffindor’s was now almost empty. “Are you okay? Umbridge hasn’t been asking you about the D.A., has she?”

“Oh no,” said Cho hurriedly. “No, it was only … Well, I just wanted to say … Harry, I never dreamed Marietta would tell. …”

“Yeah, well,” said Harry moodily. He did feel Cho might have cho-sen her friends a bit more carefully. It was small consolation that the last he had heard, Marietta was still up in the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey had not been able to make the slightest improve-ment to her pimples.

“She’s a lovely person really,” said Cho. “She just made a mistake —”

Harry looked at her incredulously.

“A lovely person who made a mistake? She sold us all out, including you!”

“Well … we all got away, didn’t we?” said Cho pleadingly. “You know, her mum works for the Ministry, it’s really difficult for her —”

“Ron’s dad works for the Ministry too!” Harry said furiously. “And in case you hadn’t noticed, he hasn’t got ‘sneak’ written across his face —”

“That was a really horrible trick of Hermione Granger’s,” said Cho fiercely. “She should have told us she’d jinxed that list —”

“I think it was a brilliant idea,” said Harry coldly. Cho flushed and her eyes grew brighter.

“Oh yes, I forgot — of course, if it was darling Hermione’s idea —”

“Don’t start crying again,” said Harry warningly.

“I wasn’t going to!” she shouted.

“Yeah … well … good,” he said. “I’ve got enough to cope with at the moment.”

“Go and cope with it then!” she said furiously, turning on her heel and stalking off.

Fuming, Harry descended the stairs to Snape’s dungeon, and though he knew from experience how much easier it would be for Snape to penetrate his mind if he arrived angry and resentful, he suc-ceeded in nothing but thinking of a few more good things he should have said to Cho about Marietta before reaching the dungeon door.

“You’re late, Potter,” said Snape coldly, as Harry closed the door behind him.

Snape was standing with his back to Harry, removing, as usual, certain of his thoughts and placing them carefully in Dumbledore’s Pensieve. He dropped the last silvery strand into the stone basin and turned to face Harry.

“So,” he said. “Have you been practicing?”

“Yes,” Harry lied, looking carefully at one of the legs of Snape’s desk.

“Well, we’ll soon find out, won’t we?” said Snape smoothly. “Wand out, Potter.”

Harry moved into his usual position, facing Snape with the desk between them. His heart was pumping fast with anger at Cho and anxiety about how much Snape was about to extract from his mind.

“On the count of three then,” said Snape lazily. “One — two —”

Snape’s office door banged open and Draco Malfoy sped in.

“Professor Snape, sir — oh — sorry —”

Malfoy was looking at Snape and Harry in some surprise.

“It’s all right, Draco,” said Snape, lowering his wand. “Potter is here for a little Remedial Potions.”

Harry had not seen Malfoy look so gleeful since Umbridge had turned up to inspect Hagrid.

“I didn’t know,” he said, leering at Harry, who knew his face was burning. He would have given a great deal to be able to shout the truth at Malfoy — or, even better, to hit him with a good curse.

“Well, Draco, what is it?” asked Snape.

“It’s Professor Umbridge, sir — she needs your help,” said Malfoy. “They’ve found Montague, sir. He’s turned up jammed inside a toilet on the fourth floor.”

“How did he get in there?” demanded Snape.

“I don’t know, sir, he’s a bit confused. …”

“Very well, very well — Potter,” said Snape, “we shall resume this lesson tomorrow evening instead.”

He turned and swept from his office. Malfoy mouthed “Remedial Potions?” at Harry behind Snape’s back before following him.

Seething, Harry replaced his wand inside his robes and made to leave the room. At least he had twenty-four more hours in which to practice; he knew he ought to feel grateful for the narrow escape, though it was hard that it came at the expense of Malfoy telling the whole school that he needed Remedial Potions. …He was at the office door when he saw it: a patch of shivering light dancing on the door frame. He stopped, looking at it, reminded of something. … Then he remembered: It was a little like the lights he had seen in his dream last night, the lights in the second room he had walked through on his journey through the Department of Mysteries.

He turned around. The light was coming from the Pensieve sitting on Snape’s desk. The silver-white contents were ebbing and swirling within. Snape’s thoughts … things he did not want Harry to see if he

broke through Snape's defenses accidentally. …Harry gazed at the Pensieve, curiosity welling inside him. … What was it that Snape was so keen to hide from Harry?

The silvery lights shivered on the wall. … Harry took two steps to-ward the desk, thinking hard. Could it possibly be information about the Department of Mysteries that Snape was determined to keep from him?

Harry looked over his shoulder, his heart now pumping harder and faster than ever. How long would it take Snape to release Montague from the toilet? Would he come straight back to his office afterward, or accompany Montague to the hospital wing? Surely the latter … Montague was Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team, Snape would want to make sure he was all right. …Harry walked the remaining few feet to the Pensieve and stood over it, gazing into its depths. He hesitated, listening, then pulled out his wand again. The office and the corridor beyond were completely silent. He gave the contents of the Pensieve a small prod with the end of his wand.

The silvery stuff within began to swirl very fast. Harry leaned for-ward over it and saw that it had become transparent. He was, once again, looking down into a room as though through a circular win-dow in the ceiling. … In fact, unless he was much mistaken, he was looking down upon the Great Hall. …His breath was actually fogging the surface of Snape's thoughts. … His brain seemed to be in limbo. … It would be insane to do the thing that he was so strongly tempted to do. … He was trembling. … Snape could be back at any moment … but Harry thought of Cho's anger, of Malfoy's jeering face, and a reckless daring seized him.

He took a great gulp of breath and plunged his face into the surface of Snape's thoughts. At once, the floor of the office lurched, tipping Harry headfirst into the Pensieve. …He was falling through cold blackness, spinning furiously as he went, and then —He was standing in the middle of the Great Hall, but the four House tables

were gone. Instead there were more than a hundred smaller tables, all facing the same way, at each of which sat a student, head bent low, scribbling on a roll of parchment. The only sound was the scratching of quills and the occasional rustle as somebody adjusted their parchment. It was clearly exam time.

Sunshine was streaming through the high windows onto the bent heads, which shone chestnut and copper and gold in the bright light. Harry looked around carefully. Snape had to be here somewhere. … This was his memory. …And there he was, at a table right behind Harry. Harry stared. Snape-the-teenager had a stringy, pallid look about him, like a plant kept in the dark. His hair was lank and greasy and was flopping onto the table, his hooked nose barely half an inch from the surface of the parchment as he scribbled. Harry moved around behind Snape and read the heading of the examination paper:DEFENSE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS —ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL

So Snape had to be fifteen or sixteen, around Harry's own age. His hand was flying across the parchment; he had written at least a foot more than his closest neighbors, and yet his writing was minuscule and cramped.

"Five more minutes!"

The voice made Harry jump; turning, he saw the top of Professor Flitwick's head moving between the desks a short distance away. Pro-fessor Flitwick was walking past a boy with untidy black hair … very untidy black hair. …Harry moved so quickly that, had he been solid, he would have knocked desks flying. Instead he seemed to slide, dreamlike, across two aisles and up a third. The back of the black-haired boy's head drew nearer and nearer. … He was straightening up now, putting down his quill, pulling his roll of parchment toward him so as to reread what he had written. …Harry stopped in front of the desk and gazed down at his fifteen-year-old father.

Excitement exploded in the pit of his stomach: It was as though he was looking at himself but with deliberate mistakes. James's eyes were hazel, his nose was slightly longer than Harry's, and there was no scar on his forehead, but they had the same thin face, same mouth, same eyebrows. James's hair stuck up at the back exactly as Harry's did, his hands could have been Harry's, and Harry could tell that when James stood up, they would be within an inch of each other's heights.

James yawned hugely and rumpled up his hair, making it even messier than it had been. Then, with a glance toward Professor Flitwick, he turned in his seat and grinned at a boy sitting four seats behind him.

With another shock of excitement, Harry saw Sirius give James the thumbs-up. Sirius was lounging in his chair at his ease, tilting it back on two legs. He was very good-looking; his dark hair fell into his eyes with a sort of casual elegance neither James's nor Harry's could ever have achieved, and a girl sitting behind him was eyeing him hopefully, though he didn't seem to have noticed. And two seats along from this girl — Harry's stomach gave another pleasurable squirm — was Re-mus Lupin. He looked rather pale and peaky (was the full moon ap-proaching?) and was absorbed in the exam: As he reread his answers he scratched his chin with the end of his quill, frowning slightly.

So that meant Wormtail had to be around here somewhere too … and sure enough, Harry spotted him within seconds: a small, mousy-haired boy with a pointed nose. Wormtail looked anxious; he was chewing his fingernails, staring down at his paper, scuffing the ground with his toes. Every now and then he glanced hopefully at his neigh-bor's paper. Harry stared at Wormtail for a moment, then back at James, who was now doodling on a bit of scrap parchment. He had drawn a Snitch and was now tracing the letters L. E. What did they stand for?

“Quills down, please!” squeaked Professor Flitwick. “That means you too, Stebbins! Please remain seated while I collect your parch-ment! Accio!”

More than a hundred rolls of parchment zoomed into the air and into Professor Flitwick’s outstretched arms, knocking him backward off his feet. Several people laughed. A couple of students at the front desks got up, took hold of Professor Flitwick beneath the elbows, and lifted him onto his feet again.

“Thank you … thank you,” panted Professor Flitwick. “Very well, everybody, you’re free to go!”

Harry looked down at his father, who had hastily crossed out the L. E. he had been embellishing, jumped to his feet, stuffed his quill and the exam question paper into his bag, which he slung over his back, and stood waiting for Sirius to join him.

Harry looked around and glimpsed Snape a short way away, mov-ing between the tables toward the doors into the entrance hall, still absorbed in his own examination paper. Round-shouldered yet angu-lar, he walked in a twitchy manner that recalled a spider, his oily hair swinging about his face.

A gang of chattering girls separated Snape from James and Sirius, and by planting himself in the midst of this group, Harry managed to keep Snape in sight while straining his ears to catch the voices of James and his friends.

“Did you like question ten, Moony?” asked Sirius as they emerged into the entrance hall.

“Loved it,” said Lupin briskly. “ ‘Give five signs that identify the werewolf.’ Excellent question.”

“D’you think you managed to get all the signs?” said James in tones of mock concern.

“Think I did,” said Lupin seriously, as they joined the crowd throng-ing around the front doors eager to get out into the sunlit grounds. “One: He’s sitting on my chair. Two: He’s wearing my clothes. Three: His name’s Remus Lupin …”

Wormtail was the only one who didn’t laugh.

“I got the snout shape, the pupils of the eyes, and the tufted tail,” he said anxiously, “but I couldn’t think what else —”

“How thick are you, Wormtail?” said James impatiently. “You run round with a werewolf once a month —”

“Keep your voice down,” implored Lupin.

Harry looked anxiously behind him again. Snape remained close by, still buried in his examination questions; but this was Snape’s memory, and Harry was sure that if Snape chose to wander off in a different direction once outside in the grounds, he, Harry, would not be able to follow James any farther. To his intense relief, however, when James and his three friends strode off down the lawn toward the lake, Snape followed, still poring over the paper and apparently with no fixed idea of where he was going. By jogging a little ahead of him, Harry managed to maintain a close watch on James and the others.

“Well, I thought that paper was a piece of cake,” he heard Sirius say. “I’ll be surprised if I don’t get Outstanding on it at least.”

“Me too,” said James. He put his hand in his pocket and took out a struggling Golden Snitch.

“Where’d you get that?”

“Nicked it,” said James casually. He started playing with the Snitch, allowing it to fly as much as a foot away and seizing it again; his re-flexes were excellent. Wormtail watched him in awe.

They stopped in the shade of the very same beech tree on the edge of the lake where Harry, Ron, and Hermione had spent a Sunday finishing their homework, and threw themselves down on the grass.

Harry looked over his shoulder yet again and saw, to his delight, that Snape had settled himself on the grass in the dense shadows of a clump of bushes. He was as deeply immersed in the O.W.L. paper as ever, which left Harry free to sit down on the grass between the beech and the bushes and watch the foursome under the tree.

The sunlight was dazzling on the smooth surface of the lake, on the bank of which the group of laughing girls who had just left the Great Hall were sitting with shoes and socks off, cooling their feet in the water.

Lupin had pulled out a book and was reading. Sirius stared around at the students milling over the grass, looking rather haughty and bored, but very handsomely so. James was still playing with the Snitch, letting it zoom farther and farther away, almost escaping but always grabbed at the last second. Wormtail was watching him with his mouth open. Every time James made a particularly difficult catch, Wormtail gasped and applauded. After five minutes of this, Harry wondered why James didn't tell Wormtail to get a grip on himself, but James seemed to be enjoying the attention. Harry noticed his father had a habit of rumpling up his hair as though to make sure it did not get too tidy, and also that he kept looking over at the girls by the water's edge.

"Put that away, will you?" said Sirius finally, as James made a fine catch and Wormtail let out a cheer. "Before Wormtail wets himself from excitement."

Wormtail turned slightly pink but James grinned.

"If it bothers you," he said, stuffing the Snitch back in his pocket. Harry had the distinct impression that Sirius was the only one for whom James would have stopped showing off.

"I'm bored," said Sirius. "Wish it was full moon."

"You might," said Lupin darkly from behind his book. "We've still got Transfiguration, if you're bored you could test me. … Here." He held out his book.

Sirius snorted. "I don't need to look at that rubbish, I know it all."

"This'll liven you up, Padfoot," said James quietly. "Look who it is. …"

Sirius's head turned. He had become very still, like a dog that has scented a rabbit.

"Excellent," he said softly. "Snivellus."

Harry turned to see what Sirius was looking at.

Snape was on his feet again, and was stowing the O.W.L. paper in his bag. As he emerged from the shadows of the bushes and set off across the grass, Sirius and James stood up. Lupin and Wormtail remained sitting: Lupin was still staring down at his book, though his eyes were not moving and a faint frown line had appeared between his eyebrows. Wormtail was looking from Sirius and James to Snape with a look of avid anticipation on his face.

"All right, Snivellus?" said James loudly.

Snape reacted so fast it was as though he had been expecting an attack: Dropping his bag, he plunged his hand inside his robes, and his wand was halfway into the air when James shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

Snape's wand flew twelve feet into the air and fell with a little thud in the grass behind him. Sirius let out a bark of laughter.

"Impedimenta!" he said, pointing his wand at Snape, who was knocked off his feet, halfway through a dive toward his own fallen wand.

Students all around had turned to watch. Some of them had gotten to their feet and were edging nearer to watch. Some looked apprehensive, others entertained.

Snape lay panting on the ground. James and Sirius advanced on him, wands up, James glancing over his shoulder at the girls at the water's edge as he went. Wormtail was on his feet now, watching hungrily, edging around Lupin to get a clearer view.

"How'd the exam go, Snivelly?" said James.

"I was watching him, his nose was touching the parchment," said Sirius viciously. "There'll be great grease marks all over it, they won't be able to read a word."

Several people watching laughed; Snape was clearly unpopular. Wormtail sniggered shrilly. Snape was trying to get up, but the jinx was still operating on him; he was struggling, as though bound by invisible ropes.

"You — wait," he panted, staring up at James with an expression of purest loathing. "You — wait. …"

"Wait for what?" said Sirius coolly. "What're you going to do, Sniv-elly, wipe your nose on us?"

Snape let out a stream of mixed swearwords and hexes, but his wand being ten feet away nothing happened.

"Wash out your mouth," said James coldly. "Scourgify!"

Pink soap bubbles streamed from Snape's mouth at once; the froth was covering his lips, making him gag, choking him —"Leave him ALONE!"

James and Sirius looked around. James's free hand jumped to his hair again.

It was one of the girls from the lake edge. She had thick, dark red hair that fell to her shoulders and startlingly green almond-shaped eyes — Harry's eyes.

Harry's mother …

"All right, Evans?" said James, and the tone of his voice was suddenly pleasant, deeper, more mature.

"Leave him alone," Lily repeated. She was looking at James with every sign of great dislike. "What's he done to you?"

"Well," said James, appearing to deliberate the point, "it's more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean. …"

Many of the surrounding watchers laughed, Sirius and Wormtail included, but Lupin, still apparently intent on his book, didn't, and neither did Lily.

"You think you're funny," she said coldly. "But you're just an arro-gant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him alone."

"I will if you go out with me, Evans," said James quickly. "Go on … Go out with me, and I'll never lay a wand on old Snivelly again."

Behind him, the Impediment Jinx was wearing off. Snape was beginning to inch toward his fallen wand, spitting out soapsuds as he crawled.

"I wouldn't go out with you if it was a choice between you and the giant squid," said Lily.

"Bad luck, Prongs," said Sirius briskly, turning back to Snape. "OY!"

But too late; Snape had directed his wand straight at James; there was a flash of light and a gash appeared on the side of James's face, spattering his robes with blood. James whirled about; a second flash

of light later, Snape was hanging upside down in the air, his robes falling over his head to reveal skinny, pallid legs and a pair of graying underpants.

Many people in the small crowd watching cheered. Sirius, James, and Wormtail roared with laughter.

Lily, whose furious expression had twitched for an instant as though she was going to smile, said, “Let him down!”

“Certainly,” said James and he jerked his wand upward. Snape fell into a crumpled heap on the ground. Disentangling himself from his robes, he got quickly to his feet, wand up, but Sirius said, “Petrificus Totalus!” and Snape keeled over again at once, rigid as a board.

“LEAVE HIM ALONE!” Lily shouted. She had her own wand out now. James and Sirius eyed it warily.

“Ah, Evans, don’t make me hex you,” said James earnestly.

“Take the curse off him, then!”

James sighed deeply, then turned to Snape and muttered the countercurse.

“There you go,” he said, as Snape struggled to his feet again, “you’re lucky Evans was here, Snivellus —”

“I don’t need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!”

Lily blinked. “Fine,” she said coolly. “I won’t bother in future. And I’d wash your pants if I were you, Snivellus.”

“Apologize to Evans!” James roared at Snape, his wand pointed threateningly at him.

“I don’t want you to make him apologize,” Lily shouted, rounding on James. “You’re as bad as he is. …”

“What?” yelped James. “I’d NEVER call you a — you-know-what!”

“Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you’ve just got off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid Snitch, walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can — I’m surprised your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat head on it. You make me SICK.”

She turned on her heel and hurried away.

“Evans!” James shouted after her, “Hey, EVANS!”

But she didn’t look back.

“What is it with her?” said James, trying and failing to look as though this was a throwaway question of no real importance to him.

“Reading between the lines, I’d say she thinks you’re a bit conceited, mate,” said Sirius.

“Right,” said James, who looked furious now, “right —”

There was another flash of light, and Snape was once again hang-ing upside down in the air.

“Who wants to see me take off Snivelly’s pants?”

But whether James really did take off Snape’s pants, Harry never found out. A hand had closed tight over his upper arm, closed with a pincerlike grip. Wincing, Harry looked around to see who had hold of him, and saw, with a thrill of horror, a fully grown, adult-sized Snape standing right beside him, white with rage.

“Having fun?”

Harry felt himself rising into the air. The summer’s day evaporated around him, he was floating upward through icy blackness, Snape’s hand still tight upon his upper arm. Then, with a swooping feeling as

though he had turned head over heels in midair, his feet hit the stone floor of Snape's dungeon, and he was standing again beside the Pensieve on Snape's desk in the shadowy, present-day Potions master's study.

"So," said Snape, gripping Harry's arm so tightly Harry's hand was starting to feel numb. "So … been enjoying yourself, Potter?"

"N-no …" said Harry, trying to free his arm.

It was scary: Snape's lips were shaking, his face was white, his teeth were bared.

"Amusing man, your father, wasn't he?" said Snape, shaking Harry so hard that his glasses slipped down his nose.

"I — didn't —"

Snape threw Harry from him with all his might. Harry fell hard onto the dungeon floor.

"You will not tell anybody what you saw!" Snape bellowed.

"No," said Harry, getting to his feet as far from Snape as he could. "No, of course I w —"

"Get out, get out, I don't want to see you in this office ever again!"

And as Harry hurtled toward the door, a jar of dead cockroaches exploded over his head. He wrenched the door open and flew away up the corridor, stopping only when he had put three floors between himself and Snape. There he leaned against the wall, panting, and rubbing his bruised arm.

He had no desire at all to return to Gryffindor Tower so early, nor to tell Ron and Hermione what he had just seen. What was making Harry feel so horrified and unhappy was not being shouted at or hav-

ing jars thrown at him — it was that he knew how it felt to be humiliated in the middle of a circle of onlookers, knew exactly how Snape had felt as his father had taunted him, and that judging from what he had just seen, his father had been every bit as arrogant as Snape had al-ways told him.

Chapter 29 Career Advice

"But why haven't you got Occlumency lessons anymore?" said Hermione, frowning.

"I've told you," Harry muttered. "Snape reckons I can carry on by myself now I've got the basics. …"

"So you've stopped having funny dreams?" said Hermione skeptically.

"Pretty much," said Harry, not looking at her.

"Well, I don't think Snape should stop until you're absolutely sure you can control them!" said Hermione indignantly. "Harry, I think you should go back to him and ask —"

"No," said Harry forcefully. "Just drop it, Hermione, okay?"

It was the first day of the Easter holidays and Hermione, as was her custom, had spent a large part of the day drawing up study schedules for the three of them. Harry and Ron had let her do it — it was easier than arguing with her and, in any case, they might come in useful.

Ron had been startled to discover that there were only six weeks left until their exams.

"How can that come as a shock?" Hermione demanded, as she tapped each little square on Ron's schedule with her wand so that it flashed a different color according to its subject.

"I dunno …" said Ron, "there's been a lot going on. …"

"Well, there you are," she said, handing him his schedule, "if you follow that you should do fine."

Ron looked down it gloomily, but then brightened.

"You've given me an evening off every week!"

"That's for Quidditch practice," said Hermione.

The smile faded from Ron's face.

"What's the point?" he said. "We've got about as much chance of winning the Quidditch Cup this year as Dad's got of becoming Minister of Magic. …"

Hermione said nothing. She was looking at Harry, who was staring blankly at the opposite wall of the common room while Crookshanks pawed at his hand, trying to get his ears scratched.

"What's wrong, Harry?"

"What?" he said quickly. "Nothing …"

He seized his copy of Defensive Magical Theory and pretended to be looking something up in the index. Crookshanks gave him up as a bad job and slunk away under Hermione's chair.

"I saw Cho earlier," said Hermione tentatively, "and she looked re-ally miserable too. … Have you two had a row again?"

"Wha — oh yeah, we have," said Harry, seizing gratefully on the excuse.

"What about?"

"That sneak friend of hers, Marietta," said Harry.

"Yeah, well, I don't blame you!" said Ron angrily, setting down his study schedule. "If it hadn't been for her …"

Ron went into a rant about Marietta Edgecombe, which Harry found helpful. All he had to do was look angry, nod, and say “yeah” and “that’s right” whenever Ron drew breath, leaving his mind free to dwell, ever more miserably, on what he had seen in the Pensieve.

He felt as though the memory of it was eating him from inside. He had been so sure that his parents had been wonderful people that he never had the slightest difficulty in disbelieving Snape’s aspersions on his father’s character. Hadn’t people like Hagrid and Sirius told Harry how wonderful his father had been? (Yeah, well, look what Sirius was like himself, said a nagging voice inside Harry’s head. … He was as bad, wasn’t he?) Yes, he had once overheard Professor McGonagall saying that his father and Sirius had been troublemakers at school, but she had described them as forerunners of the Weasley twins, and Harry could not imagine Fred and George dangling someone upside down for the fun of it … not unless they really loathed them … Perhaps Malfoy, or somebody who really deserved it …Harry tried to make a case for Snape having deserved what he had suffered at James’s hands — but hadn’t Lily asked, “What’s he done to you?” And hadn’t James replied, “It’s more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean?” Hadn’t James started it all simply because Sirius said he was bored? Harry remembered Lupin saying back in Grim-mauld Place that Dumbledore had made him prefect in the hope that he would be able to exercise some control over James and Sirius. … But in the Pensieve, he had sat there and let it all happen. …Harry reminded himself that Lily had intervened; his mother had been decent, yet the memory of the look on her face as she had shouted at James disturbed him quite as much as anything else. She had clearly loathed James and Harry simply could not understand how they could have ended up married. Once or twice he even wondered whether James had forced her into it. …For nearly five years the thought of his father had been a source of comfort, of inspiration. Whenever someone had told him he was like James he had glowed with pride inside. And now … now he felt cold and miserable at the thought of him.

The weather grew breezier, brighter, and warmer as the holidays passed, but Harry was stuck with the rest of the fifth and seventh years, who were all trapped inside, traipsing back and forth to the library. Harry pretended that his bad mood had no other cause but the approaching exams, and as his fellow Gryffindors were sick of studying themselves, his excuse went unchallenged.

"Harry, I'm talking to you, can you hear me?"

"Huh?"

He looked around. Ginny Weasley, looking very windswept, had joined him at the library table where he had been sitting alone. It was late on Sunday evening; Hermione had gone back to Gryffindor Tower to review Ancient Runes; Ron had Quidditch practice.

"Oh hi," said Harry, pulling his books back toward him. "How come you're not at practice?"

"It's over," said Ginny. "Ron had to take Jack Sloper up to the hospital wing."

"Why?"

"Well, we're not sure, but we think he knocked himself out with his own bat." She sighed heavily. "Anyway … a package just arrived, it's only just got through Umbridge's new screening process. …"

She hoisted a box wrapped in brown paper onto the table; it had clearly been unwrapped and carelessly rewrapped, and there was a scribbled note across it in red ink, reading inspected and passed by the Hogwarts high inquisitor.

"It's Easter eggs from Mum," said Ginny. "There's one for you. … There you go. …"

She handed him a handsome chocolate egg decorated with small, iced Snitches and, according to the packaging, containing a bag of Fizzing Whizbees. Harry looked at it for a moment, then, to his horror, felt a hard lump rise in his throat.

“Are you okay, Harry?” asked Ginny quietly.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” said Harry gruffly. The lump in his throat was painful. He did not understand why an Easter egg should have made him feel like this.

“You seem really down lately,” Ginny persisted. “You know, I’m sure if you just talked to Cho …”

“It’s not Cho I want to talk to,” said Harry brusquely.

“Who is it, then?” asked Ginny.

“I …”

He glanced around to make quite sure that nobody was listening; Madam Pince was several shelves away, stamping out a pile of books for a frantic-looking Hannah Abbott.

“I wish I could talk to Sirius,” he muttered. “But I know I can’t.”

More to give himself something to do than because he really wanted any, Harry unwrapped his Easter egg, broke off a large bit, and put it into his mouth.

“Well,” said Ginny slowly, helping herself to a bit of egg too, “if you really want to talk to Sirius, I expect we could think of a way to do it. …”

“Come on,” said Harry hopelessly. “With Umbridge policing the fires and reading all our mail?”

“The thing about growing up with Fred and George,” said Ginny thoughtfully, “is that you sort of start thinking anything’s possible if you’ve got enough nerve.”

Harry looked at her. Perhaps it was the effect of the chocolate — Lupin had always advised eating some after encounters with dementors — or simply because he had finally spoken aloud the wish that had been burning inside him for a week, but he felt a bit more hopeful. …“WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?”

“Oh damn,” whispered Ginny, jumping to her feet. “I forgot —”

Madam Pince was swooping down upon them, her shriveled face contorted with rage.

“Chocolate in the library!” she screamed. “Out — out — OUT!”

And whipping out her wand, she caused Harry’s books, bag, and ink bottle to chase him and Ginny from the library, whacking them repeatedly over the head as they ran.

As though to underline the importance of their upcoming examinations, a batch of pamphlets, leaflets, and notices concerning various Wizarding careers appeared on the tables in Gryffindor Tower shortly before the end of the holidays, along with yet another notice on the board, which read:CAREER ADVICE

All fifth years will be required to attend a short meeting with their Head of House during the first week of the Sum-mer term, in which they will be given the opportunity to discuss their future careers. Times of individual appoint-ments are listed below.

Harry looked down the list and found that he was expected in Professor McGonagall’s office at half-past two on Monday, which would mean missing most of Divination. He and the other fifth years spent a considerable part of the final weekend of the Easter break reading all the career information that had been left there for their perusal.

“Well, I don’t fancy Healing,” said Ron on the last evening of the holidays. He was immersed in a leaflet that carried the crossed bone-and-wand emblem of St. Mungo’s on its front. “It says here you need at least an E at N.E.W.T. level in Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. I mean … blimey. … Don’t want much, do they?”

“Well, it’s a very responsible job, isn’t it?” said Hermione absently. She was poring over a bright pink-and-orange leaflet that was headed SO YOU THINK YOU’D LIKE TO WORK IN MUGGLE RELATIONS? “You don’t seem to need many qualifications to liaise with Muggles. … All they want is an O.W.L. in Muggle Studies. … ‘Much more important is your enthusiasm, patience, and a good sense of fun!’ ”

“You’d need more than a good sense of fun to liaise with my uncle,” said Harry darkly. “Good sense of when to duck, more like …” He was halfway through a pamphlet on Wizard banking. “Listen to this:“ ‘Are you seeking a challenging career involving travel, adventure, and substantial, danger-related treasure bonuses? Then consider a position with Gringotts Wizarding Bank, who are currently recruiting Curse-Breakers for thrilling opportunities abroad. …’ They want Arithmancy, though. … You could do it, Hermione!”

“I don’t much fancy banking,” said Hermione vaguely, now im-mersed in HAVE YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES TO TRAIN SECURITY TROLLS?

“Hey,” said a voice in Harry’s ear. He looked around; Fred and George had come to join them. “Ginny’s had a word with us about you,” said Fred, stretching out his legs on the table in front of them and causing several booklets on careers with the Ministry of Magic to slide off onto the floor. “She says you need to talk to Sirius?”

“What?” said Hermione sharply, freezing with her hand halfway toward picking up MAKE A BANG AT THE DEPARTMENT OF

MAGICAL ACCIDENTS AND CATASTROPHES.

“Yeah …” said Harry, trying to sound casual, “yeah, I thought I’d like —”

“Don’t be so ridiculous,” said Hermione, straightening up and looking at him as though she could not believe her eyes. “With Um-bridge groping around in the fires and frisking all the owls?”

“Well, we think we can find a way around that,” said George, stretching and smiling. “It’s a simple matter of causing a diversion. Now, you might have noticed that we have been rather quiet on the mayhem front during the Easter holidays?”

“What was the point, we asked ourselves, of disrupting leisure time?” continued Fred. “No point at all, we answered ourselves. And of course, we’d have messed up people’s studying too, which would be the very last thing we’d want to do.”

He gave Hermione a sanctimonious little nod. She looked rather taken aback by this thoughtfulness.

“But it’s business as usual from tomorrow,” Fred continued briskly. “And if we’re going to be causing a bit of uproar, why not do it so that Harry can have his chat with Sirius?”

“Yes, but still,” said Hermione with an air of explaining something very simple to somebody very obtuse, “even if you do cause a diver-sion, how is Harry supposed to talk to him?”

“Umbridge’s office,” said Harry quietly.

He had been thinking about it for a fortnight and could think of no alternative; Umbridge herself had told him that the only fire that was not being watched was her own.

“Are — you — insane?” said Hermione in a hushed voice.

Ron had lowered his leaflet on jobs in the cultivated fungus trade and was watching the conversation warily.

“I don’t think so,” said Harry, shrugging.

“And how are you going to get in there in the first place?”

Harry was ready for this question.

“Sirius’s knife,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“Christmas before last Sirius gave me a knife that’ll open any lock,” said Harry. “So even if she’s bewitched the door so Alohomora won’t work, which I bet she has —”

“What do you think about this?” Hermione demanded of Ron, and Harry was reminded irresistibly of Mrs. Weasley appealing to her husband during Harry’s first dinner in Grimmauld Place.

“I dunno,” said Ron, looking alarmed at being asked to give an opinion. “If Harry wants to do it, it’s up to him, isn’t it?”

“Spoken like a true friend and Weasley,” said Fred, clapping Ron hard on the back. “Right, then. We’re thinking of doing it tomorrow, just after lessons, because it should cause maximum impact if everybody’s in the corridors — Harry, we’ll set it off in the east wing somewhere, draw her right away from her own office — I reckon we should be able to guarantee you, what, twenty minutes?” he said, looking at George.

“Easy,” said George.

“What sort of diversion is it?” asked Ron.

“You’ll see, little bro,” said Fred, as he and George got up again. “At least, you will if you trot along to Gregory the Smarmy’s corridor

round about five o'clock tomorrow."

Harry awoke very early the next day, feeling almost as anxious as he had done on the morning of his hearing at the Ministry of Magic. It was not only the prospect of breaking into Umbridge's office and using her fire to speak to Sirius that was making him feel nervous, though that was certainly bad enough — today also happened to be the first time he would be in close proximity with Snape since Snape had thrown him out of his office, as they had Potions that day.

After lying in bed for a while thinking about the day ahead, Harry got up very quietly and moved across to the window beside Neville's bed, staring out on a truly glorious morning. The sky was a clear, misty, opalescent blue. Directly ahead of him, Harry could see the towering beech tree below which his father had once tormented Snape. He was not sure what Sirius could possibly say to him that would make up for what he had seen in the Pensieve, but he was des-perate to hear Sirius's own account of what had happened, to know of any mitigating factors there might have been, any excuse at all for his father's behavior. …Something caught Harry's attention: movement on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Harry squinted into the sun and saw Hagrid emerging from between the trees. He seemed to be limping. As Harry watched, Hagrid staggered to the door of his cabin and disappeared inside it. Harry watched the cabin for several minutes. Hagrid did not emerge again, but smoke furled from the chimney, so Hagrid could not be so badly injured that he was unequal to stoking the fire. …Harry turned away from the window, headed back to his trunk, and started to dress.

With the prospect of forcing entry into Umbridge's office ahead, Harry had never expected the day to be a restful one, but he had not reckoned on Hermione's almost continual attempts to dissuade him from what he was planning to do at five o'clock. For the first time ever, she was at least as inattentive to Professor Binns in History of Magic as Harry and Ron were, keeping up a stream of whispered admonitions that Harry tried very hard to ignore.

"… and if she does catch you there, apart from being expelled, she'll be able to guess you've been talking to Snuffles and this time I expect she'll force you to drink Veritaserum and answer her questions. …"

"Hermione," said Ron in a low and indignant voice, "are you going to stop telling Harry off and listen to Binns, or am I going to have to take notes instead?"

"You take notes for a change, it won't kill you!"

By the time they reached the dungeons, neither Harry nor Ron was speaking to Hermione any longer. Undeterred, she took advantage of their silence to maintain an uninterrupted flow of dire warnings, all uttered under her breath in a vehement hiss that caused Seamus to waste five whole minutes checking his cauldron for leaks.

Snape, meanwhile, seemed to have decided to act as though Harry were invisible. Harry was, of course, well used to this tactic, as it was one of Uncle Vernon's favorites, and on the whole was grateful he had to suffer nothing worse. In fact, compared to what he usually had to endure from Snape in the way of taunts and snide remarks, he found the new approach something of an improvement and was pleased to find that when left well alone, he was able to concoct an Invigoration Draught quite easily. At the end of the lesson he scooped some of the potion into a flask, corked it, and took it up to Snape's desk for mark-ing, feeling that he might at last have scraped an E.

He had just turned away when he heard a smashing noise; Malfoy gave a gleeful yell of laughter. Harry whipped around again. His potion sample lay in pieces on the floor, and Snape was watching him with a look of gloating pleasure.

"Whoops," he said softly. "Another zero, then, Potter …"

Harry was too incensed to speak. He strode back to his cauldron, intending to fill another flask and force Snape to mark it, but saw to

his horror that the rest of the contents had vanished.

“I’m sorry!” said Hermione with her hands over her mouth. “I’m really sorry, Harry, I thought you’d finished, so I cleared up!”

Harry could not bring himself to answer. When the bell rang he hurried out of the dungeon without a backward glance and made sure that he found himself a seat between Neville and Seamus for lunch so that Hermione could not start nagging him about using Umbridge’s office again.

He was in such a bad mood by the time that he got to Divination that he had quite forgotten his career appointment with Professor McGonagall, remembering only when Ron asked him why he wasn’t in her office. He hurtled back upstairs and arrived out of breath, only a few minutes late.

“Sorry, Professor,” he panted, as he closed the door. “I forgot. …”

“No matter, Potter,” she said briskly, but as she spoke, somebody else sniffed from the corner. Harry looked around.

Professor Umbridge was sitting there, a clipboard on her knee, a fussy little pie-frill around her neck, and a small, horribly smug smile on her face.

“Sit down, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall tersely. Her hands shook slightly as she shuffled the many pamphlets littering her desk.

Harry sat down with his back to Umbridge and did his best to pre-tend he could not hear the scratching of her quill on her clipboard.

“Well, Potter, this meeting is to talk over any career ideas you might have, and to help you decide which subjects you should continue into sixth and seventh years,” said Professor McGonagall. “Have you had any thoughts about what you would like to do after you leave Hogwarts?”

“Er,” said Harry.

He was finding the scratching noise from behind him very dis-tracting.

“Yes?” Professor McGonagall prompted Harry.

“Well, I thought of, maybe, being an Auror,” Harry mumbled.

“You’d need top grades for that,” said Professor McGonagall, ex-tracting a small, dark leaflet from under the mass on her desk and opening it. “They ask for a minimum of five N.E.W.T.s, and nothing under ‘Exceeds Expectations’ grade, I see. Then you would be re-quired to undergo a stringent series of character and aptitude tests at the Auror office. It’s a difficult career path, Potter; they only take the best. In fact, I don’t think anybody has been taken on in the last three years.”

At this moment Professor Umbridge gave a very tiny cough, as though she was trying to see how quietly she could do it. Professor McGonagall ignored her.

“You’ll want to know which subjects you ought to take, I suppose?” she went on, talking a little more loudly than before.

“Yes,” said Harry. “Defense Against the Dark Arts, I suppose?”

“Naturally,” said Professor McGonagall crisply. “I would also advise —”

Professor Umbridge gave another cough, a little more audible this time. Professor McGonagall closed her eyes for a moment, opened them again, and continued as though nothing had happened.

“I would also advise Transfiguration, because Aurors frequently need to Transfigure or Untransfigure in their work. And I ought to tell you now, Potter, that I do not accept students into my N.E.W.T. classes unless they have achieved ‘Exceeds Expectations’ or higher at

Ordinary Wizarding Level. I'd say you're averaging 'Acceptable' at the moment, so you'll need to put in some good hard work before the exams to stand a chance of continuing. Then you ought to do Charms, always useful, and Potions. Yes, Potter, Potions," she added, with the merest flicker of a smile. "Poisons and antidotes are essential study for Aurors. And I must tell you that Professor Snape absolutely refuses to take students who get anything other than 'Outstanding' in their O.W.L.s, so —"

Professor Umbridge gave her most pronounced cough yet.

"May I offer you a cough drop, Dolores?" Professor McGonagall asked curtly, without looking at Professor Umbridge.

"Oh no, thank you very much," said Umbridge, with that simper-ing laugh Harry hated so much. "I just wondered whether I could make the teensiest interruption, Minerva?"

"I daresay you'll find you can," said Professor McGonagall through tightly gritted teeth.

"I was just wondering whether Mr. Potter has quite the tempera-ment for an Auror?" said Professor Umbridge sweetly.

"Were you?" said Professor McGonagall haughtily. "Well, Potter," she continued, as though there had been no interruption, "if you are serious in this ambition, I would advise you to concentrate hard on bringing your Transfiguration and Potions up to scratch. I see Professor Flitwick has graded you between Acceptable' and 'Exceeds Expec-tations' for the last two years, so your Charm work seems satisfactory; as for Defense Against the Dark Arts, your marks have been generally high, Professor Lupin in particular thought you — are you quite sure you wouldn't like a cough drop, Dolores?"

"Oh, no need, thank you, Minerva," simpered Professor Um-bridge, who had just coughed her loudest yet. "I was just concerned that you

might not have Harry's most recent Defense Against the Dark Arts marks in front of you. I'm quite sure I slipped in a note …"

"What, this thing?" said Professor McGonagall in a tone of revul-sion, as she pulled a sheet of pink parchment from between the leaves of Harry's folder. She glanced down it, her eyebrows slightly raised, then placed it back into the folder without comment.

"Yes, as I was saying, Potter, Professor Lupin thought you showed a pronounced aptitude for the subject, and obviously for an Auror —"

"Did you not understand my note, Minerva?" asked Professor Umbridge in honeyed tones, quite forgetting to cough.

"Of course I understood it," said Professor McGonagall, her teeth clenched so tightly that the words came out a little muffled.

"Well, then, I am confused. … I'm afraid I don't quite understand how you can give Mr. Potter false hope that —"

"False hope?" repeated Professor McGonagall, still refusing to look round at Professor Umbridge. "He has achieved high marks in all his Defense Against the Dark Arts tests —"

"I'm terribly sorry to have to contradict you, Minerva, but as you will see from my note, Harry has been achieving very poor results in his classes with me —"

"I should have made my meaning plainer," said Professor McGonagall, turning at last to look Umbridge directly in the eyes. "He has achieved high marks in all Defense Against the Dark Arts tests set by a competent teacher."

Professor Umbridge's smile vanished as suddenly as a lightbulb blowing. She sat back in her chair, turned a sheet on her clipboard, and began scribbling very fast indeed, her bulging eyes rolling from

side to side. Professor McGonagall turned back to Harry, her thin nostrils flared, her eyes burning.

“Any questions, Potter?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “What sort of character and aptitude tests do the Ministry do on you, if you get enough N.E.W.T.s?”

“Well, you’ll need to demonstrate the ability to react well to pressure and so forth,” said Professor McGonagall, “perseverance and dedication, because Auror training takes a further three years, not to mention very high skills in practical defense. It will mean a lot more study even after you’ve left school, so unless you’re prepared to —”

“I think you’ll also find,” said Umbridge, her voice very cold now, “that the Ministry looks into the records of those applying to be Au-rora. Their criminal records.”

“— unless you’re prepared to take even more exams after Hog-warts, you should really look at another —”

“— which means that this boy has as much chance of becoming an Auror as Dumbledore has of ever returning to this school.”

“A very good chance, then,” said Professor McGonagall.

“Potter has a criminal record,” said Umbridge loudly.

“Potter has been cleared of all charges,” said Professor McGonagall, even more loudly.

Professor Umbridge stood up. She was so short that this did not make a great deal of difference, but her fussy, simpering demeanor had given place to a hard fury that made her broad, flabby face look oddly sinister.

“Potter has no chance whatsoever of becoming an Auror!”

Professor McGonagall got to her feet too, and in her case this was a much more impressive move. She towered over Professor Umbridge.

“Potter,” she said in ringing tones, “I will assist you to become an Auror if it is the last thing I do! If I have to coach you nightly I will make sure you achieve the required results!”

“The Minister of Magic will never employ Harry Potter!” said Um-bridge, her voice rising furiously.

“There may well be a new Minister of Magic by the time Potter is ready to join!” shouted Professor McGonagall.

“Aha!” shrieked Professor Umbridge, pointing a stubby finger at McGonagall. “Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Of course! That’s what you want, isn’t it, Minerva McGonagall? You want Cornelius Fudge replaced by Al-bus Dumbledore! You think you’ll be where I am, don’t you, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister and headmistress to boot!”

“You are raving,” said Professor McGonagall, superbly disdainful. “Potter, that concludes our career consultation.”

Harry swung his bag over his shoulder and hurried out of the room, not daring to look at Umbridge. He could hear her and Profes-sor McGonagall continuing to shout at each other all the way back along the corridor.

Professor Umbridge was still breathing as though she had just run a race when she strode into their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson that afternoon.

“I hope you’ve thought better of what you were planning to do, Harry,” Hermione whispered, the moment they had opened their books to chapter thirty-four (“Non-Retaliation and Negotiation”). “Umbridge looks like she’s in a really bad mood already. …”

Every now and then Umbridge shot glowering looks at Harry, who kept his head down, staring at Defensive Magical Theory, his eyes un-focused, thinking. …He could just imagine Professor McGonagall's reaction if he were caught trespassing in Professor Umbridge's office mere hours after she had vouched for him. … There was nothing to stop him simply going back to Gryffindor Tower and hoping that sometime during the next summer holiday he would have a chance to ask Sirius about the scene he had witnessed in the Pensieve. … Nothing, except that the thought of taking this sensible course of action made him feel as though a lead weight had dropped into his stomach. … And then there was the matter of Fred and George, whose diversion was already planned, not to mention the knife Sirius had given him, which was currently residing in his schoolbag along with his father's old Invisi-bility Cloak. …But the fact remained that if he were caught …"Dumbledore sacrificed himself to keep you in school, Harry!" whispered Hermione, raising her book to hide her face from Um-bridge. "And if you get thrown out today it will all have been for nothing!"

He could abandon the plan and simply learn to live with the mem-ory of what his father had done on a summer's day more than twenty years ago. …And then he remembered Sirius in the fire upstairs in the Gryffin-dor common room. …"You're less like your father than I thought. … The risk would've been what made it fun for James. …"

But did he want to be like his father anymore?

"Harry, don't do it, please don't do it!" Hermione said in anguished tones as the bell rang at the end of the class.

He did not answer; he did not know what to do. Ron seemed de-termined to give neither his opinion nor his advice. He would not look at Harry, though when Hermione opened her mouth to try dis-suading Harry some more, he said in a low voice, "Give it a rest, okay? He can make up his own mind."

Harry's heart beat very fast as he left the classroom. He was halfway along the corridor outside when he heard the unmistakable sounds of a diversion going off in the distance. There were screams and yells reverberating from somewhere above them. People exiting the classrooms all around Harry were stopping in their tracks and looking up at the ceiling fearfully —Then Umbridge came pelting out of her classroom as fast as her short legs would carry her. Pulling out her wand, she hurried off in the opposite direction: It was now or never.

"Harry — please!" said Hermione weakly.

But he had made up his mind — hitching his bag more securely onto his shoulder he set off at a run, weaving in and out of students now hurrying in the opposite direction, off to see what all the fuss was about in the east wing. …Harry reached the corridor where Umbridge's office was situated and found it deserted. Dashing behind a large suit of armor whose helmet creaked around to watch him, he pulled open his bag, seized Sirius's knife, and donned the Invisibility Cloak. He then crept slowly and carefully back out from behind the suit of armor and along the corridor until he reached Umbridge's door.

He inserted the blade of the magical knife into the crack around it and moved it gently up and down, then withdrew it. There was a tiny click, and the door swung open. He ducked inside the office, closed the door quickly behind him, and looked around.

It was empty; nothing was moving except the horrible kittens on the plates continuing to frolic on the wall above the confiscated broomsticks.

Harry pulled off his cloak and, striding over to the fireplace, found what he was looking for within seconds: a small box containing glittering Floo powder.

He crouched down in front of the empty grate, his hands shaking. He had never done this before, though he thought he knew how it must work. Sticking his head into the fireplace, he took a large pinch of

powder and dropped it onto the logs stacked neatly beneath him. They exploded at once into emerald-green flames.

“Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!” Harry said loudly and clearly.

It was one of the most curious sensations he had ever experienced; he had traveled by Floo powder before, of course, but then it had been his entire body that had spun around and around in the flames through the network of Wizarding fireplaces that stretched over the country: This time, his knees remained firm upon the cold floor of Umbridge’s office, and only his head hurtled through the emerald fire. …And then, abruptly as it had begun, the spinning stopped. Feeling rather sick and as though he was wearing an exceptionally hot muffler around his head, Harry opened his eyes to find that he was looking up out of the kitchen fireplace at the long, wooden table, where a man sat poring over a piece of parchment.

“Sirius?”

The man jumped and looked around. It was not Sirius, but Lupin.

“Harry!” he said, looking thoroughly shocked. “What are you — what’s happened, is everything all right?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “I just wondered — I mean, I just fancied a — a chat with Sirius.”

“I’ll call him,” said Lupin, getting to his feet, still looking perplexed. “He went upstairs to look for Kreacher, he seems to be hiding in the at-tic again. …”

And Harry saw Lupin hurry out of the kitchen. Now he was left with nothing to look at but the chair and table legs. He wondered why Sirius had never mentioned how very uncomfortable it was to speak out of the fire — his knees were already objecting painfully to their prolonged contact with Umbridge’s hard stone floor.

Lupin returned with Sirius at his heels moments later.

“What is it?” said Sirius urgently, sweeping his long dark hair out of his eyes and dropping to the ground in front of the fire, so that he and Harry were on a level; Lupin knelt down too, looking very con-cerned. “Are you all right? Do you need help?”

“No,” said Harry, “it’s nothing like that. … I just wanted to talk … about my dad. …”

They exchanged a look of great surprise, but Harry did not have time to feel awkward or embarrassed; his knees were becoming sorer by the second, and he guessed that five minutes had already passed from the start of the diversion — George had only guaranteed him twenty. He therefore plunged immediately into the story of what he had seen in the Pensieve.

When he had finished, neither Sirius nor Lupin spoke for a mo-ment. Then Lupin said quietly, “I wouldn’t like you to judge your father on what you saw there, Harry. He was only fifteen —”

“I’m fifteen!” said Harry heatedly.

“Look, Harry,” said Sirius placatingly, “James and Snape hated each other from the moment they set eyes on each other, it was just one of those things, you can understand that, can’t you? I think James was everything Snape wanted to be — he was popular, he was good at Quidditch, good at pretty much everything. And Snape was just this little oddball who was up to his eyes in the Dark Arts and James — whatever else he may have appeared to you, Harry — always hated the Dark Arts.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “but he just attacked Snape for no good reason, just because — well, just because you said you were bored,” he fin-ished with a slightly apologetic note in his voice.

“I’m not proud of it,” said Sirius quickly.

Lupin looked sideways at Sirius and then said, “Look, Harry, what you’ve got to understand is that your father and Sirius were the best in the school at whatever they did — everyone thought they were the height of cool — if they sometimes got a bit carried away —”

“If we were sometimes arrogant little berks, you mean,” said Sirius.

Lupin smiled.

“He kept messing up his hair,” said Harry in a pained voice.

Sirius and Lupin laughed.

“I’d forgotten he used to do that,” said Sirius affectionately.

“Was he playing with the Snitch?” said Lupin eagerly.

“Yeah,” said Harry, watching uncomprehendingly as Sirius and Lupin beamed reminiscently. “Well … I thought he was a bit of an idiot.”

“Of course he was a bit of an idiot!” said Sirius bracingly. “We were all idiots! Well — not Moony so much,” he said fairly, looking at Lupin, but Lupin shook his head.

“Did I ever tell you to lay off Snape?” he said. “Did I ever have the guts to tell you I thought you were out of order?”

“Yeah, well,” said Sirius, “you made us feel ashamed of ourselves sometimes. … That was something. …”

“And,” said Harry doggedly, determined to say everything that was on his mind now he was here, “he kept looking over at the girls by the lake, hoping they were watching him!”

“Oh, well, he always made a fool of himself whenever Lily was around,” said Sirius, shrugging. “He couldn’t stop himself showing off whenever he got near her.”

“How come she married him?” Harry asked miserably. “She hated him!”

“Nah, she didn’t,” said Sirius.

“She started going out with him in seventh year,” said Lupin.

“Once James had deflated his head a bit,” said Sirius.

“And stopped hexing people just for the fun of it,” said Lupin.

“Even Snape?” said Harry.

“Well,” said Lupin slowly, “Snape was a special case. I mean, he never lost an opportunity to curse James, so you couldn’t really expect James to take that lying down, could you?”

“And my mum was okay with that?”

“She didn’t know too much about it, to tell you the truth,” said Sir-ius. “I mean, James didn’t take Snape on dates with her and jinx him in front of her, did he?”

Sirius frowned at Harry, who was still looking unconvinced.

“Look,” he said, “your father was the best friend I ever had, and he was a good person. A lot of people are idiots at the age of fifteen. He grew out of it.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Harry heavily. “I just never thought I’d feel sorry for Snape.”

“Now you mention it,” said Lupin, a faint crease between his eye-brows, “how did Snape react when he found you’d seen all this?”

“He told me he’d never teach me Occlumency again,” said Harry indifferently, “like that’s a big disappoint —”

“He WHAT?” shouted Sirius, causing Harry to jump and inhale a mouthful of ashes.

“Are you serious, Harry?” said Lupin quickly. “He’s stopped giving you lessons?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, surprised at what he considered a great overreac-tion. “But it’s okay, I don’t care, it’s a bit of a relief to tell you the —”

“I’m coming up there to have a word with Snape!” said Sirius force-fully and he actually made to stand up, but Lupin wrenched him back down again.

“If anyone’s going to tell Snape it will be me!” he said firmly. “But Harry, first of all, you’re to go back to Snape and tell him that on no ac-count is he to stop giving you lessons — when Dumbledore hears —”

“I can’t tell him that, he’d kill me!” said Harry, outraged. “You didn’t see him when we got out of the Pensieve —”

“Harry, there is nothing so important as you learning Occlu-mency!” said Lupin sternly. “Do you understand me? Nothing!”

“Okay, okay,” said Harry, thoroughly discomposed, not to mention annoyed. “I’ll … I’ll try and say something to him. … But it won’t be …”

He fell silent. He could hear distant footsteps.

“Is that Kreacher coming downstairs?”

“No,” said Sirius, glancing behind him. “It must be somebody your end …”

Harry’s heart skipped several beats.

“I’d better go!” he said hastily and he pulled his head backward out of Grimmauld Place’s fire. For a moment his head seemed to be re-

volving on his shoulders, and then he found himself kneeling in front of Umbridge's fire with his head firmly back on, watching the emerald flames flicker and die.

"Quickly, quickly!" he heard a wheezy voice mutter right outside the office door. "Ah, she's left it open. …"

Harry dived for the Invisibility Cloak and had just managed to pull it back over himself when Filch burst into the office. He looked absolutely delighted about something and was talking to himself feverishly as he crossed the room, pulled open a drawer in Umbridge's desk, and began rifling through the papers inside it.

"Approval for Whipping … Approval for Whipping … I can do it at last. … They've had it coming to them for years. …"

He pulled out a piece of parchment, kissed it, then shuffled rapidly back out of the door, clutching it to his chest.

Harry leapt to his feet and, making sure that he had his bag and the Invisibility Cloak was completely covering him, he wrenched open the door and hurried out of the office after Filch, who was hobbling along faster than Harry had ever seen him go.

One landing down from Umbridge's office and Harry thought it was safe to become visible again; he pulled off the cloak, shoved it in his bag and hurried onward. There was a great deal of shouting and movement coming from the entrance hall. He ran down the marble staircase and found what looked like most of the school assembled there.

It was just like the night when Trelawney had been sacked. Stu-dents were standing all around the walls in a great ring (some of them, Harry noticed, covered in a substance that looked very like Stinksap); teachers and ghosts were also in the crowd. Prominent among the on-lookers were members of the Inquisitorial Squad, who were all look-ing exceptionally pleased with themselves, and Peeves, who

was bobbing overhead, gazed down upon Fred and George, who stood in the middle of the floor with the unmistakable look of two people who had just been cornered.

“So!” said Umbridge triumphantly, whom Harry realized was standing just a few stairs in front of him, once more looking down upon her prey. “So … you think it amusing to turn a school corridor into a swamp, do you?”

“Pretty amusing, yeah,” said Fred, looking back up at her without the slightest sign of fear.

Filch elbowed his way closer to Umbridge, almost crying with happiness.

“I’ve got the form, Headmistress,” he said hoarsely, waving the piece of parchment Harry had just seen him take from her desk. “I’ve got the form and I’ve got the whips waiting. … Oh, let me do it now. …”

“Very good, Argus,” she said. “You two,” she went on, gazing down at Fred and George, “are about to learn what happens to wrongdoers in my school.”

“You know what?” said Fred. “I don’t think we are.”

He turned to his twin.

“George,” said Fred, “I think we’ve outgrown full-time education.”

“Yeah, I’ve been feeling that way myself,” said George lightly.

“Time to test our talents in the real world, d’you reckon?” asked Fred.

“Definitely,” said George.

And before Umbridge could say a word, they raised their wands and said together, “Accio Brooms!”

Harry heard a loud crash somewhere in the distance. Looking to his left he ducked just in time — Fred and George's broomsticks, one still trailing the heavy chain and iron peg with which Umbridge had fastened them to the wall, were hurtling along the corridor to-ward their owners. They turned left, streaked down the stairs, and stopped sharply in front of the twins, the chain clattering loudly on the flagged stone floor.

"We won't be seeing you," Fred told Professor Umbridge, swinging his leg over his broomstick.

"Yeah, don't bother to keep in touch," said George, mounting his own.

Fred looked around at the assembled students, and at the silent, watchful crowd.

"If anyone fancies buying a Portable Swamp, as demonstrated upstairs, come to number ninety-three, Diagon Alley — Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes," he said in a loud voice. "Our new premises!"

"Special discounts to Hogwarts students who swear they're going to use our products to get rid of this old bat," added George, pointing at Professor Umbridge.

"STOP THEM!" shrieked Umbridge, but it was too late. As the Inquisitorial Squad closed in, Fred and George kicked off from the floor, shooting fifteen feet into the air, the iron peg swinging dangerously below. Fred looked across the hall at the poltergeist bobbing on his level above the crowd.

"Give her hell from us, Peeves."

And Peeves, whom Harry had never seen take an order from a student before, swept his belled hat from his head and sprang to a salute as Fred and George wheeled about to tumultuous applause from the students below and sped out of the open front doors into the glorious sunset.

Chapter 30 Grawp

The story of Fred and George's flight to freedom was retold so of-ten over the next few days that Harry could tell it would soon become the stuff of Hogwarts legend. Within a week, even those who had been eyewitnesses were half-convinced that they had seen the twins dive-bomb Umbridge on their brooms, pelting her with Dung-bombs before zooming out of the doors. In the immediate aftermath of their departure there was a great wave of talk about copying them, so that Harry frequently heard students saying things like, "Honestly, some days I just feel like jumping on my broom and leaving this place," or else, "One more lesson like that and I might just do a Weasley. …"

Fred and George had made sure that nobody was likely to forget them very soon. For one thing, they had not left instructions on how to remove the swamp that now filled the corridor on the fifth floor of the east wing. Umbridge and Filch had been observed trying different means of removing it but without success. Eventually the area was roped off and Filch, gnashing his teeth furiously, was given the task of punting students across it to their classrooms. Harry was certain that teachers like McGonagall or Flitwick could have removed the swamp in an instant, but just as in the case of Fred and George's Wildfire Whiz-Bangs, they seemed to prefer to watch Umbridge struggle.

Then there were the two large broom-shaped holes in Umbridge's office door, through which Fred and George's Cleansweeps had smashed to rejoin their masters. Filch fitted a new door and removed Harry's Firebolt to the dungeons where, it was rumored, Umbridge had set an armed security troll to guard it. However, her troubles were far from over.

Inspired by Fred and George's example, a great number of students were now vying for the newly vacant positions of Troublemakers-in-Chief. In spite of the new door, somebody managed to slip a hairy-snouted niffler into Umbridge's office, which promptly tore the place

apart in its search for shiny objects, leapt on Umbridge on her reentrance, and tried to gnaw the rings off her stubby fingers. Dungbombs and Stinkpellets were dropped so frequently in the corridors that it became the new fashion for students to perform Bubble-Head Charms on themselves before leaving lessons, which ensured them a supply of fresh clean air, even though it gave them all the peculiar appearance of wearing upside-down goldfish bowls on their heads.

Filch prowled the corridors with a horsewhip ready in his hands, desperate to catch miscreants, but the problem was that there were now so many of them that he did not know which way to turn. The Inquisitorial Squad were attempting to help him, but odd things kept happening to its members. Warrington of the Slytherin Quidditch team reported to the hospital wing with a horrible skin complaint that made him look as though he had been coated in cornflakes. Pansy Parkinson, to Hermione's delight, missed all her lessons the following day, as she had sprouted antlers.

Meanwhile it became clear just how many Skiving Snackboxes Fred and George had managed to sell before leaving Hogwarts. Umbridge only had to enter her classroom for the students assembled there to faint, vomit, develop dangerous fevers, or else spout blood from both nostrils. Shrieking with rage and frustration she attempted to trace the mysterious symptoms to their source, but the students told her stubbornly they were suffering "Umbridge-itis." After putting four successive classes in detention and failing to discover their secret she was forced to give up and allow the bleeding, swooning, sweating, and vomiting students to leave her classes in droves.

But not even the users of the Snackboxes could compete with that master of chaos, Peeves, who seemed to have taken Fred's parting words deeply to heart. Cackling madly, he soared through the school, upending tables, bursting out of blackboards, and toppling statues and vases. Twice he shut Mrs. Norris inside suits of armor, from which she was rescued, yowling loudly, by the furious caretaker. He smashed lanterns and snuffed out candles, juggled burning torches

over the heads of screaming students, caused neatly stacked piles of parchment to topple into fires or out of windows, flooded the second floor when he pulled off all the taps in the bathrooms, dropped a bag of tarantu-las in the middle of the Great Hall during breakfast and, whenever he fancied a break, spent hours at a time floating along after Umbridge and blowing loud raspberries every time she spoke.

None of the staff but Filch seemed to be stirring themselves to help her. Indeed, a week after Fred and George's departure Harry witnessed Professor McGonagall walking right past Peeves, who was determinedly loosening a crystal chandelier, and could have sworn he heard her tell the poltergeist out of the corner of her mouth, "It unscrews the other way."

To cap matters, Montague had still not recovered from his sojourn in the toilet. He remained confused and disorientated and his parents were to be observed one Tuesday morning striding up the front drive, looking extremely angry.

"Should we say something?" said Hermione in a worried voice, pressing her cheek against the Charms window so that she could see Mr. and Mrs. Montague marching inside. "About what happened to him? In case it helps Madam Pomfrey cure him?"

" 'Course not, he'll recover," said Ron indifferently.

"Anyway, more trouble for Umbridge, isn't it?" said Harry in a sat-isfied voice.

He and Ron both tapped the teacups they were supposed to be charming with their wands. Harry's spouted four very short legs that would not reach the desk and wriggled pointlessly in midair. Ron's grew four very thin spindly legs that hoisted the cup off the desk with great difficulty, trembled for a few seconds, then folded, causing the cup to crack into two.

“Reparo!” said Hermione quickly, mending Ron’s cup with a wave of her wand. “That’s all very well, but what if Montague’s perma-nently injured?”

“Who cares?” said Ron irritably, while his teacup stood drunkenly again, trembling violently at the knees. “Montague shouldn’t have tried to take all those points from Gryffindor, should he? If you want to worry about anyone, Hermione, worry about me!”

“You?” she said, catching her teacup as it scampered happily away across the desk on four sturdy little willow-patterned legs and replac-ing it in front of her. “Why should I be worried about you?”

“When Mum’s next letter finally gets through Umbridge’s screen-ing process,” said Ron bitterly, now holding his cup up while its frail legs tried feebly to support its weight, “I’m going to be in deep trou-ble. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s sent a Howler again.”

“But —”

“It’ll be my fault Fred and George left, you wait,” said Ron darkly. “She’ll say I should’ve stopped them leaving, I should’ve grabbed the ends of their brooms and hung on or something. … Yeah, it’ll be all my fault. …”

“Well, if she does say that it’ll be very unfair, you couldn’t have done anything! But I’m sure she won’t, I mean, if it’s really true they’ve got premises in Diagon Alley now, they must have been planning this for ages. …”

“Yeah, but that’s another thing, how did they get premises?” said Ron, hitting his teacup so hard with his wand that its legs collapsed again and it lay twitching before him. “It’s a bit dodgy, isn’t it? They’ll need loads of Galleons to afford the rent on a place in Diagon Alley, she’ll want to know what they’ve been up to, to get their hands on that sort of gold. …”

“Well, yes, that occurred to me too,” said Hermione, allowing her teacup to jog in neat little circles around Harry’s, whose stubby little legs were still unable to touch the desktop. “I’ve been wondering whether Mundungus has persuaded them to sell stolen goods or something awful. …”

“He hasn’t,” said Harry curtly.

“How do you know?” said Ron and Hermione together.

“Because —” Harry hesitated, but the moment to confess finally seemed to have come. There was no good to be gained in keeping silent if it meant anyone suspected that Fred and George were criminals. “Because they got the gold from me. I gave them my Triwizard winnings last June.”

There was a shocked silence, then Hermione’s teacup jogged right over the edge of the desk and smashed on the floor.

“Oh, Harry, you didn’t!” she said.

“Yes, I did,” said Harry mutinously. “And I don’t regret it either — I didn’t need the gold, and they’ll be great at a joke shop. …”

“But this is excellent!” said Ron, looking thrilled. “It’s all your fault, Harry — Mum can’t blame me at all! Can I tell her?”

“Yeah, I suppose you’d better,” said Harry dully. “ ’Specially if she thinks they’re receiving stolen cauldrons or something. …”

Hermione said nothing at all for the rest of the lesson, but Harry had a shrewd suspicion that her self-restraint was bound to crack before long. Sure enough, once they had left the castle for break and were standing around in the weak May sunshine, she fixed Harry with a beady eye and opened her mouth with a determined air.

Harry interrupted her before she had even started.

“It’s no good nagging me, it’s done,” he said firmly. “Fred and George have got the gold — spent a good bit of it too, by the sounds of it — and I can’t get it back from them and I don’t want to. So save your breath, Hermione.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything about Fred and George!” she said in an injured voice.

Ron snorted disbelievingly and Hermione threw him a very dirty look.

“No, I wasn’t!” she said angrily. “As a matter of fact, I was going to ask Harry when he’s going to go back to Snape and ask for Occlu-mency lessons again!”

Harry’s heart sank. Once they had exhausted the subject of Fred and George’s dramatic departure, which admittedly had taken many hours, Ron and Hermione had wanted to hear news of Sirius. As Harry had not confided in them the reason he had wanted to talk to Sirius in the first place, it had been hard to think of things to tell them. He had ended up saying to them truthfully that Sirius wanted Harry to resume Occlumency lessons. He had been regretting this ever since; Hermione would not let the subject drop and kept revert-ing to it when Harry least expected it.

“You can’t tell me you’ve stopped having funny dreams,” Hermione said now, “because Ron told me last night you were muttering in your sleep again. …”

Harry threw Ron a furious look. Ron had the grace to look ashamed of himself.

“You were only muttering a bit,” he mumbled apologetically. “Something about ‘just a bit farther.’ ”

“I dreamed I was watching you lot play Quidditch,” Harry lied brutally. “I was trying to get you to stretch out a bit farther to grab the Quaffle.”

Ron’s ears went red. Harry felt a kind of vindictive pleasure: He had not, of course, dreamed anything of the sort.

Last night he had once again made the journey along the Department of Mysteries corridor. He had passed through the circular room, then the room full of clicking and dancing light, until he found him-self again inside that cavernous room full of shelves on which were ranged dusty glass spheres. …He had hurried straight toward row number ninety-seven, turned left, and ran along it. … It had probably been then that he had spo-ken aloud. … Just a bit farther … for he could feel his conscious self struggling to wake … and before he had reached the end of the row, he had found himself lying in bed again, gazing up at the canopy of his four-poster.

“You are trying to block your mind, aren’t you?” said Hermione, looking beadily at Harry. “You are keeping going with your Occlumency?”

“Of course I am,” said Harry, trying to sound as though this ques-tion was insulting, but not quite meeting her eye. The truth was that he was so intensely curious about what was hidden in that room full of dusty orbs that he was quite keen for the dreams to continue.

The problem was that with just under a month to go until the ex-ams and every free moment devoted to studying, his mind seemed saturated with information when he went to bed so that he found it very difficult to get to sleep at all. When he did, his overwrought brain presented him most nights with stupid dreams about the exams. He also suspected that part of his mind — the part that often spoke in Hermione’s voice — now felt guilty on the occasions it strayed down that corridor ending in the black door, and sought to wake him before he could reach journey’s end.

“You know,” said Ron, whose ears were still flaming red, “if Montague doesn’t recover before Slytherin play Hufflepuff, we might be in with a chance of winning the Cup.”

“Yeah, I s’pose so,” said Harry, glad of a change of subject.

“I mean, we’ve won one, lost one — if Slytherin lose to Hufflepuff next Saturday —”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Harry, losing track of what he was agree-ing to: Cho Chang had just walked across the courtyard, deter-minedly not looking at him.

The final match of the Quidditch season, Gryffindor versus Raven-claw, was to take place on the last weekend of May. Although Slytherin had been narrowly defeated by Hufflepuff in their last match, Gryffindor was not daring to hope for victory, due mainly (though of course nobody said it to him) to Ron’s abysmal goalkeep-ing record. He, however, seemed to have found a new optimism.

“I mean, I can’t get any worse, can I?” he told Harry and Hermione grimly over breakfast on the morning of the match. “Nothing to lose now, is there?”

“You know,” said Hermione, as she and Harry walked down to the pitch a little later in the midst of a very excitable crowd, “I think Ron might do better without Fred and George around. They never exactly gave him a lot of confidence. …”

Luna Lovegood overtook them with what appeared to be a live ea-gle perched on top of her head.

“Oh gosh, I forgot!” said Hermione, watching the eagle flapping its wings as Luna walked serenely past a group of cackling and pointing Slytherins. “Cho will be playing, won’t she?”

Harry, who had not forgotten this, merely grunted.

They found seats in the topmost row of the stands. It was a fine, clear day. Ron could not wish for better, and Harry found himself hoping against hope that Ron would not give the Slytherins cause for more rousing choruses of “Weasley Is Our King.”

Lee Jordan, who had been very dispirited since Fred and George had left, was commentating as usual. As the teams zoomed out onto the pitches he named the players with something less than his usual gusto.

"… Bradley … Davies … Chang," he said, and Harry felt his stomach perform, less of a back flip, more a feeble lurch as Cho walked out onto the pitch, her shiny black hair rippling in the slight breeze. He was not sure what he wanted to happen anymore, except that he could not stand any more rows. Even the sight of her chatting animatedly to Roger Davies as they prepared to mount their brooms caused him only a slight twinge of jealousy.

"And they're off!" said Lee. "And Davies takes the Quaffle immediately, Ravenclaw Captain Davies with the Quaffle, he dodges Johnson, he dodges Bell, he dodges Spinnet as well. … He's going straight for goal! He's going to shoot — and — and —" Lee swore very loudly. "And he's scored."

Harry and Hermione groaned with the rest of the Gryffindors. Predictably, horribly, the Slytherins on the other side of the stands began to sing:Weasley cannot save a thing,

He cannot block a single ring …"Harry," said a hoarse voice in Harry's ear. "Hermione …"

Harry looked around and saw Hagrid's enormous bearded face sticking between the seats; apparently he had squeezed his way all along the row behind, for the first and second years he had just passed had a ruffled, flattened look about them. For some reason, Hagrid was bent double as though anxious not to be seen, though he was still at least four feet taller than everybody else.

"Listen," he whispered, "can yeh come with me? Now? While ev'ryone's watchin' the match?"

"Er … can't it wait, Hagrid?" asked Harry. "Till the match is over?

“No,” said Hagrid. “No, Harry, it’s gotta be now … while ev’ry-one’s lookin’ the other way. … Please?”

Hagrid’s nose was gently dripping blood. His eyes were both blackened. Harry had not seen him this close up since his return to the school; he looked utterly woebegone.

“ ’Course,” said Harry at once, “ ’course we’ll come. …”

He and Hermione edged back along their row of seats, causing much grumbling among the students who had to stand up for them. The people in Hagrid’s row were not complaining, merely attempting to make themselves as small as possible.

“I ’ppreciate this, you two, I really do,” said Hagrid as they reached the stairs. He kept looking around nervously as they descended to-ward the lawn below. “I jus’ hope she doesn’ notice us goin’. …”

“You mean Umbridge?” said Harry. “She won’t, she’s got her whole Inquisitorial Squad sitting with her, didn’t you see? She must be expecting trouble at the match.”

“Yeah, well, a bit o’ trouble wouldn’ hurt,” said Hagrid, pausing to peer around the edge of the stands to make sure the stretch of lawn between there and his cabin was deserted. “Give us more time …”

“What is it, Hagrid?” said Hermione, looking up at him with a concerned expression on her face as they hurried across the lawn toward the edge of the forest.

“Yeh — yeh’ll see in a mo’,” said Hagrid, looking over his shoulder as a great roar rose from the stands behind them. “Hey — did some-one jus’ score?”

“It’ll be Ravenclaw,” said Harry heavily.

“Good … good …” said Hagrid distractedly. “Tha’s good. …”

They had to jog to keep up with him as he strode across the lawn, looking around with every other step. When they reached his cabin, Hermione turned automatically left toward the front door; Hagrid, however, walked straight past it into the shade of the trees on the outermost edge of the forest, where he picked up a crossbow that was leaning against a tree. When he realized they were no longer with him, he turned.

“We’re goin’ in here,” he said, jerking his shaggy head behind him.

“Into the forest?” said Hermione, perplexed.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid. “C’mon now, quick, before we’re spotted!”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, then ducked into the cover of the trees behind Hagrid, who was already striding away from them into the green gloom, his crossbow over his arm. Harry and Hermione ran to catch up with him.

“Hagrid, why are you armed?” said Harry.

“Jus’ a precaution,” said Hagrid, shrugging his massive shoulders.

“You didn’t bring your crossbow the day you showed us the thestrals,” said Hermione timidly.

“Nah, well, we weren’ goin’ in so far then,” said Hagrid. “An’ any-way, tha’ was before Firenze left the forest, wasn’ it?”

“Why does Firenze leaving make a difference?” asked Hermione curiously.

“ ’Cause the other centaurs are good an’ riled at me, tha’s why,” said Hagrid quietly, glancing around. “They used ter be — well, yeh couldn’ call ’em friendly — but we got on all righ’. Kept ’emselves to ’emselves, bu’ always turned up if I wanted a word. Not anymore …”

He sighed deeply.

“Firenze said that they’re angry because he went to work for Dumbledore?” Harry asked, tripping on a protruding root because he was busy watching Hagrid’s profile.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid heavily. “Well, angry doesn’ cover it. Ruddy livid. If I hadn’ stepped in, I reckon they’d’ve kicked Firenze ter death —”

“They attacked him?” said Hermione, sounding shocked.

“Yep,” said Hagrid gruffly, forcing his way through several low-hanging branches. “He had half the herd onto him —”

“And you stopped it?” said Harry, amazed and impressed. “By yourself?”

“ ’Course I did, couldn’t stand by an’ watch ’em kill him, could I?” said Hagrid. “Lucky I was passin’, really … an’ I’d’ve thought Firenze mighta remembered tha’ before he started sendin’ me stupid warnin’s!” he added hotly and unexpectedly.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, startled, but Hagrid, scowling, did not elaborate.

“Anyway,” he said, breathing a little more heavily than usual, “since then the other centaurs’ve bin livid with me an’ the trouble is, they’ve got a lot of influence in the forest. … Cleverest creatures in here …”

“Is that why we’re here, Hagrid?” asked Hermione. “The centaurs?”

“Ah no,” said Hagrid, shaking his head dismissively, “no, it’s not them. … Well, o’ course, they could complicate the problem, yeah. … But yeh’ll see what I mean in a bit. …”

On this incomprehensible note he fell silent and forged a little ahead, taking one stride for every three of theirs, so that they had great

trouble keeping up with him.

The path was becoming increasingly overgrown and the trees grew so closely together as they walked farther and farther into the forest that it was as dark as dusk. They were soon a long way past the clear-ing where Hagrid had shown them the thestrals, but Harry felt no sense of unease until Hagrid stepped unexpectedly off the path and began wending his way in and out of trees toward the dark heart of the forest.

“Hagrid?” said Harry, fighting his way through thickly knotted brambles over which Hagrid had stepped easily and remembering very vividly what had happened to him on the other occasions he had stepped off the forest path. “Where are we going?”

“Bit further,” said Hagrid over his shoulder. “C’mon, Harry. … We need ter keep together now. …”

It was a great struggle to keep up with Hagrid, what with branches and thickets of thorn through which Hagrid marched as easily as though they were cobwebs, but which snagged Harry and Hermione’s robes, frequently entangling them so severely that they had to stop for minutes at a time to free themselves. Harry’s arms and legs were soon covered in small cuts and scratches. They were so deep in the forest now that sometimes all Harry could see of Hagrid in the gloom was a massive dark shape ahead of him. Any sound seemed threatening in the muffled silence. The breaking of a twig echoed loudly and the tiniest rustle of movement, though it might have been made by an innocent sparrow, caused Harry to peer through the gloom for a culprit. It occurred to him that he had never managed to get this far into the for-est without meeting some kind of creature — their absence struck him as rather ominous.

“Hagrid, would it be all right if we lit our wands?” said Hermione quietly.

“Er … all righ’,” Hagrid whispered back. “In fact …”

He stopped suddenly and turned around; Hermione walked right into him and was knocked over backward. Harry caught her just be-fore she hit the forest floor.

“Maybe we bes’ jus’ stop fer a momen’, so I can … fill yeh in,” said Hagrid. “Before we ge’ there, like.”

“Good!” said Hermione, as Harry set her back on her feet. They both murmured “Lumos!” and their wand tips ignited. Hagrid’s face swam through the gloom by the light of the two wavering beams and Harry saw that he looked nervous and sad again.

“Righ,” said Hagrid. “Well … see … the thing is …”

He took a great breath.

“Well, there’s a good chance I’m goin’ ter be gettin’ the sack any day now,” he said.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, then back at him.

“But you’ve lasted this long —” Hermione said tentatively. “What makes you think —”

“Umbridge reckons it was me that put tha’ niffler in her office.”

“And was it?” said Harry, before he could stop himself.

“No, it ruddy well wasn’!” said Hagrid indignantly. “On’y anythin’ ter do with magical creatures an’ she thinks it’s got somethin’ ter do with me. Yeh know she’s bin lookin’ fer a chance ter get rid of me ever since I got back. I don’ wan’ ter go, o’ course, but if it wasn’ fer … well … the special circumstances I’m abou’ ter explain to yeh, I’d leave righ now, before she’s go’ the chance ter do it in front o’ the whole school, like she did with Trelawney.”

Harry and Hermione both made noises of protest, but Hagrid overrode them with a wave of one of his enormous hands.

"It's not the end o' the world, I'll be able ter help Dumbledore once I'm outta here, I can be useful ter the Order. An' you lot'll have Grubbly-Plank, yeh'll — yeh'll get through yer exams fine. …" His voice trembled and broke.

"Don' worry abou' me," he said hastily, as Hermione made to pat his arm. He pulled his enormous spotted handkerchief from the pocket of his waistcoat and mopped his eyes with it. "Look, I wouldn' be tellin' yer this at all if I didn' have ter. See, if I go … well, I can' leave withou' … withou' tellin' someone … because I'll — I'll need you two ter help me. An' Ron, if he's willin'."

"Of course we'll help you," said Harry at once. "What do you want us to do?"

Hagrid gave a great sniff and patted Harry wordlessly on the shoulder with such force that Harry was knocked sideways into a tree.

"I knew yeh'd say yes," said Hagrid into his handkerchief, "but I won' … never … forget … Well … c'mon … jus' a little bit fur-ther through here … Watch yerselves, now, there's nettles. …"

They walked on in silence for another fifteen minutes. Harry had opened his mouth to ask how much farther they had to go when Hagrid threw out his right arm to signal that they should stop.

"Really easy," he said softly. "Very quiet, now …"

They crept forward and Harry saw that they were facing a large, smooth mound of earth nearly as tall as Hagrid that he thought, with a jolt of dread, was sure to be the lair of some enormous animal. Trees had been ripped up at the roots all around the mound, so that it stood on a bare patch of ground surrounded by heaps of trunks and boughs

that formed a kind of fence or barricade, behind which Harry, Hermione, and Hagrid now stood.

“Sleepin’,” breathed Hagrid.

Sure enough, Harry could hear a distant, rhythmic rumbling that sounded like a pair of enormous lungs at work. He glanced sideways at Hermione, who was gazing at the mound with her mouth slightly open. She looked utterly terrified.

“Hagrid,” she said in a whisper barely audible over the sound of the sleeping creature, “who is he?”

Harry found this an odd question. … “What is it?” was the one he had been planning on asking.

“Hagrid, you told us,” said Hermione, her wand now shaking in her hand, “you told us none of them wanted to come!”

Harry looked from her to Hagrid and then, as realization hit him, he looked back at the mound with a small gasp of horror.

The great mound of earth, on which he, Hermione, and Hagrid could easily have stood, was moving slowly up and down in time with the deep, grunting breathing. It was not a mound at all. It was the curved back of what was clearly …“Well — no — he didn’ want ter come,” said Hagrid, sounding desperate. “But I had ter bring him, Hermione, I had ter!”

“But why?” asked Hermione, who sounded as though she wanted to cry. “Why — what — oh, Hagrid!”

“I knew if I jus’ got him back,” said Hagrid, sounding close to tears himself, “an’ — an’ taught him a few manners — I’d be able ter take him outside an’ show ev’ryone he’s harmless!”

"Harmless!" said Hermione shrilly, and Hagrid made frantic hush-ing noises with his hands as the enormous creature before them grunted loudly and shifted in its sleep. "He's been hurting you all this time, hasn't he? That's why you've had all these injuries!"

"He don' know his own strength!" said Hagrid earnestly. "An' he's gettin' better, he's not fightin' so much anymore —"

"So this is why it took you two months to get home!" said Hermione distractedly. "Oh Hagrid, why did you bring him back if he didn't want to come, wouldn't he have been happier with his own people?"

"They were all bullyin' him, Hermione, 'cause he's so small!" said Hagrid.

"Small?" said Hermione. "Small?"

"Hermione, I couldn' leave him," said Hagrid, tears now trickling down his bruised face into his beard. "See — he's my brother!"

Hermione simply stared at him, her mouth open.

"Hagrid, when you say 'brother,' " said Harry slowly, "do you mean — ?"

"Well — half-brother," amended Hagrid. "Turns out me mother took up with another giant when she left me dad, an' she went an' had Grawp here —"

"Grawp?" said Harry.

"Yeah … well, tha's what it sounds like when he says his name," said Hagrid anxiously. "He don' speak a lot of English. … I've bin tryin' ter teach him. … Anyway, she don' seem ter have liked him much more'n she liked me. … See, with giantesses, what counts is producin' good big kids, and he's always been a bit on the runty side fer a giant — on'y sixteen foot —"

“Oh yes, tiny!” said Hermione, with a kind of hysterical sarcasm. “Absolutely minuscule!”

“He was bein’ kicked around by all o’ them — I jus’ couldn’ leave him —”

“Did Madame Maxime want to bring him back?” asked Harry.

“She — well, she could see it was right importan’ ter me,” said Hagrid, twisting his enormous hands. “Bu’ — bu’ she got a bit tired of him after a while, I must admit … so we split up on the journey home. … She promised not ter tell anyone though. …”

“How on earth did you get him back without anyone noticing?” said Harry.

“Well, tha’s why it took so long, see,” said Hagrid. “Could on’y travel by nigh an’ through wild country an’ stuff. ’Course, he covers the ground pretty well when he wants ter, but he kep’ wantin’ ter go back. …”

“Oh Hagrid, why on earth didn’t you let him!” said Hermione, flopping down onto a ripped-up tree and burying her face in her hands. “What do you think you’re going to do with a violent giant who doesn’t even want to be here!”

“Well, now — ‘violent’ — tha’s a bit harsh,” said Hagrid, still twisting his hands agitatedly. “I’ll admit he mighta taken a couple o’ swings at me when he’s bin in a bad mood, but he’s gettin’ better, loads better, settlin’ down well. …”

“What are those ropes for, then?” Harry asked.

He had just noticed ropes thick as saplings stretching from around the trunks of the largest nearby trees toward the place where Grawp lay curled on the ground with his back to them.

“You have to keep him tied up?” said Hermione faintly.

“Well … yeah …” said Hagrid, looking anxious. “See — it’s like I say — he doesn’ really know his strength —”

Harry understood now why there had been such a suspicious lack of any other living creature in this part of the forest.

“So what is it you want Harry and Ron and me to do?” Hermione asked apprehensively.

“Look after him,” said Hagrid croakily. “After I’m gone.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged miserable looks, Harry uncomfortably aware that he had already promised Hagrid that he would do whatever he asked.

“What — what does that involve, exactly?” Hermione inquired.

“Not food or anythin’!” said Hagrid eagerly. “He can get his own food, no problem. Birds an’ deer an’ stuff … No, it’s company he needs. If I jus’ knew someone was carryin’ on tryin’ ter help him a bit … teachin’ him, yeh know …”

Harry said nothing, but turned to look back at the gigantic form lying asleep on the ground in front of them. Grawp had his back to them. Unlike Hagrid, who simply looked like a very oversize hu-man, Grawp looked strangely misshapen. What Harry had taken to be a vast mossy boulder to the left of the great earthen mound he now recognized as Grawp’s head. It was much larger in proportion to the body than a human head, almost perfectly round and covered with tightly curling, close-growing hair the color of bracken. The rim of a single large, fleshy ear was visible on top of the head, which seemed to sit, rather like Uncle Vernon’s, directly upon the shoulders with little or no neck in between. The back, under what looked like a dirty brownish smock comprised of animal skins sewn roughly to-gether, was very broad, and as Grawp slept, it seemed to strain a lit-tle at the

rough seams of the skins. The legs were curled up under the body; Harry could see the soles of enormous, filthy, bare feet, large as sledges, resting one on top of the other on the earthy forest floor.

“You want us to teach him,” Harry said in a hollow voice. He now understood what Firenze’s warning had meant. His attempt is not work-ing. He would do better to abandon it. Of course, the other creatures who lived in the forest would have heard Hagrid’s fruitless attempts to teach Grawp English. …“Yeah — even if yeh jus’ talk ter him a bit,” said Hagrid hopefully. “ ’Cause I reckon, if he can talk ter people, he’ll understand more that we all like him really, an’ want him to stay. …”

Harry looked at Hermione, who peered back at him from between the fingers over her face.

“Kind of makes you wish we had Norbert back, doesn’t it?” he said and she gave a very shaky laugh.

“Yeh’ll do it, then?” said Hagrid, who did not seem to have caught what Harry had just said.

“We’ll …” said Harry, already bound by his promise. “We’ll try, Hagrid. …”

“I knew I could count on yeh, Harry,” Hagrid said, beaming in a very watery way and dabbing at his face with his handkerchief again. “An’ I don’ wan’ yeh ter put yerself out too much, like. … I know yeh’ve got exams. … If yeh could jus’ nip down here in yer Invisibil-ity Cloak maybe once a week an’ have a little chat with him … I’ll wake him up, then — introduce you —”

“Wha — no!” said Hermione, jumping up, “Hagrid, no, don’t wake him, really, we don’t need —”

But Hagrid had already stepped over the great trunk in front of them and was proceeding toward Grawp. When he was around ten feet

away, he lifted a long, broken bough from the ground, smiled reassuringly over his shoulder at Harry and Hermione, and then poked Grawp hard in the middle of the back with the end of the bough.

The giant gave a roar that echoed around the silent forest. Birds in the treetops overhead rose twittering from their perches and soared away. In front of Harry and Hermione, meanwhile, the gigantic Grawp was rising from the ground, which shuddered as he placed an enormous hand upon it to push himself onto his knees and turned his head to see who and what had disturbed him.

"All righ', Grawpy?" said Hagrid in a would-be cheery voice, back-ing away with the long bough raised, ready to poke Grawp again. "Had a nice sleep, eh?"

Harry and Hermione retreated as far as they could while still keep-ing the giant within their sights. Grawp knelt between two trees he had not yet uprooted. They looked up into his startlingly huge face, which resembled a gray full moon swimming in the gloom of the clearing. It was as though the features had been hewn onto a great stone ball. The nose was stubby and shapeless, the mouth lopsided and full of misshapen yellow teeth the size of half-bricks. The small eyes were a muddy greenish-brown and just now were half gummed together with sleep. Grawp raised dirty knuckles as big as cricket balls to his eyes, rubbed vigorously, then, without warning, pushed himself to his feet with surprising speed and agility.

"Oh my …" Harry heard Hermione squeal, terrified, beside him.

The trees to which the other ends of the ropes around Grawp's wrists and ankles were attached creaked ominously. He was, as Hagrid had said, at least sixteen feet tall. Gazing blearily around, he reached out a hand the size of a beach umbrella, seized a bird's nest from the upper branches of a towering pine and turned it upside down with a roar of apparent displeasure that there was no bird in it — eggs fell

like grenades toward the ground and Hagrid threw his arms over his head to protect himself.

“Anyway, Grawpy,” shouted Hagrid, looking up apprehensively in case of further falling eggs, “I’ve brought some friends ter meet yeh. Remember, I told yeh I might? Remember, when I said I might have ter go on a little trip an’ leave them ter look after yeh fer a bit? Remember that, Grawpy?”

But Grawp merely gave another low roar; it was hard to say whether he was listening to Hagrid or whether he even recognized the sounds Hagrid was making as speech. He had now seized the top of the pine tree and was pulling it toward him, evidently for the simple pleasure of seeing how far it would spring back when he let go.

“Now, Grawpy, don’ do that!” shouted Hagrid. “Tha’s how you ended up pullin’ up the others —”

And sure enough, Harry could see the earth around the tree’s roots beginning to crack.

“I got company fer yeh!” Hagrid shouted. “Company, see! Look down, yeh big buffoon, I brought yeh some friends!”

“Oh Hagrid, don’t,” moaned Hermione, but Hagrid had already raised the bough again and gave Grawp’s knee a sharp poke.

The giant let go of the top of the pine tree, which swayed menac-ingly and deluged Hagrid with a rain of needles, and looked down.

“This,” said Hagrid, hastening over to where Harry and Hermione stood, “is Harry, Grawp! Harry Potter! He migh’ be comin’ ter visit yeh if I have ter go away, understand?”

The giant had only just realized that Harry and Hermione were there. They watched, in great trepidation, as he lowered his huge boul-der of a head so that he could peer blearily at them.

“An’ this is Hermione, see? Her —” Hagrid hesitated. Turning to Hermione he said, “Would yeh mind if he called yeh Hermy, Hermione? On’y it’s a difficult name fer him ter remember. …”

“No, not at all,” squeaked Hermione.

“This is Hermy, Grawp! An’ she’s gonna be comin’ an’ all! Is’n tha’ nice? Eh? Two friends fer yeh ter — GRAWPY, NO!”

Grawp’s hand had shot out of nowhere toward Hermione — Harry seized her and pulled her backward behind the tree, so that Grawp’s fist scraped the trunk but closed on thin air.

“BAD BOY, GRAWPY!” Harry heard Hagrid yelling, as Hermione clung to Harry behind the tree, shaking and whimpering. “VERY BAD BOY! YEH DON’ GRAB — OUCH!”

Harry poked his head out from around the trunk and saw Hagrid lying on his back, his hand over his nose. Grawp, apparently losing interest, had straightened up again and was again engaged in pulling back the pine as far as it would go.

“Righ’,” said Hagrid thickly, getting up with one hand pinching his bleeding nose and the other grasping his crossbow. “Well … there yeh are. … Yeh’ve met him an’ — an’ now he’ll know yeh when yeh come back. Yeah … well …”

He looked up at Grawp, who was now pulling back the pine with an expression of detached pleasure on his boulderish face; the roots were creaking as he ripped them away from the ground. …“Well, I reckon tha’s enough fer one day,” said Hagrid. “We’ll — er — we’ll go back now, shall we?”

Harry and Hermione nodded. Hagrid shouldered his crossbow again and, still pinching his nose, led the way back into the trees.

Nobody spoke for a while, not even when they heard the distant crash that meant Grawp had pulled over the pine tree at last. Hermione's face was pale and set. Harry could not think of a single thing to say. What on earth was going to happen when somebody found out that Hagrid had hidden Grawp in the forest? And he had promised that he, Ron, and Hermione would continue Hagrid's to-tally pointless attempts to civilize the giant. … How could Hagrid, even with his immense capacity to delude himself that fanged monsters were lovably harmless, fool himself that Grawp would ever be fit to mix with humans?

"Hold it," said Hagrid abruptly, just as Harry and Hermione were struggling through a patch of thick knotgrass behind him. He pulled an arrow out of the quiver over his shoulder and fitted it into the crossbow. Harry and Hermione raised their wands; now that they had stopped walking, they too could hear movement close by.

"Oh blimey," said Hagrid quietly.

"I thought that we told you, Hagrid," said a deep male voice, "that you are no longer welcome here?"

A man's naked torso seemed for an instant to be floating toward them through the dappled green half-light. Then they saw that his waist joined smoothly with a horse's chestnut body. This centaur had a proud, high-cheekboned face and long black hair. Like Hagrid, he was armed: A quiverful of arrows and a long bow were slung over his shoulders.

"How are yeh, Magorian?" said Hagrid warily.

The trees behind the centaur rustled and four or five more emerged behind him. Harry recognized the black-bodied and bearded Bane, whom he had met nearly four years ago on the same night he had met Firenze. Bane gave no sign that he had ever seen Harry before.

“So,” he said, with a nasty inflection in his voice, before turning immediately to Magorian. “We agreed, I think, what we would do if this human showed his face in the forest again?”

“ ‘This human’ now, am I?” said Hagrid testily. “Jus’ fer stoppin’ all of yeh committin’ murder?”

“You ought not to have meddled, Hagrid,” said Magorian. “Our ways are not yours, nor are our laws. Firenze has betrayed and dishonored us.”

“I dunno how yeh work that out,” said Hagrid impatiently. “He’s done nothin’ except help Albus Dumbledore —”

“Firenze has entered into servitude to humans,” said a gray centaur with a hard, deeply lined face.

“Servitude!” said Hagrid scathingly. “He’s doin’ Dumbledore a favor is all —”

“He is peddling our knowledge and secrets among humans,” said Magorian quietly. “There can be no return from such disgrace.”

“If yeh say so,” said Hagrid, shrugging, “but personally I think yeh’re makin’ a big mistake —”

“As are you, human,” said Bane, “coming back into our forest when we warned you —”

“Now, you listen ter me,” said Hagrid angrily. “I’ll have less of the ‘our’ forest, if it’s all the same ter you. It’s not up ter you who comes an’ goes in here —”

“No more is it up to you, Hagrid,” said Magorian smoothly. “I shall let you pass today because you are accompanied by your young —”

“They’re not his!” interrupted Bane contemptuously. “Students, Magorian, from up at the school! They have probably already profited from the traitor Firenze’s teachings. …”

“Nevertheless,” said Magorian calmly, “the slaughter of foals is a terrible crime. … We do not touch the innocent. Today, Hagrid, you pass. Henceforth, stay away from this place. You forfeited the friendship of the centaurs when you helped the traitor Firenze escape us.”

“I won’ be kept outta the fores’ by a bunch of mules like you!” said Hagrid loudly.

“Hagrid,” said Hermione in a high-pitched and terrified voice, as both Bane and the gray centaur pawed at the ground, “let’s go, please lets go!

Hagrid moved forward, but his crossbow was still raised and his eyes were still fixed threateningly upon Magorian.

“We know what you are keeping in the forest, Hagrid!” Magorian called after them, as the centaurs slipped out of sight. “And our tolerance is waning!”

Hagrid turned and gave every appearance of wanting to walk straight back to Magorian again.

“You’ll tolerate him as long as he’s here, it’s as much his forest as yours!” he yelled, while Harry and Hermione both pushed with all their might against Hagrid’s moleskin waistcoat in an effort to keep him moving forward. Still scowling, he looked down; his expression changed to mild surprise at the sight of them both pushing him. He seemed not to have felt it.

“Calm down, you two,” he said, turning to walk on while they panted along behind him. “Ruddy old nags though, eh?”

“Hagrid,” said Hermione breathlessly, skirting the patch of nettles they had passed on their way there, “if the centaurs don’t want humans in the forest, it doesn’t really look as though Harry and I will be able —”

“Ah, you heard what they said,” said Hagrid dismissively “They wouldn’t hurt foals — I mean, kids. Anyway, we can’ let ourselves be pushed around by that lot. …”

“Nice try,” Harry murmured to Hermione, who looked crestfallen.

At last they rejoined the path and after another ten minutes, the trees began to thin. They were able to see patches of clear blue sky again and hear, in the distance, the definite sounds of cheering and shouting.

“Was that another goal?” asked Hagrid, pausing in the shelter of the trees as the Quidditch stadium came into view. “Or d’you reckon the match is over?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione miserably. Harry saw that she looked much the worse for wear; her hair was full of bits of twig and leaves, her robes were ripped in several places and there were numerous scratches on her face and arms. He knew he could look little better.

“I reckon it’s over, yeh know!” said Hagrid, still squinting toward the stadium. “Look — there’s people comin’ out already — if you two hurry yeh’ll be able ter blend in with the crowd an’ no one’ll know you weren’t there!”

“Good idea,” said Harry. “Well … see you later, then, Hagrid. …”

“I don’t believe him,” said Hermione in a very unsteady voice, the moment they were out of earshot of Hagrid. “I don’t believe him. I really don’t believe him. …”

“Calm down,” said Harry.

“Calm down!” she said feverishly. “A giant! A giant in the forest! And we’re supposed to give him English lessons! Always assuming, of course, we can get past the herd of murderous centaurs on the way in and out! I — don’t — believe — him!”

“We haven’t got to do anything yet!” Harry tried to reassure her in a quiet voice, as they joined a stream of jabbering Hufflepuffs heading back toward the castle. “He’s not asking us to do anything unless he gets chucked out and that might not even happen —”

“Oh come off it, Harry!” said Hermione angrily, stopping dead in her tracks so that the people behind her had to swerve to avoid her. “Of course he’s going to be chucked out and to be perfectly honest, af-ter what we’ve just seen, who can blame Umbridge?”

There was a pause in which Harry glared at her, and her eyes filled slowly with tears.

“You didn’t mean that,” said Harry quietly.

“No … well … all right … I didn’t,” she said, wiping her eyes angrily. “But why does he have to make life so difficult for himself — for us?”

“I dunno —”

Weasley is our King,

Weasley is our King,

He didn’t let the Quaffle in,Weasley is our King …

“And I wish they’d stop singing that stupid song,” said Hermione miserably, “haven’t they gloated enough?”

A great tide of students was moving up the sloping lawns from the pitch.

“Oh, let’s get in before we have to meet the Slytherins,” said Hermione.

Weasley can save anything,

He never leaves a single ring

That’s why Gryffindors all sing:Weasley is our King.

“Hermione …” said Harry slowly.

The song was growing louder, but it was issuing not from a crowd of green-and-silver-clad Slytherins, but from a mass of red and gold moving slowly toward the castle, which was bearing a solitary figure upon its many shoulders. …Weasley is our King,

Weasley is our King,

He didn’t let the Quaffle in,Weasley is our King …

“No!” said Hermione in a hushed voice.

“YES!” said Harry loudly.

“HARRY! HERMIONE!” yelled Ron, waving the silver Quidditch Cup in the air and looking quite beside himself. “WE DID IT! WE WON!”

They beamed up at him as he passed; there was a scrum at the door of the castle and Ron’s head got rather badly bumped on the lintel, but nobody seemed to want to put him down. Still singing, the crowd squeezed itself into the entrance hall and out of sight. Harry and Hermione watched them go, beaming, until the last echoing strains of “Weasley Is Our King” died away. Then they turned to each other, their smiles fading.

“We’ll save our news till tomorrow, shall we?” said Harry.

“Yes, all right,” said Hermione wearily. “I’m not in any hurry. …”

They climbed the steps together. At the front doors both instinc-tively looked back at the Forbidden Forest. Harry was not sure whether it was his imagination or not, but he rather thought he saw a small cloud of birds erupting into the air over the treetops in the dis-tance, almost as though the tree in which they had been nesting had just been pulled up by the roots.

Chapter 31 O.W.L.S

Ron's euphoria at helping Gryffindor scrape the Quidditch Cup was such that he could not settle to anything next day. All he wanted to do was talk over the match and Harry and Hermione found it very difficult to find an opening in which to mention Grawp — not that either of them tried very hard; neither was keen to be the one to bring Ron back to reality in quite such a brutal fashion. As it was an-other fine, warm day, they persuaded him to join them in studying under the beech tree on the edge of the lake, where they stood less chance of being overheard than in the common room. Ron was not particularly keen on this idea at first; he was thoroughly enjoying be-ing patted on the back by Gryffindors walking past his chair, not to mention the occasional outbursts of "Weasley Is Our King," but agreed after a while that some fresh air might do him good.

They spread their books out in the shade of the beech tree and sat down while Ron talked them through his first save of the match for what felt like the dozenth time.

"Well, I mean, I'd already let in that one of Davies's, so I wasn't feeling that confident, but I dunno, when Bradley came toward me, just out of nowhere, I thought — you can do this! And I had about a second to decide which way to fly, you know, because he looked like he was aiming for the right goal hoop — my right, obviously, his left — but I had a funny feeling that he was feinting, and so I took the chance and flew left — his right, I mean — and — well — you saw what happened," he concluded modestly, sweeping his hair back quite unnecessarily so that it looked interestingly windswept and glancing around to see whether the people nearest to them — a bunch of gos-siping third-year Hufflepuffs — had heard him. "And then, when Chambers came at me about five minutes later — what?" Ron said, stopping mid-sentence at the look on Harry's face. "Why are you grinning?"

“I’m not,” said Harry quickly, looking down at his Transfiguration notes and attempting to straighten his face. The truth was that Ron had just reminded Harry forcibly of another Gryffindor Quidditch player who had once sat rumpling his hair under this very tree. “I’m just glad we won, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” said Ron slowly, savoring the words, “we won. Did you see the look on Chang’s face when Ginny got the Snitch right out from under her nose?”

“I suppose she cried, did she?” said Harry bitterly.

“Well, yeah — more out of temper than anything, though …” Ron frowned slightly. “But you saw her chuck her broom away when she got back to the ground, didn’t you?”

“Er —” said Harry.

“Well, actually … no, Ron,” said Hermione with a heavy sigh, putting down her book and looking at him apologetically. “As a mat-ter of fact, the only bit of the match Harry and I saw was Davies’s first goal.”

Ron’s carefully ruffled hair seemed to wilt with disappointment.

“You didn’t watch?” he said faintly, looking from one to the other. “You didn’t see me make any of those saves?”

“Well — no,” said Hermione, stretching out a placatory hand to-ward him. “But Ron, we didn’t want to leave — we had to!”

“Yeah?” said Ron, whose face was growing rather red. “How come?”

“It was Hagrid,” said Harry. “He decided to tell us why he’s been covered in injuries ever since he got back from the giants. He wanted us to go into the forest with him, we had no choice, you know how he gets. … Anyway …”

The story was told in five minutes, by the end of which Ron's indignation had been replaced by a look of total incredulity.

"He brought one back and hid it in the forest?"

"Yep," said Harry grimly.

"No," said Ron, as though by saying this he could make it untrue. "No, he can't have. …"

"Well, he has," said Hermione firmly. "Grawp's about sixteen feet tall, enjoys ripping up twenty-foot pine trees, and knows me," she snorted, "as Hermy."

Ron gave a nervous laugh.

"And Hagrid wants us to … ?"

"Teach him English, yeah," said Harry.

"He's lost his mind," said Ron in an almost awed voice.

"Yes," said Hermione irritably, turning a page of Intermediate Transfiguration and glaring at a series of diagrams showing an owl turning into a pair of opera glasses. "Yes, I'm starting to think he has. But unfortunately, he made Harry and me promise."

"Well, you're just going to have to break your promise, that's all," said Ron firmly. "I mean, come on … We've got exams and we're about that far," he held up his hand to show thumb and forefinger a millimeter apart, "from being chucked out as it is. And anyway … remember Norbert? Remember Aragog? Have we ever come off better for mixing with any of Hagrid's monster mates?"

"I know, it's just that — we promised," said Hermione in a small voice.

Ron smoothed his hair flat again, looking preoccupied.

"Well," he sighed, "Hagrid hasn't been sacked yet, has he? He's hung on this long, maybe he'll hang on till the end of term and we won't have to go near Grawp at all."

The castle grounds were gleaming in the sunlight as though freshly painted; the cloudless sky smiled at itself in the smoothly sparkling lake, the satin-green lawns rippled occasionally in a gentle breeze: June had arrived, but to the fifth years this meant only one thing: Their O.W.L.s were upon them at last.

Their teachers were no longer setting them homework; lessons were devoted to reviewing those topics their teachers thought most likely to come up in the exams. The purposeful, feverish atmosphere drove nearly everything but the O.W.L.s from Harry's mind, though he did wonder occasionally during Potions lessons whether Lupin had ever told Snape that he must continue giving Harry Occlumency tuition: If he had, then Snape had ignored Lupin as thoroughly as he was now ignoring Harry. This suited Harry very well; he was quite busy and tense enough without extra classes with Snape, and to his re-lief Hermione was much too preoccupied these days to badger him about Occlumency. She was spending a lot of time muttering to her-self and had not laid out any elf clothes for days.

She was not the only person acting oddly as the O.W.L.s drew steadily nearer. Ernie Macmillan had developed an irritating habit of interrogating people about their study habits.

"How many hours d'you think you're doing a day?" he demanded of Harry and Ron as they queued outside Herbology, a manic gleam in his eyes.

"I dunno," said Ron. "A few …"

"More or less than eight?"

"Less, I s'pose," said Ron, looking slightly alarmed.

“I’m doing eight,” said Ernie, puffing out his chest. “Eight or nine. I’m getting an hour in before breakfast every day. Eight’s my average. I can do ten on a good weekend day. I did nine and a half on Monday. Not so good on Tuesday — only seven and a quarter. Then on Wednesday —”

Harry was deeply thankful that Professor Sprout ushered them into greenhouse three at that point, forcing Ernie to abandon his recital.

Meanwhile Draco Malfoy had found a different way to induce panic.

“Of course, it’s not what you know,” he was heard to tell Crabbe and Goyle loudly outside Potions a few days before the exams were to start, “it’s who you know. Now, Father’s been friendly with the head of the Wizarding Examinations Authority for years — old Griselda Marchbanks — we’ve had her round for dinner and everything. …”

“Do you think that’s true?” Hermione whispered to Harry and Ron, looking frightened.

“Nothing we can do about it if it is,” said Ron gloomily.

“I don’t think it’s true,” said Neville quietly from behind them. “Because Griselda Marchbanks is a friend of my gran’s, and she’s never mentioned the Malfoys.”

“What’s she like, Neville?” asked Hermione at once. “Is she strict?”

“Bit like Gran, really,” said Neville in a subdued voice.

“Knowing her won’t hurt your chances though, will it?” Ron told him encouragingly.

“Oh, I don’t think it will make any difference,” said Neville, still more miserably. “Gran’s always telling Professor Marchbanks I’m not as good as my dad. … Well … you saw what she’s like at St. Mungo’s. …”

Neville looked fixedly at the floor. Harry, Ron, and Hermione glanced at one another, but didn't know what to say. It was the first time that Neville had acknowledged that they had met at the Wizard-ing hospital.

Meanwhile a flourishing black-market trade in aids to concentra-tion, mental agility, and wakefulness had sprung up among the fifth and seventh years. Harry and Ron were much tempted by the bottle of Baruffio's Brain Elixir offered to them by Ravenclaw sixth year Ed-die Carmichael, who swore it was solely responsible for the nine "Outstanding" O.W.L.s he had gained the previous summer and was offering the whole pint for a mere twelve Galleons. Ron assured Harry he would reimburse him for his half the moment he left Hogwarts and got a job, but before they could close the deal, Hermione had confiscated the bottle from Carmichael and poured the contents down a toilet.

"Hermione, we wanted to buy that!" shouted Ron.

"Don't be stupid," she snarled. "You might as well take Harold Dingle's powdered dragon claw and have done with it."

"Dingle's got powdered dragon claw?" said Ron eagerly.

"Not anymore," said Hermione. "I confiscated that too. None of these things actually works you know —"

"Dragon claw does work!" said Ron. "It's supposed to be incredible, really gives your brain a boost, you come over all cunning for a few hours — Hermione, let me have a pinch, go on, it can't hurt —"

"This stuff can," said Hermione grimly. "I've had a look at it, and it's actually dried doxy droppings."

This information took the edge off Harry and Ron's desire for brain stimulants.

They received their examination schedules and details of the procedure for O.W.L.s during their next Transfiguration lesson.

"As you can see," Professor McGonagall told the class while they copied down the dates and times of their exams from the blackboard, "your O.W.L.s are spread over two successive weeks. You will sit the theory exams in the mornings and the practice in the afternoons. Your practical Astronomy examination will, of course, take place at night.

"Now, I must warn you that the most stringent Anti-Cheating Charms have been applied to your examination papers. Auto-Answer Quills are banned from the examination hall, as are Remembralls, Detachable Cribbing Cuffs, and Self-Correcting Ink. Every year, I am afraid to say, seems to harbor at least one student who thinks that he or she can get around the Wizarding Examinations Authority's rules. I can only hope that it is nobody in Gryffindor. Our new — headmistress" — Professor McGonagall pronounced the word with the same look on her face that Aunt Petunia had whenever she was contemplating a particularly stubborn bit of dirt — "has asked the Heads of House to tell their students that cheating will be punished most severely — because, of course, your examination results will reflect upon the headmistress's new regime at the school. …"

Professor McGonagall gave a tiny sigh. Harry saw the nostrils of her sharp nose flare.

"However, that is no reason not to do your very best. You have your own futures to think about."

"Please, Professor," said Hermione, her hand in the air, "when will we find out our results?"

"An owl will be sent to you some time in July," said Professor McGonagall.

"Excellent," said Dean Thomas in an audible whisper, "so we don't have to worry about it till the holidays. …"

Harry imagined sitting in his bedroom in Privet Drive in six weeks' time, waiting for his O.W.L. results. Well, he thought, at least he would be sure of one bit of post next summer. …Their first exam, Theory of Charms, was scheduled for Monday morning. Harry agreed to test Hermione after lunch on Sunday but regretted it almost at once. She was very agitated and kept snatching the book back from him to check that she had gotten the answer com-pletely right, finally hitting him hard on the nose with the sharp edge of Achievements in Charming.

"Why don't you just do it yourself?" he said firmly, handing the book back to her, his eyes watering.

Meanwhile Ron was reading two years of Charms notes with his fingers in his ears, his lips moving soundlessly; Seamus was lying flat on his back on the floor, reciting the definition of a Substantive Charm, while Dean checked it against The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5; and Parvati and Lavender, who were practicing basic loco-motion charms, were making their pencil cases race each other around the edge of the table.

Dinner was a subdued affair that night. Harry and Ron did not talk much, but ate with gusto, having studied hard all day. Hermione on the other hand kept putting down her knife and fork and diving un-der the table for her bag, from which she would seize a book to check some fact or figure. Ron was just telling her that she ought to eat a de-cent meal or she would not sleep that night, when her fork slid from her limp fingers and landed with a loud tinkle on her plate.

"Oh, my goodness," she said faintly, staring into the entrance hall. "Is that them? Is that the examiners?"

Harry and Ron whipped around on their bench. Through the doors to the Great Hall they could see Umbridge standing with a small group of ancient-looking witches and wizards. Umbridge, Harry was pleased to see, looked rather nervous.

“Shall we go and have a closer look?” said Ron.

Harry and Hermione nodded and they hastened toward the double doors into the entrance hall, slowing down as they stepped over the threshold to walk sedately past the examiners. Harry thought Professor Marchbanks must be the tiny, stooped witch with a face so lined it looked as though it had been draped in cobwebs; Umbridge was speaking to her very deferentially. Professor Marchbanks seemed to be a little deaf; she was answering Umbridge very loudly considering that they were only a foot apart.

“Journey was fine, journey was fine, we’ve made it plenty of times before!” she said impatiently. “Now, I haven’t heard from Dumbledore lately!” she added, peering around the hall as though hopeful he might suddenly emerge from a broom cupboard. “No idea where he is, I suppose?”

“None at all,” said Umbridge, shooting a malevolent look at Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who were now dawdling around the foot of the stairs as Ron pretended to do up his shoelace. “But I daresay the Ministry of Magic will track him down soon enough. …”

“I doubt it,” shouted tiny Professor Marchbanks, “not if Dumble-dore doesn’t want to be found! I should know. … Examined him personally in Transfiguration and Charms when he did N.E.W.T.s … Did things with a wand I’d never seen before …”

“Yes … well …” said Professor Umbridge as Harry, Ron, and Hermione dragged their feet up the marble staircase as slowly as they dared, “let me show you to the staffroom … I daresay you’d like a cup of tea after your journey. …”

It was an uncomfortable sort of an evening. Everyone was trying to do some last-minute studying but nobody seemed to be getting very far. Harry went to bed early but then lay awake for what felt like hours. He remembered his careers consultation and McGonagall’s fu-rious declaration that she would help him become an Auror if it was the last

thing she did. … He wished he had expressed a more achiev-able ambition now that exam time was here. … He knew that he was not the only one lying awake, but none of the others in the dormitory spoke and finally, one by one, they fell asleep.

None of the fifth years talked very much at breakfast next day ei-ther. Parvati was practicing incantations under her breath while the salt cellar in front of her twitched, Hermione was rereading Achieve-ment in Charming so fast that her eyes appeared blurred, and Neville kept dropping his knife and fork and knocking over the marmalade.

Once breakfast was over, the fifth and seventh years milled around in the entrance hall while the other students went off to lessons. Then, at half-past nine, they were called forward class by class to reenter the Great Hall, which was now arranged exactly as Harry had seen it in the Pensieve when his father, Sirius, and Snape had been taking their O.W.L.s. The four House tables had been removed and replaced in-stead with many tables for one, all facing the staff-table end of the Hall where Professor McGonagall stood facing them. When they were all seated and quiet she said, "You may begin," and turned over an enormous hourglass on the desk beside her, on which were also spare quills, ink bottles, and rolls of parchment.

Harry turned over his paper, his heart thumping hard. … Three rows to his right and four seats ahead, Hermione was already scrib-bling. … He lowered his eyes to the first question: a) Give the incanta-tion, and b) describe the wand movement required to make objects fly. … Harry had a fleeting memory of a club soaring high into the air and landing loudly on the thick skull of a troll. … Smiling slightly, he bent over the paper and began to write. …"Well, it wasn't too bad, was it?" asked Hermione anxiously in the en-trance hall two hours later, still clutching the exam paper. "I'm not sure I did myself justice on Cheering Charms, I just ran out of time — did you put in the countercharm for hiccups? I wasn't sure whether I ought to, it felt like too much — and on question twenty-three —"

“Hermione,” said Ron sternly, “we’ve been through this before. … We’re not going through every exam afterward, it’s bad enough doing them once.”

The fifth years ate lunch with the rest of the school (the four House tables reappeared over the lunch hour) and then trooped off into the small chamber beside the Great Hall, where they were to wait until called for their practical examination. As small groups of students were called forward in alphabetical order, those left behind muttered incantations and practiced wand movements, occasionally poking one another in the back or eye by mistake.

Hermione’s name was called. Trembling, she left the chamber with Anthony Goldstein, Gregory Goyle, and Daphne Greengrass. Students who had already been tested did not return afterward, so Harry and Ron had no idea how Hermione had done.

“She’ll be fine — remember she got a hundred and twelve percent on one of our Charms tests?” said Ron.

Ten minutes later, Professor Flitwick called, “Parkinson, Pansy — Patil, Padma — Patil, Parvati — Potter, Harry.”

“Good luck,” said Ron quietly. Harry walked into the Great Hall, clutching his wand so tightly his hand shook.

“Professor Tofty is free, Potter,” squeaked Professor Flitwick, who was standing just inside the door. He pointed Harry toward what looked like the very oldest and baldest examiner, who was sitting behind a small table in a far corner, a short distance from Professor Marchbanks, who was halfway through testing Draco Malfoy.

“Potter, is it?” said Professor Tofty, consulting his notes and peering over his pince-nez at Harry as he approached. “The famous Potter?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry distinctly saw Malfoy throw a scathing look over at him; the wine glass Malfoy had been levitating

fell to the floor and smashed. Harry could not suppress a grin. Professor Tofty smiled back at him encouragingly.

"That's it," he said in his quavery old voice, "no need to be nervous. … Now, if I could ask you to take this eggcup and make it do some cartwheels for me. …"

On the whole Harry thought it went rather well; his Levitation Charm was certainly much better than Malfoy's had been, though he wished he had not mixed up the incantations for Color-Change and Growth Charms, so that the rat he was supposed to be turning orange swelled shockingly and was the size of a badger before Harry could rectify his mistake. He was glad Hermione had not been in the Hall at the time and neglected to mention it to her afterward. He could tell Ron, though; Ron had caused a dinner plate to mutate into a large mushroom and had no idea how it had happened.

There was no time to relax that night — they went straight to the common room after dinner and submerged themselves in studying for Transfiguration next day. Harry went to bed, his head buzzing with complex spell models and theories.

He forgot the definition of a Switching Spell during his written exam next morning, but thought his practical could have been a lot worse. At least he managed to vanish the whole of his iguana, whereas poor Hannah Abbott lost her head completely at the next table and somehow managed to multiply her ferret into a flock of flamingos, causing the examination to be halted for ten minutes while the birds were captured and carried out of the Hall.

They had their Herbology exam on Wednesday (other than a small bite from a Fanged Geranium, Harry felt he had done reasonably well) and then, on Thursday, Defense Against the Dark Arts. Here, for the first time, Harry felt sure he had passed. He had no problem with any of the written questions and took particular pleasure, during the practical examination, in performing all the counterjinxes and defen-

sive spells right in front of Umbridge, who was watching coolly from near the doors into the entrance hall.

"Oh bravo!" cried Professor Tofty, who was examining Harry again, when Harry demonstrated a perfect boggart banishing spell. "Very good indeed! Well, I think that's all, Potter … unless …"

He leaned forward a little.

"I heard, from my dear friend Tiberius Ogden, that you can pro-duce a Patronus? For a bonus point … ?"

Harry raised his wand, looked directly at Umbridge, and imagined her being sacked.

"Expecto Patronum!"

The silver stag erupted from the end of his wand and cantered the length of the hall. All of the examiners looked around to watch its progress and when it dissolved into silver mist, Professor Tofty clapped his veined and knotted hands enthusiastically.

"Excellent!" he said. "Very well, Potter, you may go!"

As Harry passed Umbridge beside the door their eyes met. There was a nasty smile playing around her wide, slack mouth, but he did not care. Unless he was very much mistaken (and he was not planning on saying it to anybody, in case he was), he had just achieved an "Out-standing" O.W.L.

On Friday, Harry and Ron had a day off while Hermione sat her Ancient Runes exam, and as they had the whole weekend in front of them, they permitted themselves a break from studying. They stretched and yawned beside the open window, through which warm summer air wafted over them as they played a desultory game of wiz-ard chess. Harry could see Hagrid in the distance, teaching a class on the edge of the forest. He was trying to guess what creatures they

were examining — he thought it must be unicorns, because the boys seemed to be standing back a little — when the portrait hole opened and Hermione clambered in, looking thoroughly bad tempered.

“How were the runes?” said Ron, yawning and stretching.

“I mistranslated ‘ehwaz,’ ” said Hermione furiously. “It means ‘partnership,’ not ‘defense,’ I mixed it up with ‘eihwaz.’ ”

“Ah well,” said Ron lazily, “that’s only one mistake, isn’t it, you’ll still get —”

“Oh shut up,” said Hermione angrily, “it could be the one mistake that makes the difference between a pass and a fail. And what’s more, someone’s put another niffler in Umbridge’s office, I don’t know how they got it through that new door, but I just walked past there and Umbridge is shrieking her head off — by the sound of it, it tried to take a chunk out of her leg —”

“Good,” said Harry and Ron together.

“It is not good!” said Hermione hotly. “She thinks it’s Hagrid doing it, remember? And we do not want Hagrid chucked out!”

“He’s teaching at the moment, she can’t blame him,” said Harry, gesturing out of the window.

“Oh, you’re so naive sometimes, Harry, you really think Umbridge will wait for proof?” said Hermione, who seemed determined to be in a towering temper, and she swept off toward the girls’ dormitories, banging the door behind her.

“Such a lovely, sweet-tempered girl,” said Ron, very quietly, prod-ding his queen forward so that she could begin beating up one of Harry’s knights.

Hermione's bad mood persisted for most of the weekend, though Harry and Ron found it quite easy to ignore as they spent most of Saturday and Sunday studying for Potions on Monday, the exam to which Harry was looking forward least and which he was sure would be the one that would be the downfall of his ambitions to become an Auror. Sure enough, he found the written exam difficult, though he thought he might have got full marks on the question about Polyjuice Potion: He could describe its effects extremely accurately, having taken it illegally in his second year.

The afternoon practical was not as dreadful as he had expected it to be. With Snape absent from the proceedings he found that he was much more relaxed than he usually was while making potions. Neville, who was sitting very near Harry, also looked happier than Harry had ever seen him during a Potions class. When Professor Marchbanks said, "Step away from your cauldrons, please, the examination is over," Harry corked his sample flask feeling that he might not have achieved a good grade but that he had, with luck, avoided a fail.

"Only four exams left," said Parvati Patil wearily as they headed back to Gryffindor common room.

"Only!" said Hermione snappishly. "I've got Arithmancy and it's probably the toughest subject there is!"

Nobody was foolish enough to snap back, so she was unable to vent her spleen on any of them and was reduced to telling off some first years for giggling too loudly in the common room.

Harry was determined to perform well in Tuesday's Care of Magi-cal Creatures exam so as not to let Hagrid down. The practical examination took place in the afternoon on the lawn on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, where students were required to correctly identify the knarl hidden among a dozen hedgehogs (the trick was to offer them all milk in turn: knarls, highly suspicious creatures whose quills

had many magical properties, generally went berserk at what they saw as an attempt to poison them); then demonstrate correct handling of a bowtruckle, feed and clean a fire-crab without sustaining serious burns, and choose, from a wide selection of food, the diet they would give a sick unicorn.

Harry could see Hagrid watching anxiously out of his cabin win-dow. When Harry's examiner, a plump little witch this time, smiled at him and told him he could leave, Harry gave Hagrid a fleeting thumbs-up before heading back up to the castle.

The Astronomy theory exam on Wednesday morning went well enough; Harry was not convinced he had got the names of all of Jupiter's moons right, but was at least confident that none of them was inhabited by mice. They had to wait until evening for their practical Astronomy; the afternoon was devoted instead to Divination.

Even by Harry's low standards in Divination, the exam went very badly. He might as well have tried to see moving pictures in the desk-top as in the stubbornly blank crystal ball; he lost his head completely during tea-leaf reading, saying it looked to him as though Professor Marchbanks would shortly be meeting a round, dark, soggy stranger, and rounded off the whole fiasco by mixing up the life and head lines on her palm and informing her that she ought to have died the previous Tuesday.

"Well, we were always going to fail that one," said Ron gloomily as they ascended the marble staircase. He had just made Harry feel rather better by telling him how he told the examiner in detail about the ugly man with a wart on his nose in his crystal ball, only to look up and realize he had been describing his examiner's reflection.

"We shouldn't have taken the stupid subject in the first place," said Harry.

"Still, at least we can give it up now."

“Yeah,” said Harry. “No more pretending we care what happens when Jupiter and Uranus get too friendly …”

“And from now on, I don’t care if my tea leaves spell die, Ron, die — I’m just chucking them in the bin where they belong.”

Harry laughed just as Hermione came running up behind them. He stopped laughing at once, in case it annoyed her.

“Well, I think I’ve done all right in Arithmancy,” she said, and Harry and Ron both sighed with relief. “Just time for a quick look over our star charts before dinner, then …”

When they reached the top of the Astronomy Tower at eleven o’clock they found a perfect night for stargazing, cloudless and still. The grounds were bathed in silvery moonlight, and there was a slight chill in the air. Each of them set up his or her telescope and, when Professor Marchbanks gave the word, proceeded to fill in the blank star chart he or she had been given.

Professors Marchbanks and Tofty strolled among them, watching as they entered the precise positions of the stars and planets they were observing. All was quiet except for the rustle of parchment, the occasional creak of a telescope as it was adjusted on its stand, and the scrib-bling of many quills. Half an hour passed, then an hour; the little squares of reflected gold light flickering on the ground below started to vanish as lights in the castle windows were extinguished.

As Harry completed the constellation Orion on his chart, however, the front doors of the castle opened directly below the parapet where he was standing, so that light spilled down the stone steps a little way across the lawn. Harry glanced down as he made a slight adjustment to the position of his telescope and saw five or six elongated shadows moving over the brightly lit grass before the doors swung shut and the lawn became a sea of darkness once more.

Harry put his eye back to his telescope and refocused it, now examining Venus. He looked down at his chart to enter the planet there, but something distracted him. Pausing with his quill suspended over the parchment, he squinted down into the shadowy grounds and saw half a dozen figures walking over the lawn. If they had not been moving, and the moonlight had not been gilding the tops of their heads, they would have been indistinguishable from the dark ground on which they stood. Even at this distance, Harry had a funny feeling that he recognized the walk of the squattest among them, who seemed to be leading the group.

He could not think why Umbridge would be taking a stroll outside past midnight, much less accompanied by five others. Then some-body coughed behind him, and he remembered that he was halfway through an exam. He had quite forgotten Venus's position — jamming his eye to his telescope, he found it again and was again on the point of entering it on his chart when, alert for any odd sound, he heard a distant knock that echoed through the deserted grounds, followed immediately by the muffled barking of a large dog.

He looked up, his heart hammering. There were lights on in Ha-grid's windows and the people he had observed crossing the lawn were now silhouetted against them. The door opened and he distinctly saw six tiny but sharply defined figures walk over the threshold. The door closed again and there was silence.

Harry felt very uneasy. He glanced around to see whether Ron or Hermione had noticed what he had, but Professor Marchbanks came walking behind him at that moment, and not wanting to appear as though he was sneaking looks at anyone else's work, he hastily bent over his star chart and pretended to be adding notes to it while really peering over the top of the parapet toward Hagrid's cabin. Figures were now moving across the cabin windows, temporarily blocking the light.

He could feel Professor Marchbanks's eyes on the back of his neck and pressed his eye again to his telescope, staring up at the moon though he had marked its position an hour ago, but as Professor Marchbanks moved on he heard a roar from the distant cabin that echoed through the darkness right to the top of the Astronomy Tower. Several of the people around Harry ducked out from behind their telescopes and peered instead in the direction of Hagrid's cabin.

Professor Tofty gave another dry little cough.

"Try and concentrate, now, boys and girls," he said softly.

Most people returned to their telescopes. Harry looked to his left. Hermione was gazing transfixed at Hagrid's.

"Ahem — twenty minutes to go," said Professor Tofty.

Hermione jumped and returned at once to her star chart; Harry looked down at his own and noticed that he had mislabelled Venus as Mars. He bent to correct it.

There was a loud BANG from the grounds. Several people said "Ouch!" as they poked themselves in the face with the ends of their telescopes, hastening to see what was going on below.

Hagrid's door had burst open and by the light flooding out of the cabin they saw him quite clearly, a massive figure roaring and bran-dishing his fists, surrounded by six people, all of whom, judging by the tiny threads of red light they were casting in his direction, seemed to be attempting to Stun him.

"No!" cried Hermione.

"My dear!" said Professor Tofty in a scandalized voice. "This is an examination!"

But nobody was paying the slightest attention to their star charts anymore: Jets of red light were still flying beside Hagrid's cabin, yet somehow they seemed to be bouncing off him. He was still upright and still, as far as Harry could see, fighting. Cries and yells echoed across the grounds; a man yelled, "Be reasonable, Hagrid!" and Hagrid roared, "Reasonable be damned, yeh won' take me like this, Dawlish!"

Harry could see the tiny outline of Fang, attempting to defend Ha-grid, leaping at the wizards surrounding him until a Stunning Spell caught him and he fell to the ground. Hagrid gave a howl of fury, lifted the culprit bodily from the ground, and threw him: The man flew what looked like ten feet and did not get up again. Hermione gasped, both hands over her mouth; Harry looked around at Ron and saw that he too was looking scared. None of them had ever seen Ha-grid in a real temper before. …"Look!" squealed Parvati, who was leaning over the parapet and pointing to the foot of the castle where the front doors seemed to have opened again; more light had spilled out onto the dark lawn and a sin-gle long black shadow was now rippling across the lawn.

"Now, really!" said Professor Tofty anxiously. "Only sixteen min-utes left, you know!"

But nobody paid him the slightest attention: They were watching the person now sprinting toward the battle beside Hagrid's cabin.

"How dare you!" the figure shouted as she ran. "How dare you!"

"It's McGonagall!" whispered Hermione.

"Leave him alone! Alone, I say!" said Professor McGonagall's voice through the darkness. "On what grounds are you attacking him? He has done nothing, nothing to warrant such —"

Hermione, Parvati, and Lavender all screamed. No fewer than four Stunners had shot from the figures around the cabin toward

Professor McGonagall. Halfway between cabin and castle the red beams col-lided with her. For a moment she looked luminous, illuminated by an eerie red glow, then was lifted right off her feet, landed hard on her back, and moved no more.

“Galloping gargoyles!” shouted Professor Tofty, who seemed to have forgotten the exam completely. “Not so much as a warning! Outrageous behavior!”

“COWARDS!” bellowed Hagrid, his voice carrying clearly to the top of the tower, and several lights flickered back on inside the castle. “RUDDY COWARDS! HAVE SOME O’ THAT — AN’ THAT —”

“Oh my —” gasped Hermione.

Hagrid took two massive swipes at his closest attackers; judging by their immediate collapse, they had been knocked cold. Harry saw him double over and thought for a moment that he had finally been overcome by a spell, but on the contrary, next moment Hagrid was standing again with what appeared to be a sack on his back — then Harry realized that Fang’s limp body was draped around his shoulders.

“Get him, get him!” screamed Umbridge, but her remaining helper seemed highly reluctant to go within reach of Hagrid’s fists. Indeed, he was backing away so fast he tripped over one of his unconscious colleagues and fell over. Hagrid had turned and begun to run with Fang still hung around his neck; Umbridge sent one last Stunning Spell after him but it missed, and Hagrid, running full-pelt toward the distant gates, disappeared into the darkness.

There was a long minute’s quivering silence, everybody gazing openmouthed into the grounds. Then Professor Tofty’s voice said feebly, “Um … five minutes to go, everybody …”

Though he had only filled in two-thirds of his chart, Harry was desperate for the end of the exam. When it came at last he, Ron, and Hermione forced their telescopes haphazardly back into their holders

and dashed back down the spiral staircase. None of the students were going to bed — they were all talking loudly and excitedly at the foot of the stairs about what they had witnessed.

“That evil woman!” gasped Hermione, who seemed to be having difficulty talking due to rage. “Trying to sneak up on Hagrid in the dead of night!”

“She clearly wanted to avoid another scene like Trelawney’s,” said Ernie Macmillan sagely, squeezing over to join them.

“Hagrid did well, didn’t he?” said Ron, who looked more alarmed than impressed. “How come all the spells bounced off him?”

“It’ll be his giant blood,” said Hermione shakily. “It’s very hard to Stun a giant, they’re like trolls, really tough. … But poor Professor McGonagall. … Four Stunners straight in the chest, and she’s not ex-actly young, is she?”

“Dreadful, dreadful,” said Ernie, shaking his head pompously. “Well, I’m off to bed. … ’Night, all …”

People around them were drifting away, still talking excitedly about what they had just seen.

“At least they didn’t get to take Hagrid off to Azkaban,” said Ron. “I ’spect he’s gone to join Dumbledore, hasn’t he?”

“I suppose so,” said Hermione, who looked tearful. “Oh, this is aw-ful, I really thought Dumbledore would be back before long, but now we’ve lost Hagrid too. …”

They traipsed back to the Gryffindor common room to find it full. The commotion out in the grounds had woken several people, who had hastened to rouse their friends. Seamus and Dean, who had ar-rived ahead of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, were now telling everyone what they had heard from the top of the Astronomy Tower.

"But why sack Hagrid now?" asked Angelina Johnson, shaking her head. "It's not like Trelawney, he's been teaching much better than usual this year!"

"Umbridge hates part-humans," said Hermione bitterly, flopping down into an armchair. "She was always going to try and get Hagrid out."

"And she thought Hagrid was putting nifflers in her office," piped up Katie Bell.

"Oh blimey," said Lee Jordan, covering his mouth. "It's me's been putting the nifflers in her office, Fred and George left me a couple, I've been levitating them in through her window. …"

"She'd have sacked him anyway," said Dean. "He was too close to Dumbledore."

"That's true," said Harry, sinking into an armchair beside Her-mione's.

"I just hope Professor McGonagall's all right," said Lavender tearfully.

"They carried her back up to the castle, we watched through the dor-mitory window," said Colin Creevey "She didn't look very well. …"

"Madam Pomfrey will sort her out," said Alicia Spinnet firmly. "She's never failed yet."

It was nearly four in the morning before the common room cleared. Harry felt wide awake — the image of Hagrid sprinting away into the dark was haunting him. He was so angry with Umbridge he could not think of a punishment bad enough for her, though Ron's suggestion of having her fed to a box of starving Blast-Ended Skrewts had its merits. He fell asleep contemplating hideous revenges and arose from bed three hours later feeling distinctly unrested.

Their final exam, History of Magic, was not to take place until that afternoon. Harry would very much have liked to go back to bed after

breakfast, but he had been counting on the morning for a spot of last-minute studying, so instead he sat with his head in his hands by the common room window, trying hard not to doze off as he read through some of the notes stacked three-and-a-half feet high that Hermione had lent him.

The fifth years entered the Great Hall at two o'clock and took their places in front of their overturned examination papers. Harry felt exhausted. He just wanted this to be over so that he could go and sleep. Then tomorrow, he and Ron were going to go down to the Quidditch pitch — he was going to have a fly on Ron's broom and savor their freedom from studying. …"Turn over your papers," said Professor Marchbanks from the front of the Hall, flicking over the giant hourglass. "You may begin. …"

Harry stared fixedly at the first question. It was several seconds before it occurred to him that he had not taken in a word of it; there was a wasp buzzing distractingly against one of the high windows. Slowly, tortuously, he began to write an answer.

He was finding it very difficult to remember names and kept confusing dates. He simply skipped question four: In your opinion, did wand legislation contribute to, or lead to better control of, goblin riots of the eighteenth century? thinking that he would go back to it if he had time at the end. He had a stab at question five: How was the Statute of Secrecy breached in 1749 and what measures were introduced to prevent a recurrence? but had a nagging suspicion that he had missed several im-portant points. He had a feeling vampires had come into the story somewhere. …He looked ahead for a question he could definitely answer and his eyes alighted upon number ten.

Describe the circumstances that led to the Formation of the International Confederation of Wizards and explain why the warlocks of Liecht-enstein refused to join.

I know this, Harry thought, though his brain felt torpid and slack. He could visualize a heading, in Hermione's handwriting: The Forma-tion of the International Confederation of Wizards… He had read these notes only this morning. …He began to write, looking up now and again to check the large hourglass on the desk beside Professor Marchbanks. He was sitting right behind Parvati Patil, whose long dark hair fell below the back of her chair. Once or twice he found himself staring at the tiny golden lights that glistened in it when she moved her head very slightly and had to give his own head a little shake to clear it.

… the first Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards was Pierre Bonaccord, but his appointment was contested by the Wizarding community of Liechtenstein, because —All around Harry quills were scratching on parchment like scurry-ing, burrowing rats. The sun was very hot on the back of his head. What was it that Bonaccord had done to offend the wizards of Liecht-enstein? Harry had a feeling it had something to do with trolls. … He gazed blankly at the back of Parvati's head again. If he could only perform Legilimency and open a window in the back of her head and see what it was about trolls that had caused the breach between Pierre Bonaccord and Liechtenstein. …Harry closed his eyes and buried his face in his hands, so that the glowing red of his eyelids grew dark and cool. Bonaccord had wanted to stop troll-hunting and give the trolls rights … but Liechtenstein was having problems with a tribe of particularly vicious mountain trolls. … That was it. …He opened his eyes; they stung and watered at the sight of the blaz-ing-white parchment. Slowly he wrote two lines about the trolls then read through what he had done so far. It did not seem very informa-tive or detailed, yet he was sure Hermione's notes on the confedera-tion had gone on for pages and pages. …He closed his eyes again, trying to see them, trying to remember. … The confederation had met for the first time in France, yes, he had written that already. …Goblins had tried to attend and been ousted. … He had written that too. …And nobody from Liechtenstein had wanted to come …Think, he told himself, his face in his hands, while all around him quills scratched out never-ending

answers and the sand trickled through the hourglass at the front. … He was walking along the cool, dark corridor to the Department of Mysteries again, walking with a firm and purposeful tread, breaking occasionally into a run, determined to reach his destination at last. … The black door swung open for him as usual, and here he was in the circular room with its many doors. …Straight across the stone floor and through the second door … patches of dancing light on the walls and floor and that odd mechan-ical clicking, but no time to explore, he must hurry. …He jogged the last few feet to the third door, which swung open just like the others. …Once again he was in the cathedral-sized room full of shelves and glass spheres. … His heart was beating very fast now. … He was go-ing to get there this time. … When he reached number ninety-seven he turned left and hurried along the aisle between two rows. …But there was a shape on the floor at the very end, a black shape moving upon the floor like a wounded animal. … Harry's stomach contracted with fear … with excitement. …A voice issued from his own mouth, a high, cold voice empty of any human kindness, "Take it for me. … Lift it down, now. … I cannot touch it … but you can. …"

The black shape upon the floor shifted a little. Harry saw a long-fingered white hand clutching a wand rise on the end of his own arm … heard the high, cold voice say, "Crucio!"

The man on the floor let out a scream of pain, attempted to stand but fell back, writhing. Harry was laughing. He raised his wand, the curse lifted, and the figure groaned and became motionless.

"Lord Voldemort is waiting. …"

Very slowly, his arms trembling, the man on the ground raised his shoulders a few inches and lifted his head. His face was bloodstained and gaunt, twisted in pain yet rigid with defiance. …"You'll have to kill me," whispered Sirius.

“Undoubtedly I shall in the end,” said the cold voice. “But you will fetch it for me first, Black. … You think you have felt pain thus far? Think again. … We have hours ahead of us and nobody to hear you scream. …”

But somebody screamed as Voldemort lowered his wand again; somebody yelled and fell sideways off a hot desk onto the cold stone floor. Harry hit the ground and awoke, still yelling, his scar on fire, as the Great Hall erupted all around him.

Chapter 32 Out of the Fire

“I’m not going. … I don’t need the hospital wing. … I don’t want …”

He was gibbering, trying to pull away from Professor Tofty, who was looking at him with much concern, and who had just helped Harry out into the entrance hall while the students all around them stared.

“I’m — I’m fine, sir,” Harry stammered, wiping the sweat from his face. “Really … I just fell asleep. … Had a nightmare …”

“Pressure of examinations!” said the old wizard sympathetically, patting Harry shakily on the shoulder. “It happens, young man, it happens! Now, a cooling drink of water, and perhaps you will be ready to return to the Great Hall? The examination is nearly over, but you may be able to round off your last answer nicely?”

“Yes,” said Harry wildly. “I mean … no … I’ve done — done as much as I can, I think. …”

“Very well, very well,” said the old wizard gently. “I shall go and collect your examination paper, and I suggest that you go and have a nice lie down. …”

“I’ll do that,” said Harry, nodding vigorously. “Thanks very much.”

He waited for the second when the old man’s heels disappeared over the threshold into the Great Hall, then ran up the marble stair-case and then more staircases toward the hospital wing, hurtling along the corridors so fast that the portraits he passed muttered reproaches, and burst through the double doors like a hurricane, causing Madam Pomfrey, who had been spooning some bright blue liquid into Montague’s open mouth, to shriek in alarm.

“Potter, what do you think you’re doing?”

“I need to see Professor McGonagall,” gasped Harry, the breath tearing his lungs. “Now … It’s urgent. …”

“She’s not here, Potter,” said Madam Pomfrey sadly. “She was transferred to St. Mungo’s this morning. Four Stunning Spells straight to the chest at her age? It’s a wonder they didn’t kill her.”

“She’s … gone?” said Harry, stunned.

The bell rang just outside the dormitory, and he heard the usual distant rumbling of students starting to flood out into the corridors above and below him. He remained quite still, looking at Madam Pomfrey. Terror was rising inside him.

There was nobody left to tell. Dumbledore had gone, Hagrid had gone, but he had always expected Professor McGonagall to be there, irascible and inflexible, perhaps, but always dependably, solidly present. …“I don’t wonder you’re shocked, Potter,” said Madam Pomfrey with a kind of fierce approval in her face. “As if one of them could have Stunned Minerva McGonagall face on by daylight! Cowardice, that’s what it was. … Despicable cowardice … If I wasn’t worried what would happen to you students without me, I’d resign in protest. …”

“Yes,” said Harry blankly.

He strode blindly from the hospital wing into the teeming corridor where he stood, buffeted by the crowd, the panic expanding inside him like poison gas so that his head swam and he could not think what to do. …Ron and Hermione, said a voice in his head.

He was running again, pushing students out of the way, oblivious to their angry protests and shouts. He sprinted back down two floors and was at the top of the marble staircase when he saw them hurrying toward him.

"Harry!" said Hermione at once, looking very frightened. "What happened? Are you all right? Are you ill?"

"Where have you been?" demanded Ron.

"Come with me," Harry said quickly. "Come on, I've got to tell you something. …"

He led them along the first-floor corridor, peering through door-ways, and at last found an empty classroom into which he dived, clos-ing the door behind Ron and Hermione the moment they were inside and leaning against it, facing them.

"Voldemort's got Sirius."

"What?"

"How d'you — ?"

"Saw it. Just now. When I fell asleep in the exam."

"But — but where? How?" said Hermione, whose face was white.

"I dunno how," said Harry. "But I know exactly where. There's a room in the Department of Mysteries full of shelves covered in these little glass balls, and they're at the end of row ninety-seven … He's trying to use Sirius to get whatever it is he wants from in there. … He's torturing him. … Says he'll end by killing him …"

Harry found his voice was shaking, as were his knees. He moved over to a desk and sat down on it, trying to master himself.

"How're we going to get there?" he asked them.

There was a moment's silence. Then Ron said, "G-get there?"

"Get to the Department of Mysteries, so we can rescue Sirius!" Harry said loudly.

“But — Harry …” said Ron weakly.

“What? What?” said Harry.

He could not understand why they were both gaping at him as though he was asking them something unreasonable.

“Harry,” said Hermione in a rather frightened voice, “er … how … how did Voldemort get into the Ministry of Magic without any-body realizing he was there?”

“How do I know?” bellowed Harry. “The question is how we’re going to get in there!”

“But … Harry, think about this,” said Hermione, taking a step toward him, “it’s five o’clock in the afternoon. … The Ministry of Magic must be full of workers. … How would Voldemort and Sirius have got in without being seen? Harry … they’re probably the two most wanted wizards in the world. … You think they could get into a building full of Aurors undetected?”

“I dunno, Voldemort used an Invisibility Cloak or something!” Harry shouted. “Anyway, the Department of Mysteries has always been completely empty whenever I’ve been —”

“You’ve never been there, Harry,” said Hermione quietly. “You’ve dreamed about the place, that’s all.”

“They’re not normal dreams!” Harry shouted in her face, standing up and taking a step closer to her in turn. He wanted to shake her. “How d’you explain Ron’s dad then, what was all that about, how come I knew what had happened to him?”

“He’s got a point,” said Ron quietly, looking at Hermione.

“But this is just — just so unlikely!” said Hermione desperately. “Harry, how on earth could Voldemort have got hold of Sirius when

he's been in Grimmauld Place all the time?"

"Sirius might've cracked and just wanted some fresh air," said Ron, sounding worried. "He's been desperate to get out of that house for ages —"

"But why," Hermione persisted, "why on earth would Voldemort want to use Sirius to get the weapon, or whatever the thing is?"

"I dunno, there could be loads of reasons!" Harry yelled at her. "Maybe Sirius is just someone Voldemort doesn't care about seeing hurt —"

"You know what, I've just thought of something," said Ron in a hushed voice. "Sirius's brother was a Death Eater, wasn't he? Maybe he told Sirius the secret of how to get the weapon!"

"Yeah — and that's why Dumbledore's been so keen to keep Sirius locked up all the time!" said Harry.

"Look, I'm sorry," cried Hermione, "but neither of you are making sense, and we've got no proof for any of this, no proof Voldemort and Sirius are even there —"

"Hermione, Harry's seen them!" said Ron, rounding on her.

"Okay," she said, looking frightened yet determined, "I've just got to say this. …"

"What?"

"You … This isn't a criticism, Harry! But you do … sort of … I mean — don't you think you've got a bit of a — a — saving-people-thing?" she said.

He glared at her. "And what's that supposed to mean, a 'saving-people-thing'?"

“Well … you …” She looked more apprehensive than ever. “I mean … last year, for instance … in the lake … during the Tourna-ment … you shouldn’t have … I mean, you didn’t need to save that little Delacour girl. … You got a bit … carried away …”

A wave of hot, prickly anger swept Harry’s body — how could she remind him of that blunder now?

“… I mean, it was really great of you and everything,” said Hermione quickly, looking positively petrified at the look on Harry’s face. “Everyone thought it was a wonderful thing to do —”

“That’s funny,” said Harry in a trembling voice, “because I definitely remember Ron saying I’d wasted time acting the hero. … Is that what you think this is? You reckon I want to act the hero again?”

“No, no, no!” said Hermione, looking aghast. “That’s not what I mean at all!”

“Well, spit out what you’ve got to say, because we’re wasting time here!” Harry shouted.

“I’m trying to say — Voldemort knows you, Harry! He took Ginny down into the Chamber of Secrets to lure you there, it’s the kind of thing he does, he knows you’re the — the sort of person who’d go to Sirius’s aid! What if he’s just trying to get you into the Department of Myst — ?”

“Hermione, it doesn’t matter if he’s done it to get me there or not — they’ve taken McGonagall to St. Mungo’s, there isn’t anyone left from the Order at Hogwarts who we can tell, and if we don’t go, Sirius is dead!”

“But Harry — what if your dream was — was just that, a dream?”

Harry let out a roar of frustration. Hermione actually stepped back from him, looking alarmed.

"You don't get it!" Harry shouted at her. "I'm not having night-mares, I'm not just dreaming! What d'you think all the Occlumency was for, why d'you think Dumbledore wanted me prevented from seeing these things? Because they're REAL, Hermione — Sirius is trapped — I've seen him — Voldemort's got him, and no one else knows, and that means we're the only ones who can save him, and if you don't want to do it, fine, but I'm going, understand? And if I re-member rightly, you didn't have a problem with my saving-people-thing when it was you I was saving from the dementors, or" — he rounded on Ron — "when it was your sister I was saving from the basilisk —"

"I never said I had a problem!" said Ron heatedly.

"But Harry, you've just said it," said Hermione fiercely. "Dumbledore wanted you to learn to shut these things out of your mind, if you'd done Occlumency properly you'd never have seen this —"

"IF YOU THINK I'M JUST GOING TO ACT LIKE I HAVEN'T SEEN —"

"Sirius told you there was nothing more important than you learn-ing to close your mind!"

"WELL, I EXPECT HE'D SAY SOMETHING DIFFERENT IF HE KNEW WHAT I'D JUST —"

The classroom door opened. Harry, Ron, and Hermione whipped around. Ginny walked in, looking curious, followed by Luna, who as usual looked as though she had drifted in accidentally.

"Hi," said Ginny uncertainly. "We recognized Harry's voice — what are you yelling about?"

"Never you mind," said Harry roughly.

Ginny raised her eyebrows.

“There’s no need to take that tone with me,” she said coolly. “I was only wondering whether I could help.”

“Well, you can’t,” said Harry shortly.

“You’re being rather rude, you know,” said Luna serenely.

Harry swore and turned away. The very last thing he wanted now was a conversation with Luna Lovegood.

“Wait,” said Hermione suddenly. “Wait … Harry, they can help.”

Harry and Ron looked at her.

“Listen,” she said urgently, “Harry, we need to establish whether Sirius really has left headquarters —”

“I’ve told you, I saw —”

“Harry, I’m begging you, please!” said Hermione desperately. “Please let’s just check that Sirius isn’t at home before we go charging off to London — if we find out he’s not there then I swear I won’t try and stop you, I’ll come, I’ll d-do whatever it takes to try and save him —”

“Sirius is being tortured NOW!” shouted Harry. “We haven’t got time to waste —”

“But if this is a trick of V-Voldemort’s — Harry, we’ve got to check, we’ve got to —”

“How?” Harry demanded. “How’re we going to check?”

“We’ll have to use Umbridge’s fire and see if we can contact him,” said Hermione, who looked positively terrified at the thought. “We’ll draw Umbridge away again, but we’ll need lookouts, and that’s where we can use Ginny and Luna.”

Though clearly struggling to understand what was going on, Ginny said immediately, “Yeah, we’ll do it,” and Luna said, “When you say ‘Sirius,’ are you talking about Stubby Boardman?”

Nobody answered her.

“Okay,” Harry said aggressively to Hermione, “Okay, if you can think of a way of doing this quickly, I’m with you, otherwise I’m go-ing to the Department of Mysteries right now —”

“The Department of Mysteries?” said Luna, looking mildly sur-prised. “But how are you going to get there?”

Again, Harry ignored her.

“Right,” said Hermione, twisting her hands together and pacing up and down between the desks. “Right … well … One of us has to go and find Umbridge and — and send her off in the wrong direction, keep her away from her office. They could tell her — I don’t know — that Peeves is up to something awful as usual. …”

“I’ll do it,” said Ron at once. “I’ll tell her Peeves is smashing up the Transfiguration department or something, it’s miles away from her of-fice. Come to think of it, I could probably persuade Peeves to do it if I met him on the way. …”

It was a mark of the seriousness of the situation that Hermione made no objection to the smashing up of the Transfiguration department.

“Okay,” she said, her brow furrowed as she continued to pace. “Now, we need to keep students away from her office while we force entry, or some Slytherin’s bound to go and tip her off. …”

“Luna and I can stand at either end of the corridor,” said Ginny promptly, “and warn people not to go down there because someone’s let off a load of Garroting Gas.” Hermione looked surprised at the readiness with which Ginny had come up with this lie. Ginny

shrugged and said, “Fred and George were planning to do it before they left.”

“Okay,” said Hermione, “well then, Harry, you and I will be under the Invisibility Cloak, and we’ll sneak into the office and you can talk to Sirius —”

“He’s not there, Hermione!”

“I mean, you can — can check whether Sirius is at home or not while I keep watch, I don’t think you should be in there alone, Lee’s already proved the window’s a weak spot, sending those nifflers through it.”

Even through his anger and impatience Harry recognized Hermione’s offer to accompany him into Umbridge’s office as a sign of solidarity and loyalty.

“I … okay, thanks,” he muttered.

“Right, well, even if we do all of that, I don’t think we’re going to be able to bank on more than five minutes,” said Hermione, looking relieved that Harry seemed to have accepted the plan, “not with Filch and the wretched Inquisitorial Squad floating around.”

“Five minutes’ll be enough,” said Harry. “C’mon, let’s go —”

“Now?” said Hermione, looking shocked.

“Of course now!” said Harry angrily. “What did you think, we’re going to wait until after dinner or something? Hermione, Sirius is be-ing tortured right now!”

“I — oh all right,” she said desperately. “You go and get the Invisibility Cloak and we’ll meet you at the end of Umbridge’s corridor, okay?”

Harry did not answer, but flung himself out of the room and began to fight his way through the milling crowds outside. Two floors up he met Seamus and Dean, who hailed him jovially and told him they were planning a dusk-till-dawn end-of-exams celebration in the com-mon room. Harry barely heard them. He scrambled through the por-trait hole while they were still arguing about how many black-market butterbeers they would need and was climbing back out of it, the In-visibility Cloak and Sirius's knife secure in his bag, before they noticed he had left them.

"Harry, d'you want to chip in a couple of Galleons? Harold Dingle reckons he could sell us some firewhisky. …"

But Harry was already tearing away back along the corridor, and a couple of minutes later was jumping the last few stairs to join Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Luna, who were huddled together at the end of Umbridge's corridor.

"Got it," he panted. "Ready to go, then?"

"All right," whispered Hermione as a gang of loud sixth years passed them. "So Ron — you go and head Umbridge off. … Ginny, Luna, if you can start moving people out of the corridor. … Harry and I will get the cloak on and wait until the coast is clear. …"

Ron strode away, his bright red hair visible right to the end of the passage. Meanwhile, Ginny's equally vivid head bobbed between the jostling students surrounding them in the other direction, trailed by Luna's blonde one.

"Get over here," muttered Hermione, tugging at Harry's wrist and pulling him back into a recess where the ugly stone head of a medieval wizard stood muttering to itself on a column. "Are — are you sure you're okay, Harry? You're still very pale. …"

"I'm fine," he said shortly, tugging the Invisibility Cloak from out of his bag. In truth, his scar was aching, but not so badly that he thought

Voldemort had yet dealt Sirius a fatal blow. It had hurt much worse than this when Voldemort had been punishing Avery. …“Here,” he said. He threw the Invisibility Cloak over both of them and they stood listening carefully over the Latin mumblings of the bust in front of them.

“You can’t come down here!” Ginny was calling to the crowd. “No, sorry, you’re going to have to go round by the swiveling staircase, someone’s let off Garroting Gas just along here —”

They could hear people complaining; one surly voice said, “I can’t see no gas …”

“That’s because it’s colorless,” said Ginny in a convincingly exasperated voice, “but if you want to walk through it, carry on, then we’ll have your body as proof for the next idiot who didn’t believe us. …”

Slowly the crowd thinned. The news about the Garroting Gas seemed to have spread — people were not coming this way anymore. When at last the surrounding area was quite clear, Hermione said qui-etly, “I think that’s as good as we’re going to get, Harry — come on, let’s do it.”

Together they moved forward, covered by the cloak. Luna was standing with her back to them at the far end of the corridor. As they passed Ginny, Hermione whispered, “Good one … don’t forget the signal …”

“What’s the signal?” muttered Harry, as they approached Urn-bridge’s door.

“A loud chorus of ‘Weasley Is Our King’ if they see Umbridge coming,” replied Hermione, as Harry inserted the blade of Sirius’s knife in the crack between door and wall. The lock clicked open, and they entered the office.

The garish kittens were basking in the late afternoon sunshine warming their plates, but otherwise the office was as still and empty as last time. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

"I thought she might have added extra security after the second niffler. …"

They pulled off the cloak. Hermione hurried over to the window and stood out of sight, peering down into the grounds with her wand out. Harry dashed over to the fireplace, seized the pot of Floo powder, and threw a pinch into the grate, causing emerald flames to burst into life there. He knelt down quickly, thrust his head into the dancing fire, and cried, "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!"

His head began to spin as though he had just got off a fairground ride though his knees remained firmly planted upon the cold office floor. He kept his eyes screwed up against the whirling ash, and when the spinning stopped, he opened them to find himself looking out upon the long, cold kitchen of Grimmauld Place.

There was nobody there. He had expected this, yet was not prepared for the molten wave of dread and panic that seemed to burst through his stomach floor at the sight of the deserted room.

"Sirius?" he shouted. "Sirius, are you there?"

His voice echoed around the room, but there was no answer except a tiny scuffing sound to the right of the fire.

"Who's there?" he called, wondering whether it was just a mouse.

Kreacher the house-elf came creeping into view. He looked highly delighted about something, though he seemed to have recently sustained a nasty injury to both hands, which were heavily bandaged.

"It's the Potter boy's head in the fire," Kreacher informed the empty kitchen, stealing furtive, oddly triumphant glances at Harry. "What has

he come for, Kreacher wonders?”

“Where’s Sirius, Kreacher?” Harry demanded.

The house-elf gave a wheezy chuckle. “Master has gone out, Harry Potter.”

“Where’s he gone? Where’s he gone, Kreacher?”

Kreacher merely cackled.

“I’m warning you!” said Harry, fully aware that his scope for inflict-ing punishment upon Kreacher was almost nonexistent in this position. “What about Lupin? Mad-Eye? Any of them, are any of them here?”

“Nobody here but Kreacher!” said the elf gleefully, and turning away from Harry he began to walk slowly toward the door at the end of the kitchen. “Kreacher thinks he will have a little chat with his Mistress now, yes, he hasn’t had a chance in a long time, Kreacher’s Master has been keeping him away from her —”

“Where has Sirius gone?” Harry yelled after the elf. “Kreacher, has he gone to the Department of Mysteries?”

Kreacher stopped in his tracks. Harry could just make out the back of his bald head through the forest of chair legs before him.

“Master does not tell poor Kreacher where he is going,” said the elf quietly.

“But you know!” shouted Harry. “Don’t you? You know where he is!”

There was a moment’s silence, then the elf let out his loudest cackle yet. “Master will not come back from the Department of Mysteries!” he said gleefully. “Kreacher and his Mistress are alone again!”

And he scurried forward and disappeared through the door to the hall.

“You — !”

But before he could utter a single curse or insult, Harry felt a great pain at the top of his head. He inhaled a lot of ash and, choking, found himself being dragged backward through the flames until, with a horrible abruptness, he was staring up into the wide, pallid face of Professor Umbridge, who had dragged him backward out of the fire by the hair and was now bending his neck back as far as it would go as though she was going to slit his throat.

“You think,” she whispered, bending Harry’s neck back even far-ther, so that he was looking up at the ceiling above him, “that after two nifflers I was going to let one more foul, scavenging little creature enter my office without my knowledge? I had Stealth Sensoring Spells placed all around my doorway after the last one got in, you foolish boy. Take his wand,” she barked at someone he could not see, and he felt a hand grope inside the chest pocket of his robes and remove the wand. “Hers too …”

Harry heard a scuffle over by the door and knew that Hermione had just had her wand wrested from her as well.

“I want to know why you are in my office,” said Umbridge, shak-ing the fist clutching his hair so that he staggered.

“I was — trying to get my Firebolt!” Harry croaked.

“Liar.” She shook his head again. “Your Firebolt is under strict guard in the dungeons, as you very well know, Potter. You had your head in my fire. With whom have you been communicating?”

“No one —” said Harry, trying to pull away from her. He felt sev-eral hairs part company with his scalp.

“Liar!” shouted Umbridge. She threw him from her, and he slammed into the desk. Now he could see Hermione pinioned against the wall by Millicent Bulstrode. Malfoy was leaning on the win-dowsill,

smirking as he threw Harry's wand into the air one-handed and then caught it again.

There was a commotion outside and several large Slytherins entered, each gripping Ron, Ginny, Luna, and — to Harry's bewil-derment — Neville, who was trapped in a stranglehold by Crabbe and looked in imminent danger of suffocation. All four of them had been gagged.

"Got 'em all," said Warrington, shoving Ron roughly forward into the room. "That one." he poked a thick finger at Neville, "tried to stop me taking her," he pointed at Ginny, who was trying to kick the shins of the large Slytherin girl holding her, "so I brought him along too."

"Good, good," said Umbridge, watching Ginny's struggles. "Well, it looks as though Hogwarts will shortly be a Weasley-free zone, doesn't it?"

Malfoy laughed loudly and sycophantically. Umbridge gave her wide, complacent smile and settled herself into a chintz-covered arm-chair, blinking up at her captives like a toad in a flowerbed.

"So, Potter," she said. "You stationed lookouts around my office and you sent this buffoon," she nodded at Ron, and Malfoy laughed even louder, "to tell me the poltergeist was wreaking havoc in the Transfiguration department when I knew perfectly well that he was busy smearing ink on the eyepieces of all the school telescopes, Mr. Filch having just informed me so.

"Clearly, it was very important for you to talk to somebody. Was it Albus Dumbledore? Or the half-breed, Hagrid? I doubt it was Min-erva McGonagall, I hear she is still too ill to talk to anyone. …"

Malfoy and a few of the other members of the Inquisitorial Squad laughed some more at that. Harry found he was so full of rage and ha-tred he was shaking.

"It's none of your business who I talk to," he snarled.

Umbridge's slack face seemed to tighten.

"Very well," she said in her most dangerous and falsely sweet voice. "Very well, Mr. Potter … I offered you the chance to tell me freely. You refused. I have no alternative but to force you. Draco — fetch Professor Snape."

Malfoy stowed Harry's wand inside his robes and left the room smirking, but Harry hardly noticed. He had just realized some-thing; he could not believe he had been so stupid as to forget it. He had thought that all the members of the Order, all those who could help him save Sirius, were gone — but he had been wrong. There was still a member of the Order of the Phoenix at Hogwarts — Snape.

There was silence in the office except for the fidgetings and scuf-flings resultant from the Slytherins' efforts to keep Ron and the others under control. Ron's lip was bleeding onto Umbridge's carpet as he struggled against Warrington's half nelson. Ginny was still trying to stamp on the feet of the sixth-year girl who had both her upper arms in a tight grip. Neville was turning steadily more purple in the face while tugging at Crabbe's arms, and Hermione was attempting vainly to throw Millicent Bulstrode off her. Luna, however, stood limply by the side of her captor, gazing vaguely out of the window as though rather bored by the proceedings.

Harry looked back at Umbridge, who was watching him closely. He kept his face deliberately smooth and blank as footsteps were heard in the corridor outside and Draco Malfoy came back into the room, holding open the door for Snape.

"You wanted to see me, Headmistress?" said Snape, looking around at all the pairs of struggling students with an expression of complete indifference.

"Ah, Professor Snape," said Umbridge, smiling widely and standing up again. "Yes, I would like another bottle of Veritaserum, as quick as you can, please."

“You took my last bottle to interrogate Potter,” he said, observing her coolly through his greasy curtains of black hair. “Surely you did not use it all? I told you that three drops would be sufficient.”

Umbridge flushed.

“You can make some more, can’t you?” she said, her voice becom-ing more sweetly girlish as it always did when she was furious.

“Certainly,” said Snape, his lip curling. “It takes a full moon cycle to mature, so I should have it ready for you in around a month.”

“A month?” squawked Umbridge, swelling toadishly. “A month? But I need it this evening, Snape! I have just found Potter using my fire to communicate with a person or persons unknown!”

“Really?” said Snape, showing his first, faint sign of interest as he looked around at Harry. “Well, it doesn’t surprise me. Potter has never shown much inclination to follow school rules.”

His cold, dark eyes were boring into Harry’s, who met his gaze unflinchingly, concentrating hard on what he had seen in his dream, willing Snape to read it in his mind, to understand …“I wish to interrogate him!” shouted Umbridge angrily, and Snape looked away from Harry back into her furiously quivering face. “I wish you to provide me with a potion that will force him to tell me the truth!”

“I have already told you,” said Snape smoothly, “that I have no further stocks of Veritaserum. Unless you wish to poison Potter — and I assure you I would have the greatest sympathy with you if you did — I cannot help you. The only trouble is that most venoms act too fast to give the victim much time for truth-telling. …”

Snape looked back at Harry, who stared at him, frantic to communicate without words.

Voldemort's got Sirius in the Department of Mysteries, he thought des-perately. Voldemort's got Sirius —"You are on probation!" shrieked Professor Umbridge, and Snape looked back at her, his eyebrows slightly raised. "You are being delib-erately unhelpful! I expected better, Lucius Malfoy always speaks most highly of you! Now get out of my office!"

Snape gave her an ironic bow and turned to leave. Harry knew his last chance of letting the Order know what was going on was walking out of the door.

"He's got Padfoot!" he shouted. "He's got Padfoot at the place where it's hidden!"

Snape had stopped with his hand on Umbridge's door handle.

"Padfoot?" cried Professor Umbridge, looking eagerly from Harry to Snape. "What is Padfoot? Where what is hidden? What does he mean, Snape?"

Snape looked around at Harry. His face was inscrutable. Harry could not tell whether he had understood or not, but he did not dare speak more plainly in front of Umbridge.

"I have no idea," said Snape coldly. "Potter, when I want nonsense shouted at me I shall give you a Babbling Beverage. And Crabbe, loosen your hold a little, if Longbottom suffocates it will mean a lot of tedious paperwork, and I am afraid I shall have to mention it on your reference if ever you apply for a job."

He closed the door behind him with a snap, leaving Harry in a state of worse turmoil than before: Snape had been his very last hope. He looked at Umbridge, who seemed to be feeling the same way; her chest was heaving with rage and frustration.

"Very well," she said, and she pulled out her wand. "Very well … I am left with no alternative. … This is more than a matter of school

discipline. … This is an issue of Ministry security. … Yes … yes …"

She seemed to be talking herself into something. She was shifting her weight nervously from foot to foot, staring at Harry, beating her wand against her empty palm and breathing heavily. Harry felt horribly powerless without his own wand as he watched her.

"You are forcing me, Potter. … I do not want to," said Umbridge, still moving restlessly on the spot, "but sometimes circumstances jus-tify the use … I am sure the Minister will understand that I had no choice. …"

Malfoy was watching her with a hungry expression on his face.

"The Cruciatus Curse ought to loosen your tongue," said Um-bridge quietly.

"No!" shrieked Hermione. "Professor Umbridge — it's illegal" — but Umbridge took no notice. There was a nasty, eager, excited look on her face that Harry had never seen before. She raised her wand.

"The Minister wouldn't want you to break the law, Professor Umbridge!" cried Hermione.

"What Cornelius doesn't know won't hurt him," said Umbridge, who was now panting slightly as she pointed her wand at different parts of Harry's body in turn, apparently trying to decide what would hurt the most. "He never knew I ordered dementors after Potter last summer, but he was delighted to be given the chance to expel him, all the same. …"

"It was you?" gasped Harry. "You sent the dementors after me?"

"Somebody had to act," breathed Umbridge, as her wand came to rest pointing directly at Harry's forehead. "They were all bleating about silencing you somehow — discrediting you — but I was the one

who actually did something about it. … Only you wriggled out of that one, didn't you, Potter? Not today, though, not now …"

And taking a deep breath, she cried, "Cruc —"

"NO!" shouted Hermione in a cracked voice from behind Milli-cent Bulstrode. "No — Harry — Harry, we'll have to tell her!"

"No way!" yelled Harry, staring at the little of Hermione he could see.

"We'll have to, Harry, she'll force it out of you anyway, what's … what's the point… ?"

And Hermione began to cry weakly into the back of Millicent Bulstrode's robes. Millicent stopped trying to squash her against the wall immediately and dodged out of her way looking disgusted.

"Well, well, well!" said Umbridge, looking triumphant. "Little Miss Question-All is going to give us some answers! Come on then, girl, come on!"

"Er — my — nee — no!" shouted Ron through his gag.

Ginny was staring at Hermione as though she had never seen her before; Neville, still choking for breath, was gazing at her too. But Harry had just noticed something. Though Hermione was sobbing desperately into her hands, there was no trace of a tear. …"I'm — I'm sorry everyone," said Hermione. "But — I can't stand it —"

"That's right, that's right, girl!" said Umbridge, seizing Hermione by the shoulders, thrusting her into the abandoned chintz chair and leaning over her. "Now then … with whom was Potter communicating just now?"

"Well," gulped Hermione into her hands, "well, he was trying to speak to Professor Dumbledore. …"

Ron froze, his eyes wide; Ginny stopped trying to stamp on her Slytherin captor's toes; even Luna looked mildly surprised. Fortunately, the attention of Umbridge and her minions was focused too exclusively upon Hermione to notice these suspicious signs.

"Dumbledore?" said Umbridge eagerly. "You know where Dumbledore is, then?"

"Well … no!" sobbed Hermione. "We've tried the Leaky Caul-dron in Diagon Alley and the Three Broomsticks and even the Hog's Head —"

"Idiot girl, Dumbledore won't be sitting in a pub when the whole Ministry's looking for him!" shouted Umbridge, disappointment etched in every sagging line of her face.

"But — but we needed to tell him something important!" wailed Hermione, holding her hands more tightly over her face, not, Harry knew, out of anguish, but to disguise the continued absence of tears.

"Yes?" said Umbridge with a sudden resurgence of excitement. "What was it you wanted to tell him?"

"We … we wanted to tell him it's r-ready!" choked Hermione.

"What's ready?" demanded Umbridge, and now she grabbed Hermione's shoulders again and shook her slightly. "What's ready, girl?"

"The … the weapon," said Hermione.

"Weapon? Weapon?" said Umbridge, and her eyes seemed to pop with excitement. "You have been developing some method of resistance? A weapon you could use against the Ministry? On Professor Dumbledore's orders, of course?"

“Y-y-yes,” gasped Hermione. “But he had to leave before it was finished and n-n-now we’ve finished it for him, and we c-c-can’t find him t-t-to tell him!”

“What kind of weapon is it?” said Umbridge harshly, her stubby hands still tight on Hermione’s shoulders.

“We don’t r-r-really understand it,” said Hermione, sniffing loudly. “We j-j-just did what P-P-Professor Dumbledore told us t-t-to do …”

Umbridge straightened up, looking exultant.

“Lead me to the weapon,” she said.

“I’m not showing … them,” said Hermione shrilly, looking around at the Slytherins through her fingers.

“It is not for you to set conditions,” said Professor Umbridge harshly.

“Fine,” said Hermione, now sobbing into her hands again, “fine … let them see it, I hope they use it on you! In fact, I wish you’d in-vite loads and loads of people to come and see! Th-that would serve you right — oh, I’d love it if the wh-whole school knew where it was, and how to u-use it, and then if you annoy any of them they’ll be able to s-sort you out!”

These words had a powerful impact on Umbridge. She glanced swiftly and suspiciously around at her Inquisitorial Squad, her bulging eyes resting for a moment on Malfoy, who was too slow to disguise the look of eagerness and greed that had appeared on his face.

Umbridge contemplated Hermione for another long moment and then spoke in what she clearly thought was a motherly voice. “All right, dear, let’s make it just you and me … and we’ll take Potter too, shall we? Get up, now —”

“Professor,” said Malfoy eagerly, “Professor Umbridge, I think some of the squad should come with you to look after —”

“I am a fully qualified Ministry official, Malfoy, do you really think I cannot manage two wandless teenagers alone?” asked Umbridge sharply. “In any case, it does not sound as though this weapon is something that schoolchildren should see. You will remain here until I return and make sure none of these” — she gestured around at Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna — “escape.”

“All right,” said Malfoy, looking sulky and disappointed.

“And you two can go ahead of me and show me the way,” said Umbridge, pointing at Harry and Hermione with her wand. “Lead on. …”

Chapter 33 Fight and Flight

Harry had no idea what Hermione was planning, or even whether she had a plan. He walked half a pace behind her as they headed down the corridor outside Umbridge's office, knowing it would look very suspicious if he appeared not to know where they were going. He did not dare attempt to talk to her; Umbridge was walking so closely behind them that he could hear her ragged breathing.

Hermione led the way down the stairs into the entrance hall. The din of loud voices and the clatter of cutlery on plates echoed from out of the double doors to the Great Hall. It seemed incredible to Harry that twenty feet away were people who were enjoying dinner, cele-brating the end of exams, not a care in the world. …Hermione walked straight out of the oak front doors and down the stone steps into the balmy evening air. The sun was falling toward the tops of the trees in the Forbidden Forest now as Hermione marched purposefully across the grass, Umbridge jogging to keep up. Their long dark shadows rippled over the grass behind them like cloaks.

"It's hidden in Hagrid's hut, is it?" said Umbridge eagerly in Harry's ear.

"Of course not," said Hermione scathingly. "Hagrid might have set it off accidentally."

"Yes," said Umbridge, whose excitement seemed to be mounting. "Yes, he would have done, of course, the great half-breed oaf. …"

She laughed. Harry felt a strong urge to swing around and seize her by the throat, but resisted. His scar was throbbing in the soft evening air but it had not yet burned white-hot, as he knew it would if Voldemort had moved in for the kill. …"Then … where is it?" asked Umbridge, with a hint of uncertainty in her voice as Hermione continued to stride toward the forest.

“In there, of course,” said Hermione, pointing into the dark trees. “It had to be somewhere that students weren’t going to find it accidentally, didn’t it?”

“Of course,” said Umbridge, though she sounded a little apprehensive now. “Of course … very well, then … you two stay ahead of me.”

“Can we have your wand, then, if we’re going first?” Harry asked her.

“No, I don’t think so, Mr. Potter,” said Umbridge sweetly, poking him in the back with it. “The Ministry places a rather higher value on my life than yours, I’m afraid.”

As they reached the cool shade of the first trees, Harry tried to catch Hermione’s eye; walking into the forest without wands seemed to him to be more foolhardy than anything they had done so far this evening. She, however, merely gave Umbridge a contemptuous glance and plunged straight into the trees, moving at such a pace that Umbridge, with her shorter legs, had difficulty in keeping up.

“Is it very far in?” Umbridge asked, as her robe ripped on a bramble.

“Oh yes,” said Hermione. “Yes, it’s well hidden.”

Harry’s misgivings increased. Hermione was not taking the path they had followed to visit Grawp, but the one he had followed three years ago to the lair of the monster Aragog. Hermione had not been with him on that occasion; he doubted she had any idea what danger lay at the end of it.

“Er — are you sure this is the right way?” he asked her pointedly.

“Oh yes,” she said in a steely voice, crashing through the undergrowth with what he thought was a wholly unnecessary amount of noise. Behind them, Umbridge tripped over a fallen sapling. Neither of them paused to help her up again; Hermione merely strode on, calling loudly over her shoulder, “It’s a bit further in!”

“Hermione, keep your voice down,” Harry muttered, hurrying to catch up with her. “Anything could be listening in here —”

“I want us heard,” she answered quietly, as Umbridge jogged nois-ily after them. “You’ll see. …”

They walked on for what seemed a long time, until they were once again so deep into the forest that the dense tree canopy blocked out all light. Harry had the feeling he had had before in the forest, one of be-ing watched by unseen eyes. …“How much further?” demanded Umbridge angrily from behind him.

“Not far now!” shouted Hermione, as they emerged into a dim, dank clearing. “Just a little bit —”

An arrow flew through the air and landed with a menacing thud in the tree just over her head. The air was suddenly full of the sound of hooves. Harry could feel the forest floor trembling; Umbridge gave a little scream and pushed him in front of her like a shield —He wrenched himself free of her and turned. Around fifty centaurs were emerging on every side, their bows raised and loaded, pointing at Harry, Hermione, and Umbridge, who backed slowly into the center of the clearing, Umbridge uttering odd little whimpers of terror. Harry looked sideways at Hermione. She was wearing a triumphant smile.

“Who are you?” said a voice.

Harry looked left. The chestnut-bodied centaur called Magorian was walking toward them out of the circle; his bow, like the others’, was raised. On Harry’s right, Umbridge was still whimpering, her wand trembling violently as she pointed it at the advancing centaur.

“I asked you who are you, human,” said Magorian roughly.

“I am Dolores Umbridge!” said Umbridge in a high-pitched, terri-fied voice. “Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic and Head-mistress and High Inquisitor of Hogwarts!”

“You are from the Ministry of Magic?” said Magorian, as many of the centaurs in the surrounding circle shifted restlessly.

“That’s right!” said Umbridge in an even higher voice. “So be very careful! By the laws laid down by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, any attack by half-breeds such as yourselves on a human —”

“What did you call us?” shouted a wild-looking black centaur, whom Harry recognized as Bane. There was a great deal of angry muttering and tightening of bowstrings around them.

“Don’t call them that!” Hermione said furiously, but Umbridge did not appear to have heard her. Still pointing her shaking wand at Magorian, she continued, “Law Fifteen B states clearly that ‘Any attack by a magical creature who is deemed to have near-human intelligence, and therefore considered responsible for its actions —’ ”

“ ‘Near-human intelligence’?” repeated Magorian, as Bane and several others roared with rage and pawed the ground. “We consider that a great insult, human! Our intelligence, thankfully, far outstrips your own —”

“What are you doing in our forest?” bellowed the hard-faced gray centaur whom Harry and Hermione had seen on their last trip into the forest. “Why are you here?”

“Your forest?” said Umbridge, shaking now not only with fright but also, it seemed, with indignation. “I would remind you that you live here only because the Ministry of Magic permits you certain areas of land —”

An arrow flew so close to her head that it caught at her mousy hair in passing. She let out an earsplitting scream and threw her hands over her head while some of the centaurs bellowed their approval and others laughed raucously. The sound of their wild, neighing laughter

echoing around the dimly lit clearing and the sight of their pawing hooves was extremely unnerving.

“Whose forest is it now, human?” bellowed Bane.

“Filthy half-breeds!” she screamed, her hands still tight over her head. “Beasts! Uncontrolled animals!”

“Be quiet!” shouted Hermione, but it was too late — Umbridge pointed her wand at Magorian and screamed, “Incarcerous!”

Ropes flew out of midair like thick snakes, wrapping themselves tightly around the centaur’s torso and trapping his arms. He gave a cry of rage and reared onto his hind legs, attempting to free himself, while the other centaurs charged.

Harry grabbed Hermione and pulled her to the ground. Facedown on the forest floor he knew a moment of terror as hooves thundered around him, but the centaurs leapt over and around them, bellowing and screaming with rage.

“Nooooo!” he heard Umbridge shriek. “Noooooo … I am Senior Undersecretary … you cannot … unhand me, you animals … nooooo!”

He saw a flash of red light and knew that she had attempted to Stun one of them — then she screamed very loudly. Lifting his head a few inches, Harry saw that Umbridge had been seized from behind by Bane and lifted high into the air, wriggling and yelling with fright. Her wand fell from her hand to the ground and Harry’s heart leapt, if he could just reach it —But as he stretched out a hand toward it, a centaur’s hoof descended upon the wand and it broke cleanly in half.

“Now!” roared a voice in Harry’s ear and a thick hairy arm descended from thin air and dragged him upright; Hermione too had been pulled to her feet. Over the plunging, many-colored backs and heads of the centaurs Harry saw Umbridge being borne away

through the trees by Bane, still screaming nonstop; her voice grew fainter and fainter until they could no longer hear it over the trampling of hooves surrounding them.

"And these?" said the hard-faced, gray centaur holding Hermione.

"They are young," said a slow, doleful voice from behind Harry. "We do not attack foals."

"They brought her here, Ronan," replied the centaur who had such a firm grip on Harry. "And they are not so young. … He is nearing manhood, this one. …"

He shook Harry by the neck of his robes.

"Please," said Hermione breathlessly, "please, don't attack us, we don't think like her, we aren't Ministry of Magic employees! We only came in here because we hoped you'd drive her off for us —"

Harry knew at once from the look on the face of the gray centaur holding Hermione that she had made a terrible mistake in saying this. The gray centaur threw back his head, his back legs stamping furiously, and bellowed, "You see, Ronan? They already have the arrogance of their kind! So we were to do your dirty work, were we, human girl? We were to act as your servants, drive away your enemies like obedient hounds?"

"No!" said Hermione in a horrorstruck squeak. "Please — I didn't mean that! I just hoped you'd be able to — to help us —"

But she seemed to be going from bad to worse.

"We do not help humans!" snarled the centaur holding Harry, tightening his grip and rearing a little at the same time, so that Harry's feet left the ground momentarily. "We are a race apart and proud to be so. … We will not permit you to walk from here, boasting that we did your bidding!"

“We’re not going to say anything like that!” Harry shouted. “We know you didn’t do anything because we wanted you to —”

But nobody seemed to be listening to him. A bearded centaur to-ward the back of the crowd shouted, “They came here unasked, they must pay the consequences!”

A roar of approval met these words and a dun-colored centaur shouted, “They can join the woman!”

“You said you didn’t hurt the innocent!” shouted Hermione, real tears sliding down her face now. “We haven’t done anything to hurt you, we haven’t used wands or threats, we just want to go back to school, please let us go back —”

“We are not all like the traitor Firenze, human girl!” shouted the gray centaur, to more neighing roars of approval from his fellows. “Perhaps you thought us pretty talking horses? We are an ancient peo-ple who will not stand wizard invasions and insults! We do not recog-nize your laws, we do not acknowledge your superiority, we are —”

But they did not hear what else centaurs were, for at that moment there came a crashing noise on the edge of the clearing so loud that all of them — Harry, Hermione, and the fifty or so centaurs filling the clearing — looked around. Harry’s centaur let him fall to the ground again as his hands flew to his bow and quiver of arrows; Hermione had been dropped too, and Harry hurried toward her as two thick tree trunks parted ominously and the monstrous form of Grawp the giant appeared in the gap.

The centaurs nearest him backed into those behind. The clearing was now a forest of bows and arrows waiting to be fired, all pointing upward at the enormous grayish face now looming over them from just beneath the thick canopy of branches. Grawp’s lopsided mouth was gaping stupidly. They could see his bricklike yellow teeth glim-mering in the half-light, his dull sludge-colored eyes narrowed as he

squinted down at the creatures at his feet. Broken ropes trailed from both ankles.

He opened his mouth even wider.

“Hagger.”

Harry did not know what “hagger” meant, or what language it was from, nor did he much care — he was watching Grawp’s feet, which were almost as long as Harry’s whole body. Hermione gripped his arm tightly; the centaurs were quite silent, staring up at the giant, whose huge, round head moved from side to side as he continued to peer amongst them as though looking for something he had dropped.

“Hagger!” he said again, more insistently.

“Get away from here, giant!” called Magorian. “You are not wel-come among us!”

These words seemed to make no impression whatsoever on Grawp. He stooped a little (the centaurs’ arms tensed on their bows) and then bellowed, “HAGGER!”

A few of the centaurs looked worried now. Hermione, however, gave a gasp.

“Harry!” she whispered. “I think he’s trying to say ‘Hagrid’!”

At this precise moment Grawp caught sight of them, the only two humans in a sea of centaurs. He lowered his head another foot or so, staring intently at them. Harry could feel Hermione shaking as Grawp opened his mouth wide again and said, in a deep, rumbling voice, “Hermy.”

“Goodness,” said Hermione, gripping Harry’s arm so tightly it was growing numb and looking as though she was about to faint, “he — he remembered!”

“HERMY!” roared Grawp. “WHERE HAGGER?”

“I don’t know!” squealed Hermione, terrified. “I’m sorry, Grawp, I don’t know!”

“GRAWP WANT HAGGER!”

One of the giant’s massive hands swooped down upon them — Hermione let out a real scream, ran a few steps backward and fell over. Wandless, Harry braced himself to punch, kick, bite, or whatever else it took as the hand flew toward him and knocked a snow-white cen-taur off his legs.

It was what the centaurs had been waiting for — Grawp’s out-stretched fingers were a foot from Harry when fifty arrows went soar-ing through the air at the giant, peppering his enormous face, causing him to howl with pain and rage and straighten up again, rubbing his face with his enormous hands, breaking off the arrow shafts but forc-ing the heads in still deeper.

He yelled and stamped his enormous feet and the centaurs scat-tered out of the way. Pebble-sized droplets of Grawp’s blood showered Harry as he pulled Hermione to her feet and the pair of them ran as fast as they could for the shelter of the trees. Once there they looked back — Grawp was snatching blindly at the centaurs as blood ran all down his face; they were retreating in disorder, galloping away through the trees on the other side of the clearing. As Harry and Hermione watched, Grawp gave another roar of fury and plunged af-ter them, smashing more trees aside as he went.

“Oh no,” said Hermione, quaking so badly that her knees gave way. “Oh, that was horrible. And he might kill them all. …”

“I’m not that fussed, to be honest,” said Harry bitterly.

The sounds of the galloping centaurs and the blundering giant were growing fainter and fainter. As Harry listened to them his scar gave

another great throb and a wave of terror swept over him.

They had wasted so much time — they were even further from rescuing Sirius than they had been when he had had the vision. Not only had Harry managed to lose his wand but they were stuck in the middle of the Forbidden Forest with no means of transport whatsoever.

“Smart plan,” he spat at Hermione, keen to release some of his fury. “Really smart plan. Where do we go from here?”

“We need to get back up to the castle,” said Hermione faintly.

“By the time we’ve done that, Sirius’ll probably be dead!” said Harry, kicking a nearby tree in temper; there was a high-pitched chattering overhead and he looked up to see an angry bowtruckle flex-ing its long twiglike fingers at him.

“Well, we can’t do anything without wands,” said Hermione hopelessly, dragging herself up again. “Anyway, Harry, how exactly were you planning to get all the way to London?”

“Yeah, we were just wondering that,” said a familiar voice from behind her.

Harry and Hermione moved instinctively together, peering through the trees, as Ron came into sight, with Ginny, Neville, and Luna hurrying along behind him. All of them looked a little the worse for wear — there were several long scratches running the length of Ginny’s cheek, a large purple lump was swelling above Neville’s right eye, Ron’s lip was bleeding worse than ever — but all were looking rather pleased with themselves.

“So,” said Ron, pushing aside a low-hanging branch and holding out Harry’s wand, “had any ideas?”

“How did you get away?” asked Harry in amazement, taking his wand from Ron.

"Couple of Stunners, a Disarming Charm, Neville brought off a re-ally nice little Impediment Jinx," said Ron airily, now handing back Hermione's wand too. "But Ginny was best, she got Malfoy — Bat-Bogey Hex — it was superb, his whole face was covered in the great flapping things. Anyway, we saw you heading into the forest out of the window and followed. What've you done with Umbridge?"

"She got carried away," said Harry. "By a herd of centaurs."

"And they left you behind?" asked Ginny, looking astonished.

"No, they got chased off by Grawp," said Harry.

"Who's Grawp?" Luna asked interestedly.

"Hagrid's little brother," said Ron promptly. "Anyway, never mind that now. Harry, what did you find out in the fire? Has You-Know-Who got Sirius or — ?"

"Yes," said Harry, as his scar gave another painful prickle, "and I'm sure Sirius is still alive, but I can't see how we're going to get there to help him."

They all fell silent, looking rather scared. The problem facing them seemed insurmountable.

"Well, we'll have to fly, won't we?" said Luna in the closest thing to a matter-of-fact voice Harry had ever heard her use.

"Okay," said Harry irritably, rounding on her, "first of all, 'we' aren't doing anything if you're including yourself in that, and second of all, Ron's the only one with a broomstick that isn't being guarded by a security troll, so —"

"I've got a broom!" said Ginny.

"Yeah, but you're not coming," said Ron angrily.

“Excuse me, but I care what happens to Sirius as much as you do!” said Ginny, her jaw set so that her resemblance to Fred and George was suddenly striking.

“You’re too —” Harry began.

“I’m three years older than you were when you fought You-Know-Who over the Sorcerer’s Stone,” she said fiercely, “and it’s because of me Malfoy’s stuck back in Umbridge’s office with giant flying bogeys attacking him —”

“Yeah, but —”

“We were all in the D.A. together,” said Neville quietly. “It was all supposed to be about fighting You-Know-Who, wasn’t it? And this is the first chance we’ve had to do something real — or was that all just a game or something?”

“No — of course it wasn’t —” said Harry impatiently.

“Then we should come too,” said Neville simply. “We want to help.”

“That’s right,” said Luna, smiling happily.

Harry’s eyes met Ron’s. He knew that Ron was thinking exactly what he was: If he could have chosen any members of the D.A. in ad-dition to himself, Ron, and Hermione to join him in the attempt to rescue Sirius, he would not have picked Ginny, Neville, or Luna.

“Well, it doesn’t matter anyway,” said Harry frustratedly, “because we still don’t know how to get there —”

“I thought we’d settled that?” said Luna maddeningly. “We’re flying!”

“Look,” said Ron, barely containing his anger, “you might be able to fly without a broomstick but the rest of us can’t sprout wings when-ever we —”

“There are other ways of flying than with broomsticks,” said Luna serenely.

“I s’pose we’re going to ride on the back of the Kacky Snorgle or whatever it is?” Ron demanded.

“The Crumple-Horned Snorkack can’t fly,” said Luna in a dignified voice, “but they can, and Hagrid says they’re very good at finding places their riders are looking for.”

Harry whirled around. Standing between two trees, their white eyes gleaming eerily, were two thestrals, watching the whispered con-versation as though they understood every word.

“Yes!” he whispered, moving toward them. They tossed their reptil-ian heads, throwing back long black manes, and Harry stretched out his hand eagerly and patted the nearest one’s shining neck. How could he ever have thought them ugly?

“Is it those mad horse things?” said Ron uncertainly, staring at a point slightly to the left of the thestral Harry was patting. “Those ones you can’t see unless you’ve watched someone snuff it?”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“How many?”

“Just two.”

“Well, we need three,” said Hermione, who was still looking a lit-tle shaken, but determined just the same.

“Four, Hermione,” said Ginny, scowling.

“I think there are six of us, actually,” said Luna calmly, counting.

“Don’t be stupid, we can’t all go!” said Harry angrily. “Look, you three” — he pointed at Neville, Ginny, and Luna — “you’re not in-volved in

this, you're not —"

They burst into more protests. His scar gave another, more painful, twinge. Every moment they delayed was precious; he did not have time to argue.

"Okay, fine, it's your choice," he said curtly. "But unless we can find more thestrals you're not going to be able —"

"Oh, more of them will come," said Ginny confidently, who like Ron was squinting in quite the wrong direction, apparently under the impression that she was looking at the horses.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because in case you hadn't noticed, you and Hermione are both covered in blood," she said coolly, "and we know Hagrid lures thestrals with raw meat, so that's probably why these two turned up in the first place. …"

Harry felt a soft tug on his robes at that moment and looked down to see the closest thestral licking his sleeve, which was damp with Grawp's blood.

"Okay, then," he said, a bright idea occurring. "Ron and I will take these two and go ahead, and Hermione can stay here with you three and she'll attract more thestrals —"

"I'm not staying behind!" said Hermione furiously.

"There's no need," said Luna, smiling. "Look, here come more now. … You two must really smell. …"

Harry turned. No fewer than six or seven thestrals were picking their way through the trees now, their great leathery wings folded tight to their bodies, their eyes gleaming through the darkness. He had no excuse now. …"All right," he said angrily, "pick one and get on, then."

Chapter 34 The Department of Mysteries

Harry wound his hand tightly into the mane of the nearest thestral, placed a foot on a stump nearby, and scrambled clumsily onto the horse's silken back. It did not object, but twisted its head around, fangs bared, and attempted to continue its eager licking of his robes.

He found there was a way of lodging his knees behind the wing joints that made him feel more secure and looked around at the oth-ers. Neville had heaved himself over the back of the next thestral and was now attempting to swing one short leg over the creature's back. Luna was already in place, sitting sidesaddle and adjusting her robes as though she did this every day. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, however, were still standing motionless on the spot, openmouthed and staring.

"What?" he said.

"How're we supposed to get on?" said Ron faintly. "When we can't see the things?"

"Oh it's easy," said Luna, sliding obligingly from her thestral and marching over to him, Hermione, and Ginny. "Come here. …"

She pulled them over to the other thestrals standing around and one by one managed to help them onto the backs of their mounts. All three looked extremely nervous as she wound their hands into the horses' manes and told them to grip tightly before getting back onto her own steed.

"This is mad," Ron said faintly, moving his free hand gingerly up and down his horse's neck. "Mad … if I could just see it —"

"You'd better hope it stays invisible," said Harry darkly. "We all ready, then?"

They all nodded and he saw five pairs of knees tighten beneath their robes.

“Okay …”

He looked down at the back of his thestral’s glossy black head and swallowed. “Ministry of Magic, visitors’ entrance, London, then,” he said uncertainly. “Er … if you know … where to go …”

For a moment his thestral did nothing at all. Then, with a sweep-ing movement that nearly unseated him, the wings on either side extended, the horse crouched slowly and then rocketed upward so fast and so steeply that Harry had to clench his arms and legs tightly around the horse to avoid sliding backward over its bony rump. He closed his eyes and put his face down into the horse’s silky mane as they burst through the topmost branches of the trees and soared out into a bloodred sunset.

Harry did not think he had ever moved so fast: The thestral streaked over the castle, its wide wings hardly beating. The cooling air was slapping Harry’s face; eyes screwed up against the rushing wind, he looked around and saw his five fellows soaring along behind him, each of them bent as low as possible into the neck of their thestral to protect themselves from its slipstream.

They were over the Hogwarts grounds, they had passed Hogsmeade. Harry could see mountains and gullies below them. In the falling darkness Harry saw small collections of lights as they passed over more villages, then a winding road on which a single car was beetling its way home through the hills. …“This is bizarre!” Harry heard Ron yell from somewhere behind him, and he imagined how it must feel to be speeding along at this height with no visible means of support. …Twilight fell: The sky turned to a light, dusky purple littered with tiny silver stars, and soon it was only the lights of Muggle towns that gave them any clue of how far from the ground they were or how very fast they were traveling. Harry’s arms were wrapped tightly

around his horse's neck as he willed it to go even faster. How much time had elapsed since he had seen Sirius lying on the Department of Mysteries floor? How much longer would he be able to resist Voldemort? All Harry knew for sure was that Sirius had neither done as Voldemort wanted, nor died, for he was convinced that either outcome would cause him to feel Voldemort's jubilation or fury course through his own body, making his scar sear as painfully as it had on the night Mr. Weasley was attacked. …On they flew through the gathering darkness; Harry's face felt stiff and cold, his legs numb from gripping the thestral's sides so tightly, but he did not dare shift positions lest he slip. … He was deaf from the thundering in his ears and his mouth was dry and frozen from the rush of cold night air. He had lost all sense of how far they had come; all his faith was in the beast below him, still streaking purposefully through the night, barely flapping its wings as it sped ever onward. …If they were too late …

He's still alive, he's still fighting, I can feel it. …If Voldemort decided Sirius was not going to crack …I'd know. …

Harry's stomach gave a jolt. The thestral's head was suddenly pointing toward the ground and he had actually slid forward a few inches along its neck. They were descending at last. … He heard one of the girls shriek behind him and twisted around dangerously but could see no sign of a falling body. … Presumably they had received a shock from the change of position, just as he had. …And now bright orange lights were growing larger and rounder on all sides. They could see the tops of buildings, streams of headlights like luminous insect eyes, squares of pale yellow that were windows. Quite suddenly, it seemed, they were hurtling toward the pavement. Harry gripped the thestral with every last ounce of his strength, braced for a sudden impact, but the horse touched the dark ground as lightly as a shadow and Harry slid from his back, looking around at the street where the overflowing dumpster still stood a short way from the vandalized telephone box, both drained of color in the flat orange glare of the streetlights.

Ron landed a short way away and toppled immediately off his thestral onto the pavement.

"Never again," he said, struggling to his feet. He made as though to stride away from his thestral, but, unable to see it, collided with its hindquarters and almost fell over again. "Never, ever again … that was the worst —"

Hermione and Ginny touched down on either side of him. Both slid off their mounts a little more gracefully than Ron, though with similar expressions of relief at being back on firm ground. Neville jumped down, shaking, but Luna dismounted smoothly.

"Where do we go from here, then?" she asked Harry in a politely interested voice, as though this was all a rather interesting day-trip.

"Over here," he said. He gave his thestral a quick, grateful pat, then led the way quickly to the battered telephone box and opened the door. "Come on!" he urged the others as they hesitated.

Ron and Ginny marched in obediently; Hermione, Neville, and Luna squashed themselves in after them; Harry took one glance back at the thestrals, now foraging for scraps of rotten food inside the dumpster, then forced himself into the box after Luna.

"Whoever's nearest the receiver, dial six two four four two!" he said.

Ron did it, his arm bent bizarrely to reach the dial. As it whirred back into place the cool female voice sounded inside the box, "Wel-come to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business."

"Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger," Harry said very quickly, "Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood … We're here to save someone, unless your Ministry can do it first!"

"Thank you," said the cool female voice. "Visitors, please take the badges and attach them to the front of your robes."

Half a dozen badges slid out of the metal chute where returned coins usually appeared. Hermione scooped them up and handed them mutely to Harry over Ginny's head; he glanced at the topmost one.

HARRY POTTER

RESCUE MISSION

"Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium."

"Fine!" Harry said loudly, as his scar gave another throb. "Now can we move?"

The floor of the telephone box shuddered and the pavement rose up past the glass windows of the telephone box. The scavenging thestrals were sliding out of sight, blackness closed over their heads, and with a dull grinding noise they sank down into the depths of the Ministry of Magic.

A chink of soft golden light hit their feet and, widening, rose up their bodies. Harry bent his knees and held his wand as ready as he could in such cramped conditions, peering through the glass to see whether anybody was waiting for them in the Atrium, but it seemed to be completely empty. The light was dimmer than it had been by day. There were no fires burning under the mantelpieces set into the walls, but he saw as the lift slid smoothly to a halt that golden symbols continued to twist sinuously in the dark blue ceiling.

"The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant evening," said the woman's voice.

The door of the telephone box burst open; Harry toppled out of it, followed by Neville and Luna. The only sound in the Atrium was the steady rush of water from the golden fountain, where jets from the wands of the witch and wizard, the point of the centaur's arrow, the tip

of the goblin's hat, and the house-elf's ears continued to gush into the surrounding pool.

"Come on," said Harry quietly and the six of them sprinted off down the hall, Harry in the lead, past the fountain, toward the desk where the security man who had weighed Harry's wand had sat and which was now deserted.

Harry felt sure that there ought to be a security person there, sure that their absence was an ominous sign, and his feeling of foreboding increased as they passed through the golden gates to the lifts. He pressed the nearest down button and a lift clattered into sight almost immediately, the golden grilles slid apart with a great, echoing clanking, and they dashed inside. Harry stabbed the number nine button, the grilles closed with a bang, and the lift began to descend, jangling and rattling. Harry had not realized how noisy the lifts were on the day that he had come with Mr. Weasley — he was sure that the din would raise every security person within the building, yet when the lift halted, the cool female voice said, "Department of Mysteries," and the grilles slid open again, they stepped out into the corridor where nothing was moving but the nearest torches, flickering in the rush of air from the lift.

Harry turned toward the plain black door. After months and months of dreaming about it, he was here at last. …"Let's go," he whispered, and he led the way down the corridor, Luna right behind him, gazing around with her mouth slightly open.

"Okay, listen," said Harry, stopping again within six feet of the door. "Maybe … maybe a couple of people should stay here as a — as a lookout, and —"

"And how're we going to let you know something's coming?" asked Ginny, her eyebrows raised. "You could be miles away."

"We're coming with you, Harry," said Neville.

“Let’s get on with it,” said Ron firmly.

Harry still did not want to take them all with him, but it seemed he had no choice. He turned to face the door and walked forward. Just as it had in his dream, it swung open and he marched forward, leading the others over the threshold.

They were standing in a large, circular room. Everything in here was black including the floor and ceiling — identical, unmarked, handleless black doors were set at intervals all around the black walls, interspersed with branches of candles whose flames burned blue, their cool, shimmering light reflected in the shining marble floor so that it looked as though there was dark water underfoot.

“Someone shut the door,” Harry muttered.

He regretted giving this order the moment Neville had obeyed it. Without the long chink of light from the torch-lit corridor behind them, the place became so dark that for a moment the only things they could see were the bunches of shivering blue flames on the walls and their ghostly reflections in the floor below.

In his dream, Harry had always walked purposefully across this room to the door immediately opposite the entrance and walked on. But there were around a dozen doors here. Just as he was gazing ahead at the doors opposite him, trying to decide which was the right one, there was a great rumbling noise and the candles began to move side-ways. The circular wall was rotating.

Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm as though frightened the floor might move too, but it did not. For a few seconds the blue flames around them were blurred to resemble neon lines as the wall sped around and then, quite as suddenly as it had started, the rumbling stopped and everything became stationary once again.

Harry’s eyes had blue streaks burned into them; it was all he could see.

“What was that about?” whispered Ron fearfully.

“I think it was to stop us knowing which door we came in from,” said Ginny in a hushed voice.

Harry realized at once that she was right: He could no sooner have picked the exit from the other doors than located an ant upon the jet-black floor. Meanwhile, the door through which they needed to proceed could be any of the dozen surrounding them.

“How’re we going to get back out?” said Neville uncomfortably.

“Well, that doesn’t matter now,” said Harry forcefully, blinking to try and erase the blue lines from his vision, and clutching his wand tighter than ever. “We won’t need to get out till we’ve found Sirius —”

“Don’t go calling for him, though!” Hermione said urgently, but Harry had never needed her advice less; his instinct was to keep as quiet as possible for the time being.

“Where do we go, then, Harry?” Ron asked.

“I don’t —” Harry began. He swallowed. “In the dreams I went through the door at the end of the corridor from the lifts into a dark room — that’s this one — and then I went through another door into a room that kind of … glitters. We should try a few doors,” he said hastily. “I’ll know the right way when I see it. C’mon.”

He marched straight at the door now facing him, the others follow-ing close behind him, set his left hand against its cool, shining surface, raised his wand, ready to strike the moment it opened, and pushed. It swung open easily.

After the darkness of the first room, the lamps hanging low on golden chains from this ceiling gave the impression that this long rectangular room was much brighter, though there were no glittering, shimmering lights such as Harry had seen in his dreams. The place

was quite empty except for a few desks and, in the very middle of the room, an enormous glass tank of deep-green water, big enough for all of them to swim in, which contained a number of pearly white objects that were drifting around lazily in the liquid.

"What're those things?" whispered Ron.

"Dunno," said Harry.

"Are they fish?" breathed Ginny.

"Aquavirius maggots!" said Luna excitedly. "Dad said the Ministry were breeding —"

"No," said Hermione. She sounded odd. She moved forward to look through the side of the tank. "They're brains."

"Brains?"

"Yes … I wonder what they're doing with them?"

Harry joined her at the tank. Sure enough, there could be no mis-take now that he saw them at close quarters. Glimmering eerily they drifted in and out of sight in the depths of the green water, looking something like slimy cauliflowers.

"Let's get out of here," said Harry. "This isn't right, we need to try another door —"

"There are doors here too," said Ron, pointing around the walls. Harry's heart sank; how big was this place?

"In my dream I went through that dark room into the second one," he said. "I think we should go back and try from there."

So they hurried back into the dark, circular room; the ghostly shapes of the brains were now swimming before Harry's eyes instead of the blue candle flames.

“Wait!” said Hermione sharply, as Luna made to close the door of the brain room behind them. “Flagrate!”

She drew with her wand in midair and a fiery X appeared on the door. No sooner had the door clicked shut behind them than there was a great rumbling, and once again the wall began to revolve very fast, but now there was a great red-gold blur in amongst the faint blue, and when all became still again, the fiery cross still burned, showing the door they had already tried.

“Good thinking,” said Harry. “Okay, let’s try this one —”

Again he strode directly at the door facing him and pushed it open, his wand still raised, the others at his heels.

This room was larger than the last, dimly lit and rectangular, and the center of it was sunken, forming a great stone pit some twenty feet be-low them. They were standing on the topmost tier of what seemed to be stone benches running all around the room and descending in steep steps like an amphitheater, or the courtroom in which Harry had been tried by the Wizengamot. Instead of a chained chair, however, there was a raised stone dais in the center of the lowered floor, and upon this dais stood a stone archway that looked so ancient, cracked, and crumbling that Harry was amazed the thing was still standing. Unsupported by any surrounding wall, the archway was hung with a tattered black cur-tain or veil which, despite the complete stillness of the cold surround-ing air, was fluttering very slightly as though it had just been touched.

“Who’s there?” said Harry, jumping down onto the bench below. There was no answering voice, but the veil continued to flutter and sway.

“Careful!” whispered Hermione.

Harry scrambled down the benches one by one until he reached the stone bottom of the sunken pit. His footsteps echoed loudly as he

walked slowly toward the dais. The pointed archway looked much taller from where he stood now than when he had been looking down on it from above. Still the veil swayed gently, as though somebody had just passed through it.

“Sirius?” Harry spoke again, but much more quietly now that he was nearer.

He had the strangest feeling that there was someone standing right behind the veil on the other side of the archway. Gripping his wand very tightly, he edged around the dais, but there was nobody there. All that could be seen was the other side of the tattered black veil.

“Let’s go,” called Hermione from halfway up the stone steps. “This isn’t right, Harry, come on, let’s go. …”

She sounded scared, much more scared than she had in the room where the brains swam, yet Harry thought the archway had a kind of beauty about it, old though it was. The gently rippling veil intrigued him; he felt a very strong inclination to climb up on the dais and walk through it.

“Harry, let’s go, okay?” said Hermione more forcefully.

“Okay,” he said, but he did not move. He had just heard some-thing. There were faint whispering, murmuring noises coming from the other side of the veil.

“What are you saying?” he said very loudly, so that the words echoed all around the surrounding stone benches.

“Nobody’s talking, Harry!” said Hermione, now moving over to him.

“Someone’s whispering behind there,” he said, moving out of her reach and continuing to frown at the veil. “Is that you, Ron?”

“I’m here, mate,” said Ron, appearing around the side of the arch-way.

“Can’t anyone else hear it?” Harry demanded, for the whispering and murmuring was becoming louder; without really meaning to put it there, he found his foot was on the dais.

“I can hear them too,” breathed Luna, joining them around the side of the archway and gazing at the swaying veil. “There are people in there!”

“What do you mean, ‘in there’?” demanded Hermione, jumping down from the bottom step and sounding much angrier than the oc-casion warranted. “There isn’t any ‘in there,’ it’s just an archway, there’s no room for anybody to be there — Harry, stop it, come away —”

She grabbed his arm and pulled, but he resisted.

“Harry, we are supposed to be here for Sirius!” she said in a high-pitched, strained voice.

“Sirius,” Harry repeated, still gazing, mesmerized, at the continu-ously swaying veil. “Yeah …”

And then something slid back into place in his brain: Sirius, cap-tured, bound, and tortured, and he was staring at this archway. …He took several paces back from the dais and wrenched his eyes from the veil.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to — well, come on, then!” said Hermione, and she led the way back around the dais. On the other side, Ginny and Neville were staring, apparently entranced, at the veil too. Without speaking, Hermione took hold of Ginny’s arm, Ron Neville’s, and they marched them firmly back to the lowest stone bench and clambered all the way back up to the door.

"What d'you reckon that arch was?" Harry asked Hermione as they regained the dark circular room.

"I don't know, but whatever it was, it was dangerous," she said firmly, again inscribing a fiery cross upon the door.

Once more the wall spun and became still again. Harry approached a door at random and pushed. It did not move.

"What's wrong?" said Hermione.

"It's … locked …" said Harry, throwing his weight at the door, but it did not budge.

"This is it, then, isn't it?" said Ron excitedly, joining Harry in the attempt to force the door open. "Bound to be!"

"Get out of the way!" said Hermione sharply. She pointed her wand at the place where a lock would have been on an ordinary door and said, "Alohomora!"

Nothing happened.

"Sirius's knife!" said Harry, and he pulled it out from inside his robes and slid it into the crack between the door and the wall. The others all watched eagerly as he ran it from top to bottom, withdrew it, and then flung his shoulder again at the door. It remained as firmly shut as ever. What was more, when Harry looked down at the knife, he saw that the blade had melted.

"Right, we're leaving that room," said Hermione decisively.

"But what if that's the one?" said Ron, staring at it with a mixture of apprehension and longing.

"It can't be, Harry could get through all the doors in his dream," said Hermione, marking the door with another fiery cross as Harry re-

placed the now-useless handle of Sirius's knife in his pocket.

"You know what could be in there?" said Luna eagerly, as the wall started to spin yet again.

"Something blibbering, no doubt," said Hermione under her breath, and Neville gave a nervous little laugh.

The wall slid back to a halt and Harry, with a feeling of increasing desperation, pushed the next door open.

"This is it!"

He knew it at once by the beautiful, dancing, diamond-sparkling light. As Harry's eyes became more accustomed to the brilliant glare he saw clocks gleaming from every surface, large and small, grandfa-ther and carriage, hanging in spaces between the bookcases or stand-ing on desks ranging the length of the room, so that a busy, relentless ticking filled the place like thousands of minuscule, marching foot-steps. The source of the dancing, diamond-bright light was a towering crystal bell jar that stood at the far end of the room.

"This way!"

Harry's heart was pumping frantically now that he knew they were on the right track. He led the way forward down the narrow space be-tween the lines of the desks, heading, as he had done in his dream, for the source of the light, the crystal bell jar quite as tall as he was that stood on a desk and appeared to be full of a billowing, glittering wind.

"Oh look!" said Ginny, as they drew nearer, pointing at the very heart of the bell jar.

Drifting along in the sparkling current inside was a tiny, jewel-bright egg. As it rose in the jar it cracked open and a hummingbird emerged, which was carried to the very top of the jar, but as it fell on the draft,

its feathers became bedraggled and damp again, and by the time it had been borne back to the bottom of the jar it had been en-closed once more in its egg.

“Keep going!” said Harry sharply, because Ginny showed signs of wanting to stop and watch the egg’s progress back into a bird.

“You dawdled enough by that old arch!” she said crossly, but followed him past the bell jar to the only door behind it.

“This is it,” Harry said again, and his heart was now pumping so hard and fast he felt it must interfere with his speech. “It’s through here —”

He glanced around at them all. They had their wands out and looked suddenly serious and anxious. He looked back at the door and pushed. It swung open.

They were there, they had found the place: high as a church and full of nothing but towering shelves covered in small, dusty, glass orbs. They glimmered dully in the light issuing from more candle brackets set at intervals along the shelves. Like those in the circular room behind them, their flames were burning blue. The room was very cold.

Harry edged forward and peered down one of the shadowy aisles between two rows of shelves. He could not hear anything nor see the slightest sign of movement.

“You said it was row ninety-seven,” whispered Hermione.

“Yeah,” breathed Harry, looking up at the end of the closest row. Beneath the branch of blue-glowing candles protruding from it glimmered the silver figure 53.

“We need to go right, I think,” whispered Hermione, squinting to the next row. “Yes … that’s fifty-four. …”

“Keep your wands out,” Harry said softly.

They crept forward, staring behind them as they went on down the long alleys of shelves, the farther ends of which were in near total darkness. Tiny, yellowing labels had been stuck beneath each glass orb on the shelf. Some of them had a weird, liquid glow; others were as dull and dark within as blown lightbulbs.

They passed row eighty-four … eighty-five … Harry was listen-ing hard for the slightest sound of movement, but Sirius might be gagged now, or else unconscious … or, said an unbidden voice inside his head, he might already be dead. …I'd have felt it, he told himself, his heart now hammering against his Adam's apple. I'd already know. …"Ninety-seven!" whispered Hermione.

They stood grouped around the end of the row, gazing down the alley beside it. There was nobody there.

"He's right down at the end," said Harry, whose mouth had be-come slightly dry. "You can't see properly from here. …"

And he led them forward, between the towering rows of glass balls, some of which glowed softly as they passed. …"He should be near here," whispered Harry, convinced that every step was going to bring the ragged form of Sirius into view upon the darkened floor. "Anywhere here … really close …"

"Harry?" said Hermione tentatively, but he did not want to re-spond. His mouth was very dry now.

"Somewhere about … here …" he said.

They had reached the end of the row and emerged into more dim candlelight. There was nobody there at all. All was echoing, dusty silence.

"He might be …" Harry whispered hoarsely, peering down the alley next door. "Or maybe …" He hurried to look down the one beyond that.

“Harry?” said Hermione again.

“What?” he snarled.

“I … I don’t think Sirius is here.”

Nobody spoke. Harry did not want to look at any of them. He felt sick. He did not understand why Sirius was not here. He had to be here. This was where he, Harry, had seen him. …He ran up the space at the end of the rows, staring down them. Empty aisle after empty aisle flickered past. He ran the other way, back past his staring companions. There was no sign of Sirius any-where, nor any hint of a struggle.

“Harry?” Ron called.

“What?”

He did not want to hear what Ron had to say, did not want to hear Ron tell him he had been stupid, or suggest that they ought to go back to Hogwarts. But the heat was rising in his face and he felt as though he would like to skulk down here in the darkness for a long while be-fore facing the brightness of the Atrium above and the others’ accus-ing stares. …“Have you seen this?” said Ron.

“What?” said Harry, but eagerly this time — it had to be a sign that Sirius had been there, a clue — he strode back to where they were all standing, a little way down row ninety-seven, but found nothing except Ron staring at one of the dusty glass spheres on the shelves.

“What?” Harry repeated glumly.

“It’s — it’s got your name on,” said Ron.

Harry moved a little closer. Ron was pointing at one of the small glass spheres that glowed with a dull inner light, though it was very dusty and appeared not to have been touched for many years.

“My name?” said Harry blankly.

He stepped forward. Not as tall as Ron, he had to crane his neck to read the yellowish label affixed to the shelf right beneath the dusty glass ball. In spidery writing was written a date of some sixteen years previously, and below that:S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D.

Dark Lord

and (?) Harry Potter

Harry stared at it.

“What is it?” Ron asked, sounding unnerved. “What’s your name doing down here?”

He glanced along at the other labels on that stretch of shelf.

“I’m not here,” he said, sounding perplexed. “None of the rest of us are here. …”

“Harry, I don’t think you should touch it,” said Hermione sharply, as he stretched out his hand.

“Why not?” he said. “It’s something to do with me, isn’t it?”

“Don’t, Harry,” said Neville suddenly. Harry looked around at him. Neville’s round face was shining slightly with sweat. He looked as though he could not take much more suspense.

“It’s got my name on,” said Harry.

And feeling slightly reckless, he closed his fingers around the dusty ball’s surface. He had expected it to feel cold, but it did not. On the contrary, it felt as though it had been lying in the sun for hours, as though the glow of light within was warming it. Expecting, even hoping, that something dramatic was going to happen, something excit-

ing that might make their long and dangerous journey worthwhile after all, he lifted the glass ball down from its shelf and stared at it.

Nothing whatsoever happened. The others moved in closer around Harry, gazing at the orb as he brushed it free of the clogging dust.

Chapter 35 Beyond the Veil

Black shapes were emerging out of thin air all around them, block-ing their way left and right; eyes glinted through slits in hoods, a dozen lit wand tips were pointing directly at their hearts. Ginny gave a gasp of horror.

“To me, Potter,” repeated the drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy as he held out his hand, palm up.

Harry’s insides plummeted sickeningly. They were trapped and outnumbered two to one.

“To me,” said Malfoy yet again.

“Where’s Sirius?” Harry said.

Several of the Death Eaters laughed. A harsh female voice from the midst of the shadowy figures to Harry’s left said triumphantly, “The Dark Lord always knows!”

“Always,” echoed Malfoy softly. “Now, give me the prophecy, Potter.”

“I want to know where Sirius is!”

“I want to know where Sirius is!” mimicked the woman to his left.

She and her fellow Death Eaters had closed in so that they were mere feet away from Harry and the others, the light from their wands dazzling Harry’s eyes.

“You’ve got him,” said Harry, ignoring the rising panic in his chest, the dread he had been fighting since they had first entered the ninety-seventh row. “He’s here. I know he is.”

"The little baby woke up fwightened and fort what it dweamed was twoo," said the woman in a horrible, mock-baby voice. Harry felt Ron stir beside him.

"Don't do anything," he muttered. "Not yet —"

The woman who had mimicked him let out a raucous scream of laughter.

"You hear him? You hear him? Giving instructions to the other children as though he thinks of fighting us!"

"Oh, you don't know Potter as I do, Bellatrix," said Malfoy softly. "He has a great weakness for heroics; the Dark Lord understands this about him. Now give me the prophecy, Potter."

"I know Sirius is here," said Harry, though panic was causing his chest to constrict and he felt as though he could not breathe properly. "I know you've got him!"

More of the Death Eaters laughed, though the woman still laughed loudest of all.

"It's time you learned the difference between life and dreams, Potter," said Malfoy. "Now give me the prophecy, or we start using wands."

"Go on, then," said Harry, raising his own wand to chest height. As he did so, the five wands of Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Luna rose on either side of him. The knot in Harry's stomach tightened. If Sirius really was not here, he had led his friends to their deaths for no reason at all. …But the Death Eaters did not strike.

"Hand over the prophecy and no one need get hurt," said Malfoy coolly.

It was Harry's turn to laugh.

"Yeah, right!" he said. "I give you this — prophecy, is it? And you'll just let us skip off home, will you?"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the female Death Eater shrieked, "Accio Proph —"

Harry was just ready for her. He shouted "Protego!" before she had finished her spell, and though the glass sphere slipped to the tips of his fingers he managed to cling on to it.

"Oh, he knows how to play, little bitty baby Potter," she said, her mad eyes staring through the slits in her hood. "Very well, then —"

"I TOLD YOU, NO!" Lucius Malfoy roared at the woman. "If you smash it — !"

Harry's mind was racing. The Death Eaters wanted this dusty spun-glass sphere. He had no interest in it. He just wanted to get them all out of this alive, make sure that none of his friends paid a ter-rible price for his stupidity …The woman stepped forward, away from her fellows, and pulled off her hood. Azkaban had hollowed Bellatrix Lestrange's face, making it gaunt and skull-like, but it was alive with a feverish, fanatical glow.

"You need more persuasion?" she said, her chest rising and falling rapidly. "Very well — take the smallest one," she ordered the Death Eaters beside her. "Let him watch while we torture the little girl. I'll do it."

Harry felt the others close in around Ginny. He stepped sideways so that he was right in front of her, the prophecy held up to his chest.

"You'll have to smash this if you want to attack any of us," he told Bellatrix. "I don't think your boss will be too pleased if you come back without it, will he?"

She did not move; she merely stared at him, the tip of her tongue moistening her thin mouth.

“So,” said Harry, “what kind of prophecy are we talking about anyway?”

He could not think what to do but to keep talking. Neville’s arm was pressed against his, and he could feel him shaking. He could feel one of the other’s quickened breath on the back of his head. He was hoping they were all thinking hard about ways to get out of this, because his mind was blank.

“What kind of prophecy?” repeated Bellatrix, the grin fading from her face. “You jest, Harry Potter.”

“Nope, not jesting,” said Harry, his eyes flicking from Death Eater to Death Eater, looking for a weak link, a space through which they could escape. “How come Voldemort wants it?”

Several of the Death Eaters let out low hisses.

“You dare speak his name?” whispered Bellatrix.

“Yeah,” said Harry, maintaining his tight grip on the glass ball, expecting another attempt to bewitch it from him. “Yeah, I’ve got no problem saying Vol —”

“Shut your mouth!” Bellatrix shrieked. “You dare speak his name with your unworthy lips, you dare besmirch it with your half-blood’s tongue, you dare —”

“Did you know he’s a half-blood too?” said Harry recklessly. Hermione gave a little moan in his ear. “Voldemort? Yeah, his mother was a witch but his dad was a Muggle — or has he been telling you lot he’s pureblood?”

“STUPEF —”

“NO!”

A jet of red light had shot from the end of Bellatrix Lestrange’s wand, but Malfoy had deflected it. His spell caused hers to hit the shelf a foot to the left of Harry and several of the glass orbs there shattered.

Two figures, pearly white as ghosts, fluid as smoke, unfurled themselves from the fragments of broken glass upon the floor and each began to speak. Their voices vied with each other, so that only fragments of what they were saying could be heard over Malfoy and Bellatrix’s shouts.

“… at the Solstice will come a new …” said the figure of an old, bearded man.

“DO NOT ATTACK! WE NEED THE PROPHECY!”

“He dared — he dares —” shrieked Bellatrix incoherently. “— He stands there — filthy half-blood —”

“WAIT UNTIL WE’VE GOT THE PROPHECY!” bawled Malfoy.

“… and none will come after …” said the figure of a young woman.

The two figures that had burst from the shattered spheres had melted into thin air. Nothing remained of them or their erstwhile homes but fragments of glass upon the floor. They had, however, given Harry an idea. The problem was going to be conveying it to the others.

“You haven’t told me what’s so special about this prophecy I’m supposed to be handing over,” he said, playing for time. He moved his foot slowly sideways, feeling around for someone else’s.

“Do not play games with us, Potter,” said Malfoy.

“I’m not playing games,” said Harry, half his mind on the conversation, half on his wandering foot. And then he found someone’s toes

and pressed down upon them. A sharp intake of breath behind him told him they were Hermione's.

"What?" she whispered.

"Dumbledore never told you that the reason you bear that scar was hidden in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries?" said Malfoy sneeringly.

"I — what?" said Harry, and for a moment he quite forgot his plan. "What about my scar?"

"What?" whispered Hermione more urgently behind him.

"Can this be?" said Malfoy, sounding maliciously delighted; some of the Death Eaters were laughing again, and under cover of their laughter, Harry hissed to Hermione, moving his lips as little as possible, "Smash shelves —"

"Dumbledore never told you?" Malfoy repeated. "Well, this ex-plains why you didn't come earlier, Potter, the Dark Lord wondered why —"

"— when I say go —"

"— you didn't come running when he showed you the place where it was hidden in your dreams. He thought natural curiosity would make you want to hear the exact wording. …"

"Did he?" said Harry. Behind him he felt rather than heard Hermione passing his message to the others and he sought to keep talking, to distract the Death Eaters. "So he wanted me to come and get it, did he? Why?"

"Why?" Malfoy sounded incredulously delighted. "Because the only people who are permitted to retrieve a prophecy from the Department of Mysteries, Potter, are those about whom it was made, as

the Dark Lord discovered when he attempted to use others to steal it for him."

"And why did he want to steal a prophecy about me?"

"About both of you, Potter, about both of you … Haven't you ever wondered why the Dark Lord tried to kill you as a baby?"

Harry stared into the slitted eyeholes through which Malfoy's gray eyes were gleaming. Was this prophecy the reason Harry's parents had died, the reason he carried his lightning-bolt scar? Was the answer to all of this clutched in his hand?

"Someone made a prophecy about Voldemort and me?" he said quietly, gazing at Lucius Malfoy, his fingers tightening over the warm glass sphere in his hand. It was hardly larger than a Snitch and still gritty with dust. "And he's made me come and get it for him? Why couldn't he come and get it himself?"

"Get it himself?" shrieked Bellatrix on a cackle of mad laughter. "The Dark Lord, walk into the Ministry of Magic, when they are so sweetly ignoring his return? The Dark Lord, reveal himself to the Au-rors, when at the moment they are wasting their time on my dear cousin?"

"So he's got you doing his dirty work for him, has he?" said Harry. "Like he tried to get Sturgis to steal it — and Bode?"

"Very good, Potter, very good …" said Malfoy slowly. "But the Dark Lord knows you are not unintell —"

"NOW!" yelled Harry.

Five different voices behind him bellowed "REDUCTO!" Five curses flew in five different directions and the shelves opposite them exploded as they hit. The towering structure swayed as a hundred glass spheres burst apart, pearly-white figures unfurled into the air and floated there, their voices echoing from who knew what long-

dead past amid the torrent of crashing glass and splintered wood now rain-ing down upon the floor —“RUN!” Harry yelled, and as the shelves swayed precariously and more glass spheres began to pour from above, he seized a handful of Hermione’s robes and dragged her forward, one arm over his head as chunks of shelf and shards of glass thundered down upon them. A Death Eater lunged forward through the cloud of dust and Harry el-bowed him hard in the masked face. They were all yelling, there were cries of pain, thunderous crashes as the shelves collapsed upon them-selves, weirdly echoing fragments of the Seers unleashed from their spheres —Harry found the way ahead clear and saw Ron, Ginny, and Luna sprint past him, their arms over their heads. Something heavy struck him on the side of the face but he merely ducked his head and sprinted onward; a hand caught him by the shoulder; he heard Her-mione shout “Stupefy!” and the hand released him at once.

They were at the end of row ninety-seven; Harry turned right and began to sprint in earnest. He could hear footsteps right behind him and Hermione’s voice urging Neville on. The door through which they had come was ajar straight ahead, Harry could see the glittering light of the bell jar, he pelted through it, the prophecy still clutched tight and safe in his hand, waited for the others to hurtle over the threshold before slamming the door behind them —“Colloportus!” gasped Hermione and the door sealed itself with an odd squelching noise.

“Where — where are the others?” gasped Harry.

He had thought that Ron, Luna, and Ginny had been ahead of them, that they would be waiting in this room, but there was nobody there.

“They must have gone the wrong way!” whispered Hermione, ter-ror in her face.

“Listen!” whispered Neville.

Footsteps and shouts echoed from behind the door they had just sealed. Harry put his ear close to the door to listen and heard Lucius

Malfoy roar: “Leave Nott, leave him, I say, the Dark Lord will not care for Nott’s injuries as much as losing that prophecy — Jugson, come back here, we need to organize! We’ll split into pairs and search, and don’t forget, be gentle with Potter until we’ve got the prophecy, you can kill the others if necessary — Bellatrix, Rodolphus, you take the left, Crabbe, Rabastan, go right — Jugson, Dolohov, the door straight ahead — Macnair and Avery, through here — Rookwood, over there — Mulciber, come with me!”

“What do we do?” Hermione asked Harry, trembling from head to foot.

“Well, we don’t stand here waiting for them to find us, for a start,” said Harry. “Let’s get away from this door. …”

They ran, quietly as they could, past the shimmering bell jar where the tiny egg was hatching and unhatching, toward the exit into the circular hallway at the far end of the room. They were almost there when Harry heard something large and heavy collide with the door Hermione had charmed shut.

“Stand aside!” said a rough voice. “Alohomora!”

As the door flew open, Harry, Hermione, and Neville dived under desks. They could see the bottom of the two Death Eaters’ robes drawing nearer, their feet moving rapidly.

“They might’ve run straight through to the hall,” said the rough voice.

“Check under the desks,” said another.

Harry saw the knees of the Death Eaters bend. Poking his wand out from under the desk he shouted, “STUPEFY!”

A jet of red light hit the nearest Death Eater; he fell backward into a grandfather clock and knocked it over. The second Death Eater, however, had leapt aside to avoid Harry’s spell and now pointed his

own wand at Hermione, who had crawled out from under the desk to get a better aim.

“Avada —”

Harry launched himself across the floor and grabbed the Death Eater around the knees, causing him to topple and his aim to go awry. Neville overturned his desk in his anxiety to help; pointing his wand wildly at the struggling pair he cried, “EXPELLIARMUS!”

Both Harry’s and the Death Eater’s wands flew out of their hands and soared back toward the entrance to the Hall of Prophecy; both scrambled to their feet and charged after them, the Death Eater in front and Harry hot on his heels, Neville bringing up the rear, plainly horrorstruck at what he had done.

“Get out of the way, Harry!” yelled Neville, clearly determined to repair the damage.

Harry flung himself sideways as Neville took aim again and shouted, “STUPEFY!”

The jet of red light flew right over the Death Eater’s shoulder and hit a glass-fronted cabinet on the wall full of variously shaped hour-glasses. The cabinet fell to the floor and burst apart, glass flying every-where, then sprang back up onto the wall, fully mended, then fell down again, and shattered —The Death Eater had snatched up his wand, which lay on the floor beside the glittering bell jar. Harry ducked down behind another desk as the man turned — his mask had slipped so that he could not see, he ripped it off with his free hand and shouted, “STUP —”

“STUPEFY!” screamed Hermione, who had just caught up with them. The jet of red light hit the Death Eater in the middle of his chest; he froze, his arm still raised, his wand fell to the floor with a clatter and he collapsed backward toward the bell jar. Harry expected to hear a clunk, for the man to hit solid glass and slide off the jar onto the floor,

but instead, his head sank through the surface of the bell jar as though it was nothing but a soap bubble and he came to rest, sprawled on his back on the table, with his head lying inside the jar full of glittering wind.

“Accio Wand!” cried Hermione. Harry’s wand flew from a dark cor-ner into her hand and she threw it to him.

“Thanks,” he said, “right, let’s get out of —”

“Look out!” said Neville, horrified, staring at the Death Eater’s head in the bell jar.

All three of them raised their wands again, but none of them struck. They were all gazing, openmouthed, appalled, at what was happening to the man’s head.

It was shrinking very fast, growing balder and balder, the black hair and stubble retracting into his skull, his cheeks smooth, his skull round and covered with a peachlike fuzz. …A baby’s head now sat grotesquely on top of the thick, muscled neck of the Death Eater as he struggled to get up again. But even as they watched, their mouths open, the head began to swell to its previ-ous proportions again, thick black hair was sprouting from the pate and chin. …“It’s time,” said Hermione in an awestruck voice. “Time …”

The Death Eater shook his ugly head again, trying to clear it, but before he could pull himself together again, it began to shrink back to babyhood once more. …There was a shout from a room nearby, then a crash and a scream.

“RON?” Harry yelled, turning quickly from the monstrous trans-formation taking place before them. “GINNY? LUNA?”

“Harry!” Hermione screamed.

The Death Eater had pulled his head out of the bell jar. His appearance was utterly bizarre, his tiny baby's head bawling loudly while his thick arms flailed dangerously in all directions, narrowly missing Harry, who ducked. Harry raised his wand but to his amazement Hermione seized his arm.

"You can't hurt a baby!"

There was no time to argue the point. Harry could hear more footsteps growing louder from the Hall of Prophecy they had just left and knew, too late, that he ought not to have shouted and given away their position.

"Come on!" he said again, and leaving the ugly baby-headed Death Eater staggering behind them, they took off for the door that stood ajar at the other end of the room, leading back into the black hallway.

They had run halfway toward it when Harry saw through the open door two more Death Eaters running across the black room toward them. Veering left he burst instead into a small, dark, cluttered office and slammed the door behind them.

"Collo —" began Hermione, but before she could complete the spell the door had burst open again and the two Death Eaters had come hurtling inside. With a cry of triumph, both yelled, "IMPEDIMENTA!"

Harry, Hermione, and Neville were all knocked backward off their feet. Neville was thrown over the desk and disappeared from view, Hermione smashed into a bookcase and was promptly deluged in a cascade of heavy books; the back of Harry's head slammed into the stone wall behind him, tiny lights burst in front of his eyes, and for a moment he was too dizzy and bewildered to react.

"WE'VE GOT HIM!" yelled the Death Eater nearest Harry, "IN AN OFFICE OFF —"

“Silencio!” cried Hermione, and the man’s voice was extinguished. He continued to mouth through the hole in his mask, but no sound came out; he was thrust aside by his fellow.

“Petrificus Totalus!” shouted Harry, as the second Death Eater raised his wand. His arms and legs snapped together and he fell forward, facedown onto the rug at Harry’s feet, stiff as a board and unable to move at all.

“Well done, Ha —”

But the Death Eater Hermione had just struck dumb made a sud-den slashing movement with his wand from which flew a streak of what looked like purple flame. It passed right across Hermione’s chest; she gave a tiny “oh!” as though of surprise and then crumpled onto the floor where she lay motionless.

“HERMIONE!”

Harry fell to his knees beside her as Neville crawled rapidly toward her from under the desk, his wand held up in front of him. The Death Eater kicked out hard at Neville’s head as he emerged — his foot broke Neville’s wand in two and connected with his face — Neville gave a howl of pain and recoiled, clutching his mouth and nose. Harry twisted around, his own wand held high, and saw that the Death Eater had ripped off his mask and was pointing his wand directly at Harry, who recognized the long, pale, twisted face from the Daily Prophet: Antonin Dolohov, the wizard who had murdered the Prewetts.

Dolohov grinned. With his free hand, he pointed from the prophecy still clutched in Harry’s hand, to himself, then at Hermione. Though he could no longer speak his meaning could not have been clearer: Give me the prophecy, or you get the same as her. …“Like you won’t kill us all the moment I hand it over anyway!” said Harry.

A whine of panic inside his head was preventing him thinking properly. He had one hand on Hermione's shoulder, which was still warm, yet did not dare look at her properly. Don't let her be dead, don't let her be dead, it's my fault if she's dead. …"Whaddever you do, Harry," said Neville fiercely from under the desk, lowering his hands to show a clearly broken nose and blood pouring down his mouth and chin, "don'd gib it to him!"

Then there was a crash outside the door, and Dolohov looked over his shoulder — the baby-headed Death Eater had appeared in the doorway, his head bawling, his great fists still flailing uncontrollably at everything around him.

Harry seized his chance: "PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!"

The spell hit Dolohov before he could block it, and he toppled forward across his comrade, both of them rigid as boards and unable to move an inch.

"Hermione," Harry said at once, shaking her as the baby-headed Death Eater blundered out of sight again. "Hermione, wake up. …"

"Whaddid he do to her?" said Neville, crawling out from under the desk again to kneel at her other side, blood streaming from his rapidly swelling nose. "I dunno. …"

Neville groped for Hermione's wrist.

"Dat's a pulse, Harry, I'b sure id is. …"

Such a powerful wave of relief swept through Harry that for a moment he felt light-headed.

"She's alive?"

"Yeah, I dink so. …"

There was a pause in which Harry listened hard for the sounds of more footsteps, but all he could hear were the whimpers and blunderings of the baby Death Eater in the next room.

“Neville, we’re not far from the exit,” Harry whispered. “We’re right next to that circular room. … If we can just get you across it and find the right door before any more Death Eaters come, I’ll bet you can get Hermione up the corridor and into the lift. … Then you could find someone. … Raise the alarm …”

“And whad are you going do do?” said Neville, mopping his bleed-ing nose with his sleeve and frowning at Harry.

“I’ve got to find the others,” said Harry.

“Well, I’b going do find dem wid you,” said Neville firmly.

“But Hermione —”

“We’ll dake her wid us,” said Neville firmly. “I’ll carry her — you’re bedder at fighding dem dan I ab —”

He stood up and seized one of Hermione’s arms, glared at Harry, who hesitated, then grabbed the other and helped hoist Hermione’s limp form over Neville’s shoulders.

“Wait,” said Harry, snatching up Hermione’s wand from the floor and shoving it into Nevilles hand, “you’d better take this. …”

Neville kicked aside the broken fragments of his own wand as they walked slowly toward the door.

“My gran’s going do kill be,” said Neville thickly, blood spattering from his nose as he spoke, “dat was by dad’s old wand. …”

Harry stuck his head out of the door and looked around cautiously. The baby-headed Death Eater was screaming and banging into

things, toppling grandfather clocks and overturning desks, bawling and confused, while the glass cabinet that Harry now suspected had contained Time-Turners continued to fall, shatter, and repair itself on the wall behind them.

“He’s never going to notice us,” he whispered. “C’mon … keep close behind me. …”

They crept out of the office and back toward the door into the black hallway, which now seemed completely deserted. They walked a few steps forward, Neville tottering slightly due to Hermione’s weight. The door of the Time Room swung shut behind them, and the walls began to rotate once more. The recent blow on the back of Harry’s head seemed to have unsteadied him; he narrowed his eyes, swaying slightly, until the walls stopped moving again. With a sinking heart Harry saw that Hermione’s fiery crosses had faded from the doors.

“So which way d’you reck — ?”

But before they could make a decision as to which way to try, a door to their right sprang open and three people fell out of it.

“Ron!” croaked Harry, dashing toward them. “Ginny — are you all — ?”

“Harry,” said Ron, giggling weakly, lurching forward, seizing the front of Harry’s robes and gazing at him with unfocused eyes. “There you are. … Ha ha ha … You look funny, Harry. … You’re all messed up. … Ron’s face was very white and something dark was trickling from the corner of his mouth. Next moment his knees had given way, but he still clutched the front of Harry’s robes, so that Harry was pulled into a kind of bow.

“Ginny?” Harry said fearfully. “What happened?”

But Ginny shook her head and slid down the wall into a sitting position, panting and holding her ankle.

“I think her ankle’s broken, I heard something crack,” whispered Luna, who was bending over her and who alone seemed to be unhurt. “Four of them chased us into a dark room full of planets, it was a very odd place, some of the time we were just floating in the dark —”

“Harry, we saw Uranus up close!” said Ron, still giggling feebly. “Get it, Harry? We saw Uranus — ha ha ha —”

A bubble of blood grew at the corner of Ron’s mouth and burst.

“Anyway, one of them grabbed Ginny’s foot, I used the Reductor Curse and blew up Pluto in his face, but …”

Luna gestured hopelessly at Ginny, who was breathing in a very shallow way, her eyes still closed.

“And what about Ron?” said Harry fearfully, as Ron continued to giggle, still hanging off the front of Harry’s robes.

“I don’t know what they hit him with,” said Luna sadly, “but he’s gone a bit funny, I could hardly get him along at all. …”

“Harry,” said Ron, pulling Harry’s ear down to his mouth and still giggling weakly, “you know who this girl is, Harry? She’s Loony … Loony Lovegood … ha ha ha …”

“We’ve got to get out of here,” said Harry firmly. “Luna, can you help Ginny?”

“Yes,” said Luna, sticking her wand behind her ear for safekeeping, putting an arm around Ginny’s waist and pulling her up.

“It’s only my ankle, I can do it myself!” said Ginny impatiently, but next moment she had collapsed sideways and grabbed Luna for sup-port. Harry pulled Ron’s arm over his shoulder just as, so many months ago, he had pulled Dudley’s. He looked around: They had a one-in-twelve chance of getting the exit right the first time —He heaved Ron

toward a door; they were within a few feet of it when another door across the hall burst open and three Death Eaters sped into the hall, led by Bellatrix Lestrange.

“There they are!” she shrieked.

Stunning Spells shot across the room: Harry smashed his way through the door ahead, flung Ron unceremoniously from him, and ducked back to help Neville in with Hermione. They were all over the threshold just in time to slam the door against Bellatrix.

“Colloportus!” shouted Harry, and he heard three bodies slam into the door on the other side.

“It doesn’t matter!” said a man’s voice. “There are other ways in — WE’VE GOT THEM, THEY’RE HERE!”

Harry spun around. They were back in the Brain Room and, sure enough, there were doors all around the walls. He could hear footsteps in the hall behind them as more Death Eaters came running to join the first.

“Luna — Neville — help me!”

The three of them tore around the room, sealing the doors as they went: Harry crashed into a table and rolled over the top of it in his haste to reach the next door.

“Colloportus!”

There were footsteps running along behind the doors; every now and then another heavy body would launch itself against one, so it creaked and shuddered. Luna and Neville were bewitching the doors along the opposite wall — then, as Harry reached the very top of the room, he heard Luna cry, “Collo — aaaaaaaaargh …”

He turned in time to see her flying through the air. Five Death Eaters were surging into the room through the door she had not reached in time; Luna hit a desk, slid over its surface and onto the floor on the other side where she lay sprawled, as still as Hermione.

“Get Potter!” shrieked Bellatrix, and she ran at him. He dodged her and sprinted back up the room; he was safe as long as they thought they might hit the prophecy —“Hey!” said Ron, who had staggered to his feet and was now totter-ing drunkenly toward Harry, giggling. “Hey, Harry, there are brains in here, ha ha ha, isn’t that weird, Harry?”

“Ron, get out of the way, get down —”

But Ron had already pointed his wand at the tank.

“Honest, Harry, they’re brains — look — Accio Brain!”

The scene seemed momentarily frozen. Harry, Ginny, and Neville and each of the Death Eaters turned in spite of themselves to watch the top of the tank as a brain burst from the green liquid like a leap-ing fish. For a moment it seemed suspended in midair, then it soared toward Ron, spinning as it came, and what looked like ribbons of moving images flew from it, unraveling like rolls of film —“Ha ha ha, Harry, look at it —” said Ron, watching it disgorge its gaudy innards. “Harry, come and touch it, bet it’s weird —”

“RON, NO!”

Harry did not know what would happen if Ron touched the tenta-cles of thought now flying behind the brain, but he was sure it would not be anything good. He darted forward but Ron had already caught the brain in his outstretched hands.

The moment they made contact with his skin, the tentacles began wrapping themselves around Ron’s arms like ropes.

"Harry, look what's happen — no — no, I don't like it — no, stop — stop —"

But the thin ribbons were spinning around Ron's chest now. He tugged and tore at them as the brain was pulled tight against him like an octopus's body.

"Diffindo!" yelled Harry, trying to sever the feelers wrapping them-selves tightly around Ron before his eyes, but they would not break. Ron fell over, still thrashing against his bonds.

"Harry, it'll suffocate him!" screamed Ginny, immobilized by her broken ankle on the floor — then a jet of red light flew from one of the Death Eater's wands and hit her squarely in the face. She keeled over sideways and lay there unconscious.

"STUBEFY!" shouted Neville, wheeling around and waving Hermione's wand at the oncoming Death Eaters. "STUBEFY, STUBEFY!"

But nothing happened — one of the Death Eaters shot their own Stunning Spell at Neville; it missed him by inches. Harry and Neville were now the only two left fighting the five Death Eaters, two of whom sent streams of silver light like arrows past them that left craters in the wall behind them. Harry ran for it as Bellatrix Lestrange sprinted right at him. Holding the prophecy high above his head he sprinted back up the room; all he could think of doing was to draw the Death Eaters away from the others.

It seemed to have worked. They streaked after him, knocking chairs and tables flying but not daring to bewitch him in case they hurt the prophecy, and he dashed through the only door still open, the one through which the Death Eaters themselves had come. Inwardly pray-ing that Neville would stay with Ron — find some way of releasing him — he ran a few feet into the new room and felt the floor vanish —He was falling down steep stone step after steep stone step, bounc-ing on every tier until at last, with a crash that knocked all the

breath out of his body, he landed flat on his back in the sunken pit where the stone archway stood on its dais. The whole room was ringing with the Death Eaters' laughter. He looked up and saw the five who had been in the Brain Room descending toward him, while as many more emerged through other doorways and began leaping from bench to bench toward him. Harry got to his feet though his legs were trem-bling so badly they barely supported him. The prophecy was still miraculously unbroken in his left hand, his wand clutched tightly in his right. He backed away, looking around, trying to keep all the Death Eaters within his sights. The back of his legs hit something solid; he had reached the dais where the archway stood. He climbed backward onto it.

The Death Eaters all halted, gazing at him. Some were panting as hard as he was. One was bleeding badly; Dolohov, freed of the full Body-Bind, was leering, his wand pointing straight at Harry's face.

"Potter, your race is run," drawled Lucius Malfoy, pulling off his mask. "Now hand me the prophecy like a good boy. …"

"Let — let the others go, and I'll give it to you!" said Harry desperately.

A few of the Death Eaters laughed.

"You are not in a position to bargain, Potter," said Lucius Malfoy, his pale face flushed with pleasure. "You see, there are ten of us and only one of you … or hasn't Dumbledore ever taught you how to count?"

"He's dot alone!" shouted a voice from above them. "He's still god be!"

Harry's heart sank. Neville was scrambling down the stone benches toward them, Hermione's wand held fast in his trembling hand.

"Neville — no — go back to Ron —"

"STUBEFY!" Neville shouted again, pointing his wand at each Death Eater in turn, "STUBEFY! STUBE —"

One of the largest Death Eaters seized Neville from behind, pinioning his arms to his sides. He struggled and kicked; several of the Death Eaters laughed.

"It's Longbottom, isn't it?" sneered Lucius Malfoy. "Well, your grandmother is used to losing family members to our cause. … Your death will not come as a great shock. …"

"Longbottom?" repeated Bellatrix, and a truly evil smile lit her gaunt face. "Why, I have had the pleasure of meeting your parents, boy. …"

"I DOE YOU HAB!" roared Neville, and he fought so hard against his captor's encircling grip that the Death Eater shouted, "Someone Stun him!"

"No, no, no," said Bellatrix. She looked transported, alive with excitement as she glanced at Harry, then back at Neville. "No, let's see how long Longbottom lasts before he cracks like his parents. … Unless Potter wants to give us the prophecy —"

"DON'D GIB ID DO DEM!" roared Neville, who seemed beside himself, kicking and writhing as Bellatrix drew nearer to him and his captor, her wand raised. "DON'D GIB ID DO DEM, HARRY!"

Bellatrix raised her wand. "Crucio!"

Neville screamed, his legs drawn up to his chest so that the Death Eater holding him was momentarily holding him off the ground. The Death Eater dropped him and he fell to the floor, twitching and screaming in agony.

"That was just a taster!" said Bellatrix, raising her wand so that Neville's screams stopped and he lay sobbing at her feet. She turned

and gazed up at Harry. “Now, Potter, either give us the prophecy, or watch your little friend die the hard way!”

Harry did not have to think; there was no choice. The prophecy was hot with the heat from his clutching hand as he held it out. Mal-foy jumped forward to take it.

Then, high above them, two more doors burst open and five more people sprinted into the room: Sirius, Lupin, Moody, Tonks, and Kingsley.

Malfoy turned and raised his wand, but Tonks had already sent a Stunning Spell right at him. Harry did not wait to see whether it had made contact, but dived off the dais out of the way. The Death Eaters were completely distracted by the appearance of the members of the Order, who were now raining spells down upon them as they jumped from step to step toward the sunken floor: Through the darting bod-ies, the flashes of light, Harry could see Neville crawling along. He dodged another jet of red light and flung himself flat on the ground to reach Neville.

“Are you okay?” he yelled, as another spell soared inches over their heads.

“Yes,” said Neville, trying to pull himself up.

“And Ron?”

“I dink he’s all right — he was still fighding the brain when I left —”

The stone floor between them exploded as a spell hit it, leaving a crater right where Neville’s hand had been seconds before. Both scrambled away from the spot, then a thick arm came out of nowhere, seized Harry around the neck and pulled him upright, so that his toes were barely touching the floor.

“Give it to me,” growled a voice in his ear, “give me the prophecy —”

The man was pressing so tightly on Harry's windpipe that he could not breathe — through watering eyes he saw Sirius dueling with a Death Eater some ten feet away. Kingsley was fighting two at once; Tonks, still halfway up the tiered seats, was firing spells down at Bellatrix — nobody seemed to realize that Harry was dying. … He turned his wand backward toward the man's side, but had no breath to utter an incantation, and the man's free hand was groping toward the hand in which Harry was grasping the prophecy —"AARGH!"

Neville had come lunging out of nowhere: Unable to articulate a spell, he had jabbed Hermione's wand hard into the eyehole of the Death Eater's mask. The man relinquished Harry at once with a howl of pain and Harry whirled around to face him and gasped, "STUPEFY!"

The Death Eater keeled over backward and his mask slipped off. It was Macnair, Buckbeak's would-be killer, one of his eyes now swollen and bloodshot.

"Thanks!" Harry said to Neville, pulling him aside as Sirius and his Death Eater lurched past, dueling so fiercely that their wands were blurs. Then Harry's foot made contact with something round and hard and he slipped — for a moment he thought he had dropped the prophecy, then saw Moody's magic eye spinning away across the floor.

Its owner was lying on his side, bleeding from the head, and his attacker was now bearing down upon Harry and Neville: Dolohov, his long pale face twisted with glee.

"Tarantallegra!" he shouted, his wand pointing at Neville, whose legs went immediately into a kind of frenzied tap dance, unbalancing him and causing him to fall to the floor again. "Now, Potter —"

He made the same slashing movement with his wand that he had used on Hermione just as Harry yelled, "Protego!"

Harry felt something streak across his face like a blunt knife but the force of it knocked him sideways, and he fell over Neville's jerking legs, but the Shield Charm had stopped the worst of the spell.

Dolohov raised his wand again. "Accio Proph —"

Sirius hurtled out of nowhere, rammed Dolohov with his shoulder, and sent him flying out of the way. The prophecy had again flown to the tips of Harry's fingers but he had managed to cling to it. Now Sir-ius and Dolohov were dueling, their wands flashing like swords, sparks flying from their wand tips —Dolohov drew back his wand to make the same slashing movement he had used on Harry and Hermione. Springing up, Harry yelled, "Petrificus Totalus!" Once again, Dolohov's arms and legs snapped to-gether and he keeled over backward, landing with a crash on his back.

"Nice one!" shouted Sirius, forcing Harry's head down as a pair of Stunning Spells flew toward them. "Now I want you to get out of —"

They both ducked again. A jet of green light had narrowly missed Sirius; across the room Harry saw Tonks fall from halfway up the stone steps, her limp form toppling from stone seat to stone seat, and Bellatrix, triumphant, running back toward the fray.

"Harry, take the prophecy, grab Neville, and run!" Sirius yelled, dashing to meet Bellatrix. Harry did not see what happened next: Kingsley swayed across his field of vision, battling with the pock-marked Rookwood, now mask-less; another jet of green light flew over Harry's head as he launched himself toward Neville —"Can you stand?" he bellowed in Neville's ear, as Neville's legs jerked and twitched uncontrollably. "Put your arm round my neck —"

Neville did so — Harry heaved — Neville's legs were still flying in every direction, they would not support him and then, out of nowhere, a man lunged at them. Both fell backward, Neville's legs waving wildly like an overturned beetle's, Harry with his left arm held up in the air to try and save the small glass ball from being smashed.

“The prophecy, give me the prophecy, Potter!” snarled Lucius Malfoy’s voice in his ear, and Harry felt the tip of Malfoy’s wand pressing hard between his ribs.

“No — get — off — me … Neville — catch it!”

Harry flung the prophecy across the floor, Neville spun himself around on his back and scooped the ball to his chest. Malfoy pointed the wand instead at Neville, but Harry jabbed his own wand back over his shoulder and yelled, “Impedimenta!”

Malfoy was blasted off his back. As Harry scrambled up again he looked around and saw Malfoy smash into the dais on which Sirius and Bellatrix were now dueling. Malfoy aimed his wand at Harry and Neville again, but before he could draw breath to strike, Lupin had jumped between them.

“Harry, round up the others and GO!”

Harry seized Neville by the shoulder of his robes and lifted him bodily onto the first tier of stone steps. Neville’s legs twitched and jerked and would not support his weight. Harry heaved again with all the strength he possessed and they climbed another step —A spell hit the stone bench at Harry’s heel. It crumbled away and he fell back to the step below: Neville sank to the ground, his legs still jerking and thrashing, and thrust the prophecy into his pocket.

“Come on!” said Harry desperately, hauling at Neville’s robes. “Just try and push with your legs —”

He gave another stupendous heave and Neville’s robes tore all along the left seam — the small spun-glass ball dropped from his pocket and before either of them could catch it, one of Neville’s floundering feet kicked it. It flew some ten feet to their right and smashed on the step beneath them. As both of them stared at the place where it had broken, appalled at what had happened, a pearly-white figure with hugely magnified eyes rose into the air, unnoticed by any but them.

Harry could see its mouth moving, but in all the crashes and screams and yells surrounding them, not one word of the prophecy could he hear. The figure stopped speaking and dissolved into nothingness.

“Harry, I’b sorry!” cried Neville, his face anguished as his legs continued to flounder, “I’b so sorry, Harry, I didn’d bean do —”

“It doesn’t matter!” Harry shouted. “Just try and stand, let’s get out of —”

“Dubbledore!” said Neville, his sweaty face suddenly transported, staring over Harry’s shoulder.

“What?”

“DUBBLEDORE!”

Harry turned to look where Neville was staring. Directly above them, framed in the doorway from the Brain Room, stood Albus Dumbledore, his wand aloft, his face white and furious. Harry felt a kind of electric charge surge through every particle of his body — they were saved.

Dumbledore sped down the steps past Neville and Harry, who had no more thought of leaving. Dumbledore was already at the foot of the steps when the Death Eaters nearest realized he was there. There were yells; one of the Death Eaters ran for it, scrabbling like a monkey up the stone steps opposite. Dumbledore’s spell pulled him back as easily and effortlessly as though he had hooked him with an invisible line —Only one couple were still battling, apparently unaware of the new arrival. Harry saw Sirius duck Bellatrix’s jet of red light: He was laugh-ing at her. “Come on, you can do better than that!” he yelled, his voice echoing around the cavernous room.

The second jet of light hit him squarely on the chest.

The laughter had not quite died from his face, but his eyes widened in shock.

Harry released Neville, though he was unaware of doing so. He was jumping down the steps again, pulling out his wand, as Dumbledore turned to the dais too.

It seemed to take Sirius an age to fall. His body curved in a grace-ful arc as he sank backward through the ragged veil hanging from the arch. …And Harry saw the look of mingled fear and surprise on his god-father's wasted, once-handsome face as he fell through the ancient doorway and disappeared behind the veil, which fluttered for a mo-ment as though in a high wind and then fell back into place.

Harry heard Bellatrix Lestrange's triumphant scream, but knew it meant nothing — Sirius had only just fallen through the archway, he would reappear from the other side any second. …But Sirius did not reappear.

"SIRIUS!" Harry yelled, "SIRIUS!"

He had reached the floor, his breath coming in searing gasps. Sirius must be just behind the curtain, he, Harry, would pull him back out again. …But as he reached the ground and sprinted toward the dais, Lupin grabbed Harry around the chest, holding him back.

"There's nothing you can do, Harry —"

"Get him, save him, he's only just gone through!"

"It's too late, Harry —"

"We can still reach him —"

Harry struggled hard and viciously, but Lupin would not let go. …"There's nothing you can do, Harry … nothing. … He's gone."

Chapter 36 The Only One He Ever Feared

“He hasn’t gone!” Harry yelled.

He did not believe it, he would not believe it; still he fought Lupin with every bit of strength he had: Lupin did not under-stand, people hid behind that curtain, he had heard them whispering the first time he had entered the room — Sirius was hiding, simply lurking out of sight —“SIRIUS!” he bellowed, “SIRIUS!”

“He can’t come back, Harry,” said Lupin, his voice breaking as he struggled to contain Harry. “He can’t come back, because he’s d —”

“HE — IS — NOT — DEAD!” roared Harry. “SIRIUS!”

There was movement going on around them, pointless bustling, the flashes of more spells. To Harry it was meaningless noise, the de-flected curses flying past them did not matter, nothing mattered ex-cept that Lupin stop pretending that Sirius, who was standing feet from them behind that old curtain, was not going to emerge at any moment, shaking back his dark hair and eager to reenter the battle — Lupin dragged Harry away from the dais, Harry still staring at the archway, angry at Sirius now for keeping him waiting —But some part of him realized, even as he fought to break free from Lupin, that Sirius had never kept him waiting before. … Sirius had risked everything, always, to see Harry, to help him. … If Sirius was not reappearing out of that archway when Harry was yelling for him as though his life depended on it, the only possible explanation was that he could not come back. … That he really was …Dumbledore had most of the remaining Death Eaters grouped in the middle of the room, seemingly immobilized by invisible ropes. Mad-Eye Moody had crawled across the room to where Tonks lay and was attempting to revive her. Behind the dais there were still flashes of light, grunts, and cries — Kingsley had run forward to continue Sir-ius’s duel with Bellatrix.

“Harry?”

Neville had slid down the stone benches one by one to the place where Harry stood. Harry was no longer struggling against Lupin, who maintained a precautionary grip on his arm nevertheless.

“Harry … I’b really sorry. …” said Neville. His legs were still dancing uncontrollably. “Was dat man — was Sirius Black a — a friend of yours?”

Harry nodded.

“Here,” said Lupin quietly, and pointing his wand at Neville’s legs he said, “Finite.” The spell was lifted. Neville’s legs fell back onto the floor and remained still. Lupin’s face was pale. “Let’s — let’s find the others. Where are they all, Neville?”

Lupin turned away from the archway as he spoke. It sounded as though every word was causing him pain.

“Dey’re all back dere,” said Neville. “A brain addacked Ron bud I dink he’s all righd — and Herbione’s unconscious, bud we could feel a bulse —”

There was a loud bang and a yell from behind the dais. Harry saw Kingsley, yelling in pain, hit the ground. Bellatrix Lestrange turned tail and ran as Dumbledore whipped around. He aimed a spell at her but she deflected it. She was halfway up the steps now —“Harry — no!” cried Lupin, but Harry had already ripped his arm from Lupin’s slackened grip.

“SHE KILLED SIRIUS!” bellowed Harry. “SHE KILLED HIM — I’LL KILL HER!”

And he was off, scrambling up the stone benches. People were shouting behind him but he did not care. The hem of Bellatrix’s robes whipped out of sight ahead and they were back in the room where the

brains were swimming. …She aimed a curse over her shoulder. The tank rose into the air and tipped. Harry was deluged in the foul-smelling potion within. The brains slipped and slid over him and began spinning their long, col-ored tentacles, but he shouted, “Wingardium Leviosa!” and they flew into the air away from him. Slipping and sliding he ran on toward the door. He leapt over Luna, who was groaning on the floor, past Ginny, who said, “Harry — what — ?” past Ron, who giggled feebly, and Hermione, who was still unconscious. He wrenched open the door into the circular black hall and saw Bellatrix disappearing through a door on the other side of the room — beyond her was the corridor leading back to the lifts.

He ran, but she had slammed the door behind her and the walls had begun to rotate again. Once more he was surrounded by streaks of blue light from the whirling candelabra.

“Where’s the exit?” he shouted desperately, as the wall rumbled to a halt again. “Where’s the way out?”

The room seemed to have been waiting for him to ask. The door right behind him flew open, and the corridor toward the lifts stretched ahead of him, torch-lit and empty. He ran. …He could hear a lift clattering ahead of him. He sprinted up the passageway, swung around the corner, and slammed his fist onto the button to call a second lift. It jangled and banged lower and lower; the grilles slid open and Harry dashed inside, now hammering the button marked Atrium. The doors slid shut and he was rising. …He forced his way out of the lift before the grilles were fully open and looked around. Bellatrix was almost at the telephone lift at the other end of the hall, but she looked back as he sprinted toward her, and aimed another spell at him. He dodged behind the Fountain of Magical Brethren; the spell zoomed past him and hit the wrought gold gates at the other end of the Atrium so that they rang like bells. There were no more footsteps. She had stopped running. He crouched be-hind the statues, listening.

“Come out, come out, little Harry!” she called in her mock-baby voice, which echoed off the polished wooden floors. “What did you come after me for, then? I thought you were here to avenge my dear cousin!”

“I am!” shouted Harry, and a score of ghostly Harry’s seemed to chorus I am! I am! I am! all around the room.

“Aaaaaah … did you love him, little baby Potter?”

Hatred rose in Harry such as he had never known before. He flung himself out from behind the fountain and bellowed “Crucio!”

Bellatrix screamed. The spell had knocked her off her feet, but she did not writhe and shriek with pain as Neville had — she was already on her feet again, breathless, no longer laughing. Harry dodged behind the golden fountain again — her counterspell hit the head of the handsome wizard, which was blown off and landed twenty feet away, gouging long scratches into the wooden floor.

“Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?” she yelled. She had abandoned her baby voice now. “You need to mean them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain — to enjoy it — righteous anger won’t hurt me for long — I’ll show you how it is done, shall I? I’ll give you a lesson —”

Harry had been edging around the fountain on the other side. She screamed, “Crucio!” and he was forced to duck down again as the cen-taur’s arm, holding its bow, spun off and landed with a crash on the floor a short distance from the golden wizard’s head.

“Potter, you cannot win against me!” she cried. He could hear her moving to the right, trying to get a clear shot of him. He backed around the statue away from her, crouching behind the centaur’s legs, his head level with the house-elf’s. “I was and am the Dark Lord’s most loyal servant, I learned the Dark Arts from him, and I know spells of such power that you, pathetic little boy, can never hope to compete —”

“Stupefy!” yelled Harry. He had edged right around to where the goblin stood beaming up at the now headless wizard and taken aim at her back as she peered around the fountain for him. She reacted so fast he barely had time to duck.

“Protego!”

The jet of red light, his own Stunning Spell, bounced back at him. Harry scrambled back behind the fountain, and one of the goblin’s ears went flying across the room.

“Potter, I am going to give you one chance!” shouted Bellatrix. “Give me the prophecy — roll it out toward me now — and I may spare your life!”

“Well, you’re going to have to kill me, because it’s gone!” Harry roared — and as he shouted it, pain seared across his forehead. His scar was on fire again, and he felt a surge of fury that was quite unconnected with his own rage. “And he knows!” said Harry with a mad laugh to match Bellatrix’s own. “Your dear old mate Voldemort knows it’s gone! He’s not going to be happy with you, is he?”

“What? What do you mean?” she cried, and for the first time there was fear in her voice.

“The prophecy smashed when I was trying to get Neville up the steps! What do you think Voldemort’ll say about that, then?”

His scar seared and burned. … The pain of it was making his eyes stream. …“LIAR!” she shrieked, but he could hear the terror behind the anger now. “YOU’VE GOT IT, POTTER, AND YOU WILL GIVE IT TO ME — Accio Prophecy! ACCIO PROPHECY!”

Harry laughed again because he knew it would incense her, the pain building in his head so badly he thought his skull might burst. He waved his empty hand from behind the one-eared goblin and withdrew it quickly as she sent another jet of green light flying at him.

“Nothing there!” he shouted. “Nothing to summon! It smashed and nobody heard what it said, tell your boss that —”

“No!” she screamed. “It isn’t true, you’re lying — MASTER, I TRIED, I TRIED — DO NOT PUNISH ME —”

“Don’t waste your breath!” yelled Harry, his eyes screwed up against the pain in his scar, now more terrible than ever. “He can’t hear you from here!”

“Can’t I, Potter?” said a high, cold voice.

Harry opened his eyes.

Tall, thin, and black-hooded, his terrible snakelike face white and gaunt, his scarlet, slit-pupiled eyes staring … Lord Voldemort had appeared in the middle of the hall, his wand pointing at Harry who stood frozen, quite unable to move.

“So you smashed my prophecy?” said Voldemort softly, staring at Harry with those pitiless red eyes. “No, Bella, he is not lying. … I see the truth looking at me from within his worthless mind. … Months of preparation, months of effort … and my Death Eaters have let Harry Potter thwart me again. …”

“Master, I am sorry, I knew not, I was fighting the Animagus Black!” sobbed Bellatrix, flinging herself down at Voldemort’s feet as he paced slowly nearer. “Master, you should know —”

“Be quiet, Bella,” said Voldemort dangerously. “I shall deal with you in a moment. Do you think I have entered the Ministry of Magic to hear your sniveling apologies?”

“But Master — he is here — he is below —”

Voldemort paid no attention.

“I have nothing more to say to you, Potter,” he said quietly. “You have irked me too often, for too long. AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Harry had not even opened his mouth to resist. His mind was blank, his wand pointing uselessly at the floor.

But the headless golden statue of the wizard in the fountain had sprung alive, leaping from its plinth, and landed on the floor with a crash between Harry and Voldemort. The spell merely glanced off its chest as the statue flung out its arms, protecting Harry.

“What — ?” said Voldemort, staring around. And then he breathed, “Dumbledore!”

Harry looked behind him, his heart pounding. Dumbledore was standing in front of the golden gates.

Voldemort raised his wand and sent another jet of green light at Dumbledore, who turned and was gone in a whirling of his cloak; next second he had reappeared behind Voldemort and waved his wand toward the remnants of the fountain; the other statues sprang to life too. The statue of the witch ran at Bellatrix, who screamed and sent spells streaming uselessly off its chest, before it dived at her, pin-ning her to the floor. Meanwhile, the goblin and the house-elf scuttled toward the fireplaces set along the wall, and the one-armed centaur galloped at Voldemort, who vanished and reappeared beside the pool. The headless statue thrust Harry backward, away from the fight, as Dumbledore advanced on Voldemort and the golden centaur cantered around them both.

“It was foolish to come here tonight, Tom,” said Dumbledore calmly. “The Aurors are on their way —”

“By which time I shall be gone, and you dead!” spat Voldemort. He sent another Killing Curse at Dumbledore but missed, instead hitting the security guards desk, which burst into flame.

Dumbledore flicked his own wand. The force of the spell that emanated from it was such that Harry, though shielded by his stone guard, felt his hair stand on end as it passed, and this time Voldemort was forced to conjure a shining silver shield out of thin air to deflect it. The spell, whatever it was, caused no visible damage to the shield, though a deep, gonglike note reverberated from it, an oddly chilling sound. …"You do not seek to kill me, Dumbledore?" called Voldemort, his scarlet eyes narrowed over the top of the shield. "Above such brutality, are you?"

"We both know that there are other ways of destroying a man, Tom," Dumbledore said calmly, continuing to walk toward Volde-mort as though he had not a fear in the world, as though nothing had happened to interrupt his stroll up the hall. "Merely taking your life would not satisfy me, I admit —"

"There is nothing worse than death, Dumbledore!" snarled Voldemort.

"You are quite wrong," said Dumbledore, still closing in upon Voldemort and speaking as lightly as though they were discussing the matter over drinks. Harry felt scared to see him walking along, undefended, shieldless. He wanted to cry out a warning, but his headless guard kept shunting him backward toward the wall, blocking his every attempt to get out from behind it. "Indeed, your failure to un-derstand that there are things much worse than death has always been your greatest weakness —"

Another jet of green light flew from behind the silver shield. This time it was the one-armed centaur, galloping in front of Dumbledore, that took the blast and shattered into a hundred pieces, but before the fragments had even hit the floor, Dumbledore had drawn back his wand and waved it as though brandishing a whip. A long thin flame flew from the tip; it wrapped itself around Voldemort, shield and all. For a moment, it seemed Dumbledore had won, but then the fiery rope became a serpent, which relinquished its hold upon Voldemort at once and turned, hissing furiously, to face Dumbledore.

Voldemort vanished. The snake reared from the floor, ready to strike —There was a burst of flame in midair above Dumbledore just as Voldemort reappeared, standing on the plinth in the middle of the pool where so recently the five statues had stood.

“Look out!” Harry yelled.

But even as he shouted, one more jet of green light had flown at Dumbledore from Voldemort’s wand and the snake had struck — Fawkes swooped down in front of Dumbledore, opened his beak wide, and swallowed the jet of green light whole. He burst into flame and fell to the floor, small, wrinkled, and flightless. At the same moment, Dumbledore brandished his wand in one, long, fluid move-ment — the snake, which had been an instant from sinking its fangs into him, flew high into the air and vanished in a wisp of dark smoke; the water in the pool rose up and covered Voldemort like a cocoon of molten glass —For a few seconds Voldemort was visible only as a dark, rippling, faceless figure, shimmering and indistinct upon the plinth, clearly struggling to throw off the suffocating mass —Then he was gone, and the water fell with a crash back into its pool, slopping wildly over the sides, drenching the polished floor.

“MASTER!” screamed Bellatrix.

Sure it was over, sure Voldemort had decided to flee, Harry made to run out from behind his statue guard, but Dumbledore bellowed, “Stay where you are, Harry!”

For the first time, Dumbledore sounded frightened. Harry could not see why. The hall was quite empty but for themselves, the sobbing Bellatrix still trapped under her statue, and the tiny baby Fawkes croaking feebly on the floor —And then Harry’s scar burst open. He knew he was dead: it was pain beyond imagining, pain past endurance —He was gone from the hall, he was locked in the coils of a creature with red eyes, so tightly bound that Harry did not know where his body ended and the creature’s began. They were fused

together, bound by pain, and there was no escape —And when the creature spoke, it used Harry's mouth, so that in his agony he felt his jaw move. …"Kill me now, Dumbledore. …"

Blinded and dying, every part of him screaming for release, Harry felt the creature use him again. …"If death is nothing, Dumbledore, kill the boy. …"

Let the pain stop, thought Harry. Let him kill us. … End it, Dumbledore. … Death is nothing compared to this. …And I'll see Sirius again. …And as Harry's heart filled with emotion, the creature's coils loos-ened, the pain was gone, Harry was lying facedown on the floor, his glasses gone, shivering as though he lay upon ice, not wood. … And there were voices echoing through the hall, more voices than there should have been: Harry opened his eyes, saw his glasses lying at the heel of the headless statue that had been guarding him, but which now lay flat on its back, cracked and immobile. He put them on and raised his head an inch to find Dumbledore's crooked nose inches from his own.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

"Yes," said Harry, shaking so violently he could not hold his head up properly. "Yeah, I'm — where's Voldemort, where — who are all these — what's —"

The Atrium was full of people. The floor was reflecting emerald-green flames that had burst into life in all the fireplaces along one wall, and a stream of witches and wizards was emerging from them. As Dumbledore pulled him back to his feet, Harry saw the tiny gold statues of the house-elf and the goblin leading a stunned-looking Cornelius Fudge forward.

"He was there!" shouted a scarlet-robed man with a ponytail, who was pointing at a pile of golden rubble on the other side of the hall, where Bellatrix had lain trapped moments before. "I saw him, Mr.

Fudge, I swear, it was You-Know-Who, he grabbed a woman and Disapparated!”

“I know, Williamson, I know, I saw him too!” gibbered Fudge, who was wearing pajamas under his pinstriped cloak and was gasping as though he had just run miles. “Merlin’s beard — here — here! — in the Ministry of Magic! — great heavens above — it doesn’t seem pos-sible — my word — how can this be?”

“If you proceed downstairs into the Department of Mysteries, Cor-nelius,” said Dumbledore, apparently satisfied that Harry was all right, and walking forward so that the newcomers realized he was there for the first time (a few of them raised their wands, others sim-ply looked amazed; the statues of the elf and goblin applauded and Fudge jumped so much that his slipper-clad feet left the floor), “you will find several escaped Death Eaters contained in the Death Cham-ber, bound by an Anti-Disapparation Jinx and awaiting your decision as to what to do with them.”

“Dumbledore!” gasped Fudge, apparently beside himself with amazement. “You — here — I — I —”

He looked wildly around at the Aurors he had brought with him, and it could not have been clearer that he was in half a mind to cry, “Seize him!”

“Cornelius, I am ready to fight your men — and win again!” said Dumbledore in a thunderous voice. “But a few minutes ago you saw proof, with your own eyes, that I have been telling you the truth for a year. Lord Voldemort has returned, you have been chasing the wrong men for twelve months, and it is time you listened to sense!”

“I — don’t — well —” blustered Fudge, looking around as though hoping somebody was going to tell him what to do. When nobody did, he said, “Very well — Dawlish! Williamson! Go down to the Department of Mysteries and see … Dumbledore, you — you will need to tell me exactly — the Fountain of Magical Brethren — what

hap-pened?" he added in a kind of whimper, staring around at the floor, where the remains of the statues of the witch, wizard, and centaur now lay scattered.

"We can discuss that after I have sent Harry back to Hogwarts," said Dumbledore.

"Harry — Harry Potter?"

Fudge spun around and stared at Harry, who was still standing against the wall beside the fallen statue that had been guarding him during Dumbledore and Voldemort's duel.

"He-here?" said Fudge. "Why — what's all this about?"

"I shall explain everything," repeated Dumbledore, "when Harry is back at school."

He walked away from the pool to the place where the golden wiz-ard's head lay on the floor. He pointed his wand at it and muttered, "Portus." The head glowed blue and trembled noisily against the wooden floor for a few seconds, then became still once more.

"Now see here, Dumbledore!" said Fudge, as Dumbledore picked up the head and walked back to Harry carrying it. "You haven't got authorization for that Portkey! You can't do things like that right in front of the Minister of Magic, you — you —"

His voice faltered as Dumbledore surveyed him magisterially over his half-moon spectacles.

"You will give the order to remove Dolores Umbridge from Hog-warts," said Dumbledore. "You will tell your Aurors to stop searching for my Care of Magical Creatures teacher so that he can return to work. I will give you …" Dumbledore pulled a watch with twelve hands from his pocket and glanced at it, "half an hour of my time tonight, in which I think we shall be more than able to cover the im-portant

points of what has happened here. After that, I shall need to return to my school. If you need more help from me you are, of course, more than welcome to contact me at Hogwarts. Letters ad-dressed to the headmaster will find me."

Fudge goggled worse than ever. His mouth was open and his round face grew pinker under his rumpled gray hair.

"I — you —"

Dumbledore turned his back on him.

"Take this Portkey, Harry."

He held out the golden head of the statue, and Harry placed his hand upon it, past caring what he did next or where he went.

"I shall see you in half an hour," said Dumbledore quietly. "One … two … three …"

Harry felt the familiar sensation of a hook being jerked behind his navel. The polished wooden floor was gone from beneath his feet; the Atrium, Fudge, and Dumbledore had all disappeared, and he was flying forward in a whirlwind of color and sound. …

Chapter 37 The Lost Prophecy

Harry's feet hit solid ground again; his knees buckled a little and the golden wizard's head fell with a resounding clunk to the floor. He looked around and saw that he had arrived in Dumble-dore's office.

Everything seemed to have repaired itself during the headmaster's absence. The delicate silver instruments stood again upon the spindle-legged tables, puffing and whirring serenely. The portraits of the headmasters and headmistresses were snoozing in their frames, heads lolling back in armchairs or against the edge of their pictures. Harry looked through the window. There was a cool line of pale green along the horizon: Dawn was approaching.

The silence and the stillness, broken only by the occasional grunt or snuffle of a sleeping portrait, was unbearable to him. If his surroundings could have reflected the feelings inside him, the pictures would have been screaming in pain. He walked around the quiet, beautiful office, breathing quickly, trying not to think. But he had to think. … There was no escape. …It was his fault Sirius had died; it was all his fault. If he, Harry, had not been stupid enough to fall for Voldemort's trick, if he had not been so convinced that what he had seen in his dream was real, if he had only opened his mind to the possibility that Voldemort was, as Hermione had said, banking on Harry's love of playing the hero …It was unbearable, he would not think about it, he could not stand it. … There was a terrible hollow inside him he did not want to feel or examine, a dark hole where Sirius had been, where Sirius had vanished. He did not want to have to be alone with that great, silent space, he could not stand it —A picture behind him gave a particularly loud grunting snore, and a cool voice said, "Ah … Harry Potter …"

Phineas Nigellus gave a long yawn, stretching his arms as he watched Harry with shrewd, narrow eyes.

“And what brings you here in the early hours of the morning?” said Phineas. “This office is supposed to be barred to all but the rightful headmaster. Or has Dumbledore sent you here? Oh, don’t tell me …” He gave another shuddering yawn. “Another message for my worthless great-great-grandson?”

Harry could not speak. Phineas Nigellus did not know that Sirius was dead, but Harry could not tell him. To say it aloud would be to make it final, absolute, irretrievable.

A few more of the portraits had stirred now. Terror of being interrogated made Harry stride across the room and seize the doorknob.

It would not turn. He was shut in.

“I hope this means,” said the corpulent, red-nosed wizard who hung on the wall behind Dumbledore’s desk, “that Dumbledore will soon be back with us?”

Harry turned. The wizard was eyeing him with great interest. Harry nodded. He tugged again on the doorknob behind his back, but it remained immovable.

“Oh good,” said the wizard. “It has been very dull without him, very dull indeed.”

He settled himself on the thronelike chair on which he had been painted and smiled benignly upon Harry.

“Dumbledore thinks very highly of you, as I am sure you know,” he said comfortably. “Oh yes. Holds you in great esteem.”

The guilt filling the whole of Harry’s chest like some monstrous, weighty parasite now writhed and squirmed. Harry could not stand this, he could not stand being Harry anymore. … He had never felt more trapped inside his own head and body, never wished so intensely that he could be somebody — anybody — else. …The

empty fireplace burst into emerald-green flame, making Harry leap away from the door, staring at the man spinning inside the grate. As Dumbledore's tall form unfolded itself from the fire, the wizards and witches on the surrounding walls jerked awake. Many of them gave cries of welcome.

"Thank you," said Dumbledore softly.

He did not look at Harry at first, but walked over to the perch be-side the door and withdrew, from an inside pocket of his robes, the tiny, ugly, featherless Fawkes, whom he placed gently on the tray of soft ashes beneath the golden post where the full-grown Fawkes usu-ally stood.

"Well, Harry," said Dumbledore, finally turning away from the baby bird, "you will be pleased to hear that none of your fellow stu-dents are going to suffer lasting damage from the night's events."

Harry tried to say "Good," but no sound came out. It seemed to him that Dumbledore was reminding him of the amount of damage he had caused by his actions tonight, and although Dumbledore was for once looking at him directly, and though his expression was kindly rather than accusatory, Harry could not bear to meet his eyes.

"Madam Pomfrey is patching everybody up now," said Dumble-dore. "Nymphadora Tonks may need to spend a little time in St. Mungo's, but it seems that she will make a full recovery."

Harry contented himself with nodding at the carpet, which was growing lighter as the sky outside grew paler. He was sure that all the portraits around the room were listening eagerly to every word Dum-bledore spoke, wondering where Dumbledore and Harry had been and why there had been injuries.

"I know how you are feeling, Harry," said Dumbledore very quietly.

"No, you don't," said Harry, and his voice was suddenly loud and strong. White-hot anger leapt inside him. Dumbledore knew nothing about his feelings.

"You see, Dumbledore?" said Phineas Nigellus slyly. "Never try to understand the students. They hate it. They would much rather be tragically misunderstood, wallow in self-pity, stew in their own —"

"That's enough, Phineas," said Dumbledore.

Harry turned his back on Dumbledore and stared determinedly out of the opposite window. He could see the Quidditch stadium in the distance. Sirius had appeared there once, disguised as the shaggy black dog, so he could watch Harry play. … He had probably come to see whether Harry was as good as James had been. … Harry had never asked him. …"There is no shame in what you are feeling, Harry," said Dumble-dore's voice. "On the contrary … the fact that you can feel pain like this is your greatest strength."

Harry felt the white-hot anger lick his insides, blazing in the terri-ble emptiness, filling him with the desire to hurt Dumbledore for his calmness and his empty words.

"My greatest strength, is it?" said Harry, his voice shaking as he stared out at the Quidditch stadium, no longer seeing it. "You haven't got a clue. … You don't know …"

"What don't I know?" asked Dumbledore calmly.

It was too much. Harry turned around, shaking with rage.

"I don't want to talk about how I feel, all right?"

"Harry, suffering like this proves you are still a man! This pain is part of being human —"

“THEN — I — DON’T — WANT — TO — BE — HUMAN!” Harry roared, and he seized one of the delicate silver instruments from the spindle-legged table beside him and flung it across the room. It shattered into a hundred tiny pieces against the wall. Several of the pictures let out yells of anger and fright, and the portrait of Armando Dippet said, “Really!”

“I DON’T CARE!” Harry yelled at them, snatching up a luna-scope and throwing it into the fireplace. “I’VE HAD ENOUGH, I’VE SEEN ENOUGH, I WANT OUT, I WANT IT TO END, I DON’T CARE ANYMORE —”

He seized the table on which the silver instrument had stood and threw that too. It broke apart on the floor and the legs rolled in different directions.

“You do care,” said Dumbledore. He had not flinched or made a single move to stop Harry demolishing his office. His expression was calm, almost detached. “You care so much you feel as though you will bleed to death with the pain of it.”

“I — DON’T!” Harry screamed, so loudly that he felt his throat might tear, and for a second he wanted to rush at Dumbledore and break him too; shatter that calm old face, shake him, hurt him, make him feel some tiny part of the horror inside Harry.

“Oh yes, you do,” said Dumbledore, still more calmly. “You have now lost your mother, your father, and the closest thing to a parent you have ever known. Of course you care.”

“YOU DON’T KNOW HOW I FEEL!” Harry roared. “YOU — STANDING THERE — YOU —”

But words were no longer enough, smashing things was no more help. He wanted to run, he wanted to keep running and never look back, he wanted to be somewhere he could not see the clear blue

eyes staring at him, that hatefully calm old face. He ran to the door, seized the doorknob again, and wrenched at it.

But the door would not open.

Harry turned back to Dumbledore.

"Let me out," he said. He was shaking from head to foot.

"No," said Dumbledore simply.

For a few seconds they stared at each other.

"Let me out," Harry said again.

"No," Dumbledore repeated.

"If you don't — if you keep me in here — if you don't let me —"

"By all means continue destroying my possessions," said Dumbledore serenely. "I daresay I have too many."

He walked around his desk and sat down behind it, watching Harry.

"Let me out," Harry said yet again, in a voice that was cold and almost as calm as Dumbledore's.

"Not until I have had my say," said Dumbledore.

"Do you — do you think I want to — do you think I give a — I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU'VE GOT TO SAY!" Harry roared. "I don't want to hear anything you've got to say!"

"You will," said Dumbledore sadly. "Because you are not nearly as angry with me as you ought to be. If you are to attack me, as I know you are close to doing, I would like to have thoroughly earned it."

"What are you talking — ?"

“It is my fault that Sirius died,” said Dumbledore clearly. “Or I should say almost entirely my fault — I will not be so arrogant as to claim responsibility for the whole. Sirius was a brave, clever, and ener-getic man, and such men are not usually content to sit at home in hid-ing while they believe others to be in danger. Nevertheless, you should never have believed for an instant that there was any necessity for you to go to the Department of Mysteries tonight. If I had been open with you, Harry, as I should have been, you would have known a long time ago that Voldemort might try and lure you to the Department of Mysteries, and you would never have been tricked into going there tonight. And Sirius would not have had to come after you. That blame lies with me, and with me alone.”

Harry was still standing with his hand on the doorknob but he was unaware of it. He was gazing at Dumbledore, hardly breathing, lis-tening yet barely understanding what he was hearing.

“Please sit down,” said Dumbledore. It was not an order, it was a request.

Harry hesitated, then walked slowly across the room now littered with silver cogs and fragments of wood and took the seat facing Dum-bledore’s desk.

“Am I to understand,” said Phineas Nigellus slowly from Harry’s left, “that my great-great-grandson — the last of the Blacks — is dead?”

“Yes, Phineas,” said Dumbledore.

“I don’t believe it,” said Phineas brusquely.

Harry turned his head in time to see Phineas marching out of his portrait and knew that he had gone to visit his other painting in Grimmauld Place. He would walk, perhaps, from portrait to portrait, calling for Sirius through the house. …“Harry, I owe you an explanation,” said Dumbledore. “An explana-tion of an old man’s mistakes. For I see now that what I have done, and not done, with

regard to you, bears all the hallmarks of the fail-ings of age. Youth cannot know how age thinks and feels. But old men are guilty if they forget what it was to be young … and I seem to have forgotten lately. …”

The sun was rising properly now. There was a rim of dazzling or-ange visible over the mountains and the sky above it was colorless and bright. The light fell upon Dumbledore, upon the silver of his eye-brows and beard, upon the lines gouged deeply into his face.

“I guessed, fifteen years ago,” said Dumbledore, “when I saw the scar upon your forehead, what it might mean. I guessed that it might be the sign of a connection forged between you and Voldemort.”

“You’ve told me this before, Professor,” said Harry bluntly. He did not care about being rude. He did not care about anything very much anymore.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore apologetically. “Yes, but you see — it is necessary to start with your scar. For it became apparent, shortly after you rejoined the magical world, that I was correct, and that your scar was giving you warnings when Voldemort was close to you, or else feeling powerful emotion.”

“I know,” said Harry wearily.

“And this ability of yours — to detect Voldemort’s presence, even when he is disguised, and to know what he is feeling when his emo-tions are roused — has become more and more pronounced since Voldemort returned to his own body and his full powers.”

Harry did not bother to nod. He knew all of this already.

“More recently,” said Dumbledore, “I became concerned that Voldemort might realize that this connection between you exists. Sure enough, there came a time when you entered so far into his mind and

thoughts that he sensed your presence. I am speaking, of course, of the night when you witnessed the attack on Mr. Weasley."

"Yeah, Snape told me," Harry muttered.

"Professor Snape, Harry," Dumbledore corrected him quietly. "But did you not wonder why it was not I who explained this to you? Why I did not teach you Occlumency? Why I had not so much as looked at you for months?"

Harry looked up. He could see now that Dumbledore looked sad and tired.

"Yeah," Harry mumbled. "Yeah, I wondered."

"You see," continued Dumbledore heavily "I believed it could not be long before Voldemort attempted to force his way into your mind, to manipulate and misdirect your thoughts, and I was not eager to give him more incentives to do so. I was sure that if he realized that our relationship was — or had ever been — closer than that of head-master and pupil, he would seize his chance to use you as a means to spy on me. I feared the uses to which he would put you, the possibil-ity that he might try and possess you. Harry, I believe I was right to think that Voldemort would have made use of you in such a way. On those rare occasions when we had close contact, I thought I saw a shadow of him stir behind your eyes. … I was trying, in distancing myself from you, to protect you. An old man's mistake …"

Harry remembered the feeling that a dormant snake had risen in him, ready to strike, on those occasions when he and Dumbledore made eye contact.

"Voldemort's aim in possessing you, as he demonstrated tonight, would not have been my destruction. It would have been yours. He hoped, when he possessed you briefly a short while ago, that I would sacrifice you in the hope of killing him."

He sighed deeply. Harry was letting the words wash over him. He would have been so interested to know all this a few months ago, and now it was meaningless compared to the gaping chasm inside him that was the loss of Sirius, none of it mattered …“Sirius told me that you felt Voldemort awake inside you the very night that you had the vision of Arthur Weasley’s attack. I knew at once that my worst fears were correct: Voldemort from that point had realized he could use you. In an attempt to arm you against Volde-mort’s assaults on your mind, I arranged Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape.”

He paused. Harry watched the sunlight, which was sliding slowly across the polished surface of Dumbledore’s desk, illuminate a silver ink pot and a handsome scarlet quill. Harry could tell that the portraits all around them were awake and listening raptly to Dumbledore’s explanation. He could hear the occasional rustle of robes, the slight clearing of a throat. Phineas Nigellus had still not returned. …“Professor Snape discovered,” Dumbledore resumed, “that you had been dreaming about the door to the Department of Mysteries for months. Voldemort, of course, had been obsessed with the possibility of hearing the prophecy ever since he regained his body, and as he dwelled on the door, so did you, though you did not know what it meant.

“And then you saw Rookwood, who worked in the Department of Mysteries before his arrest, telling Voldemort what we had known all along — that the prophecies held in the Ministry of Magic are heavily protected. Only the people to whom they refer can lift them from the shelves without suffering madness. In this case, either Voldemort him-self would have to enter the Ministry of Magic and risk revealing himself at last — or else you would have to take it for him. It became a matter of even greater urgency that you should master Occlumency.”

“But I didn’t,” muttered Harry. He said it aloud to try and ease the dead weight of guilt inside him; a confession must surely relieve some of the terrible pressure squeezing his heart. “I didn’t practice, I

didn't bother, I could've stopped myself having those dreams, Hermione kept telling me to do it, if I had he'd never have been able to show me where to go, and — Sirius wouldn't — Sirius wouldn't —"

Something was erupting inside Harry's head: a need to justify him-self, to explain —"I tried to check he'd really taken Sirius, I went to Umbridge's of-fice, I spoke to Kreacher in the fire, and he said Sirius wasn't there, he said he'd gone!"

"Kreacher lied," said Dumbledore calmly. "You are not his master, he could lie to you without even needing to punish himself. Kreacher intended you to go to the Ministry of Magic."

"He — he sent me on purpose?"

"Oh yes. Kreacher, I am afraid, has been serving more than one master for months."

"How?" said Harry blankly. "He hasn't been out of Grimmauld Place for years."

"Kreacher seized his opportunity shortly before Christmas," said Dumbledore, "when Sirius, apparently, shouted at him to 'get out.' He took Sirius at his word and interpreted this as an order to leave the house. He went to the only Black family member for whom he had any respect left. … Black's cousin Narcissa, sister of Bellatrix and wife of Lucius Malfoy."

"How do you know all this?" Harry said. His heart was beating very fast. He felt sick. He remembered worrying about Kreacher's odd absence over Christmas, remembered him turning up again in the attic. …"Kreacher told me last night," said Dumbledore. "You see, when you gave Professor Snape that cryptic warning, he realized that you had had a vision of Sirius trapped in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries. He, like you, attempted to contact Sirius at once. I should explain that members of the Order of the Phoenix have more reliable methods of communicating than the fire in Dolores

Umbridge's of-fice. Professor Snape found that Sirius was alive and safe in Grim-mauld Place.

"When, however, you did not return from your trip into the forest with Dolores Umbridge, Professor Snape grew worried that you still believed Sirius to be a captive of Lord Voldemort's. He alerted certain Order members at once."

Dumbledore heaved a great sigh and then said, "Alastor Moody, Nymphadora Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Remus Lupin were at headquarters when he made contact. All agreed to go to your aid at once. Professor Snape requested that Sirius remain behind, as he needed somebody to remain at headquarters to tell me what had hap-pened, for I was due there at any moment. In the meantime he, Professor Snape, intended to search the forest for you.

"But Sirius did not wish to remain behind while the others went to search for you. He delegated to Kreacher the task of telling me what had happened. And so it was that when I arrived in Grimmauld Place shortly after they had all left for the Ministry, it was the elf who told me — laughing fit to burst — where Sirius had gone."

"He was laughing?" said Harry in a hollow voice.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore. "You see, Kreacher was not able to be-tray us totally. He is not Secret-Keeper for the Order, he could not give the Malfoys our whereabouts or tell them any of the Order's confidential plans that he had been forbidden to reveal. He was bound by the enchantments of his kind, which is to say that he could not dis-obey a direct order from his master, Sirius. But he gave Narcissa information of the sort that is very valuable to Voldemort, yet must have seemed much too trivial for Sirius to think of banning him from repeating it."

"Like what?" said Harry.

"Like the fact that the person Sirius cared most about in the world was you," said Dumbledore quietly. "Like the fact that you were coming to regard Sirius as a mixture of father and brother. Voldemort knew already, of course, that Sirius was in the Order, that you knew where he was — but Kreacher's information made him realize that the one person whom you would go to any lengths to rescue was Sirius Black."

Harry's lips were cold and numb.

"So … when I asked Kreacher if Sirius was there last night …"

"The Malfoys — undoubtedly on Voldemort's instructions — had told him he must find a way of keeping Sirius out of the way once you had seen the vision of Sirius being tortured. Then, if you decided to check whether Sirius was at home or not, Kreacher would be able to pretend he was not. Kreacher injured Buckbeak the hippogriff yesterday, and at the moment when you made your appearance in the fire, Sirius was upstairs trying to tend to him."

There seemed to be very little air in Harry's lungs, his breathing was quick and shallow.

"And Kreacher told you all this … and laughed?" he croaked.

"He did not wish to tell me," said Dumbledore. "But I am a suffi-ciently accomplished Legilimens myself to know when I am being lied to and I — persuaded him — to tell me the full story, before I left for the Department of Mysteries."

"And," whispered Harry, his hands curled in cold fists on his knees, "and Hermione kept telling us to be nice to him —"

"She was quite right, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I warned Sirius when we adopted twelve Grimmauld Place as our headquarters that Kreacher must be treated with kindness and respect. I also told him that Kreacher could be dangerous to us. I do not think that Sirius took

me very seriously, or that he ever saw Kreacher as a being with feelings as acute as a humans —"

"Don't you blame — don't you — talk — about Sirius like —" Harry's breath was constricted, he could not get the words out prop-erly. But the rage that had subsided so briefly had flared in him again; he would not let Dumbledore criticize Sirius. "Kreacher's a lying — foul — he deserved —"

"Kreacher is what he has been made by wizards, Harry," said Dum-bledore. "Yes, he is to be pitied. His existence has been as miserable as your friend Dobby's. He was forced to do Sirius's bidding, because Sirius was the last of the family to which he was enslaved, but he felt no true loyalty to him. And whatever Kreacher's faults, it must be admit-ted that Sirius did nothing to make Kreacher's lot easier —"

"DON'T TALK ABOUT SIRIUS LIKE THAT!" Harry yelled.

He was on his feet again, furious, ready to fly at Dumbledore, who had plainly not understood Sirius at all, how brave he was, how much he had suffered …"What about Snape?" Harry spat. "You're not talking about him, are you? When I told him Voldemort had Sirius he just sneered at me as usual —"

"Harry, you know that Professor Snape had no choice but to pre-tend not to take you seriously in front of Dolores Umbridge," said Dumbledore steadily, "but as I have explained, he informed the Order as soon as possible about what you had said. It was he who deduced where you had gone when you did not return from the forest. It was he too who gave Professor Umbridge fake Veritaserum when she was attempting to force you to tell of Sirius's whereabouts. …"

Harry disregarded this; he felt a savage pleasure in blaming Snape, it seemed to be easing his own sense of dreadful guilt, and he wanted to hear Dumbledore agree with him.

“Snape — Snape g-goaded Sirius about staying in the house — he made out Sirius was a coward —”

“Sirius was much too old and clever to have allowed such feeble taunts to hurt him,” said Dumbledore.

“Snape stopped giving me Occlumency lessons!” Harry snarled. “He threw me out of his office!”

“I am aware of it,” said Dumbledore heavily. “I have already said that it was a mistake for me not to teach you myself, though I was sure, at the time, that nothing could have been more dangerous than to open your mind even further to Voldemort while in my presence —”

“Snape made it worse, my scar always hurt worse after lessons with him —” Harry remembered Ron’s thoughts on the subject and plunged on. “How do you know he wasn’t trying to soften me up for Voldemort, make it easier for him to get inside my —”

“I trust Severus Snape,” said Dumbledore simply. “But I forgot — another old man’s mistake — that some wounds run too deep for the healing. I thought Professor Snape could overcome his feelings about your father — I was wrong.”

“But that’s okay, is it?” yelled Harry, ignoring the scandalized faces and disapproving mutterings of the portraits covering the walls. “It’s okay for Snape to hate my dad, but it’s not okay for Sirius to hate Kreacher?”

“Sirius did not hate Kreacher,” said Dumbledore. “He regarded him as a servant unworthy of much interest or notice. Indifference and neglect often do much more damage than outright dislike. … The fountain we destroyed tonight told a lie. We wizards have mis-treated and abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward.”

“SO SIRIUS DESERVED WHAT HE GOT, DID HE?” Harry yelled.

"I did not say that, nor will you ever hear me say it," Dumbledore replied quietly. "Sirius was not a cruel man, he was kind to house-elves in general. He had no love for Kreacher, because Kreacher was a living reminder of the home Sirius had hated."

"Yeah, he did hate it!" said Harry, his voice cracking, turning his back on Dumbledore and walking away. The sun was bright inside the room now, and the eyes of all the portraits followed him as he walked, without realizing what he was doing, without seeing the office at all. "You made him stay shut up in that house and he hated it, that's why he wanted to get out last night —"

"I was trying to keep Sirius alive," said Dumbledore quietly.

"People don't like being locked up!" Harry said furiously, rounding on him. "You did it to me all last summer —"

Dumbledore closed his eyes and buried his face in his long-fingered hands. Harry watched him, but this uncharacteristic sign of exhaustion, or sadness, or whatever it was from Dumbledore, did not soften him. On the contrary, he felt even angrier that Dumbledore was showing signs of weakness. He had no business being weak when Harry wanted to rage and storm at him.

Dumbledore lowered his hands and surveyed Harry through his half-moon glasses.

"It is time," he said, "for me to tell you what I should have told you five years ago, Harry. Please sit down. I am going to tell you every-thing. I ask only a little patience. You will have your chance to rage at me — to do whatever you like — when I have finished. I will not stop you."

Harry glared at him for a moment, then flung himself back into the chair opposite Dumbledore and waited. Dumbledore stared for a moment at the sunlit grounds outside the window, then looked back at Harry and said, "Five years ago you arrived at Hogwarts, Harry, safe and whole, as I had planned and intended. Well — not quite whole.

You had suffered. I knew you would when I left you on your aunt and uncle's doorstep. I knew I was condemning you to ten dark and difficult years."

He paused. Harry said nothing.

"You might ask — and with good reason — why it had to be so. Why could some Wizarding family not have taken you in? Many would have done so more than gladly, would have been honored and delighted to raise you as a son.

"My answer is that my priority was to keep you alive. You were in more danger than perhaps anyone but myself realized. Voldemort had been vanquished hours before, but his supporters — and many of them are almost as terrible as he — were still at large, angry, desper-ate, and violent. And I had to make my decision too with regard to the years ahead. Did I believe that Voldemort was gone forever? No. I knew not whether it would be ten, twenty, or fifty years before he re-turned, but I was sure he would do so, and I was sure too, knowing him as I have done, that he would not rest until he killed you.

"I knew that Voldemort's knowledge of magic is perhaps more extensive than any wizard alive. I knew that even my most complex and powerful protective spells and charms were unlikely to be invincible if he ever returned to full power.

"But I knew too where Voldemort was weak. And so I made my decision. You would be protected by an ancient magic of which he knows, which he despises, and which he has always, therefore, underestimated — to his cost. I am speaking, of course, of the fact that your mother died to save you. She gave you a lingering protection he never expected, a protection that flows in your veins to this day. I put my trust, therefore, in your mother's blood. I delivered you to her sister, her only remaining relative."

"She doesn't love me," said Harry at once. "She doesn't give a damn —"

"But she took you," Dumbledore cut across him. "She may have taken you grudgingly, furiously, unwillingly, bitterly, yet still she took you, and in doing so, she sealed the charm I placed upon you. Your mother's sacrifice made the bond of blood the strongest shield I could give you."

"I still don't —"

"While you can still call home the place where your mother's blood dwells, there you cannot be touched or harmed by Voldemort. He shed her blood, but it lives on in you and her sister. Her blood became your refuge. You need return there only once a year, but as long as you can still call it home, there he cannot hurt you. Your aunt knows this. I explained what I had done in the letter I left, with you, on her doorstep. She knows that allowing you houseroom may well have kept you alive for the past fifteen years."

"Wait," said Harry. "Wait a moment."

He sat up straighter in his chair, staring at Dumbledore.

"You sent that Howler. You told her to remember — it was your voice —"

"I thought," said Dumbledore, inclining his head slightly, "that she might need reminding of the pact she had sealed by taking you. I suspected the dementor attack might have awoken her to the dangers of having you as a surrogate son."

"It did," said Harry quietly. "Well — my uncle more than her. He wanted to chuck me out, but after the Howler came she — she said I had to stay." He stared at the floor for a moment, then said, "But what's this got to do with …"

He could not say Sirius's name.

"Five years ago, then," continued Dumbledore, as though he had not paused in his story, "you arrived at Hogwarts, neither as happy nor as well nourished as I would have liked, perhaps, yet alive and healthy. You were not a pampered little prince, but as normal a boy as I could have hoped under the circumstances. Thus far, my plan was working well.

"And then … well, you will remember the events of your first year at Hogwarts quite as clearly as I do. You rose magnificently to the challenge that faced you, and sooner — much sooner — than I had anticipated, you found yourself face-to-face with Voldemort. You survived again. You did more. You delayed his return to full power and strength. You fought a man's fight. I was … prouder of you than I can say.

"Yet there was a flaw in this wonderful plan of mine," said Dumbledore. "An obvious flaw that I knew, even then, might be the undoing of it all. And yet, knowing how important it was that my plan should succeed, I told myself that I would not permit this flaw to ruin it. I alone could prevent this, so I alone must be strong. And here was my first test, as you lay in the hospital wing, weak from your struggle with Voldemort."

"I don't understand what you're saying," said Harry.

"Don't you remember asking me, as you lay in the hospital wing, why Voldemort had tried to kill you when you were a baby?"

Harry nodded.

"Ought I to have told you then?"

Harry stared into the blue eyes and said nothing, but his heart was racing again.

"You do not see the flaw in the plan yet? No … perhaps not. Well, as you know, I decided not to answer you. Eleven, I told myself, was much too young to know. I had never intended to tell you when you were eleven. The knowledge would be too much at such a young age.

"I should have recognized the danger signs then. I should have asked myself why I did not feel more disturbed that you had already asked me the question to which I knew, one day, I must give a terrible answer. I should have recognized that I was too happy to think that I did not have to do it on that particular day. … You were too young, much too young.

"And so we entered your second year at Hogwarts. And once again you met challenges even grown wizards have never faced. Once again you acquitted yourself beyond my wildest dreams. You did not ask me again, however, why Voldemort had left that mark upon you. We dis-cussed your scar, oh yes. … We came very, very close to the subject. Why did I not tell you everything?

"Well, it seemed to me that twelve was, after all, hardly better than eleven to receive such information. I allowed you to leave my presence, bloodstained, exhausted but exhilarated, and if I felt a twinge of unease that I ought, perhaps, have told you then, it was swiftly silenced. You were still so young, you see, and I could not find it in me to spoil that night of triumph. …"Do you see, Harry? Do you see the flaw in my brilliant plan now? I had fallen into the trap I had foreseen, that I had told myself I could avoid, that I must avoid."

"I don't —"

"I cared about you too much," said Dumbledore simply. "I cared more for your happiness than your knowing the truth, more for your peace of mind than my plan, more for your life than the lives that might be lost if the plan failed. In other words, I acted exactly as Voldemort expects we fools who love to act.

"Is there a defense? I defy anyone who has watched you as I have — and I have watched you more closely than you can have imagined — not to want to save you more pain than you had already suffered. What did I care if numbers of nameless and faceless people and crea-tures were slaughtered in the vague future, if in the here and now you were alive, and well, and happy? I never dreamed that I would have such a person on my hands.

"We entered your third year. I watched from afar as you struggled to repel dementors, as you found Sirius, learned what he was and rescued him. Was I to tell you then, at the moment when you had triumphantly snatched your godfather from the jaws of the Ministry? But now, at the age of thirteen, my excuses were running out. Young you might be, but you had proved you were exceptional. My conscience was uneasy, Harry. I knew the time must come soon. …"But you came out of the maze last year, having watched Cedric Diggory die, having escaped death so narrowly yourself … and I did not tell you, though I knew, now Voldemort had returned, I must do it soon. And now, tonight, I know you have long been ready for the knowledge I have kept from you for so long, because you have proved that I should have placed the burden upon you before this. My only defense is this: I have watched you struggling under more burdens than any student who has ever passed through this school, and I could not bring myself to add another — the greatest one of all."

Harry waited, but Dumbledore did not speak.

"I still don't understand."

"Voldemort tried to kill you when you were a child because of a prophecy made shortly before your birth. He knew the prophecy had been made, though he did not know its full contents. He set out to kill you when you were still a baby, believing he was fulfilling the terms of the prophecy. He discovered, to his cost, that he was mis-taken, when the curse intended to kill you backfired. And so, since his return to his body, and particularly since your extraordinary escape from him

last year, he has been determined to hear that prophecy in its entirety. This is the weapon he has been seeking so assiduously since his return: the knowledge of how to destroy you."

The sun had risen fully now. Dumbledore's office was bathed in it. The glass case in which the sword of Godric Gryffindor resided gleamed white and opaque, the fragments of the instruments Harry had thrown to the floor glistened like raindrops, and behind him, the baby Fawkes made soft chirruping noises in his nest of ashes.

"The prophecy's smashed," Harry said blankly. "I was pulling Neville up those benches in the — the room where the archway was, and I ripped his robes and it fell. …"

"The thing that smashed was merely the record of the prophecy kept by the Department of Mysteries. But the prophecy was made to somebody, and that person has the means of recalling it perfectly."

"Who heard it?" asked Harry, though he thought he knew the an-swer already.

"I did," said Dumbledore. "On a cold, wet night sixteen years ago, in a room above the bar at the Hog's Head Inn. I had gone there to see an applicant for the post of Divination teacher, though it was against my inclination to allow the subject of Divination to continue at all. The applicant, however, was the great-great-granddaughter of a very famous, very gifted Seer, and I thought it common politeness to meet her. I was disappointed. It seemed to me that she had not a trace of the gift herself. I told her, courteously I hope, that I did not think she would be suitable for the post. I turned to leave."

Dumbledore got to his feet and walked past Harry to the black cab-inet that stood beside Fawkes's perch. He bent down, slid back a catch, and took from inside it the shallow stone basin, carved with runes around the edges, in which Harry had seen his father torment-ing Snape. Dumbledore walked back to the desk, placed the Pensieve upon it, and raised his wand to his own temple. From it, he

withdrew silvery, gossamer-fine strands of thought clinging to the wand, and deposited them in the basin. He sat back down behind his desk and watched his thoughts swirl and drift inside the Pensieve for a moment. Then, with a sigh, he raised his wand and prodded the silvery sub-stance with its tip.

A figure rose out of it, draped in shawls, her eyes magnified to enormous size behind her glasses, and she revolved slowly, her feet in the basin. But when Sibyll Trelawney spoke, it was not in her usual ethe-real, mystic voice, but in the harsh, hoarse tones Harry had heard her use once before.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord ap-proaches. … Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies … and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not … and either must die at the hand of the other for nei-ther can live while the other survives. … The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies. …”

The slowly revolving Professor Trelawney sank back into the silver mass below and vanished.

The silence within the office was absolute. Neither Dumbledore nor Harry nor any of the portraits made a sound. Even Fawkes had fallen silent.

“Professor Dumbledore?” Harry said very quietly, for Dumbledore, still staring at the Pensieve, seemed completely lost in thought. “It … did that mean … What did that mean?”

“It meant,” said Dumbledore, “that the person who has the only chance of conquering Lord Voldemort for good was born at the end of July, nearly sixteen years ago. This boy would be born to parents who had already defied Voldemort three times.”

Harry felt as though something was closing in upon him. His breathing seemed difficult again.

“It means — me?”

Dumbledore surveyed him for a moment through his glasses.

“The odd thing is, Harry,” he said softly, “that it may not have meant you at all. Sibyll’s prophecy could have applied to two wizard boys, both born at the end of July that year, both of whom had par-ents in the Order of the Phoenix, both sets of parents having narrowly escaped Voldemort three times. One, of course, was you. The other was Neville Longbottom.”

“But then … but then, why was it my name on the prophecy and not Neville’s?”

“The official record was relabeled after Voldemort’s attack on you as a child,” said Dumbledore. “It seemed plain to the keeper of the Hall of Prophecy that Voldemort could only have tried to kill you be-cause he knew you to be the one to whom Sibyll was referring.”

“Then — it might not be me?” said Harry.

“I am afraid,” said Dumbledore slowly, looking as though every word cost him a great effort, “that there is no doubt that it is you.”

“But you said — Neville was born at the end of July too — and his mum and dad —”

“You are forgetting the next part of the prophecy, the final identi-fying feature of the boy who could vanquish Voldemort. … Volde-mort himself would ‘mark him as his equal.’ And so he did, Harry. He chose you, not Neville. He gave you the scar that has proved both blessing and curse.”

“But he might have chosen wrong!” said Harry. “He might have marked the wrong person!”

“He chose the boy he thought most likely to be a danger to him,” said Dumbledore. “And notice this, Harry. He chose, not the pureblood (which, according to his creed, is the only kind of wizard worth being or knowing), but the half-blood, like himself. He saw himself in you be-fore he had ever seen you, and in marking you with that scar, he did not kill you, as he intended, but gave you powers, and a future, which have fitted you to escape him not once, but four times so far — something that neither your parents, nor Neville’s parents, ever achieved.”

“Why did he do it, then?” said Harry, who felt numb and cold. “Why did he try and kill me as a baby? He should have waited to see whether Neville or I looked more dangerous when we were older and tried to kill whoever it was then —”

“That might, indeed, have been the more practical course,” said Dumbledore, “except that Voldemort’s information about the prophecy was incomplete. The Hog’s Head Inn, which Sibyll chose for its cheapness, has long attracted, shall we say, a more interesting clientele than the Three Broomsticks. As you and your friends found out to your cost, and I to mine that night, it is a place where it is never safe to assume you are not being overheard. Of course, I had not dreamed, when I set out to meet Sibyll Trelawney, that I would hear anything worth overhearing. My — our — one stroke of good for-tune was that the eavesdropper was detected only a short way into the prophecy and thrown from the building.”

“So he only heard … ?”

“He heard only the first part, the part foretelling the birth of a boy in July to parents who had thrice defied Voldemort. Consequently, he could not warn his master that to attack you would be to risk transferring power to you — again marking you as his equal. So

Voldemort never knew that there might be danger in attacking you, that it might be wise to wait or to learn more. He did not know that you would have 'power the Dark Lord knows not' —"

"But I don't!" said Harry in a strangled voice. "I haven't any powers he hasn't got, I couldn't fight the way he did tonight, I can't possess people or — or kill them —"

"There is a room in the Department of Mysteries," interrupted Dumbledore, "that is kept locked at all times. It contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than forces of nature. It is also, perhaps, the most mysterious of the many subjects for study that reside there. It is the power held within that room that you possess in such quantities and which Voldemort has not at all. That power took you to save Sirius tonight. That power also saved you from possession by Voldemort, because he could not bear to reside in a body so full of the force he detests. In the end, it mattered not that you could not close your mind. It was your heart that saved you."

Harry closed his eyes. If he had not gone to save Sirius, Sirius would not have died. … More to stave off the moment when he would have to think of Sirius again, Harry asked, without caring much about the answer, "The end of the prophecy … it was some-thing about … 'neither can live. …' "

" '… while the other survives,' " said Dumbledore.

"So," said Harry, dredging up the words from what felt like a deep well of despair inside him, "so does that mean that … that one of us has got to kill the other one … in the end?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. Somewhere far beyond the office walls, Harry could hear the sound of voices, students heading down to the Great Hall for an early breakfast, perhaps. It seemed im-

possible that there could be people in the world who still desired food, who laughed, who neither knew nor cared that Sirius Black was gone forever. Sirius seemed a million miles away already, even if a part of Harry still believed that if he had only pulled back that veil, he would have found Sirius looking back at him, greeting him, perhaps, with his laugh like a bark. …"I feel I owe you another explanation, Harry," said Dumbledore hesitantly. "You may, perhaps, have wondered why I never chose you as a prefect? I must confess … that I rather thought … you had enough responsibility to be going on with."

Harry looked up at him and saw a tear trickling down Dumble-dore's face into his long silver beard.

Chapter 38 The Second War Begins

HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED RETURNSIn a brief statement Friday night, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge confirmed that He-Who-Must-Not-Be Named has returned to this country and is active once more.

“It is with great regret that I must confirm that the wizard styling himself Lord — well, you know who I mean — is alive and among us again,” said Fudge, looking tired and flustered as he addressed reporters. “It is with almost equal regret that we report the mass revolt of the dementors of Azkaban, who have shown themselves averse to continuing in the Ministry’s em-ploy. We believe that the dementors are currently tak-ing direction from Lord — Thingy.

“We urge the magical population to remain vigi-lant. The Ministry is currently publishing guides to elementary home and personal defense that will be delivered free to all Wizarding homes within the coming month.”

The Minister’s statement was met with dismay and alarm from the Wizarding community, which as recently as last Wednesday was receiving Ministry as-surances that there was “no truth whatsoever in these persistent rumors that You-Know-Who is operating amongst us once more.”

Details of the events that led to the Ministry turn-around are still hazy, though it is believed that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and a select band of followers (known as Death Eaters) gained entry to the Ministry of Magic itself on Thursday evening.

Albus Dumbledore, newly reinstated headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, reinstated member of the International Confederation of Wizards, and reinstated Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, was unavailable for comment last night. He has insisted

for a year that You-Know-Who was not dead, as was widely hoped and believed, but recruit-ing followers once more for a fresh attempt to seize power. Meanwhile the Boy Who Lived —“There you are, Harry, I knew they’d drag you into it somehow,” said Hermione, looking over the top of the paper at him.

They were in the hospital wing. Harry was sitting on the end of Ron’s bed and they were both listening to Hermione read the front page of the Sunday Prophet. Ginny, whose ankle had been mended in a trice by Madam Pomfrey, was curled up at the foot of Hermione’s bed; Neville, whose nose had likewise been returned to its normal size and shape, was in a chair between the two beds; and Luna, who had dropped in to visit clutching the latest edition of The Quibbler, was reading the magazine upside down and apparently not taking in a word Hermione was saying.

“He’s ‘the Boy Who Lived’ again now, though, isn’t he?” said Ron darkly. “Not such a show-off maniac anymore, eh?”

He helped himself to a handful of Chocolate Frogs from the immense pile on his bedside cabinet, threw a few to Harry, Ginny, and Neville, and ripped off the wrapper of his own with his teeth. There were still deep welts on his forearms where the brain’s tentacles had wrapped around him. According to Madam Pomfrey, thoughts could leave deeper scarring than almost anything else, though since she had started applying copious amounts of Dr. Ubbly’s Oblivious Unction, there seemed to be some improvement.

“Yes, they’re very complimentary about you now, Harry,” said Hermione, now scanning down the article. “ ‘A lone voice of truth … perceived as unbalanced, yet never wavered in his story … forced to bear ridicule and slander …’ Hmmm,” said Hermione, frowning, “I notice they don’t mention the fact that it was them doing all the ridiculing and slandering, though. …”

She winced slightly and put a hand to her ribs. The curse Dolohov had used on her, though less effective than it would have been had he been able to say the incantation aloud, had nevertheless caused, in Madam Pomfrey's words, "quite enough damage to be going on with." Hermione was having to take ten different types of potion every day and although she was improving greatly, was already bored with the hospital wing.

" 'You-Know-Who's Last Attempt to Take Over, pages two to four, What the Ministry Should Have Told Us, page five, Why Nobody Listened to Al-bus Dumbledore, pages six to eight, Exclusive Interview with Harry Pot-ter, page nine …' Well," said Hermione, folding up the newspaper and throwing it aside, "it's certainly given them lots to write about. And that interview with Harry isn't exclusive, it's the one that was in The Quibbler months ago. …"

"Daddy sold it to them," said Luna vaguely, turning a page of The Quibbler. "He got a very good price for it too, so we're going to go on an expedition to Sweden this summer and see if we can catch a Crumple-Horned Snorkack."

Hermione seemed to struggle with herself for a moment, then said, "That sounds lovely."

Ginny caught Harry's eye and looked away quickly, grinning.

"So anyway," said Hermione, sitting up a little straighter and winc-ing again, "what's going on in school?"

"Well, Flitwick's got rid of Fred and George's swamp," said Ginny. "He did it in about three seconds. But he left a tiny patch under the window and he's roped it off —"

"Why?" said Hermione, looking startled.

"Oh, he just says it was a really good bit of magic," said Ginny, shrugging.

“I think he left it as a monument to Fred and George,” said Ron through a mouthful of chocolate. “They sent me all these, you know,” he told Harry, pointing at the small mountain of Frogs beside him. “Must be doing all right out of that joke shop, eh?”

Hermione looked rather disapproving and asked, “So has all the trouble stopped now Dumbledore’s back?”

“Yes,” said Neville, “everything’s settled right back down again.”

“I s’pose Filch is happy, is he?” asked Ron, propping a Chocolate Frog card featuring Dumbledore against his water jug.

“Not at all,” said Ginny. “He’s really, really miserable, actually. …” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “He keeps saying Umbridge was the best thing that ever happened to Hogwarts. …”

All six of them looked around. Professor Umbridge was lying in a bed opposite them, gazing up at the ceiling. Dumbledore had strode alone into the forest to rescue her from the centaurs. How he had done it — how he had emerged from the trees supporting Professor Umbridge without so much as a scratch on him — nobody knew, and Umbridge was certainly not telling. Since she had returned to the cas-tle she had not, as far as any of them knew, uttered a single word. No-body really knew what was wrong with her either. Her usually neat mousy hair was very untidy and there were bits of twig and leaf in it, but otherwise she seemed to be quite unscathed.

“Madam Pomfrey says she’s just in shock,” whispered Hermione.

“Sulking, more like,” said Ginny“Yeah, she shows signs of life if you do this,” said Ron, and with his tongue he made soft clip-clopping noises. Umbridge sat bolt upright, looking wildly around.

“Anything wrong, Professor?” called Madam Pomfrey, poking her head around her office door.

“No … no …” said Umbridge, sinking back into her pillows, “no, I must have been dreaming. …”

Hermione and Ginny muffled their laughter in the bedclothes.

“Speaking of centaurs,” said Hermione, when she had recovered a little, “who’s Divination teacher now? Is Firenze staying?”

“He’s got to,” said Harry, “the other centaurs won’t take him back, will they?”

“It looks like he and Trelawney are both going to teach,” said Ginny.

“Bet Dumbledore wishes he could’ve got rid of Trelawney for good,” said Ron, now munching on his fourteenth Frog. “Mind you, the whole subjects useless if you ask me, Firenze isn’t a lot better. …”

“How can you say that?” Hermione demanded. “After we’ve just found out that there are real prophecies?”

Harry’s heart began to race. He had not told Ron, Hermione, or anyone else what the prophecy had contained. Neville had told them it had smashed while Harry was pulling him up the steps in the Death Room, and Harry had not yet corrected this impression. He was not ready to see their expressions when he told them that he must be either murderer or victim, there was no other way. …“It is a pity it broke,” said Hermione quietly, shaking her head.

“Yeah, it is,” said Ron. “Still, at least You-Know-Who never found out what was in it either — where are you going?” he added, looking both surprised and disappointed as Harry stood up.

“Er — Hagrid’s,” said Harry. “You know, he just got back and I promised I’d go down and see him and tell him how you two are. …”

“Oh all right then,” said Ron grumpily, looking out of the dormi-tory window at the patch of bright blue sky beyond. “Wish we could come

…"

"Say hello to him for us!" called Hermione, as Harry proceeded down the ward. "And ask him what's happening about … about his little friend!"

Harry gave a wave of his hand to show he had heard and understood as he left the dormitory.

The castle seemed very quiet even for a Sunday. Everybody was clearly out in the sunny grounds, enjoying the end of their exams and the prospect of a last few days of term unhampered by studying or homework. Harry walked slowly along the deserted corridor, peering out of windows as he went. He could see people messing around in the air over the Quidditch pitch and a couple of students swimming in the lake, accompanied by the giant squid.

He was finding it hard at the moment to decide whether he wanted to be with people or not. Whenever he was in company he wanted to get away, and whenever he was alone he wanted company. He thought he might really go and visit Hagrid, though; he had not talked to him properly since he had returned. …Harry had just descended the last marble step into the entrance hall when Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle emerged from a door on the right that Harry knew led down to the Slytherin common room. Harry stopped dead; so did Malfoy and the others. For a few moments, the only sounds were the shouts, laughter, and splashes drifting into the hall from the grounds through the open front doors.

Malfoy glanced around. Harry knew he was checking for signs of teachers. Then he looked back at Harry and said in a low voice, "You're dead, Potter."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Funny," he said, "you'd think I'd have stopped walking around. …"

Malfoy looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him. He felt a kind of detached satisfaction at the sight of his pale, pointed face contorted with rage.

"You're going to pay," said Malfoy in a voice barely louder than a whisper. "I'm going to make you pay for what you've done to my father. …"

"Well, I'm terrified now," said Harry sarcastically. "I s'pose Lord Voldemort's just a warm-up act compared to you three — what's the matter?" he said, for Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had all looked stricken at the sound of the name. "He's your dad's mate, isn't he? Not scared of him, are you?"

"You think you're such a big man, Potter," said Malfoy, advancing now, Crabbe and Goyle flanking him. "You wait. I'll have you. You can't land my father in prison —"

"I thought I just had," said Harry.

"The dementors have left Azkaban," said Malfoy quietly. "Dad and the others'll be out in no time. …"

"Yeah, I expect they will," said Harry. "Still, at least everyone knows what scumbags they are now —"

Malfoy's hand flew toward his wand, but Harry was too quick for him. He had drawn his own wand before Malfoy's fingers had even entered the pocket of his robes.

"Potter!"

The voice rang across the entrance hall; Snape had emerged from the staircase leading down to his office, and at the sight of him Harry felt a great rush of hatred beyond anything he felt toward Malfoy. … What-ever Dumbledore said, he would never forgive Snape … never

…“What are you doing, Potter?” said Snape coldly as ever, as he strode over to the four of them.

“I’m trying to decide what curse to use on Malfoy, sir,” said Harry fiercely.

Snape stared at him.

“Put that wand away at once,” he said curtly. “Ten points from Gryff —”

Snape looked toward the giant hourglasses on the walls and gave a sneering smile.

“Ah. I see there are no longer any points left in the Gryffindor hourglass to take away. In that case, Potter, we will simply have to —”

“Add some more?”

Professor McGonagall had just stumped up the stone steps into the castle. She was carrying a tartan carpetbag in one hand and leaning heavily on a walking stick with her other, but otherwise looked quite well.

“Professor McGonagall!” said Snape, striding forward. “Out of St. Mungo’s, I see!”

“Yes, Professor Snape,” said Professor McGonagall, shrugging off her traveling cloak, “I’m quite as good as new. You two — Crabbe — Goyle —”

She beckoned them forward imperiously and they came, shuffling their large feet and looking awkward.

“Here,” said Professor McGonagall, thrusting her carpetbag into Crabbe’s chest and her cloak into Goyle’s, “take these up to my office for me.”

They turned and stumped away up the marble staircase.

"Right then," said Professor McGonagall, looking up at the hour-glasses on the wall, "well, I think Potter and his friends ought to have fifty points apiece for alerting the world to the return of You-Know-Who! What say you, Professor Snape?"

"What?" snapped Snape, though Harry knew he had heard per-fectly well. "Oh — well — I suppose …"

"So that's fifty each for Potter, the two Weasleys, Longbottom, and Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall, and a shower of rubies fell down into the bottom bulb of Gryffindor's hourglass as she spoke. "Oh — and fifty for Miss Lovegood, I suppose," she added, and a number of sapphires fell into Ravenclaw's glass. "Now, you wanted to take ten from Mr. Potter, I think, Professor Snape — so there we are. …"

A few rubies retreated into the upper bulb, leaving a respectable amount below nevertheless.

"Well, Potter, Malfoy, I think you ought to be outside on a glorious day like this," Professor McGonagall continued briskly.

Harry did not need telling twice. He thrust his wand back inside his robes and headed straight for the front doors without another glance at Snape and Malfoy.

The hot sun hit him with a blast as he walked across the lawns toward Hagrid's cabin. Students lying around on the grass sun-bathing, talking, reading the Sunday Prophet, and eating sweets looked up at him as he passed. Some called out to him, or else waved, clearly eager to show that they, like the Prophet, had decided he was something of a hero. Harry said nothing to any of them. He had no idea how much they knew of what had happened three days ago, but he had so far avoided being questioned and preferred it that way.

He thought at first when he knocked on Hagrid's cabin door that he was out, but then Fang came charging around the corner and al-most bowled him over with the enthusiasm of his welcome. Hagrid, it transpired, was picking runner beans in his back garden.

"All righ', Harry!" he said, beaming, when Harry approached the fence. "Come in, come in, we'll have a cup o' dandelion juice. …"How's things?" Hagrid asked him, as they settled down at his wooden table with a glass apiece of iced juice. "You — er — feelin' all righ', are yeh?"

Harry knew from the look of concern on Hagrid's face that he was not referring to Harry's physical well-being.

"I'm fine," Harry said quickly, because he could not bear to discuss the thing that he knew was in Hagrid's mind. "So, where've you been?"

"Bin hidin' out in the mountains," said Hagrid. "Up in a cave, like Sirius did when he —"

Hagrid broke off, cleared his throat gruffly, looked at Harry, and took a long draft of juice.

"Anyway, back now," he said feebly.

"You — you look better," said Harry, who was determined to keep the conversation moving away from Sirius.

"Wha?" said Hagrid, raising a massive hand and feeling his face. "Oh — oh yeah. Well, Grawpy's loads better behaved now, loads. Seemed right pleased ter see me when I got back, ter tell yeh the truth. He's a good lad, really. … I've bin thinkin' abou' tryin' ter find him a lady friend, actually. …"

Harry would normally have tried to persuade Hagrid out of this idea at once. The prospect of a second giant taking up residence in the

forest, possibly even wilder and more brutal than Grawp, was positively alarming, but somehow Harry could not muster the energy necessary to argue the point. He was starting to wish he was alone again, and with the idea of hastening his departure he took several large gulps of his dandelion juice, half emptying his glass.

"Ev'ryone knows you've bin tellin' the truth now, Harry," said Ha-grid softly and unexpectedly. "Tha's gotta be better, hasn' it?"

Harry shrugged.

"Look …" Hagrid leaned toward him across the table, "I knew Sirius longer 'n you did. … He died in battle, an' tha's the way he'd've wanted ter go —"

"He didn't want to go at all!" said Harry angrily.

Hagrid bowed his great shaggy head.

"Nah, I don' reckon he did," he said quietly. "But still, Harry … he was never one ter sit around at home an' let other people do the fightin'. He couldn' have lived with himself if he hadn' gone ter help —"

Harry leapt up again.

"I've got to go and visit Ron and Hermione in the hospital wing," he said mechanically.

"Oh," said Hagrid, looking rather upset. "Oh … all righ then, Harry … Take care of yerself then, an' drop back in if yeh've got a mo. …"

"Yeah … right …"

Harry crossed to the door as fast as he could and pulled it open. He was out in the sunshine again before Hagrid had finished saying good-bye and walked away across the lawn. Once again, people called out to him as he passed. He closed his eyes for a few

moments, wishing they would all vanish, that he could open his eyes and find himself alone in the grounds. …A few days ago, before his exams had finished and he had seen the vision Voldemort had planted in his mind, he would have given al-most anything for the Wizarding world to know that he had been telling the truth, for them to believe that Voldemort was back and know that he was neither a liar nor mad. Now, however …He walked a short way around the lake, sat down on its bank, shel-tered from the gaze of passersby behind a tangle of shrubs, and stared out over the gleaming water, thinking. … Perhaps the reason he wanted to be alone was because he had felt isolated from everybody since his talk with Dumbledore. An invisible barrier separated him from the rest of the world. He was — he had always been — a marked man. It was just that he had never really un-derstood what that meant. …And yet sitting here on the edge of the lake, with the terrible weight of grief dragging at him, with the loss of Sirius so raw and fresh inside, he could not muster any great sense of fear. It was sunny and the grounds around him were full of laughing people, and even though he felt as distant from them as though he belonged to a different race, it was still very hard to believe as he sat here that his life must include, or end in, murder. …He sat there for a long time, gazing out at the water, trying not to think about his godfather or to remember that it was directly across from here, on the opposite bank, that Sirius had collapsed trying to fend off a hundred dementors. …The sun had fallen before he realized that he was cold. He got up and returned to the castle, wiping his face on his sleeve as he went.

Ron and Hermione left the hospital wing completely cured three days before the end of term. Hermione showed signs of wanting to talk about Sirius, but Ron tended to make hushing noises every time she mentioned his name. Harry was not sure whether or not he wanted to talk about his godfather yet; his wishes varied with his mood. He knew one thing, though: Unhappy as he felt at the moment, he would greatly miss Hogwarts in a few days' time when he was back at num-ber four, Privet Drive. Even though he now understood exactly why

he had to return there every summer, he did not feel any better about it. Indeed, he had never dreaded his return more.

Professor Umbridge left Hogwarts the day before the end of term. It seemed that she had crept out of the hospital wing during dinner-time, evidently hoping to depart undetected, but unfortunately for her, she met Peeves on the way, who seized his last chance to do as Fred had instructed and chased her gleefully from the premises, whacking her alternately with a walking stick and a sock full of chalk. Many students ran out into the entrance hall to watch her running away down the path, and the Heads of Houses tried only halfheart-edly to restrain their pupils. Indeed, Professor McGonagall sank back into her chair at the staff table after a few feeble remonstrances and was clearly heard to express a regret that she could not run cheering after Umbridge herself, because Peeves had borrowed her walking stick.

Their last evening at school arrived; most people had finished packing and were already heading down to the end-of-term feast, but Harry had not even started.

“Just do it tomorrow!” said Ron, who was waiting by the door of their dormitory. “Come on, I’m starving. …”

“I won’t be long. … Look, you go ahead. …”

But when the dormitory door closed behind Ron, Harry made no effort to speed up his packing. The very last thing he wanted to do was to attend the end-of-term feast. He was worried that Dumbledore would make some reference to him in his speech. He was sure to mention Voldemort’s return; he had talked to them about it last year, after all. …Harry pulled some crumpled robes out of the very bottom of his trunk to make way for folded ones and, as he did so, noticed a badly wrapped package lying in a corner of it. He could not think what it was doing there. He bent down, pulled it out from underneath his trainers, and examined it.

He realized what it was within seconds. Sirius had given it to him just inside the front door of twelve Grimmauld Place. Use it if you need me, all right?

Harry sank down onto his bed and unwrapped the package. Out fell a small, square mirror. It looked old; it was certainly dirty. Harry held it up to his face and saw his own reflection looking back at him.

He turned the mirror over. There on the reverse side was a scribbled note from Sirius.

This is a two-way mirror. I've got the other. If you need to speak to me, just say my name into it; you'll appear in my mirror and I'll be able to talk in yours. James and I used to use them when we were in separate detentions.

And Harry's heart began to race. He remembered seeing his dead parents in the Mirror of Erised four years ago. He was going to be able to talk to Sirius again, right now, he knew it —He looked around to make sure there was nobody else there; the dormitory was quite empty. He looked back at the mirror, raised it in front of his face with trembling hands, and said, loudly and clearly, "Sirius."

His breath misted the surface of the glass. He held the mirror even closer, excitement flooding through him, but the eyes blinking back at him through the fog were definitely his own.

He wiped the mirror clear again and said, so that every syllable rang clearly through the room, "Sirius Black!"

Nothing happened. The frustrated face looking back out of the mirror was still, definitely, his own. …Sirius didn't have his mirror on him when he went through the arch-way, said a small voice in Harry's head. That's why it's not working. …Harry remained quite still for a moment, then hurled the mirror back into the trunk where it shattered. He had been convinced, for a whole, shining minute, that he was going to see Sirius, talk to him again. …Disappointment was burning

in his throat. He got up and began throwing his things pell-mell into the trunk on top of the broken mirror —But then an idea struck him. … A better idea than a mirror … A much bigger, more important idea … How had he never thought of it before — why had he never asked?

He was sprinting out of the dormitory and down the spiral stair-case, hitting the walls as he ran and barely noticing. He hurtled across the empty common room, through the portrait hole and off along the corridor, ignoring the Fat Lady, who called after him, "The feast is about to start, you know, you're cutting it very fine!"

But Harry had no intention of going to the feast …How could it be that the place was full of ghosts whenever you didn't need one, yet now … He ran down staircases and along corridors and met nobody either alive or dead. They were all, clearly, in the Great Hall. Outside his Charms classroom he came to a halt, panting and thinking disconsolately that he would have to wait until later, until after the end of the feast …But just as he had given up hope he saw it — a translucent some-body drifting across the end of the corridor.

"Hey — hey Nick! NICK!"

The ghost stuck its head back out of the wall, revealing the extravagantly plumed hat and dangerously wobbling head of Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington.

"Good evening," he said, withdrawing the rest of his body from the solid stone and smiling at Harry. "I am not the only one who is late, then? Though," he sighed, "in rather different senses, of course …"

"Nick, can I ask you something?"

A most peculiar expression stole over Nearly Headless Nick's face as he inserted a finger in the stiff ruff at his neck and tugged it a little straighter, apparently to give himself thinking time. He desisted only when his partially severed neck seemed about to give way completely.

“Er — now, Harry?” said Nick, looking discomforted. “Can’t it wait until after the feast?”

“No — Nick — please,” said Harry, “I really need to talk to you. Can we go in here?”

Harry opened the door of the nearest classroom and Nearly Headless Nick sighed.

“Oh very well,” he said, looking resigned. “I can’t pretend I haven’t been expecting it.”

Harry was holding the door open for him, but he drifted through the wall instead.

“Expecting what?” Harry asked, as he closed the door.

“You to come and find me,” said Nick, now gliding over to the win-dow and looking out at the darkening grounds. “It happens, some-times … when somebody has suffered a … loss.”

“Well,” said Harry, refusing to be deflected. “You were right, I’ve — I’ve come to find you.”

Nick said nothing.

“It’s —” said Harry, who was finding this more awkward than he had anticipated, “it’s just — you’re dead. But you’re still here, aren’t you?”

Nick sighed and continued to gaze out at the grounds.

“That’s right, isn’t it?” Harry urged him. “You died, but I’m talking to you. … You can walk around Hogwarts and everything, can’t you?”

“Yes,” said Nearly Headless Nick quietly, “I walk and talk, yes.”

“So, you came back, didn’t you?” said Harry urgently. “People can come back, right? As ghosts. They don’t have to disappear

completely. Well?" he added impatiently, when Nick continued to say nothing.

Nearly Headless Nick hesitated, then said, "Not everyone can come back as a ghost."

"What d'you mean?" said Harry quickly.

"Only … only wizards."

"Oh," said Harry, and he almost laughed with relief. "Well, that's okay then, the person I'm asking about is a wizard. So he can come back, right?"

Nick turned away from the window and looked mournfully at Harry. "He won't come back."

"Who?"

"Sirius Black," said Nick.

"But you did!" said Harry angrily. "You came back — you're dead and you didn't disappear —"

"Wizards can leave an imprint of themselves upon the earth, to walk palely where their living selves once trod," said Nick miserably. "But very few wizards choose that path."

"Why not?" said Harry. "Anyway — it doesn't matter — Sirius won't care if it's unusual, he'll come back, I know he will!"

And so strong was his belief that Harry actually turned his head to check the door, sure, for a split second, that he was going to see Sirius, pearly white and transparent but beaming, walking through it toward him.

"He will not come back," repeated Nick quietly. "He will have … gone on."

"What d'you mean, 'gone on'?" said Harry quickly. "Gone on where? Listen — what happens when you die, anyway? Where do you go? Why doesn't everyone come back? Why isn't this place full of ghosts? Why — ?"

"I cannot answer," said Nick.

"You're dead, aren't you?" said Harry exasperatedly. "Who can answer better than you?"

"I was afraid of death," said Nick. "I chose to remain behind. I sometimes wonder whether I oughtn't to have … Well, that is neither here nor there. … In fact, I am neither here nor there. …" He gave a small sad chuckle. "I know nothing of the secrets of death, Harry, for I chose my feeble imitation of life instead. I believe learned wizards study the matter in the Department of Mysteries —"

"Don't talk to me about that place!" said Harry fiercely.

"I am sorry not to have been more help," said Nick gently. "Well … well, do excuse me … the feast, you know …"

And he left the room, leaving Harry there alone, gazing blankly at the wall through which Nick had disappeared.

Harry felt almost as though he had lost his godfather all over again in losing the hope that he might be able to see or speak to him once more. He walked slowly and miserably back up through the empty castle, wondering whether he would ever feel cheerful again.

He had turned the corner toward the Fat Lady's corridor when he saw somebody up ahead fastening a note to a board on the wall. A second glance showed him that it was Luna. There were no good hiding places nearby, she was bound to have heard his footsteps, and in any case, Harry could hardly muster the energy to avoid anyone at the moment.

“Hello,” said Luna vaguely, glancing around at him as she stepped back from the notice.

“How come you’re not at the feast?” Harry asked.

“Well, I’ve lost most of my possessions,” said Luna serenely. “Peo-ple take them and hide them, you know. But as it’s the last night, I re-ally do need them back, so I’ve been putting up signs.”

She gestured toward the notice board, upon which, sure enough, she had pinned a list of all her missing books and clothes, with a plea for their return.

An odd feeling rose in Harry — an emotion quite different from the anger and grief that had filled him since Sirius’s death. It was a few moments before he realized that he was feeling sorry for Luna.

“How come people hide your stuff?” he asked her, frowning.

“Oh … well …” She shrugged. “I think they think I’m a bit odd, you know. Some people call me ‘Loony’ Lovegood, actually.”

Harry looked at her and the new feeling of pity intensified rather painfully.

“That’s no reason for them to take your things,” he said flatly. “D’you want help finding them?”

“Oh no,” she said, smiling at him. “They’ll come back, they always do in the end. It was just that I wanted to pack tonight. Anyway … why aren’t you at the feast?”

Harry shrugged. “Just didn’t feel like it.”

“No,” said Luna, observing him with those oddly misty, protuber-ant eyes. “I don’t suppose you do. That man the Death Eaters killed was your godfather, wasn’t he? Ginny told me.”

Harry nodded curtly, but found that for some reason he did not mind Luna talking about Sirius. He had just remembered that she too could see thestrals.

“Have you …” he began. “I mean, who … has anyone you’ve known ever died?”

“Yes,” said Luna simply, “my mother. She was a quite extraordinary witch, you know, but she did like to experiment and one of her spells went rather badly wrong one day. I was nine.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry mumbled.

“Yes, it was rather horrible,” said Luna conversationally. “I still feel very sad about it sometimes. But I’ve still got Dad. And anyway, it’s not as though I’ll never see Mum again, is it?”

“Er — isn’t it?” said Harry uncertainly.

She shook her head in disbelief. “Oh, come on. You heard them, just behind the veil, didn’t you?”

“You mean …”

“In that room with the archway. They were just lurking out of sight, that’s all. You heard them.”

They looked at each other. Luna was smiling slightly. Harry did not know what to say, or to think. Luna believed so many extraordinary things … yet he had been sure he had heard voices behind the veil too. …“Are you sure you don’t want me to help you look for your stuff?” he said.

“Oh no,” said Luna. “No, I think I’ll just go down and have some pudding and wait for it all to turn up. … It always does in the end. … Well, have a nice holiday, Harry.”

“Yeah … yeah, you too.”

She walked away from him, and as he watched her go, he found that the terrible weight in his stomach seemed to have lessened slightly.

The journey home on the Hogwarts Express next day was eventful in several ways. Firstly, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who had clearly been waiting all week for the opportunity to strike without teacher witnesses, attempted to ambush Harry halfway down the train as he made his way back from the toilet. The attack might have succeeded had it not been for the fact that they unwittingly chose to stage the attack right outside a compartment full of D.A. members, who saw what was happening through the glass and rose as one to rush to Harry’s aid. By the time Ernie Macmillan, Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Anthony Goldstein, and Terry Boot had finished using a wide variety of the hexes and jinxes Harry had taught them, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle resembled nothing so much as three gigantic slugs squeezed into Hogwarts uniforms as Harry, Ernie, and Justin hoisted them into the luggage rack and left them there to ooze.

“I must say, I’m looking forward to seeing Malfoy’s mother’s face when he gets off the train,” said Ernie with some satisfaction, as he watched Malfoy squirm above him. Ernie had never quite got over the indignity of Malfoy docking points from Hufflepuff during his brief spell as a member of the Inquisitorial Squad.

“Goyle’s mum’ll be really pleased, though,” said Ron, who had come to investigate the source of the commotion. “He’s loads betterlooking now. … Anyway, Harry, the food trolley’s just stopped if you want anything. …”

Harry thanked the others and accompanied Ron back to their compartment, where he bought a large pile of Cauldron Cakes and Pumpkin Pasties. Hermione was reading the Daily Prophet again, Ginny was doing a quiz in The Quibbler, and Neville was stroking his

Mimbulus mimbletonia, which had grown a great deal over the year and now made odd crooning noises when touched.

Harry and Ron whiled away most of the journey playing wizard chess while Hermione read out snippets from the Prophet. It was now full of articles about how to repel dementors, attempts by the Min-istry to track down Death Eaters, and hysterical letters claiming that the writer had seen Lord Voldemort walking past their house that very morning. …"It hasn't really started yet," sighed Hermione gloomily, folding up the newspaper again. "But it won't be long now. …"

"Hey, Harry," said Ron, nodding toward the glass window onto the corridor.

Harry looked around. Cho was passing, accompanied by Marietta Edgecombe, who was wearing a balaclava. His and Cho's eyes met for a moment. Cho blushed and kept walking. Harry looked back down at the chessboard just in time to see one of his pawns chased off its square by Ron's knight.

"What's — er — going on with you and her anyway?" Ron asked quietly.

"Nothing," said Harry truthfully.

"I — er — heard she's going out with someone else now," said Hermione tentatively.

Harry was surprised to find that this information did not hurt at all. Wanting to impress Cho seemed to belong to a past that was no longer quite connected with him. So much of what he had wanted before Sirius's death felt that way these days. … The week that had elapsed since he had last seen Sirius seemed to have lasted much, much longer: It stretched across two universes, the one with Sirius in it, and the one without.

“You’re well out of it, mate,” said Ron forcefully. “I mean, she’s quite good-looking and all that, but you want someone a bit more cheerful.”

“She’s probably cheerful enough with someone else,” said Harry, shrugging.

“Who’s she with now anyway?” Ron asked Hermione, but it was Ginny who answered.

“Michael Corner,” she said.

“Michael — but —” said Ron, craning around in his seat to stare at her. “But you were going out with him!”

“Not anymore,” said Ginny resolutely. “He didn’t like Gryffindor beating Ravenclaw at Quidditch and got really sulky, so I ditched him and he ran off to comfort Cho instead.” She scratched her nose absently with the end of her quill, turned The Quibbler upside down, and began marking her answers. Ron looked highly delighted.

“Well, I always thought he was a bit of an idiot,” he said, prodding his queen forward toward Harry’s quivering castle. “Good for you. Just choose someone — better — next time.”

He cast Harry an oddly furtive look as he said it.

“Well, I’ve chosen Dean Thomas, would you say he’s better?” asked Ginny vaguely.

“WHAT?” shouted Ron, upending the chessboard. Crookshanks went plunging after the pieces and Hedwig and Pigwidgeon twittered and hooted angrily from overhead.

As the train slowed down in the approach to King’s Cross, Harry thought he had never wanted to leave it less. He even wondered fleet-ingly what would happen if he simply refused to get off, but remained stubbornly sitting there until the first of September, when it

would take him back to Hogwarts. When it finally puffed to a standstill, however, he lifted down Hedwig's cage and prepared to drag his trunk from the train as usual.

When the ticket inspector signaled to him, Ron, and Hermione that it was safe to walk through the magical barrier between platforms nine and ten, however, he found a surprise awaiting him on the other side: a group of people standing there to greet him whom he had not expected at all.

There was Mad-Eye Moody, looking quite as sinister with his bowler hat pulled low over his magical eye as he would have done without it, his gnarled hands clutching a long staff, his body wrapped in a voluminous traveling cloak. Tonks stood just behind him, her bright bubble-gum-pink hair gleaming in the sunlight filtering through the dirty glass station ceiling, wearing heavily patched jeans and a bright purple T-shirt bearing the legend THE WEIRD SISTERS. Next to Tonks was Lupin, his face pale, his hair graying, a long and threadbare overcoat covering a shabby jumper and trousers. At the front of the group stood Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, dressed in their Muggle best, and Fred and George, who were both wearing brand-new jackets in some lurid green, scaly material.

"Ron, Ginny!" called Mrs. Weasley, hurrying forward and hugging her children tightly. "Oh, and Harry dear — how are you?"

"Fine," lied Harry, as she pulled him into a tight embrace. Over her shoulder he saw Ron goggling at the twins' new clothes.

"What are they supposed to be?" he asked, pointing at the jackets.

"Finest dragon skin, little bro," said Fred, giving his zip a little tweak. "Business is booming and we thought we'd treat ourselves."

"Hello, Harry," said Lupin, as Mrs. Weasley let go of Harry and turned to greet Hermione.

“Hi,” said Harry. “I didn’t expect … what are you all doing here?”

“Well,” said Lupin with a slight smile, “we thought we might have a little chat with your aunt and uncle before letting them take you home.”

“I dunno if that’s a good idea,” said Harry at once.

“Oh, I think it is,” growled Moody, who had limped a little closer. “That’ll be them, will it, Potter?”

He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder; his magical eye was evidently peering through the back of his head and his bowler hat. Harry leaned an inch or so to the left to see where Mad-Eye was point-ing and there, sure enough, were the three Dursleys, who looked positively appalled to see Harry’s reception committee.

“Ah, Harry!” said Mr. Weasley, turning from Hermione’s parents, whom he had been greeting enthusiastically, and who were taking it in turns to hug Hermione. “Well — shall we do it, then?”

“Yeah, I reckon so, Arthur,” said Moody.

He and Mr. Weasley took the lead across the station toward the place where the Dursleys stood, apparently rooted to the floor. Hermione disengaged herself gently from her mother to join the group.

“Good afternoon,” said Mr. Weasley pleasantly to Uncle Vernon, coming to a halt right in front of him. “You might remember me, my name’s Arthur Weasley.”

As Mr. Weasley had singlehandedly demolished most of the Dursleys’ living room two years previously, Harry would have been very surprised if Uncle Vernon had forgotten him. Sure enough, Uncle Vernon turned a deeper shade of puce and glared at Mr. Weasley, but chose not to say anything, partly, perhaps, because the Dursleys were outnumbered two to one. Aunt Petunia looked both frightened

and embarrassed. She kept glancing around, as though terrified somebody she knew would see her in such company. Dudley, meanwhile, seemed to be trying to look small and insignificant, a feat at which he was failing extravagantly.

“We thought we’d just have a few words with you about Harry,” said Mr. Weasley, still smiling.

“Yeah,” growled Moody. “About how he’s treated when he’s at your place.”

Uncle Vernon’s mustache seemed to bristle with indignation. Possibly because the bowler hat gave him the entirely mistaken impression that he was dealing with a kindred spirit, he addressed himself to Moody.

“I am not aware that it is any of your business what goes on in my house —”

“I expect what you’re not aware of would fill several books, Durs-ley,” growled Moody.

“Anyway, that’s not the point,” interjected Tonks, whose pink hair seemed to offend Aunt Petunia more than all the rest put together, for she closed her eyes rather than look at her. “The point is, if we find out you’ve been horrible to Harry —”

“— and make no mistake, we’ll hear about it,” added Lupin pleasantly.

“Yes,” said Mr. Weasley, “even if you won’t let Harry use the fellytone —”

“Telephone,” whispered Hermione.

“Yeah, if we get any hint that Potter’s been mistreated in any way, you’ll have us to answer to,” said Moody.

Uncle Vernon swelled ominously. His sense of outrage seemed to outweigh even his fear of this bunch of oddballs.

“Are you threatening me, sir?” he said, so loudly that passersby actually turned to stare.

“Yes, I am,” said Mad-Eye, who seemed rather pleased that Uncle Vernon had grasped this fact so quickly.

“And do I look like the kind of man who can be intimidated?” barked Uncle Vernon.

“Well …” said Moody, pushing back his bowler hat to reveal his sinisterly revolving magical eye. Uncle Vernon leapt backward in horror and collided painfully with a luggage trolley. “Yes, I’d have to say you do, Dursley.”

He turned from Uncle Vernon to Harry. “So, Potter … give us a shout if you need us. If we don’t hear from you for three days in a row, we’ll send someone along. …”

Aunt Petunia whimpered piteously. It could not have been plainer that she was thinking of what the neighbors would say if they caught sight of these people marching up the garden path.

“ ’Bye, then, Potter,” said Moody, grasping Harry’s shoulder for a moment with a gnarled hand.

“Take care, Harry,” said Lupin quietly. “Keep in touch.”

“Harry, we’ll have you away from there as soon as we can,” Mrs. Weasley whispered, hugging him again.

“We’ll see you soon, mate,” said Ron anxiously, shaking Harry’s hand.

“Really soon, Harry,” said Hermione earnestly. “We promise.”

Harry nodded. He somehow could not find words to tell them what it meant to him, to see them all ranged there, on his side. Instead he smiled, raised a hand in farewell, turned around, and led the way out of the station toward the sunlit street, with Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley hurrying along in his wake.

Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince

Chapter 1 The Other Minister

Chapter 2 Spinner's End

Chapter 3 Will And Won't

Chapter 4 Horace Slughorn

Chapter 5 An Excess Of Phlegm

Chapter 6 Draco's Detour

Chapter 7: The Slug Club

Chapter 8 Victorious Snape

Chapter 9 The Half-Blood Prince

Chapter 10 The house of count

Chapter 11 Hermione's helping hand

Chapter 12 Silver and opals

Chapter 13 The secret riddle

Chapter 14 Felix felicis

Chapter 15 The Unbreakable Vow

Chapter 16 A very frosty Christmas

Chapter 17 A sluggish memory

Chapter 18 Birthday Surprises

Chapter 19 Elf Tails

Chapter 20 Lord Voldemort's Request

Chapter 22 After the Burial

Chapter 23 Horcruxes

Chapter 24 Sectumsempra

Chapter 25 The Seer Overheard

Chapter 26 The Cave

Chapter 27 The Lightning-Struck Tower

Chapter 28 Flight of the Prince

Chapter 29 The Phoenix Lament

Chapter 30 The White Tomb

Return to the Main Contents

Chapter 1 The Other Minister

It was nearing midnight and the Prime Minister was sitting alone in his office, reading a long memo that was slipping through his brain without leaving the slightest trace of meaning behind. He was waiting for a call from the President of a far distant country, and between wondering when the wretched man would telephone, and trying to suppress unpleasant memories of what had been a very long, tiring, and difficult week, there was not much space in his head for anything else. The more he attempted to focus on the print on the page before him, the more clearly the Prime Minister could see the gloating face of one of his political opponents. This particular opponent had appeared on the news that very day, not only to enumerate all the terrible things that had happened in the last week (as though anyone needed reminding) but also to explain why each and every one of them was the government's fault.

The Prime Minister's pulse quickened at the very thought of these accusations, for they were neither fair nor true. How on earth was his government supposed to have stopped that bridge collapsing? It was outrageous for anybody to suggest that they were not spending enough on bridges. The bridge was fewer than ten years old, and the best experts were at a loss to explain why it had snapped cleanly in two, sending a dozen cars into the watery depths of the river below. And how dare anyone suggest that it was lack of policemen that had resulted in those two very nasty and well-publicized murders? Or that the government should have somehow foreseen the freak hurricane in the West Country that had caused so much damage to both people and property? And was it his fault that one of his Junior Ministers, Herbert Chorley, had chosen this week to act so peculiarly that he was now going to be spending a lot more time with his family?

"A grim mood has gripped the country," the opponent had concluded, barely concealing his own broad grin.

And unfortunately, this was perfectly true. The Prime Minister felt it himself; people really did seem more miserable than usual. Even the weather was dismal; all this chilly mist in the middle of July... It wasn't right, it wasn't normal...

He turned over the second page of the memo, saw how much longer it went on, and gave it up as a bad job. Stretching his arms above his head he looked around his office mournfully. It was a handsome room, with a fine marble fireplace facing the long sash windows, firmly closed against the unseasonable chill. With a slight shiver, the Prime Minister got up and moved over to the window, looking out at the thin mist that was pressing itself against the glass. It was then, as he stood with his back to the room, that he heard a soft cough behind him.

He froze, nose to nose with his own scared-looking reflection in the dark glass. He knew that cough. He had heard it before. He turned very slowly to face the empty room.

"Hello?" he said, trying to sound braver than he felt.

For a brief moment he allowed himself the impossible hope that nobody would answer him. However, a voice responded at once, a crisp, decisive voice that sounded as though it were reading a prepared statement. It was coming -- as the Prime Minister had known at the first cough -- from the froglike little man wearing a long silver wig who was depicted in a small, dirty oil painting in the far corner of the room.

"To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Urgent we meet. Kindly respond immediately. Sincerely, Fudge."The man in the painting looked inquiringly at the Prime Minister.

"Er," said the Prime Minister, "listen... Its not a very good time for me... I'm waiting for a telephone call, you see... from the President of--""That can be rearranged," said the portrait at once. The Prime Minister's heart sank. He had been afraid of that.

"But I really was rather hoping to speak--""We shall arrange for the President to forget to call. He will telephone tomorrow night instead," said the little man. "Kindly respond immediately to Mr. Fudge."

"I... oh ... very well," said the Prime Minister weakly. "Yes, I'll see Fudge."He hurried back to his desk, straightening his tie as he went. He had barely resumed his seat, and arranged his face into what he hoped was a relaxed and unfazed expression, when bright green flames burst into life in the empty grate beneath his marble mantelpiece. He watched, trying not to betray a flicker of surprise or alarm, as a portly man appeared within the flames, spinning as fast as a top. Seconds later, he had climbed out onto a rather fine antique rug, brushing ash from the sleeves of his long pin-striped cloak, a lime-green bowler hat in his hand.

"Ah... Prime Minister," said Cornelius Fudge, striding forward with his hand outstretched. "Good to see you again."The Prime Minister could not honestly return this compliment, so said nothing at all. He was not remotely pleased to see Fudge, whose occasional appearances, apart from being downright alarming in themselves, generally meant that he was about to hear some very bad news. Furthermore, Fudge was looking distinctly careworn. He was thinner, balder, and grayer, and his face had a crumpled look. The Prime Minister had seen that kind of look in politicians before, and it never boded well.

"How can I help you?" he said, shaking Fudge's hand very briefly and gesturing toward the hardest of the chairs in front of the desk.

"Difficult to know where to begin," muttered Fudge, pulling up the chair, sitting down, and placing his green bowler upon his knees. "What a week, what a week...""Had a bad one too, have you?" asked the Prime Minister stiffly, hoping to convey by this that he had quite enough on his plate already without any extra helpings from Fudge.

"Yes, of course," said Fudge, rubbing his eyes wearily and looking morosely at the Prime Minister. "I've been having the same week you

have, Prime Minister. The Brockdale Bridge... the Bones and Vance murders... not to mention the ruckus in the West Country...""You--er--your--I mean to say, some of your people were--were involved in those--those things, were they?"Fudge fixed the Prime Minister with a rather stern look. "Of course they were," he said, "Surely you've realized what's going on?""I..." hesitated the Prime Minister.

It was precisely this sort of behavior that made him dislike Fudge's visits so much. He was, after all, the Prime Minister and did not appreciate being made to feel like an ignorant schoolboy. But of course, it had been like this from his very first meeting with Fudge on his very first evening as Prime Minister. He remembered it as though it were yesterday and knew it would haunt him until his dying day.

He had been standing alone in this very office, savoring the triumph that was his after so many years of dreaming and scheming, when he had heard a cough behind him, just like tonight, and turned to find that ugly little portrait talking to him, announcing that the Minister of Magic was about to arrive and introduce himselfNaturally, he had thought that the long campaign and the strain of the election had caused him to go mad. He had been utterly terrified to find a portrait talking to him, though this had been nothing to how he felt when a self-proclaimed wizard had bounced out of the fireplace and shaken his hand. He had remained speechless throughout Fudge's kindly explanation that there were witches and wizards still living in secret all over the world and his reassurances that he was not to bother his head about them as the Ministry of Magic took responsibility for the whole Wizarding community and prevented the non-magical population from getting wind of them. It was, said Fudge, a difficult job that encompassed everything from regulations on responsible use of broomsticks to keeping the dragon population under control (the Prime Minister remembered clutching the desk for support at this point). Fudge had then patted the shoulder of the sLill-dumbstruck Prime Minister in a fatherly sort of way.

"Not to worry," he had said, "it's odds-on you'll never see me again. I'll only bother you if there's something really serious going on our end, something that's likely to affect the Muggles--the non-magical population, I should say. Otherwise, it's live and let live. And I must say, you're taking it a lot better than your predecessor. He tried to throw me out the window, thought I was a hoax planned by the opposition."At this, the Prime Minister had found his voice at last. "You're--you're not a hoax, then?"It had been his last, desperate hope.

"No," said Fudge gently. "No, I'm afraid I'm not. Look."And he had turned the Prime Minister's teacup into a gerbil.

"But," said the Prime Minister breathlessly, watching his teacup chewing on the corner of his next speech, "but why--why has nobody told me--?""The Minister of Magic only reveals him--or herself to the Muggle Prime Minister of the day," said Fudge, poking his wand back inside his jacket. "We find it the best way to maintain secrecy.""But then," bleated the Prime Minister, "why hasn't a former Prime Minister warned me--?"At this, Fudge had actually laughed.

"My dear Prime Minister, are you ever going to tell anybody?"Still chortling, Fudge had thrown some powder into the fireplace, stepped into the emerald flames, and vanished with a whooshing sound. The Prime Minister had stood there, quite motionless, and realized that he would never, as long as he lived, dare mention this encounter to a living soul, for who in the wide world would believe him?

The shock had taken a little while to wear off. For a time, he had tried to convince himself that Fudge had indeed been a hallucination brought on by lack of sleep during his grueling election campaign. In a vain attempt to rid himself of all reminders of this uncomfortable encounter, he had given the gerbil to his delighted niece and instructed his private secretary to take down the portrait of the ugly little man who had announced Fudge's arrival. To the Prime Minister's dismay, however, the portrait had proved impossible to remove.

When several carpenters, a builder or two, an art historian, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer had all tried unsuccessfully to prise it from the wall, the Prime Minister had abandoned the attempt and simply resolved to hope that the thing remained motionless and silent for the rest of his term in office. Occasionally he could have sworn he saw out of the corner of his eye the occupant of the painting yawning, or else scratching his nose; even, once or twice, simply walking out of his frame and leaving nothing but a stretch of muddy-brown canvas behind. However, he had trained himself not to look at the picture very much, and always to tell himself firmly that his eyes were playing tricks on him when anything like this happened.

Then, three years ago, on a night very like tonight, the Prime Minister had been alone in his office when the portrait had once again announced the imminent arrival of Fudge, who had burst out of the fireplace, sopping wet and in a state of considerable panic. Before the Prime Minister could ask why he was dripping all over the Axminster, Fudge had started ranting about a prison the Prime Minister had never heard of, a man named "Serious" Black, something that sounded like "Hogwarts," and a boy called Harry Potter, none of which made the remotest sense to the Prime Minister.

"...I've just come from Azkaban," Fudge had panted, tipping a large amount of water out of the rim of his bowler hat into his pocket. "Middle of the North Sea, you know, nasty flight... the dementors are in uproar"--he shuddered--"they've never had a breakout before. Anyway, I had to come to you, Prime Minister. Black's a known Muggle killer and may be planning to rejoin You-Know-Who.... But of course, you don't even know who You-Know-Who is!" He had gazed hopelessly at the Prime Minister for a moment, then said, "Well, sit down, sit down, I'd better fill you in... Have a whiskey..."The Prime Minister rather resented being told to sit down in his own office, let alone offered his own whiskey, but he sat nevertheless. Fudge pulled out his wand, conjured two large glasses full of amber liquid out of thin air, pushed one of them into the Prime Minister's hand, and drew up a chair.

Fudge had talked for more than an hour. At one point, he had refused to say a certain name aloud and wrote it instead on a piece of parchment, which he had thrust into the Prime Minister's whiskey-free hand. When at last Fudge had stood up to leave, the Prime Minister had stood up too.

"So you think that..." He had squinted down at the name in his left hand. "Lord Vol--""He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" snarled Fudge.

"I'm sorry... You think that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is still alive, then?""Well, Dumbledore says he is," said Fudge, as he had fastened his pin-striped cloak under his chin, "but we've never found him. If you ask me, he's not dangerous unless he's got support, so it's Black we ought to be worrying about. You'll put out that warning, then? Excellent. Well, I hope we don't see each other again, Prime Minister! Good night."But they had seen each other again. Less than a year later a harassed-looking Fudge had appeared out of thin air in the cabinet room to inform the Prime Minister that there had been a spot of bother at the Kwidditch (or that was what it had sounded like) World Cup and that several Muggles had been "involved," but that the Prime Minister was not to worry, the fact that You-Know-Who's Mark had been seen again meant nothing; Fudge was sure it was an isolated incident, and the Muggle Liaison Office was dealing with all memory modifications as they spoke.

"Oh, and I almost forgot," Fudge had added. "We're importing three foreign dragons and a sphinx for the Triwizard Tournament, quite routine, but the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures tells me that its down in the rule book that we have to notify you if we're bringing highly dangerous creatures into the country.""I--what--dragons?" spluttered the Prime Minister.

"Yes, three," said Fudge. "And a sphinx. Well, good day to you."The Prime Minister had hoped beyond hope that dragons and sphinxes would be the worst of it, but no. Less than two years later, Fudge had

erupted out of the fire yet again, this time with the news that there had been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

"A mass breakout?" repeated the Prime Minister hoarsely.

"No need to worry, no need to worry!" shouted Fudge, already with one foot in the flames. "We'll have them rounded up in no time--just thought you ought to know!"And before the Prime Minister could shout, "Now, wait just one moment!" Fudge had vanished in a shower of green sparks.

Whatever the press and the opposition might say, the Prime Minister was not a foolish man. It had not escaped his notice that, despite Fudge's assurances at their first meeting, they were now seeing rather a lot of each other, nor that Fudge was becoming more flustered with each visit. Little though he liked to think about the Minister of Magic (or, as he always called Fudge in his head, the Other Minister), the Prime Minister could not help but fear that the next time Fudge appeared it would be with graver news still. The site, therefore, of Fudge stepping out of the fire once more, looking disheveled and fretful and sternly surprised that the Prime Minister did not know exactly why he was there, was about the worst thing that had happened in the course of this extremely gloomy week.

"How should I know what's going on in the--er--Wizarding community?" snapped the Prime Minister now. "I have a country to run and quite enough concerns at the moment without--""We have the same concerns," Fudge interrupted. "The Brock-dale Bridge didn't wear out. That wasn't really a hurricane. Those murders were not the work of Muggles. And Herbert Chorley's family would be safer without him. We are currently making arrangements to have him transferred to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. The move should be effected tonight.""What do you... I'm afraid I ... What?" blustered the Prime Minister.

Fudge took a great, deep breath and said, "Prime Minister, I am very sorry to have to tell you that he's back. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back.""Back? When you say 'back'... he's alive? I mean--"The Prime Minister groped in his memory for the details of that horrible conversation of three years previously, when Fudge had told him about the wizard who was feared above all others, the wizard who had committed a thousand terrible crimes before his mysterious disappearance fifteen years earlier.

"Yes, alive," said Fudge. "That is--I don't know--is a man alive if he can't be killed? I don't really understand it, and Dumbledore won't explain properly--but anyway, he's certainly got a body and is walking and talking and killing, so I suppose, for the purposes of our discussion, yes, he's alive."The Prime Minister did not know what to say to this, but a persistent habit of wishing to appear well-informed on any subject that came up made him cast around for any details he could remember of their previous conversations.

"Is Serious Black with--er--He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?""Black? Black?" said Fudge distractedly, turning his bowler rapidly in his fingers. "Sirius Black, you mean? Merlin's beard, no. Black's dead. Turns out we were--er--mistaken about Black. He was innocent after all. And he wasn't in league with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named either. I mean," he added defensively, spinning the bowler hat still faster, "all the evidence pointed--we had more than fifty eyewitnesses--but anyway, as I say, he's dead. Murdered, as a matter of fact. On Ministry of Magic premises. There's going to be an inquiry, actually..."To his great surprise, the Prime Minister felt a fleeting stab of pity for Fudge at this point. It was, however, eclipsed almost immediately by a glow of smugness at the thought that, deficient though he himself might be in the area of materializing out of fireplaces, there had never been a murder in any of the government departments under his charge... Not yet, anyway...

While the Prime Minister surreptitiously touched the wood of his desk, Fudge continued, "But Blacks by-the-by now. The point is, we're at

war, Prime Minister, and steps must be taken.""At war?" repeated the Prime Minister nervously. "Surely that's a little bit of an overstatement?""He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has now been joined by those of his followers who broke out of Azkaban in January," said Fudge, speaking more and more rapidly and twirling his bowler so fast that it was a lime-green blur. "Since they have moved into the open, they have been wreaking havoc. The Brockdale Bridge--he did it, Prime Minister, he threatened a mass Muggle killing unless I stood aside for him and--""Good grief, so it's your fault those people were killed and I'm having to answer questions about rusted rigging and corroded expansion joints and I don't know what else!" said the Prime Minister furiously.

"My fault!" said Fudge, coloring up. "Are you saying you would have caved in to blackmail like that?""Maybe not," said the Prime Minister, standing up and striding about the room, "but I would have put all my efforts into catching the blackmailer before he committed any such atrocity!""Do you really think I wasn't already making every effort?" demanded Fudge heatedly. "Every Auror in the Ministry was--and is--trying to find him and round up his followers, but we happen to be talking about one of the most powerful wizards of all time, a wizard who has eluded capture for almost three decades!""So I suppose you're going to tell me he caused the hurricane in the West Country too?" said the Prime Minister, his temper rising with every pace he took. It was infuriating to discover the reason for all these terrible disasters and not to be able to tell the public, almost worse than it being the government's fault after all.

"That was no hurricane," said Fudge miserably.

"Excuse me!" barked the Prime Minister, now positively stamping up and down. "Trees uprooted, roofs ripped off, lampposts bent, horrible injuries--""It was the Death Eaters," said Fudge. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's followers. And... and we suspect giant involvement."The Prime Minister stopped in his tracks as though he had hit an invisible wall. "What involvement?"Fudge grimaced. "He used giants last time,

when he wanted to go for the grand effect," he said. "The Office of Misinformation has been working around the clock, we've had teams of Obliviators out trying to modify the memories of all the Muggles who saw what really happened, we've got most of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures running around Somerset, but we can't find the giant--it's been a disaster.""You don't say!" said the Prime Minister furiously.

"I won't deny that morale is pretty low at the Ministry," said Fudge. "What with all that, and then losing Amelia Bones.""Losing who?"

"Amelia Bones. Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. We think He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named may have murdered her in person, because she was a very gifted witch and--and all the evidence was that she put up a real fight."Fudge cleared his throat and, with an effort, it seemed, stopped spinning his bowler hat.

"But that murder was in the newspapers," said the Prime Minister, momentarily diverted from his anger. "Our newspapers. Amelia Bones... it just said she was a middle-aged woman who lived alone. It was a--a nasty killing, wasn't it? It's had rather a lot of publicity. The police are baffled, you see."Fudge sighed. "Well, of course they are," he said. "Killed in a room that was locked from the inside, wasn't she? We, on the other hand, know exactly who did it, not that that gets us any further toward catching him. And then there was Emmeline Vance, maybe you didn't hear about that one--""Oh yes I did!" said the Prime Minister. "It happened just around the corner from here, as a matter of fact. The papers had a field day with it, 'breakdown of law and order in the Prime Minister's backyard--'""And as if all that wasn't enough," said Fudge, barely listening to the Prime Minister, "we've got dementors swarming all over the place, attacking people left, right, and center..."Once upon a happier time this sentence would have been unintelligible to the Prime Minister, but he was wiser now.

"I thought dementors guard the prisoners in Azkaban," he said cautiously.

"They did," said Fudge wearily. "But not anymore. They've deserted the prison and joined He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. I won't pretend that wasn't a blow.""But," said the Prime Minister, with a sense of dawning horror, "didn't you tell me they're the creatures that drain hope and happiness out of people?""That's right. And they're breeding. That's what's causing all this mist."The Prime Minister sank, weak-kneed, into the nearest chair. The idea of invisible creatures swooping through the towns and countryside, spreading despair and hopelessness in his voters, made him feel quite faint.

"Now see here, Fudge--you've got to do something! It's your responsibility as Minister of Magic!""My dear Prime Minister, you can't honestly think I'm still Minister of Magic after all this? I was sacked three days ago! The whole Wizarding community has been screaming for my resignation for a fortnight. I've never known them so united in my whole term of office!" said Fudge, with a brave attempt at a smile.

The Prime Minister was momentarily lost for words. Despite his indignation at the position into which he had been placed, he still rather felt for the shrunken-looking man sitting opposite him.

"I'm very sorry," he said finally. "If there's anything I can do?""It's very kind of you, Prime Minister, but there is nothing. I was sent here tonight to bring you up to date on recent events and to introduce you to my successor. I rather thought he'd be here by now, but of course, he's very busy at the moment, with so much going on."Fudge looked around at the portrait of the ugly little man wearing the long curly silver wig, who was digging in his ear with the point of a quill. Catching Fudge's eye, the portrait said, "He'll be here in a moment, he's just finishing a letter to Dumbledore.""I wish him luck," said Fudge, sounding bitter for the first time. "I've been writing to Dumbledore twice a day for the past fortnight, but he won't budge. If

he'd just been prepared to persuade the boy, I might still be... Well, maybe Scrimgeour will have more success."Fudge subsided into what was clearly an aggrieved silence, but it was broken almost immediately by the portrait, which suddenly spoke in its crisp, official voice.

"To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Requesting a meeting. Urgent. Kindly respond immediately. Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic.""Yes, yes, fine," said the Prime Minister distractedly, and he barely flinched as the flames in the grate turned emerald green again, rose up, and revealed a second spinning wizard in their heart, disgorging him moments later onto the antique rug.

Fudge got to his feet and, after a moment's hesitation, the Prime Minister did the same, watching the new arrival straighten up, dust down his long black robes, and look around.

The Prime Minister's first, foolish thought was that Rufus Scrimgeour looked rather like an old lion. There were streaks of gray in his mane of tawny hair and his bushy eyebrows; he had keen yellowish eyes behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles and a certain rangy, loping grace even though he walked with a slight limp. There was an immediate impression of shrewdness and toughness; the Prime Minister thought he understood why the Wizarding community preferred Scrimgeour to Fudge as a leader in these dangerous times.

"How do you do?" said the Prime Minister politely, holding out his hand.

Scrimgeour grasped it briefly, his eyes scanning the room, then pulled out a wand from under his robes.

"Fudge told you everything?" he asked, striding over to the door and tapping the keyhole with his wand. The Prime Minister heard the lock click.

"Er--yes," said the Prime Minister. "And if you don't mind, I'd rather that door remained unlocked.""I'd rather not be interrupted," said Scrimgeour shortly, "or watched," he added, pointing his wand at the windows, so that the curtains swept across them. "Right, well, I'm a busy man, so let's get down lo business. First of all, we need to discuss your security."The Prime Minister drew himself up to his fullest height and replied, "I am perfectly happy with the security I've already got, thank you very--""Well, we're not," Scrimgeour cut in. "It'll be a poor lookout for the Muggles if their Prime Minister gets put under the Imperius Curse. The new secretary in your outer office--""I'm not getting rid of Kingsley Shacklebolt, if that's what you're suggesting!" said the Prime Minister hotly. "He's highly efficient, gets through twice the work the rest of them--""That's because he's a wizard," said Scrimgeour, without a flicker of a smile. "A highly trained Auror, who has been assigned to you for your protection.""Now, wait a moment!" declared the Prime Minister. "You can't just put your people into my office, I decide who works for me--""I thought you were happy with Shacklebolt?" said Scrimgeour coldly.

"I am--that's to say, I was--""Then there's no problem, is there?" said Scrimgeour.

"I... well, as long as Shacklebolt's work continues to be... er... excellent," said the Prime Minister lamely, but Scrimgeour barely seemed to hear him.

"Now, about Herbert Chorley, your Junior Minister," he continued. "The one who has been entertaining the public by impersonating a duck.""What about him?" asked the Prime Minister.

"He has clearly reacted to a poorly performed Imperius Curse," said Scrimgeour. "It's addled his brains, but he could still be dangerous.""He's only quacking!" said the Prime Minister weakly. "Surely a bit of a rest... Maybe go easy on the drink...""A team of Healers from St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries are examining him as we speak. So far he has attempted to strangle

three of them," said Scrimgeour. "I think it best that we remove him from Muggle society for a while.""I... well... He'll be all right, won't he?" said the Prime Minister anxiously.

Scrimgeour merely shrugged, already moving back toward the fireplace.

"Well, that's really all I had to say. I will keep you posted of developments, Prime Minister--or, at least, I shall probably be too busy to come personally, in which case I shall send Fudge here. He has consented to stay on in an advisory capacity."Fudge attempted to smile, but was unsuccessful; he merely looked as though he had a toothache. Scrimgeour was already rummaging in his pocket for the mysterious powder that turned the fire green. The Prime Minister gazed hopelessly at the pair of them for a moment, then the words he had fought to suppress all evening burst from him at last.

"But for heaven's sake--you're wizards! You can do magic! Surely you can sort out--well--anything!"Scrimgeour turned slowly on the spot and exchanged an incredulous look with Fudge, who really did manage a smile this time as he said kindly, "The trouble is, the other side can do magic too, Prime Minister."And with that, the two wizards stepped one after the other into the bright green fire and vanished.

Chapter 2 Spinner's End

Many miles away the chilly mist that had pressed against the Prime Minister's windows drifted over a dirty river that wound between overgrown, rubbish-strewn banks. An immense chimney, relic of a disused mill, reared up, shadowy and ominous. There was no sound apart from the whisper of the black water and no sign of life apart from a scrawny fox that had slunk down the bank to nose hopefully at some old fish-and-chip wrappings in the tall grass.

But then, with a very faint pop, a slim, hooded figure appeared out of thin air on the edge of the river. The fox froze, wary eyes fixed upon this strange new phenomenon. The figure seemed to take its bearings for a few moments, then set off with light, quick strides, its long cloak rustling over the grass.

With a second and louder pop, another hooded figure materialized.

"Wait!"

The harsh cry startled the fox, now crouching almost flat in the undergrowth. It leapt from its hiding place and up the bank. There was a flash of green light, a yelp, and the fox fell back to the ground, dead.

The second figure turned over the animal with its toe.

"Just a fox," said a woman's voice dismissively from under the hood. "I thought perhaps an Auror--Cissy, wait!"But her quarry, who had paused and looked back at the flash of light, was already scrambling up the bank the fox had just fallen down.

"Cissy--Narcissa--listen to me--"The second woman caught the first and seized her arm, but the other wrenched it away.

"Go back, Bella!"

"You must listen to me!"

"I've listened already. I've made my decision. Leave me alone!"The woman named Narcissa gained the top of the bank, where a line of old railings separated the river from a narrow, cobbled street. The other woman, Bella, followed at once. Side by side they stood looking across the road at the rows and rows of dilapidated brick houses, their windows dull and blind in the darkness.

"He lives here?" asked Bella in a voice of contempt. "Here? In this Muggle dunghill? We must be the first of our kind ever to set foot--"But Narcissa was not listening; she had slipped through a gap in the rusty railings and was already hurrying across the road.

"Cissy, wait!"

Bella followed, her cloak streaming behind, and saw Narcissa darting through an alley between the houses into a second, almost identical street. Some of the streetlamps were broken; the two women were running between patches of light and deep darkness. The pursuer caught up with her prey just as she turned another corner, this time succeeding in catching hold of her arm and swinging her around so that they faced each other.

"Cissy, you must not do this, you can't trust him--""The Dark Lord trusts him, doesn't he?""The Dark Lord is... I believe... mistaken," Bella panted, and her eyes gleamed momentarily under her hood as she looked around to check that they were indeed alone. "In any case, we were told not to speak of the plan to anyone. This is a betrayal of the Dark Lord's--""Let go, Bella!" snarled Narcissa, and she drew a wand from beneath her cloak, holding it threateningly in the other's face. Bella merely laughed.

"Cissy, your own sister? You wouldn't--""There is nothing I wouldn't do anymore!" Narcissa breathed, a note of hysteria in her voice, and as she brought down the wand like a knife, there was another flash of light. Bella let go of her sister's arm as though burned.

"Narcissa!"

But Narcissa had rushed ahead. Rubbing her hand, her pursuer followed again, keeping her distance now, as they moved deeper into the deserted labyrinth of brick houses. At last, Narcissa hurried up a street named Spinner's End, over which the towering mill chimney seemed to hover like a giant admonitory finger. Her footsteps echoed on the cobbles as she passed boarded and broken windows, until she reached the very last house, where a dim light glimmered through the curtains in a downstairs room.

She had knocked on the door before Bella, cursing under her breath, had caught up. Together they stood waiting, panting slightly, breathing in the smell of the dirty river that was carried to them on the night breeze. After a few seconds, they heard movement behind the door and it opened a crack. A sliver of a man could be seen looking out at them, a man with long black hair parted in curtains around a sallow face and black eyes.

Narcissa threw back her hood. She was so pale that she seemed to shine in the darkness; the long blonde hair streaming down her back gave her the look of a drowned person.

"Narcissa!" said the man, opening the door a little wider, so that the light fell upon her and her sister too. "What a pleasant surprise!

"Severus," she said in a strained whisper. "May I speak to you? It's urgent.""But of course."

He stood back to allow her to pass him into the house. Her still-hooded sister followed without invitation.

"Snape," she said curtly as she passed him.

"Bellatrix," he replied, his thin mouth curling into a slightly mocking smile as he closed the door with a snap behind them.

They had stepped directly into a tiny sitting room, which had the feeling of a dark, padded cell. The walls were completely covered in books, most of them bound in old black or brown leather; a threadbare sofa, an old armchair, and a rickety table stood grouped together in a pool of dim light cast by a candle-filled lamp hung from the ceiling. The place had an air of neglect, as though it was not usually inhabited.

Snape gestured Narcissa to the sofa. She threw off her cloak, cast it aside, and sat down, staring at her white and trembling hands clasped in her lap. Bellatrix lowered her hood more slowly. Dark as her sister was fair, with heavily lidded eyes and a strong jaw, she did not take her gaze from Snape as she moved to stand behind Narcissa.

"So, what can I do for you?" Snape asked, settling himself in the armchair opposite the two sisters.

"We... we are alone, aren't we?" Narcissa asked quietly.

'Yes, of course. Well, Wormtail's here, but we're not counting vermin, are we?"He pointed his wand at the wall of books behind him and with a bang, a hidden door flew open, revealing a narrow staircase upon which a small man stood frozen.

"As you have clearly realized, Wormtail, we have guests," said Snape lazily.

The man crept, hunchbacked, down the last few steps and moved into the room. He had small, watery eyes, a pointed nose, and wore an unpleasant simper. His left hand was caressing his right, which looked as though it was encased in a bright silver glove.

"Narcissa!" he said, in a squeaky voice. "And Bellatrix! How charming--""Wormtail will get us drinks, if you'd like them," said Snape. "And then he will return to his bedroom."Wormtail winced as though Snape had thrown something at him.

"I am not your servant!" he squeaked, avoiding Snape's eye.

"Really? I was under the impression that the Dark Lord placed you here to assist me.""To assist, yes--but not to make you drinks and--and clean your house!""I had no idea, Wormtail, that you were craving more dangerous assignments," said Snape silkily. "This can be easily arranged: I shall speak to the Dark Lord--""I can speak to him myself if I want to!""Of course you can," said Snape, sneering. "But in the meantime, bring us drinks. Some of the elf-made wine will do."Wormtail hesitated for a moment, looking as though he might argue, but then turned and headed through a second hidden door. They heard banging and a clinking of glasses. Within seconds he was back, bearing a dusty bottle and three glasses upon a tray. He dropped these on the rickety table and scurried from their presence, slamming the book-covered door behind him.

Snape poured out three glasses of bloodred wine and handed two of them to the sisters. Narcissa murmured a word of thanks, whilst Bellatrix said nothing, but continued to glower at Snape. This did not seem to discompose him; on the contrary, he looked rather amused.

"The Dark Lord," he said, raising his glass and draining it.

The sisters copied him. Snape refilled their glasses. As Narcissa took her second drink she said in a rush, "Severus, I'm sorry to come here like this, but I had to see you. I think you are the only one who can help me--"Snape held up a hand to stop her, then pointed his wand again at the concealed staircase door. There was a loud bang and a squeal, followed by the sound of Wormtail scurrying back up the stairs.

"My apologies," said Snape. "He has lately taken to listening at doors, I don't know what he means by it... You were saying, Narcissa?"She took a great, shuddering breath and started again.

"Severus, I know I ought not to be here, I have been told to say nothing to anyone, but--""Then you ought to hold your tongue!"

snarled Bellatrix. "Particularly in present company!""Present company'?" repeated Snape sardonically. "And what urn I to understand by that, Bellatrix?""That I don't trust you, Snape, as you very well know!"Narcissa let out a noise that might have been a dry sob and covered her face with her hands. Snape set his glass down upon the table and sat back again, his hands upon the arms of his chair, smiling into Bellatrix's glowering face.

"Narcissa, I think we ought to hear what Bellatrix is bursting to say; it will save tedious interruptions. Well, continue, Bellatrix," said Snape. "Why is it that you do not trust me?""A hundred reasons!" she said loudly, striding out from behind the sofa to slam her glass upon the table. "Where to start! Where were you when the Dark Lord fell? Why did you never make any attempt to find him when he vanished? What have you been doing all these years that you've lived in Dumbledore's pocket? Why did you stop the Dark Lord procuring the Sorcerer's Stone? Why did you not return at once when the Dark Lord was reborn? Where were you a few weeks ago when we battled to retrieve the prophecy for the Dark Lord? And why, Snape, is Harry Potter still alive, when you have had him at your mercy for five years?"She paused, her chest rising and falling rapidly, the color high in her cheeks. Behind her, Narcissa sat motionless, her face still hidden in her hands.

Snape smiled.

"Before I answer you — oh yes, Bellatrix, I am going to answer! You can carry my words back to the others who whisper behind my back, and carry false tales of my treachery to the Dark Lord! Before I answer you, I say, let me ask a question in turn. Do you really think that the Dark Lord has not asked me each and every one of those questions? And do you really think that, had I not been able to give satisfactory answers, I would be sitting here talking to you?"She hesitated.

"I know he believes you, but. . .""You think he is mistaken? Or that I have somehow hoodwinked him? Fooled the Dark Lord, the greatest wizard, the most accomplished Legilimens the world has ever seen?"Bellatrix said nothing, but looked, for the first time, a little discomfited. Snape did not press the point. He picked up his drink again, sipped it, and continued, "You ask where I was when the Dark Lord fell. I was where he had ordered me to be, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, because he wished me to spy upon Albus Dumbledore. You know, I presume, that it was on the Dark Lord's orders that I took up the post?"She nodded almost imperceptibly and then opened her mouth, but Snape forestalled her.

"You ask why I did not attempt to find him when he vanished. For the same reason that Avery, Yaxley, the Carrows, Greyback, Lucius" — he inclined his head slightly to Narcissa — "and many others did not attempt to find him. I believed him finished. I am not proud of it, I was wrong, but there it is. ... If he had not forgiven we who lost faith at that time, he would have very few followers left.""He'd have me!" said Bellatrix passionately. "I, who spent many years in Azkaban for him!""Yes, indeed, most admirable," said Snape in a bored voice. "Of i nurse, you weren't a lot of use to him in prison, but the gesture was undoubtedly fine —""Gesture!" she shrieked; in her fury she looked slightly mad. "While I endured the dementors, you remained at Hogwarts, comfortably playing Dumbledore's pet!""Not quite," said Snape calmly. "He wouldn't give me the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, you know. Seemed to think it might, ah, bring about a relapse , . . tempt me into my old ways.""This was your sacrifice for the Dark Lord, not to teach your favorite subject?" she jeered. "Why did you stay there all that time, Snape? Still spying on Dumbledore for a master you believed dead?""Hardly," said Snape, "although the Dark Lord is pleased that I never deserted my post: I had sixteen years of information on Dumbledore to give him when he returned, a rather more useful welcome-back present than endless reminiscences of how unpleasant Azkaban is. . . .""But you stayed —"

"Yes, Bellatrix, I stayed," said Snape, betraying a hint of impatience for the first time. "I had a comfortable job that I preferred to a stint in Azkaban. They were rounding up the Death Eaters, you know. Dumbledore's protection kept me out of jail; it was most convenient and I used it. I repeat: The Dark Lord does not complain that I stayed, so I do not see why you do.

"I think you next wanted to know," he pressed on a little more loudly, for Bellatrix showed every sign of interrupting, "why I stood between the Dark Lord and the Sorcerer's Stone. That is easily answered. He did not know whether he could trust me. He thought, like you, that I had turned from faithful Death Eater to Dumbledore's stooge. He was in a pitiable condition, very weak, sharing the body of a mediocre wizard. He did not dare reveal himself to a former ally if that ally might turn him over to Dumbledore or the Ministry. I deeply regret that he did not trust me. He would have returned to power three years sooner. As it was, I saw only greedy and unworthy Quirrell attempting to steal the stone and, I admit, I did all I could to thwart him."Bellatrix's mouth twisted as though she had taken an unpleasant dose of medicine.

"But you didn't return when he came back, you didn't fly back to him at once when you felt the Dark Mark burn —""Correct. I returned two hours later. I returned on Dumbledore's orders.""On Dumbledore's —?" she began, in tones of outrage.

"Think!" said Snape, impatient again. "Think! By waiting two hours, just two hours, I ensured that I could remain at Hogwarts as a spy! By allowing Dumbledore to think that I was only returning to the Dark Lord's side because I was ordered to, I have been able to pass information on Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix ever since! Consider, Bellatrix: The Dark Mark had been growing stronger for months. I knew he must be about to return, all the Death Eaters knew! I had plenty of time to think about what I wanted to do, to plan my next move, to escape like Karkaroff, didn't I?

"The Dark Lord's initial displeasure at my lateness vanished entirely, 1 assure you, when I explained that 1 remained faithful, although Dumbledore thought I was his man. Yes, the Dark Lord thought that I had left him forever, but he was wrong.""But what use have you been?" sneered Bellatrix. "What useful information have we had from you?""My information has been conveyed directly to the Dark Lord," said Snape. "If he chooses not to share it with you —""He shares everything with me!" said Bellatrix, firing up at once. "He calls me his most loyal, his most faithful —""Does he?" said Snape, his voice delicately inflected to suggest his disbelief. "Does he still, after the fiasco at the Ministry?""That was not my fault!" said Bellatrix, flushing. "The Dark Lord has, in the past, entrusted me with his most precious — if Lucius hadn't —""Don't you dare — don't you dare blame my husband!" said Narcissa, in a low and deadly voice, looking up at her sister.

"There is no point apportioning blame," said Snape smoothly. "What is done, is done.""But not by you!" said Bellatrix furiously. "No, you were once again absent while the rest of us ran dangers, were you not, Snape?""My orders were to remain behind," said Snape. "Perhaps you disagree with the Dark Lord, perhaps you think that Dumbledore would not have noticed if I had joined forces with the Death Eaters to fight the Order of the Phoenix? And — forgive me — you speak of dangers . . . you were facing six teenagers, were you not?""They were joined, as you very well know, by half of the Order before long!" snarled Bellatrix. "And, while we are on the subject of the Order, you still claim you cannot reveal the whereabouts of their headquarters, don't you?""I am not the Secret-Keeper; I cannot speak the name of the place. You understand how the enchantment works, I think? The Dark Lord is satisfied with the information I have passed him on the Order. It led, as perhaps you have guessed, to the recent capture and murder of Emmeline Vance, and it certainly helped dispose of Sirius Black, though I give you full credit for finishing him off."He inclined his head and toasted her. Her expression did nor soften.

"You are avoiding my last question, Snape. Harry Potter. You could have killed him at any point in the past five years. You have not done it. Why?""Have you discussed this matter with the Dark Lord?" asked Snape.

"He . . . lately, we ... I am asking you, Snape!""If I had murdered Harry Potter, the Dark Lord could not have used his blood to regenerate, making him invincible —""You claim you foresaw his use of the boy!" she jeered.

"I do not claim it; I had no idea of his plans; I have already confessed that I thought the Dark Lord dead. I am merely trying to explain why the Dark Lord is not sorry that Potter survived, at least until a year ago. . . .""But why did you keep him alive?""Have you not understood me? It was only Dumbledore's protection that was keeping me out of Azkaban! Do you disagree that murdering his favorite student might have turned him against me? But there was more to it than that. I should remind you that when Potter first arrived at Hogwarts there were still many stories circulating about him, rumors that he himself was a great Dark wizard, which was how he had survived the Dark Lord's attack. Indeed, many of the Dark Lords old followers thought Potter might be a standard around which we could all rally once more. I was curious, 1 admit it, and not at all inclined to murder him the moment he set fool in the castle.

"Of course, it became apparent to me very quickly that he had no extraordinary talent at all. He has fought his way out of a number of tight corners by a simple combination of sheer luck and more talented friends. He is mediocre to the last degree, though as obnoxious and self-satisfied as was his father before him. I have done my utmost to have him thrown out of Hogwarts, where I believe he scarcely belongs, but kill him, or allow him to be killed in front of me? I would have been a fool to risk it with Dumbledore close at hand.""And through all this we are supposed to believe Dumbledore has never suspected you?" asked Bellatrix. "He has no idea of your true allegiance, he trusts you implicitly still?""I have played my part well,"

said Snape. "And you overlook Dumbledore's greatest weakness: He has to believe the best of people. I spun him a tale of deepest remorse when I joined his staff, fresh from my Death Eater days, and he embraced me with open arms — though, as I say, never allowing me nearer the Dark Arts than he could help. Dumbledore has been a great wizard — oh yes, he has," (for Bellatrix had made a scathing noise), "the Dark Lord acknowledges it. I am pleased to say, however, that Dumbledore is growing old. The duel with the Dark Lord last month shook him. He has since sustained a serious injury because his reactions are slower than they once were. But through all these years, he has never stopped trusting Severus Snape, and therein lies my great value to the Dark Lord."Bellatrix still looked unhappy, though she appeared unsure how best to attack Snape next. Taking advantage of her silence, Snape turned to her sister.

"Now . . . you came to ask me for help, Narcissa?"Narcissa looked up at him, her face eloquent with despair.

"Yes, Severus. I — I think you are the only one who can help me, I have nowhere else to turn. Lucius is in jail and . . ."She closed her eyes and two large tears seeped from beneath her eyelids.

"The Dark Lord has forbidden me to speak of it," Narcissa continued, her eyes still closed. "He wishes none to know of the plan. It is ... very secret. But —""If he has forbidden it, you ought not to speak," said Snape at once. "The Dark Lord's word is law."Narcissa gasped as though he had doused her with cold water. Bellatrix looked satisfied for the first time since she had entered the house.

"There!" she said triumphantly to her sister. "Even Snape says so: You were told not to talk, so hold your silence!"But Snape had gotten to his feet and strode to the small window, peered through the curtains at the deserted street, then closed them again with a jerk. He turned around to face Narcissa, frowning.

"It so happens that I know of the plan," he said in a low voice. "I am one of the few the Dark Lord has told. Nevertheless, had I not been in on the secret, Narcissa, you would have been guilty of great treachery to the Dark Lord.""I thought you must know about it!" said Narcissa, breathing more freely. "He trusts you so, Severus. ...""You know about the plan?" said Bellatrix, her fleeting expression of satisfaction replaced by a look of outrage. "You know?""Certainly," said Snape. "But what help do you require, Nar-cissa? If you are imagining I can persuade the Dark Lord to change his mind, I am afraid there is no hope, none at all.""Severus," she whispered, tears sliding down her pale cheeks. "My son . . . my only son . . .""Draco should be proud," said Bellatrix indifferently. "The Dark Lord is granting him a great honor. And I will say this for Draco: he isn't shrinking away from his duty, he seems glad of a chance to prove himself, excited at the prospect —"Narcissa began to cry in earnest, gazing beseechingly all the while at Snape.

"That's because he is sixteen and has no idea what lies in store! Why, Severus? Why my son? It is too dangerous! This is vengeance lor Lucius's mistake, I know it!"Snape said nothing. He looked away from the sight of her tears as though they were indecent, but he could not pretend not to hear her.

"That's why he's chosen Draco, isn't it?" she persisted. "To punish Lucius?""If Draco succeeds," said Snape, still looking away from her, "he will be honored above all others.""But he won't succeed!" sobbed Narcissa. "How can he, when the Dark Lord himself— ?"Bellatrix gasped; Narcissa seemed to lose her nerve.

"I only meant. . . that nobody has yet succeeded. . . . Severus . . . please . . . You are, you have always been, Draco's favorite teacher. . . . You are Lucius's old friend. ... I beg you. .. . You are the Dark Lord's favorite, his most trusted advisor. . . . Will you speak to him, persuade him — ?""The Dark Lord will not be persuaded, and I am not stupid enough to attempt it," said Snape flatly. "I cannot pretend that the Dark Lord is not angry with Lucius. Lucius was supposed to be in

charge. He got himself captured, along with how many others, and failed to retrieve the prophecy into the bargain. Yes, the Dark Lord is angry, Narcissa, very angry indeed.""Then I am right, he has chosen Draco in revenge!" choked Narcissa. "He does not mean him to succeed, he wants him to be killed trying!"When Snape said nothing, Narcissa seemed to lose what little self-restraint she still possessed. Standing up, she staggered to Snape and seized the front of his robes. Her face close to his, her tears falling onto his chest, she gasped, "You could do it. You could do it instead of Draco, Severus. You would succeed, of course you would, and he would reward you beyond all of us —"Snape caught hold of her wrists and removed her clutching hands. Looking down into her tearstained face, he said slowly, "He intends me to do it in the end, I think. But he is determined that Draco should try first. You see, in the unlikely event that Draco succeeds, I shall be able to remain at Hogwarts a little longer, fulfilling my useful role as spy.""In other words, it doesn't matter to him if Draco is killed!""The Dark Lord is very angry," repeated Snape quietly. "He failed to hear the prophecy. You know as well as I do, Narcissa, that he does not forgive easily."She crumpled, falling at his feet, sobbing and moaning on the floor.

"My only son . . . my only son . . .""You should be proud!" said Bellatrix ruthlessly. "If I had sons, I would be glad to give them up to the service of the Dark Lord!"Narcissa gave a little scream of despair and clutched at her long blonde hair. Snape stooped, seized her by the arms, lifted her up, and steered her back onto the sofa. He then poured her more wine and forced the glass into her hand.

"Narcissa, that's enough. Drink this. Listen to me."She quieted a little; slopping wine down herself, she took a shaky sip.

"It might be possible ... for me to help Draco."She sat up, her face paper-white, her eyes huge.

"Severus — oh, Severus — you would help him? Would you look after him, see he comes to no harm?""I can try."

She flung away her glass; it skidded across the table as she slid off the sofa into a kneeling position at Snape's feet, seized his hand in both of hers, and pressed her lips to it.

"If you are there to protect him . . . Severus, will you swear it? Will you make the Unbreakable Vow?""The Unbreakable Vow?"

Snape's expression was blank, unreadable. Bellatrix, however, let out a cackle of triumphant laughter.

"Aren't you listening, Narcissa? Oh, he'll try, I'm sure. . . . The usual empty words, the usual slithering out of action . . . oh, on the Dark Lord's orders, of course!"Snape did not look at Bellatrix. His black eyes were fixed upon Narcissa's tear-filled blue ones as she continued to clutch his hand.

"Certainly, Narcissa, I shall make the Unbreakable Vow," he said quietly. "Perhaps your sister will consent to be our Bonder."Bellatrix's mouth fell open. Snape lowered himself so that he was kneeling opposite Narcissa. Beneath Bellatrix's astonished gaze, they grasped right hands.

"You will need your wand, Bellatrix," said Snape coldly.

She drew it, still looking astonished.

"And you will need to move a little closer," he said.

She stepped forward so that she stood over them, and placed the tip of her wand on their linked hands.

Narcissa spoke.

"Will you, Severus, watch over my son, Draco, as he attempts to fulfill the Dark Lord's wishes?""I will," said Snape.

A thin tongue of brilliant flame issued from the wand and wound its way around their hands like a red-hot wire.

"And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?""I will," said Snape.

A second tongue of flame shot from the wand and interlinked with the first, making a fine, glowing chain.

"And, should it prove necessary... if it seems Draco will fail. . ." whispered Narcissa (Snape's hand twitched within hers, but he did not draw away), "will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?"There was a moment's silence. Bellatrix watched, her wand upon their clasped hands, her eyes wide.

"I will," said Snape.

Bellatrix's astounded face glowed red in the blaze of a third unique of flame, which shot from the wand, twisted with the others, and bound itself thickly around their clasped hands, like a rope, like a fiery snake.

Chapter 3 Will And Won't

Harry Potter was snoring loudly. He had been sitting in a chair beside his bedroom window for the best part of four hours, staring out at the darkening street, and had finally fallen asleep with one side of his face pressed against the cold windowpane, his glasses askew and his mouth wide open. The misty fug his breath had left on the window sparkled in the orange glare of the streetlamp outside, and the artificial light drained his face of all color, so that he looked ghostly beneath his shock of untidy black hair.

The room was strewn with various possessions and a good smattering of rubbish. Owl feathers, apple cores, and sweet wrappers littered the floor, a number of spellbooks lay higgledy-piggledy among the tangled robes on his bed, and a mess of newspapers sat in a puddle of light on his desk. The headline of one blared:HARRY POTTER: THE CHOSEN ONE?

Rumors continue to fly about the mysterious recent disturbance at the Ministry of Magic, during which He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was sighted once more.

"We're not allowed to talk about it, don't ask me anything" said one agitated Obliviator, who refused to give his name as he left the Ministry last night.

Nevertheless, highly placed sources within the Ministry have confirmed that the disturbance centered on the fabled Hall of Prophecy.

Though Ministry spokes wizards have hitherto refused even to confirm the existence of such a place, a growing number of the Wizarding community believe that the Death Eaters now serving sentences in Azkaban for trespass and attempted theft were attempting to steal a prophecy. The nature of that prophecy is

unknown, although speculation is rife that it concerns Harry Potter, the only person ever known to have survived the Killing Curse, and who is also known to have been at the Ministry on the night in question. Some are going so far as to call Potter "the Chosen One," believing that the prophecy names him as the only one who will be able to rid us of He-Who-Must-No t-Be-Named.

The current whereabouts of the prophecy, if it exists, are unknown, although (ctd. page2, column 5)A second newspaper lay beside die first. This one bore die headline:SCRIMGEOUR SUCCEEDS FUDGE

Most of this front page was taken up with a large black-and-white picture of a man with a lionlike mane of thick hair and a rather ravaged face. The picture was moving — the man was waving at the ceiling.

Rufus Scrimgeour, previously Head of the Auror office in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has succeeded Cornelius Fudge as Minister of Magic. The appointment has largely been greeted with enthusiasm by the Wizarding community, though rumors of a rift between the new Minister and Albus Dumbledore, newly reinstated Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, surfaced within hours of Scrimgeour taking office.

Scrimgeour's representatives admitted that he had met with Dumbledore at once upon taking possession of the top job, but refused to comment on the topics under discussion. Albus Dumbledore is known to (ctd. page 3, column 2)To the left of this paper sat another, which had been folded so that a story bearing the title ministry guarantees students' sapety was visible.

Newly appointed Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, spoke today of the tough new measures taken by his Ministry to ensure the safety of students returning to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this autumn.

"For obvious reasons, the Ministry will not be going into detail about its stringent new security plans," said the Minister, although an insider confirmed that measures include defensive spells and charms, a complex array of countercurses, and a small task force of Aurors dedicated solely to the protection of Hogwarts School.

Most seem reassured by the new Minister's tough stand on student safety. Said Mrs. Augusta Longbottom, "My grandson, Neville — a good friend of Harry Potter's, incidentally, who fought the Death Eaters alongside him at the Ministry in June and —But the rest of this story was obscured by the large birdcage .standing on top of it. Inside it was a magnificent snowy owl. Her amber eyes surveyed the room imperiously, her head swiveling occasionally to gaze at her snoring master. Once or twice she clicked her beak impatiently, but Harry was too deeply asleep to hear her.

A large trunk stood in the very middle of the room. Its lid was open; it looked expectant; yet it was almost empty but for a residue of old underwear, sweets, empty ink bottles, and broken quills that coated the very bottom. Nearby, on the floor, lay a purple leaflet emblazoned with the words:----ISSUED ON BEHALF OF----

The Ministry of Magic

PROTECTING YOUR HOME AND FAMILY AGAINST DARK FORCESThe Wizarding community is currently under threat from an organization calling itself the Death Eaters. Observing the following simple security guidelines will help protect you, your family, and your home from attack.

1. You are advised not to leave the house alone.

2. Particular care should be taken during the hours of darkness. Wherever possible, arrange to complete journeys before night has fallen.

3. Review the security arrangements around your house, making sure that all family members are aware of emergency measures such as Shield and Disillusionment Charms, and, in the case of underage family members, Side-Along-Apparition.

4. Agree on security questions with close friends and family so as to detect Death Eaters masquerading as others by use of the Polyjuice Potion (see page 2).

5. Should you feel that a family member, colleague, friend, or neighbor is acting in a strange manner, contact the Magical Law Enforcement Squad at once. They may have been put under the Imperius Curse (see page 4).

6. Should the Dark Mark appear over any dwelling place or other building, DO NOT ENTER, but contact the Auror office immediately.

7. Unconfirmed sightings suggest that the Death Eaters may now be using Inferi (see page 10). Any sighting of an Inferius, or encounter with same, should be reported to the Ministry IMMEDIATELY.

Harry grunted in his sleep and his face slid down the window an inch or so, making his glasses still more lopsided, but he did not wake up. An alarm clock, repaired by Harry several years ago, ticked loudly on the sill, showing one minute to eleven. Beside it, held in place by Harry's relaxed hand, was a piece of parchment covered in thin, slanting writing. Harry had read this letter so often since its arrival three days ago that although it had been delivered in a tightly furled scroll, it now lay quite flat.

Dear Harry,

If it is convenient to you, I shall call at number four, Privet Drive this coming Friday at eleven p.m. to escort you to the Burrow, where you have been invited to spend the remainder of your school holidays.

If you are agreeable, I should also be glad of your assistance in a matter to which I hope to attend on the way to the . Burrow. I shall explain this more fully when I see you.

Kindly send your answer by return of this owl. Hoping to see you this Friday,I am, yours most sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Though he already knew it by heart, Harry had been stealing glances at this missive every few minutes since seven o'clock that evening, when he had first taken up his position beside his bedroom window, which had a reasonable view of both ends of Privet Drive. He knew it was pointless to keep rereading Dumbledore's words; Harry had sent back his "yes" with the delivering owl, as requested, and all he could do now was wait: Either Dumbledore was going to come, or he was not.

But Harry had not packed. It just seemed too good to be true that he was going to be rescued from the Dursleys after a mere fortnight of their company. He could not shrug off the feeling that something was going to go wrong — his reply to Dumbledore's letter might have gone astray; Dumbledore could be prevented from collecting him; the letter might turn out not to be from Dumbledore at all, but a trick or joke or trap. Harry had not been able to face packing and then being let down and having to unpack again. The only gesture he had made to the possibility of a journey was to shut his snowy owl, Hedwig, safely in her cage.

The minute hand on the alarm clock reached the number twelve and, at that precise moment, the street-lamp outside the window went out.

Harry awoke as though the sudden darkness were an alarm. Hastily straightening his glasses and unsticking his cheek from the glass, he pressed his nose against the window instead and squinted down at the pavement. A tall figure in a long, billowing cloak was walking up the garden path.

Harry jumped up as though he had received an electric shock, knocked over his chair, and started snatching anything and everything within reach from the floor and throwing it into the trunk. Even as he lobbed a set of robes, two spellbooks, and a packet of crisps across the room, the doorbell rang. Downstairs in the living room his Uncle Vernon shouted, "Who the blazes is calling at this lime of night?"Harry froze with a brass telescope in one hand and a pair of trainers in the other. He had completely forgotten to warn the Dursleys that Dumbledore might be coming. Feeling both panicky mid close to laughter, he clambered over the trunk and wrenched open his bedroom door in time to hear a deep voice say, "Good evening. You must be Mr. Dursley. I daresay Harry has told you I would be coming for him?"Harry ran down the stairs two at a time, coming to an abrupt halt several steps from the bottom, as long experience had taught him to remain out of arm's reach of his uncle whenever possible. There in the doorway stood a tall, thin man with waist-length silver hair and beard. Half-moon spectacles were perched on his crooked nose, and he was wearing a long black traveling cloak and .1 pointed hat. Vernon Dursley, whose mustache was quite as bushy as Dumbledore's, though black, and who was wearing a puce dressing gown, was staring at the visitor as though he could not believe his tiny eyes.

"Judging by your look of stunned disbelief, Harry did not warn you that I was coming," said Dumbledore pleasantly. "However, let us assume that you have invited me warmly into your house. It is unwise to linger overlong on doorsteps in these troubled times."He stepped smartly over the threshold and closed the front door behind him.

"It is a long time since my last visit," said Dumbledore, peering down his crooked nose at Uncle Vernon. "I must say, your agapanthus are flourishing."Vernon Dursley said nothing at all. Harry did not doubt that speech would return to him, and soon — the vein pulsing in his uncles temple was reaching danger point — but something about Dumbledore seemed to have robbed him temporarily of breath. It might have been the blatant wizardishness of his appearance, but it

might, too, have been that even Uncle Vernon could sense that here was a man whom it would be very difficult to bully.

"Ah, good evening Harry," said Dumbledore, looking up at him through his half-moon glasses with a most satisfied expression. "Excellent, excellent."These words seemed to rouse Uncle Vernon. It was clear that as far as he was concerned, any man who could look at Harry and say "excellent" was a man with whom he could never see eye to eye.

"I don't mean to be rude —" he began, in a tone that threatened rudeness in every syllable.

"--yet, sadly, accidental rudeness occurs alarmingly often," Dumbledore finished the sentence gravely. "Best to say nothing at all, my dear man. Ah, and this must be Petunia."The kitchen door had opened, and there stood Harry's aunt, wearing rubber gloves and a housecoat over her nightdress, clearly halfway through her usual pre-bedtime wipe-down of all the kitchen surfaces. Her rather horsey face registered nothing but shock.

"Albus Dumbledore," said Dumbledore, when Uncle Vernon failed to effect an introduction. "We have corresponded, of course." Harry thought this an odd way of reminding Aunt Petunia that he had once sent her an exploding letter, but Aunt Petunia did not challenge the term. "And this must be your son, Dudley?"Dudley had that moment peered round the living room door. His large, blond head rising out of the stripy collar of his pajamas looked oddly disembodied, his mouth gaping in astonishment and I car. Dumbledore waited a moment or two, apparently to see whether any of the Dursleys were going to say anything, but as the ?.ilcncc stretched on he smiled.

"Shall we assume that you have invited me into your sitting room?"Dudley scrambled out of the way as Dumbledore passed him. Harry, still clutching the telescope and trainers, jumped the last few stairs and followed Dumbledore, who had settled himself in the

armchair nearest the fire and was taking in the surroundings with an expression of benign interest. He looked quite extraordinarily out of place.

"Aren't —- aren't we leaving, sir?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Yes, indeed we are, but there are a few matters we need to discuss first," said Dumbledore. "And I would prefer not to do so in the open. We shall trespass upon your aunt and uncle's hospitality only a little longer.""You will, will you?"

Vernon Dursley had entered the room, Petunia at his shoulder, and Dudley skulking behind them both.

"Yes," said Dumbledore simply, "I shall."He drew his wand so rapidly that Harry barely saw it; with a casual flick, the sofa zoomed forward and knocked the knees out from under all three of the Dursleys so that they collapsed upon it in a heap. Another flick of the wand and the sofa zoomed back to its original position.

"We may as well be comfortable," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

As he replaced his wand in his pocket, Harry saw that his hand was blackened and shriveled; it looked as though his flesh had been burned away.

"Sir — what happened to your — ?""Later, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Please sit down."Harry took the remaining armchair, choosing not to look at the Dursleys, who seemed stunned into silence.

"I would assume that you were going to offer me refreshment," Dumbledore said to Uncle Vernon, "but the evidence so far suggests that that would be optimistic to the point of foolishness."A third twitch of the wand, and a dusty bottle and five glasses appeared in midair. The bottle tipped and poured a generous measure of honey-colored liquid into each of the glasses, which then floated to each person in the room.

"Madam Rosmerta’s finest oak-matured mead," said Dumbledore, raising his glass to Harry, who caught hold of his own and sipped. He had never tasted anything like it before, but enjoyed it immensely. The Dursleys, after quick, scared looks at one another, tried to ignore their glasses completely, a difficult feat, as they were nudging them gently on the sides of their heads. Harry could not suppress a suspicion that Dumbledore was rather enjoying himself.

"Well, Harry," said Dumbledore, turning toward him, "a difficulty has arisen which I hope you will be able to solve for us. By us, I mean the Order of the Phoenix. But first of all I must tell you that Sirius's will was discovered a week ago and that he left you everything he owned."Over on the sofa, Uncle Vernon’s head turned, but Harry did not look at him, nor could he think of anything to say except, "Oh. Right.""This is, in the main, fairly straightforward," Dumbledore went on. "You add a reasonable amount of gold to your account at Gringotts, and you inherit all of Sirius's personal possessions. The slightly problematic part of the legacy —""His godfather's dead?" said Uncle Vernon loudly from the sofa. Dumbledore and Harry both turned to look at him. The glass of mead was now knocking quite insistently on the side of Vernon’s head; he attempted to beat it away. "He's dead? His godfather?""Yes," said Dumbledore. He did not ask Harry why he had not confided in the Dursleys. "Our problem," he continued to Harry, as if there had been no interruption, "is that Sirius also left you number twelve, Grimmauld Place.""He's been left a house?" said Uncle Vernon greedily, his small eyes narrowing, but nobody answered him.

"You can keep using it as headquarters," said Harry. "I don't care. You can have it, I don't really want it." Harry never wanted to set foot in number twelve, Grimmauld Place again if he could help it. He thought he would be haunted forever by the memory of Sirius prowling its dark musty rooms alone, imprisoned within the place he had wanted so desperately to leave.

"That is generous," said Dumbledore. "We have, however, vacated the building temporarily.""Why?"

"Well," said Dumbledore, ignoring the mutterings of Uncle Vernon, who was now being rapped smartly over the head by the persistent glass of mead, "Black family tradition decreed that the house was handed down the direct line, to the next male with the name of 'Black.' Sirius was the very last of the line as his younger brother, Regulus, predeceased him and both were childless. While his will makes it perfectly plain that he wants you to have the house, it is nevertheless possible that some spell or enchantment has been set upon the place to ensure that it cannot be owned by anyone other than a pureblood."A vivid image of the shrieking, spitting portrait of Sirius's mother that hung in the hall of number twelve, Grimmauld Place flashed into Harry's mind. "I bet there has," he said.

"Quite," said Dumbledore. "And if such an enchantment exists, then the ownership of the house is most likely to pass to the eldest of Sirius's living relatives, which would mean his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange."Without realizing what he was doing, Harry sprang to his feet; the telescope and trainers in his lap rolled across the floor. Bellatrix Lestrange, Sirius's killer, inherit his house?

"No," he said.

"Well, obviously we would prefer that she didn't get it either," said Dumbledore calmly. "The situation is fraught with complications. We do not know whether the enchantments we ourselves have placed upon it, for example, making it Unplottable, will hold now that ownership has passed from Sirius's hands. It might be that Bellatrix will arrive on the doorstep at any moment. Naturally we had to move out until such time as we have clarified the position,""But how are you going to find out if I'm allowed to own it?""Fortunately," said Dumbledore, "there is a simple test."He placed his empty glass on a small table beside his chair, but before he could do anything else, Uncle Vernon shouted, "Will you get these ruddy things off us?"Harry

looked around; all three of the Dursleys were cowering with their arms over their heads as their glasses bounced up and down on their skulls, their contents flying everywhere.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Dumbledore politely, and he raised his wand again. -All three glasses vanished. "But it would have been better manners to drink it, you know."It looked as though Uncle Vernon was bursting with any number of unpleasant retorts, but he merely shrank back into the cushions with Aunt Petunia and Dudley and said nothing, keeping his small piggy eyes on Dumbledore's wand.

"You see," Dumbledore said, turning back to Harry and again speaking as though Uncle Vernon had not uttered, "if you have indeed inherited the house, you have also inherited —"He flicked his wand for a fifth time. There was a loud crack, and a house-elf appeared, with a snout for a nose, giant bat's ears, and enormous bloodshot eyes, crouching on the Dursleys' shag carpet and covered in grimy rags. Aunt Petunia let out a hair-raising shriek; nothing this filthy had entered her house in living memory. Dudley drew his large, bare, pink feet off the floor and sat with them raised almost above his head, as though he thought the creature might run up his pajama trousers, and Uncle Vernon bellowed, "What the hell is that?""Kreacher," finished Dumbledore.

"Kreacher wont, Kreacher won't, Kreacher wont!" croaked the house-elf, quite as loudly as Uncle Vernon, stamping his long, gnarled feet and pulling his ears. "K readier belongs to Miss Bellatrix, oh yes, Kreacher belongs to the Blacks, Kreacher wants his new mistress, Kreacher won't go to the Potter brat, Kreacher won't, won't, wont —""As you can see, Harry," said Dumbledore loudly, over Kreacher's continued croaks of "wont, won't, won't," "Kreacher is showing a certain reluctance to pass into your ownership.""I don't care," said Harry again, looking with disgust at the writhing, stamping house-elf. "I don't want him.""Won't, won’t, won't, won't —""You would prefer him to pass into the ownership of Bellatrix Lestrange? Bearing in mind that he has lived at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix for

the past year?""Won't, won't, won’t, won't —"Harry stared at Dumbledore. He knew that Kreacher could not be permitted to go and live with Bellatrix Lestrange, but the idea of owning him, of having responsibility for the creature that had betrayed Sirius, was repugnant.

"Give him an order," said Dumbledore. "If he has passed into your ownership, he will have to obey. If not, then we shall have to think of some other means of keeping him from his rightful mistress.""Won't, won't, won’t, WON'T!"Kreacher's voice had risen to a scream. Harry could think of nothing to say, except, "Kreacher, shut up!"It looked for a moment as though Kreacher was going to choke. He grabbed his throat, his mouth still working furiously, his eyes bulging. After a few seconds of frantic gulping, he threw himself face forward onto the carpet (Aunt Petunia whimpered) and beat the floor with his hands and feet, giving himself over to a violent, but entirely silent, tantrum.

"Well, that simplifies matters," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "It seems that Sirius knew what he was doing. You are the rightful owner of number twelve, Grimmauld Place and of Kreacher.""Do I — do I have to keep him with me?" Harry asked, aghast, us Kreacher thrashed around at his feet.

"Not if you don't want to," said Dumbledore. "If I might make ii suggestion, you could send him to Hogwarts to work in the kitchen there. In that way, the other house-elves could keep an eye on him.""Yeah," said Harry in relief, "yeah, I'll do that. Er — Kreacher — I want you to go to Hogwarts and work in the kitchens there with the other house-elves."Kreacher, who was now lying flat on his back with his arms and legs in the air, gave Harry one upside-down look of deepest loathing and, with another loud crack, vanished.

"Good," said Dumbledore. "There is also the matter of the hip-pogriff, Buckbeak. Hagrid has been looking after him since Sirius died, but Buckbeak is yours now, so if you would prefer to make different arrangements —""No," said Harry at once, "he can stay with Hagrid. I

think Buckbeak would prefer that.""Hagrid will be delighted," said Dumbledore, smiling. "He was thrilled to see Buckbeak again. Incidentally, we have decided, in the interests of Buckbeak's safety, to rechristen him 'Witherwings' for the time being, though I doubt that the Ministry would ever guess he is the hippogriff they once sentenced to death. Now, Harry, is your trunk packed?"Erm . ..

"Doubtful that I would turn up?" Dumbledore suggested shrewdly.

"I'll just go and — er — finish off," said Harry hastily, hurrying to pick up his fallen telescope and trainers.

It took him a little over ten minutes to track down everything he needed; at last he had managed to extract his Invisibility Cloak from under the bed, screwed the top back on his jar of color-change ink, and forced the lid of his trunk shut on his cauldron. Then, heaving his trunk in one hand and holding Hedwig's cage in the other, he made his way back downstairs,He was disappointed to discover that Dumbledore was not waiting in the hall, which meant that he had to return to the living room.

Nobody was talking. Dumbledore was humming quietly, apparently quite at his ease, but the atmosphere was thicker than cold custard, and Harry did not dare look at the Dursleys as he said, "Professor — I'm ready now.""Good," said Dumbledore. "Just one last thing, then." And he turned to speak to the Dursleys once more.

"As you will no doubt be aware, Harry comes of age in a years time —""No," said Aunt Petunia, speaking for the first time since Dumbledore's arrival.

"I'm sorry?" said Dumbledore politely.

"No, he doesn't. He's a month younger than Dudley, and Dudders doesn't turn eighteen until the year after next.""Ah," said Dumbledore pleasantly, "but in the Wizarding world, we come of age at seventeen."Uncle Vernon muttered, "Preposterous," but Dumbledore

ignored him,"Now, as you already know, the wizard called Lord Voldemort Was returned to this country. The Wizarding community is currently in a state of open warfare. Harry, whom Lord Voldemort has already attempted to kill on a number of occasions, is in even greater danger now than the day when I left him upon your doorstep fifteen years ago, with a letter explaining about his parents' murder and expressing the hope that you would care for him ;is though he were your own."Dumbledore paused, and although his voice remained light and calm, and he gave no obvious sign of anger, Harry felt a kind of chill emanating from him and noticed that the Dursleys drew very slightly closer together.

"You did not do as I asked. You have never treated Harry as a son. He has known nothing but neglect and often cruelty at your hands. The best that can be said is that he has at least escaped the appalling damage you have inflicted upon the unfortunate boy sitting between you."Both Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon looked around instinctively, as though expecting to see someone other than Dudley squeezed between them.

"Us — mistreat Dudders? What d'you — ?" began Uncle Vernon furiously, but Dumbledore raised his ringer for silence, a silence which fell as though he had struck Uncle Vernon dumb.

"The magic I evoked fifteen years ago means that Harry has powerful protection while he can still call this house 'home.' However miserable he has been here, however unwelcome, however badly treated, you have at least, grudgingly, allowed him houseroom. This magic will cease to operate the moment that Harry turns seventeen; in other words, at the moment he becomes a man. I ask only this: that you allow Harry to return, once more, to this house, before his seventeenth birthday, which will ensure that the protection continues until that time."None of the Dursleys said anything. Dudley was frowning slightly, as though he was still trying to work out when he had ever been mistreated. Uncle Vernon looked as though he had

something stuck in his throat; Aunt Petunia, however, was oddly flushed.

"Well, Harry . . . time for us to be off," said Dumbledore at last, standing up and straightening his long black cloak. "Until we meet again," he said to the Dursleys, who looked as though that moment could wait forever as far as they were concerned, and after doffing his hat, he swept from the room.

"Bye," said Harry hastily to the Dursleys, and followed Dumbledore, who paused beside Harry's trunk, upon which Hedwig's cage was perched.

"We do not want to be encumbered by these just now," he said, pulling out his wand again. "I shall send them to the Burrow to await us there. However, I would like you to bring your Invisibility Cloak . . . just in case."Harry extracted his cloak from his trunk with some difficulty, trying not to show Dumbledore the mess within. When he had stuffed it into an inside pocket of his jacket, Dumbledore waved his wand and the trunk, cage, and Hedwig vanished. Dumbledore then waved his wand again, and the front door opened onto cool, misty darkness.

"And now, Harry, let us step out into the night and pursue that flighty temptress, adventure."

Chapter 4 Horace Slughorn

Despite the fact that he had spent every waking moment of the past few days hoping desperately that Dumbledore would indeed come to fetch him, Harry felt distinctly awkward as 11 u-y set off down Privet Drive together. He had never had a proper conversation with the headmaster outside of Hogwarts before; there was usually a desk between them. The memory of their last face-to-face encounter kept intruding too, and it rather heightened Harry's sense of embarrassment; he had shouted a lot on that occasion, not to mention done his best to smash several of Dumbledore's most prized possessions.

Dumbledore, however, seemed completely relaxed.

"Keep your wand at the ready, Harry," he said brightly.

"But I thought I'm not allowed to use magic outside school, sir?""If there is an attack," said Dumbledore, "I give you permission to use any counterjinx or curse that might occur to you. However, I do not think you need worry about being attacked tonight.""Why not, sir?"

"You are with me," said Dumbledore simply. "This will do, Harry."He came to an abrupt halt at the end of Privet Drive.

"You have not, of course, passed your Apparition Test," he said.

"No," said Harry. "I thought you had to be seventeen?""You do," said Dumbledore. "So you will need to hold on to my arm very tightly. My left, if you don't mind — as you have noticed, my wand arm is a little fragile at the moment."Harry gripped Dumbledore’s proffered forearm.

"Very good," said Dumbledore. "Well, here we go."Harry felt Dumbledore’s arm twist away from him and redoubled his grip; the next thing he knew, everything went black; he was being pressed very hard from all directions; he could not breathe, there were iron

bands tightening around his chest; his eyeballs were being forced back into his head; his eardrums were being pushed deeper into his skull and then —-

He gulped great lungfuls of cold night air and opened his streaming eyes. He felt as though he had just been forced through a very tight rubber tube. It was a few seconds before he realized that Privet Drive had vanished. He and Dumbledore were now standing in what appeared to be a deserted village square, in the center of which stood an old war memorial and a few benches. His comprehension catching up with his senses, Harry realized that he had just Apparated for the first time in his life.

"Are you all right?" asked Dumbledore, looking down at him solicitously. "The sensation does take some getting used to.""I'm fine," said Harry, rubbing his ears, which felt as though they had left Privet Drive rather reluctantly. "But I think I might prefer brooms. . . ."Dumbledore smiled, drew his traveling cloak a little more lightly around his neck, and said, "This way."He set off at a brisk pace, past an empty inn and a few houses. According to a clock on a nearby church, it was almost midnight.

"So tell me, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Your scar ... has it been hurting at all?"Harry raised a hand unconsciously to his forehead and rubbed i he lightning-shaped mark.

"No," he said, "and I've been wondering about that. I thought it would be burning all the time now Voldemort's getting so powerful again."He glanced up at Dumbledore and saw that he was wearing a satisfied expression.

"I, on the other hand, thought otherwise," said Dumbledore. "Lord Voldemort has finally realized the dangerous access to his thoughts and feelings you have been enjoying. It appears that he is now employing Occlumency against you.""Well, I'm not complaining," said

Harry, who missed neither the disturbing dreams nor the startling flashes of insight into Voldemort's mind.

They turned a corner, passing a telephone box and a bus shelter. Harry looked sideways at Dumbledore again. "Professor?""Harry?"

"Er — where exactly are we?"

"This, Harry, is the charming village of Budleigh Babberton.""And what are we doing here?"

"Ah yes, of course, I haven't told you," said Dumbledore. "Well, I have lost count of the number of times I have said this in recent years, but we are, once again, one member of staff short. We are here to persuade an old colleague of mine to come out of retirement and return to Hogwarts.""How can I help with that, sir?" "Oh, I think we'll find a use for you," said Dumbledore vaguely. "Left here, Harry."They proceeded up a steep, narrow street lined with houses. All the windows were dark. The odd chill that had lain over Privet Drive for two weeks persisted here too. Thinking of dementors, Harry cast a look over his shoulder and grasped his wand reassuringly in his pocket.

"Professor, why couldn't we just Apparate directly into your old colleague's house?""Because it would be quite as rude as kicking down the front door," said Dumbledore. "Courtesy dictates that we offer fellow wizards the opportunity of denying us entry. In any case, most Wizarding dwellings are magically protected from unwanted Apparators. At Hogwarts, for instance —""— you can't Apparate anywhere inside the buildings or grounds," said Harry quickly. "Hermione Granger told me.""And she is quite right. We turn left again."The church clock chimed midnight behind them. Harry wondered why Dumbledore did not consider it rude to call on his old colleague so late, but now that conversation had been established, he had more pressing questions to ask.

"Sir, I saw in the Daily Prophet that Fudge has been sacked. . . ."“Correct," said Dumbledore, now turning up a steep side street. "He has been replaced, as I am sure you also saw, by Rufus Scrimgeour, who used to be Head of the Auror office.""Is he ... Do you think he's good?" asked Harry.

"An interesting question," said Dumbledore. "He is able, certainly. A more decisive and forceful personality than Cornelius.""Yes, but I meant —"

"I know what you meant. Rufus is a man of action and, having fought Dark wizards for most of his working life, does not under-estimate Lord Voldemort."Harry waited, but Dumbledore did not say anything about the disagreement with Scrimgeour that the Daily Prophet had reported, and he did not have the nerve to pursue the subject, so he changed ii. "And ... sir ... I saw about Madam Bones.""Yes," said Dumbledore quietly. "A terrible loss. She was a great witch. Just up here, I think — ouch."He had pointed with his injured hand.

"Professor, what happened to your — ?""I have no time to explain now," said Dumbledore. "It is a thrilling tale, I wish to do it justice."He smiled at Harry, who understood that he was not being snubbed, and that he had permission to keep asking questions.

"Sir — I got a Ministry of Magic leaflet by owl, about security measures we should all take against the Death Eaters. . . .""Yes, I received one myself," said Dumbledore, still smiling. "Did you find it useful?""Not really."

"No, I thought not. You have not asked me, for instance, what is my favorite flavor of jam, to check that I am indeed Professor Dumbledore and not an impostor.""I didn't. . ." Harry began, not entirely sure whether he was being reprimanded or not.

"For future reference, Harry, it is raspberry. . . although of course, if I were a Death Eater, I would have been sure to research my own jam preferences before impersonating myself.""Er. . . right," said Harry.

"Well, on that leaflet, it said something about Inferi. What exactly are they? The leaflet wasn't very clear.""They are corpses," said Dumbledore calmly. "Dead bodies that have been bewitched to do a Dark wizard's bidding. Inferi have not been seen for a long time, however, not since Voldemort was last powerful. . . . He killed enough people to make an army of them, of course. This is the place, Harry, just here. . . ."They were nearing a small, neat stone house set in its own garden. Harry was too busy digesting the horrible idea of Inferi to have much attention left for anything else, but as they reached the front gate, Dumbledore stopped dead and Harry walked into him.

"Oh dear. Oh dear, dear, dear."Harry followed his gaze up the carefully tended front path and felt his heart sink. The front door was hanging off its hinges.

Dumbledore glanced up and down the street. It seemed quite deserted.

"Wand out and follow me, Harry," he said quietly.

He opened the gate and walked swiftly and silently up the garden path, Harry at his heels, then pushed the front door very slowly, his wand raised and at the ready.

"Lumos."

Dumbledore's wand tip ignited, casting its light up a narrow hallway. To the left, another door stood open. Holding his illuminated wand aloft, Dumbledore walked into the sitting room with Harry right behind him.

A scene of total devastation met their eyes. A grandfather clock lay splintered at their feet, its face cracked, its pendulum lying a little farther away like a dropped sword. A piano was on its side, its keys strewn across the floor. The wreckage of a fallen chandelier flittered nearby. Cushions lay deflated, feathers oozing from slashes in their sides; fragments of glass and china lay like powder over everything.

Dumbledore raised his wand even higher, so that its light was thrown upon the walls, where something darkly red and glutinous was spattered over the wallpaper. Harry's small intake of breath made Dumbledore look around.

"Not pretty, is it?" he said heavily. "Yes, something horrible has happened here."Dumbledore moved carefully into the middle of the room, scrutinizing the wreckage at his feet. Harry followed, gazing around, half-scared of what he might see hidden behind the wreck of the piano or the overturned sofa, but there was no sign of a body.

"Maybe there was a fight and — and they dragged him off, Professor?" Harry suggested, trying not to imagine how badly wounded a man would have to be to leave those stains spattered halfway up the walls.

"I don't think so," said Dumbledore quietly, peering behind an overstuffed armchair lying on its side.

"You mean he's — ?"

"Still here somewhere? Yes."

And without warning, Dumbledore swooped, plunging the tip of his wand into the seat of the overstuffed armchair, which yelled, "Ouch!""Good evening, Horace," said Dumbledore, straightening up again.

Harry’s jaw dropped. Where a split second before there had been an armchair, there now crouched an enormously fat, bald, old man who was massaging his lower belly and squinting up at Dumbledore with an aggrieved and watery eye.

"There was no need to stick the wand in that hard," he said gruffly, clambering to his feet. "It hurt."The wandlight sparkled on his shiny pate, his prominent eyes, his enormous, silver, walruslike mustache, and the highly polished buttons on the maroon velvet jacket he was

wearing over a pair of lilac silk pajamas. The top of his head barely reached Dumbledore's chin.

"What gave it away?" he grunted as he staggered to his feet, still rubbing his lower belly. He seemed remarkably unabashed for a man who had just been discovered pretending to be an armchair.

"My dear Horace," said Dumbledore, looking amused, "if the Death Eaters really had come to call, the Dark Mark would have been set over the house."The wizard clapped a pudgy hand to his vast forehead.

"The Dark Mark," he muttered. "Knew there was something ... ah well. Wouldn't have had time anyway, I'd only just put the finishing touches to my upholstery when you entered the room."He heaved a great sigh that made the ends of his mustache flutter.

"Would you like my assistance clearing up?" asked Dumbledore politely.

"Please," said the other.

They stood back to back, the tall thin wizard and the short round one, and waved their wands in one identical sweeping motion.

The furniture flew back to its original places; ornaments reformed in midair, feathers zoomed into their cushions; torn books repaired themselves as they landed upon their shelves; oil lanterns soared onto side tables and reignited; a vast collection of splintered silver picture frames flew glittering across the room and alighted, whole and untarnished, upon a desk; rips, cracks, and holes healed everywhere, and the walls wiped themselves clean.

"What kind of blood was that, incidentally?" asked Dumbledore loudly over the chiming of the newly unsmashed grandfather flock.

"On the walls? Dragon," shouted the wizard called Horace, as, with a deafening grinding and tinkling, the chandelier screwed itself back into the ceiling.

There was a final plunk from the piano, and silence.

"Yes, dragon," repeated the wizard conversationally. "My last bottle, and prices are sky-high at the moment. Still, it might be reusable."He stumped over to a small crystal bottle standing on top of a sideboard and held it up to the light, examining the thick liquid within.

"Hmm. Bit dusty."

He set the bottle back on the sideboard and sighed. It was then that his gaze fell upon Harry.

"Oho," he said, his large round eyes flying to Harry's forehead and the lightning-shaped scar it bore. "Oho!""This," said Dumbledore, moving forward to make the introduction, "is Harry Potter. Harry, this is an old Friend and colleague of mine, Horace Slughorn."Slughorn turned on Dumbledore, his expression shrewd. "So that's how you thought you'd persuade me, is it? Well, the answer's no, Albus."He pushed past Harry, his face turned resolutely away with the air of a man trying to resist temptation.

"I suppose we can have a drink, at least?" asked Dumbledore. "For old time's sake?"Slughorn hesitated.

"All right then, one drink," he said ungraciously.

Dumbledore smiled at Harry and directed him toward a chair not unlike the one that Slughorn had so recently impersonated, which stood right beside the newly burning fire and a brightly glowing oil lamp. Harry took the seat with the distinct impression that Dumbledore, for some reason, wanted to keep him as visible as possible. Certainly when Slughorn, who had been busy with

decanters and glasses, turned to face the room again, his eyes fell immediately upon Harry.

"Hmpf," he said, looking away quickly as though frightened of hurting his eyes. "Here —" He gave a drink to Dumbledore, who had sat down without invitation, thrust the tray at Harry, and then sank into the cushions of the repaired sofa and a disgruntled silence. His legs were so short they did not touch the floor.

"Well, how have you been keeping, Horace?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not so well," said Slughorn at once. "Weak chest. Wheezy. Rheumatism too. Can't move like I used to. Well, that's to be expected. Old age. Fatigue.""And yet you must have moved fairly quickly to prepare such a welcome for us at such short notice," said Dumbledore. "You can't have had more than three minutes' warning?"Slughorn said, half irritably, half proudly, "Two. Didn't hear my Intruder Charm go off, I was taking a bath. Still," he added sternly, seeming to pull himself back together again, "the fact remains that I'm an old man, Albus. A tired old man who's earned the right to a quiet life and a few creature comforts."He certainly had those, thought Harry, looking around the room. It was stuffy and cluttered, yet nobody could say it was uncomfortable; there were soft chairs and footstools, drinks and books, boxes of chocolates and plump cushions. If Harry had not known who lived there, he would have guessed at a rich, fussy old lady.

"You're not yet as old as I am, Horace," said Dumbledore.

"Well, maybe you ought to think about retirement yourself," said Slughorn bluntly. His pale gooseberry eyes had found Dumbledore's injured hand. "Reactions not what they were, I see.""You're quite right," said Dumbledore serenely, shaking back his sleeve to reveal the tips of those burned and blackened ringers; the sight of them made the back of Harry's neck prickle unpleasantly. "1 am undoubtedly slower than I was. But on the other hand . . ."He

shrugged and spread his hands wide, as though to say that age had its compensations, and Harry noticed a ring on his uninjured hand that he had never seen Dumbledore wear before: It was large, rather clumsily made of what looked like gold, and was set with a heavy black stone that had cracked down the middle. Slughorn's eyes lingered for a moment on the ring too, and Harry saw a tiny frown momentarily crease his wide forehead.

"So, all these precautions against intruders, Horace ... are they for the Death Eaters' benefit, or mine?" asked Dumbledore.

"What would the Death Eaters want with a poor broken-down old buffer like me?" demanded Slughorn.

"I imagine that they would want you to turn your considerable talents to coercion, torture, and murder," said Dumbledore. "Are you really telling me that they haven't come recruiting yet?"Slughorn eyed Dumbledore balefully for a moment, then muttered, "I haven't given them the chance. I've been on the move for a year. Never stay in one place more than a week. Move from Muggle house to Muggle house — the owners of this place are on holiday in the Canary Islands — it's been very pleasant, I'll be sorry to leave. It's quite easy once you know how, one simple Freezing Charm on these absurd burglar alarms they use instead of Sneako-scopes and make sure the neighbors don't spot you bringing in the piano.""Ingenious," said Dumbledore. "But it sounds a rather tiring existence for a broken-down old buffer in search of a quiet life. Now, if you were to return to Hogwarts —""If you're going to tell me my life would be more peaceful at that pestilential school, you can save your breath, Albus! I might have been in hiding, but some funny rumors have reached me since Dolores Umbridge left! If that's how you treat teachers these days —""Professor Umbridge ran afoul of our centaur herd," said Dumbledore. "I think you, Horace, would have known better than to stride into the forest and call a horde of angry centaurs 'filthy half-breeds.'""That's what she did, did she?" said Slughorn. "Idiotic

woman. Never liked her."Harry chuckled and both Dumbledore and Slughorn looked round at him.

"Sorry," Harry said hastily. "It's just — I didn't like her either."Dumbledore stood up rather suddenly.

"Are you leaving?" asked Slughorn at once, looking hopeful.

"No, I was wondering whether I might use your bathroom," said Dumbledore.

"Oh," said Slughorn, clearly disappointed. "Second on the left down the hall."Dumbledore strode from the room. Once the door had closed behind him, there was silence. After a few moments, Slughorn got to his feet but seemed uncertain what to do with himself. He shot a furtive look at Harry, then crossed to the fire and turned his back on it, warming his wide behind.

"Don't think I don't know why he's brought you," he said abruptly.

Harry merely looked at Slughorn. Slughorn's watery eyes slid over Harry's scar, this time taking in the rest of his face.

"You look very like your father.""Yeah, I've been told," said Harry.

"Except for your eyes. You've got —-""My mother's eyes, yeah." Harry had heard it so often he found it a bit wearing.

"Hmpf. Yes, well. You shouldn't have favorites as a teacher, of course, but she was one of mine. Your mother," Slughorn added, in answer to Harry’s questioning look. "Lily Evans. One of the brightest I ever taught. Vivacious, you know. Charming girl. I used to tell her she ought to have been in my House. Very cheeky answers I used to get back too." <"Which was your House?"

"I was Head of Slytherin," said Slughorn. "Oh, now," he went on quickly, seeing the expression on Harry's face and wagging a stubby

ringer at him, "don't go holding that against me! You'll be Gryffindor like her, I suppose? Yes, it usually goes in families. Not always, though. Ever heard of Sirius Black? You must have done — been in the papers for the last couple of years — died a few weeks ago —"It was as though an invisible hand had twisted Harry's intestines and held them tight.

"Well, anyway, he was a big pal of your father's at school. The whole Black family had been in my House, but Sirius ended up in Gryffindor! Shame — he was a talented boy. I got his brother, Regulus, when he came along, but I'd have liked the set."He sounded like an enthusiastic collector who had been outbid at auction. Apparently lost in memories, he gazed at the opposite wall, turning idly on the spot to ensure an even heat on his backside.

"Your mother was Muggle-born, of course. Couldn't believe it when I found out. Thought she must have been pure-blood, she was so good.""One of my best friends is Muggle-born," said Harry, "and she's the best in our year.""Funny how that sometimes happens, isn't it?" said Slughorn.

"Not really," said Harry coldly.

Slughorn looked down at him in surprise. "You mustn't think I'm prejudiced!" he said. "No, no, no! Haven't I just said your mother was one of my all-time favorite students? And there was Dirk Cresswell in the year after her too — now Head of the Goblin Liaison Office, of course — another Muggle-born, a very gifted student, and still gives me excellent inside information on the goings-on at Gringotts!"He bounced up and down a little, smiling in a self-satisfied way, and pointed at the many glittering photograph frames on the dresser, each peopled with tiny moving occupants.

"All ex-students, all signed. You'll notice Barnabas Cuffe, editor of the Daily Prophet, he's always interested to hear my take on the day's news. And Ambrosius Flume, of Honeydukes — a hamper every

birthday, and all because I was able to give him an introduction to Ciceron Harkisss who gave him his first job! And at the back — you'll see her if you just crane your neck — that's Gwenog Jones, who of course captains the Holyhead Harpies. . . . People are always astonished to hear I'm on first-name terms with the Harpies, and free tickets whenever I want them!"This thought seemed to cheer him up enormously.

"And all these people know where to find you, to send you stuff?" asked Harry, who could not help wondering why the Death Eaters had not yet tracked down Slughorn if hampers of sweets, Quidditch tickets, and visitors craving his advice and opinions could find him.

The smile slid from Slughorn's face as quickly as the blood from his walls.

"Of course not," he said, looking down at Harry. "I have been out of touch with everybody for a year."Harry had the impression that the words shocked Slughorn himself; he looked quite unsettled for a moment. Then he shrugged.

"Still . . . the prudent wizard keeps his head down in such times. All very well for Dumbledore to talk, but taking up a post at Hog-warts just now would be tantamount to declaring my public allegiance to the Order of the Phoenix! And while I'm sure they're very admirable and brave and all the rest of it, I don't personally fancy the mortality rate —-""You don't have to join the Order to teach at Hogwarts," said Harry, who could not quite keep a note of derision out of his voice: It was hard to sympathize with Slughorn's cosseted existence when he remembered Sirius, crouching in a cave and living on rats. "Most of the teachers aren't in it, and none of them has ever been killed — well, unless you count Quirrell, and he got what he deserved seeing as he was working with Voldemort."Harry had been sure Slughorn would be one of those wizards who could not bear to hear Voldemort's name spoken aloud, and was not disappointed: Slughorn gave a shudder and a squawk of protest, which Harry ignored.

"I reckon the staff are safer than most people while Dumbledore's headmaster; he's supposed to be the only one Voldemort ever feared, isn't he?" Harry went on.

Slughorn gazed into space for a moment or two: He seemed to be thinking over Harry's words.

"Well, yes, it is true that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has never sought a fight with Dumbledore," he muttered grudgingly. "And I suppose one could argue that as I have not joined the Death Kilters, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named can hardly count me a friend . . . in which case, I might well be safer a little closer to Albus. . . . I cannot pretend that Amelia Bones's death did not shake me. . . . If she, with all her Ministry contacts and protection . . ."Dumbledore reentered the room and Slughorn jumped as though he had forgotten he was in the house.

"Oh, there you are, Albus," he said. "You've been a very long lime. Upset stomach?""No, I was merely reading the Muggle magazines," said Dumbledore. "I do love knitting patterns. Well, Harry, we have trespassed upon Horace's hospitality quite long enough; I think it is time for us to leave."Not at all reluctant to obey, Harry jumped to his feet. Slughorn sinned taken aback.

"You're leaving?"

"Yes, indeed. I think I know a lost cause when I see one.""Lost. . .?"

Slughorn seemed agitated. He twiddled his fat thumbs and fidgeted as he watched Dumbledore fasten his traveling cloak, and Harry zip up his jacket.

"Well, I'm sorry you don't want the job, Horace," said Dumbledore, raising his uninjured hand in a farewell salute. "Hogwarts would have been glad to see you back again. Our greatly increased security notwithstanding, you will always be welcome to visit, should you wish to.""Yes . . . well . . . very gracious ... as I say ...""Good-bye, then."

"Bye," said Harry.

They were at the front door when there was a shout from behind them.

"All right, all right, I'll do it!"Dumbledore turned to see Slughorn standing breathless in the doorway to the sitting room.

"You will come out of retirement?""Yes, yes," said Slughorn impatiently. "I must be mad, but yes.""Wonderful," said Dumbledore, beaming. "Then, Horace, we shall see you on the first of September.""Yes, I daresay you will," grunted Slughorn.

As they set off down the garden path, Slughorn's voice floated after them, "I'll want a pay rise, Dumbledore!"Dumbledore chuckled. The garden gate swung shut behind them, and they set off back down the hill through the dark and the swirling mist.

"Well done, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"I didn't do anything," said Harry in surprise.

"Oh yes you did. You showed Horace exactly how much he stands to gain by returning to Hogwarts. Did you like him?""Er..."

Harry wasn't sure whether he liked Slughorn or not. He supposed he had been pleasant in his way, but he had also seemed vain and, whatever he said to the contrary, much too surprised that a Muggle-born should make a good witch.

"Horace," said Dumbledore, relieving Harry of the responsibility to say any of this, "likes his comfort. He also likes the company of the famous, the successful, and the powerful. He enjoys the feeling that he influences these people. He has never wanted to occupy the throne himself; he prefers the backseat — more room to spread out, you see. He used to handpick favorites at Hogwarts, some-limcs for their ambition or their brains, sometimes for their charm or their

talent, and he had an uncanny knack for choosing those who would go on to become outstanding in their various fields. Horace formed a kind of club of his favorites with himself at the center, making introductions, forging useful contacts between members, and always reaping some kind of benefit in return, whether a free box of his favorite crystalized pineapple or the chance to recommend the next junior member of the Goblin liaison Office."Harry had a sudden and vivid mental image of a great swollen spider, spinning a web around it, twitching a thread here and there to bring its large and juicy flies a little closer.

"I tell you all this," Dumbledore continued, "not to turn you against Horace — or, as we must now call him, Professor Slughorn — but to put you on your guard. He will undoubtedly try to collect you, Harry. You would be the jewel of his collection; 'the Boy Who Lived' ... or, as they call you these days, 'the Chosen One.'"At these words, a chill that had nothing to do with the surrounding mist stole over Harry. He was reminded of words he had heard a few weeks ago, words that had a horrible and particular meaning to him: Neither can live while the other survives . . .

Dumbledore had stopped walking, level with the church they had passed earlier.

"This will do, Harry. If you will grasp my arm."Braced this time, Harry was ready for the Apparition, but still found it unpleasant. When the pressure disappeared and he found himself able to breathe again, he was standing in a country lane beside Dumbledore and looking ahead to the crooked silhouette of his second favorite building in the world: the Burrow. In spite of the feeling of dread that had just swept through him, his spirits could not help but lift at the sight of it. Ron was in there . . . and so was Mrs. Weasley, who could cook better than anyone he knew. . . .

"If you don't mind, Harry," said Dumbledore, as they passed through the gate, "I'd like a few words with you before we part. In private.

Perhaps in here?"Dumbledore pointed toward a run-down stone outhouse where the Weasleys kept their broomsticks. A little puzzled, Harry followed Dumbledore through the creaking door into a space a little smaller than the average cupboard. Dumbledore illuminated the tip of his wand, so that it glowed like a torch, and smiled down at Harry.

"I hope you will forgive me for mentioning it, Harry, but I am pleased and a little proud at how well you seem to be coping after everything that happened at the Ministry. Permit me to say that I think Sirius would have been proud of you."Harry swallowed; his voice seemed to have deserted him. He did not think he could stand to discuss Sirius; it had been painful enough to hear Uncle Vernon say "His godfather's dead?" and even worse to hear Sirius's name thrown out casually by Slughorn.

"It was cruel," said Dumbledore softly, "that you and Sirius had such a short time together. A brutal ending to what should have been a long and happy relationship."Harry nodded, his eyes fixed resolutely on the spider now climbing Dumbledore's hat. He could tell that Dumbledore understood, that he might even suspect that until his letter arrived, Harry had spent nearly all his time at the Dursleys' lying on his bed, refusing meals, and staring at the misted window, full of the chill emptiness i hat he had come to associate with dementors.

"It's just hard," Harry said finally, in a low voice, "to realize he won't write to me again."His eyes burned suddenly and he blinked. He felt stupid for admitting it, but the fact that he had had someone outside Hogwarts who cared what happened to him, almost like a parent, had been one of the best things about discovering his godfather . . . and now the post owls would never bring him that comfort again. . . .

"Sirius represented much to you that you had never known before," said Dumbledore gently. "Naturally, the loss is devastating. . . .

"But while I was at the Dursleys' ..." interrupted Harry, his voice growing stronger, "I realized I can’t shut myself away or — or crack up. Sirius wouldn't have wanted that, would he? And anyway, life's too short. . . . Look at Madam Bones, look at Emmeline Vance. ... It could be me next, couldn't it? But if it is," he said fiercely, now looking straight into Dumbledore's blue eyes gleaming in the wandlight, "I'll make sure I take as many Death Eaters with me as I can, and Voldemort too if I can manage it.""Spoken both like your mother and father's son and Sirius's true godson!" said Dumbledore, with an approving pat on Harry's back. "I take my hat off to you — or I would, if I were not afraid of showering you in spiders.

"And now, Harry, on a closely related subject... I gather that you have been taking the Daily Prophet over the last two weeks?""Yes," said Harry, and his heart beat a little faster.

"Then you will have seen that there have been not so much leaks as floods concerning your adventure in the Hall of Prophecy?""Yes," said Harry again. "And now everyone knows that I'm the one —"No, they do not," interrupted Dumbledore. "There are only two people in the whole world who know the full contents of the prophecy made about you and Lord Voldemort, and they are both standing in this smelly, spidery broom shed. It is true, however, that many have guessed, correctly, that Voldemort sent his Death Eaters to steal a prophecy, and that the prophecy concerned you.

"Now, I think I am correct in saying that you have not told anybody that you know what the prophecy said?""No," said Harry.

"A wise decision, on the whole," said Dumbledore. "Although I think you ought to relax it in favor of your friends, Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger. Yes," he continued, when Harry looked startled, "I think they ought to know. You do them a disservice by not confiding something this important to them.""I didn't want —"

"— to worry or frighten them?" said Dumbledore, surveying Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "Or perhaps, to confess that you yourself are worried and frightened? You need your friends, Harry. As you so rightly said, Sirius would not have wanted you to shut yourself away."Harry said nothing, but Dumbledore did not seem to require an answer. He continued, "On a different, though related, subject, it is my wish that you take private lessons with me this year.""Private — with you?" said Harry, surprised out of his preoccupied silence.

"Yes. I think it is time that I took a greater hand in your education."What will you be teaching me, sir?""Oh, a little of this, a little of that," said Dumbledore airily.

Harry waited hopefully, but Dumbledore did not elaborate, so ho asked something else that had been bothering him slightly.

"If I'm having lessons with you, I won't have to do Occlumency lessons with Snape, will I?""Professor Snape, Harry — and no, you will not.""Good," said Harry in relief, "because they were a —"He stopped, careful not to say what he really thought.

"I think the word 'fiasco' would be a good one here," said Dumbledore, nodding.

Harry laughed.

"Well, that means I won't see much of Professor Snape from now on," he said, "because he won't let me carry on Potions unless I get 'Outstanding' in my OWL., which I know I haven't.""Don't count your owls before they are delivered," said Dumbledore gravely. "Which, now I think of it, ought to be some time later today. Now, two more things, Harry, before we part.

"Firstly, I wish you to keep your Invisibility Cloak with you at all times from this moment onward. Even within Hogwarts itself. Just in case, you understand me?"Harry nodded.

"And lastly, while you stay here, the Burrow has been given the highest security the Ministry of Magic can provide. These measures have caused a certain amount of inconvenience to Arthur and Molly — all their post, for instance, is being searched at the Ministry before being sent on. They do not mind in the slightest, for their only concern is your safety. However, it would be poor repayment if you risked your neck while staying with them.""I understand," said Harry quickly.

"Very well, then," said Dumbledore, pushing open the broom shed door and stepping out into the yard. "I see a light in the kitchen. Let us not deprive Molly any longer of the chance to deplore how thin you are."

Chapter 5 An Excess Of Phlegm

Harry and Dumbledore approached the back door of the Burrow, which was surrounded by the familiar litter of old Wellington boots and rusty cauldrons; Harry could hear the soft clucking of sleepy chickens coming from a distant shed. Dumbledore knocked three times and Harry saw sudden movement behind the kitchen window.

"Who's there?" said a nervous voice he recognized as Mrs. Weasley's. "Declare yourself!""It is I, Dumbledore, bringing Harry."The door opened at once. There stood Mrs. Weasley, short, plump, and wearing an old green dressing gown.

"Harry, dear! Gracious, Albus, you gave me a fright, you said not to expect you before morning!""We were lucky," said Dumbledore, ushering Harry over the threshold. "Slughorn proved much more persuadable than I had expected. Harry's doing, of course. Ah, hello, Nymphadora!"Harry looked around and saw that Mrs. Weasley was not alone, despite the lateness of the hour. A young witch with a pale, heart-shaped face and mousy brown hair was sitting at the table clutching a large mug between her hands.

"Hello, Professor," she said. " Wotcher, Harry.""Hi, Tonks."

Harry thought she looked drawn, even ill, and there was something forced in her smile. Certainly her appearance was less colorful than usual without her customary shade of bubble-gum-pink hair.

"I'd better be off," she said quickly, standing up and pulling her cloak around her shoulders. "Thanks for the tea and sympathy, Molly""Please don't leave on my account," said Dumbledore courteously, "I cannot stay, I have urgent matters to discuss with Rufus Scrimgeour.""No, no, I need to get going," said Tonks, not meeting Dumbledore's eyes. " 'Night ?quot;"Dear, why not come to

dinner at the weekend, Remus and Mad-Eye are coming ??""No, really, Molly. . . thanks anyway. . . Good night, every-one.

Tonks hurried past Dumbledore and Harry into the yard; a few paces beyond the doorstep, she turned on the spot and vanished into thin air. Harry noticed that Mrs. Weasley looked troubled.

"Well, I shall see you at Hogwarts, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Take care of yourself. Molly, your servant."He made Mrs. Weasley a bow and followed Tonks, vanishing at precisely the same spot. Mrs. Weasley closed the door on the empty yard and then steered Harry by the shoulders into the full glow of -=-ilu* lantern on the table to examine his appearance.

"You're like Ron," she sighed, looking him up and down. "Both of you look as though you've had Stretching jinxes put on you. -=-I Nwcar Ron's grown four inches since I last bought him school robes. Are you hungry, Harry?""Yeah, I am," said Harry, suddenly realizing just how hungry he was,"Sit down, dear, I'll knock something up."As Harry sat down, a furry ginger cat with a squashed face lumped onto his knees and settled there, purring.

"So Hermione's here?" he asked happily as he tickled Crookshanks behind the ears.

"Oh yes, she arrived the day before yesterday," said Mrs. Weasley, rapping a large iron pot with her wand. It bounced onto the -=-Itovc with a loud clang and began to bubble at once. "Everyone's in bed, of course, we didn't expect you for hours. Here you are ?quot;She tapped the pot again; it rose into the air, flew toward Harry, and tipped over; Mrs. Weasley slid a bowl nearly beneath it just in lime to catch the stream of thick, steaming onion soup.

"Bread, dear?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley."

She waved her wand over her shoulder; a loaf of bread and a knife soared gracefully onto the table; as the loaf sliced itself and -=-llie soup pot dropped back onto the stove, Mrs. Weasley sat down opposite him.

"So you persuaded Horace Slughorn to take the job?"Harry nodded, his mouth so full of hot soup that he could not speak.

"He taught Arthur and me," said Mrs. Weasley. "He was at Hog-warts for ages, started around the same time as Dumbledore, I think. Did you like him?"His mouth now full of bread, Harry shrugged and gave a noncommittal jerk of the head.

"I know what you mean," said Mrs. Weasley, nodding wisely. "Of course he can be charming when he wants to be, but Arthur's never liked him much. The Ministry's littered with Slughorn's old favorites, he was always good at giving leg ups, but he never had much time for Arthur ?didn't seem to think he was enough of a highflier. Well, that just shows you, even Slughorn makes mistakes. I don't know whether Ron's told you in any of his letters ?it's only just happened ?but Arthur's been promoted!"It could not have been clearer that Mrs. Weasley had been bursting to say this.

Harry swallowed a large amount of very hot soup and thought he could feel his throat blistering. "That's great!" he gasped.

"You are sweet," beamed Mrs. Weasley, possibly taking his watering eyes for emotion at the news. "Yes, Rufus Scrimgeour has set up several new offices in response to the present situation, and Arthur's heading the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects. It's a big job, he's got ten people reporting to him now!""What exactly ??"

"Well, you see, in all the panic about You-Know-Who, odd things have been cropping up for sale everywhere, things that are supposed to guard against You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters. You can imagine the kind of thing ?so-called protective potions that are really

gravy with a bit of bubotuber pus added, or instructions for defensive jinxes that actually make your ears fall off. . . . Well, in the main the perpetrators are just people like Mundungus Hotelier, who've never done an honest day's work in their lives and are taking advantage of how frightened everybody is, but every now and then something really nasty turns up. The other day Arthur confiscated a box of cursed Sneakoscopes that were almost certainly planted by a Death Eater. So you see, it's a very important job, and I tell him it's just silly to miss dealing with spark plugs and loasters and all the rest of that Muggle rubbish." Mrs. Weasley ended her speech with a stern look, as if it had been Harry suggesting that it was natural to miss spark plugs.

"Is Mr. Weasley still at work?" Harry asked.

"Yes, he is. As a matter of fact, he's a tiny bit late. ... He said he'd be back around midnight. . . ."She turned to look at a large clock that was perched awkwardly on top of a pile of sheets in the washing basket at the end of the table. Harry recognized it at once: It had nine hands, each inscribed with the name of a family member, and usually hung on i he Weasleys' sitting room wall, though its current position suggested that Mrs. Weasley had taken to carrying it around the house with her. Every single one of its nine hands was now pointing at "mortal peril.""It's been like that for a while now," said Mrs. Weasley, in an un-convincingly casual voice, "ever since You-Know-Who came back into the open. I suppose everybody's in mortal danger now. ... I don't think it can be just our family . . . but I don't know anyone else who's got a clock like this, so I can't check. Oh!"With a sudden exclamation she pointed at the clock's face. Mr. Weasley's hand had switched to "traveling.""He's coming!"

And sure enough, a moment later there was a knock on the back door. Mrs. Weasley jumped up and hurried to it; with one hand on the doorknob and her face pressed against the wood she called softly, "Arthur, is that you?""Yes," came Mr. Weasley's weary voice. "But I

would say that even if I were a Death Eater, dear. Ask the question!""Oh, honestly..."

"Molly!"

"All right, all right. . . What is your dearest ambition?""To find out how airplanes stay up."Mrs. Weasley nodded and turned the doorknob, but apparently Mr. Weasley was holding tight to it on the other side, because the door remained firmly shut.

"Molly! I've got to ask you your question first!""Arthur, really, this is just silly. ...""What do you like me to call you when we're alone together?"Even by the dim light of the lantern Harry could tell that Mrs. Weasley had turned bright red; he himself felt suddenly warm around the ears and neck, and hastily gulped soup, clattering his spoon as loudly as he could against the bowl.

-=-"Mollywobbles," whispered a mortified Mrs. Weasley into the crack at the edge of the door.

"Correct," said Mr. Weasley. "Now you can let me in."Mrs. Weasley opened the door to reveal her husband, a thin, balding, red-haired wizard wearing horn-rimmed spectacles and a long and dusty traveling cloak.

"I still don't see why we have to go through that every time you come home," said Mrs. Weasley, still pink in the face as she helped her husband out of his cloak. "I mean, a Death Eater might have forced the answer out of you before impersonating you!""I know, dear, but it's Ministry procedure, and I have to set an example. Something smells good ?onion soup?"Mr. Weasley turned hopefully in the direction of the table.

"Harry! We didn't expect you until morning!"They shook hands, and Mr. Weasley dropped into the chair beside Harry as Mrs. Weasley set a bowl of soup in front of him too.

"Thanks, Molly. It's been a tough night. Some idiot's started selling Metamorph-Medals. Just sling them around your neck and you'll be able to change your appearance at will. A hundred thousand disguises, all for ten Galleons!""And what really happens when you put them on?""Mostly you just turn a fairly unpleasant orange color, but a couple of people have also sprouted tentacle like warts all over their bodies. As if St. Mungo's didn't have enough to do already!""It sounds like the sort of thing Fred and George would find funny," said Mrs. Weasley hesitantly. "Are you sure ??""Of course I am!" said Mr. Weasley. "The boys wouldn't do anything like that now, not when people are desperate for protection!""So is that why you're late, Metamorph-Medals?""No, we got wind of a nasty backfiring jinx down in Elephant and Castle, but luckily the Magical Law Enforcement Squad had sorted it out by the time we got there. ..."Harry stifled a yawn behind his hand.

"Bed," said an undeceived Mrs. Weasley at once. "I've got Fred and George's room all ready for you, you'll have it to yourself.""Why, where are they?"

"Oh, they're in Diagon Alley, sleeping in the little flat over their joke shop as they're so busy," said Mrs. Weasley. "I must say, I didn't approve at first, but they do seem to have a bit of a flair for business! Come on, dear, your trunks already up there.""'Night, Mr. Weasley," said Harry, pushing back his chair. Crookshanks leapt lightly from his lap and slunk out of the room.

"G'night, Harry," said Mr. Weasley.

Harry saw Mrs. Weasley glance at the clock in the washing basket as they left the kitchen. All the hands were once again at "mortal peril."Fred and George's bedroom was on the second floor. Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at a lamp on the bedside table and it ignited at once, bathing the room in a pleasant golden glow. Though a large vase of flowers had been placed on a desk in front of the small window, their perfume could not disguise the lingering smell of what

Harry thought was gunpowder. A considerable amount of floor space was devoted to a vast number of unmarked, sealed cardboard boxes, amongst which stood Harry's school trunk. The room looked as though it was being used as a temporary warehouse.

Hedwig hooted happily at Harry from her perch on top of a large wardrobe, then took off through the window; Harry knew she had been waiting to see him before going hunting. Harry bade Mrs. Weasley good night, put on pajamas, and got into one of the beds. There was something hard inside the pillowcase. He groped inside it and pulled out a sticky purple-and-orange sweet, which he recognized as a Puking Pastille. Smiling to himself, he rolled over and was instantly asleep.

Seconds later, or so it seemed to Harry, he was awakened by what sounded like cannon fire as the door burst open. Sitting bolt upright, he heard the rasp of the curtains being pulled back: The dazzling sunlight seemed to poke him hard in both eyes. Shielding them with one hand, he groped hopelessly for his glasses with the other.

"Wuzzgoinon?"

"We didn't know you were here already!" said a loud and excited voice, and he received a sharp blow to the top of the head.

"Ron, don't hit him!" said a girl's voice reproachfully.

Harry's hand found his glasses and he shoved them on, though I he light was so bright he could hardly see anyway. A long, looming shadow quivered in front of him for a moment; he blinked and Ron Weasley came into focus, grinning down at him.

"All right?"

"Never been better," said Harry, rubbing the top of his head and slumping back onto his pillows. "You?""Not bad," said Ron, pulling over a cardboard box and sitting on it. "When did you get here?

Mum's only just told us!""About one o'clock this morning.""Were the Muggles all right? Did they treat you okay?""Same as usual," said Harry, as Hermione perched herself on the edge of his bed, "they didn't talk to me much, but I like it better that way. How're you, Hermione?""Oh, I'm fine," said Hermione, who was scrutinizing Harry as though he was sickening for something. He thought he knew what was behind this, and as he had no wish to discuss Sirius's death or any other miserable subject at the moment, he said, "What's the time? Have I missed breakfast?""Don't worry about that, Mum's bringing you up a tray; she reckons you look underfed," said Ron, rolling his eyes. "So, what's been going on?""Nothing much, I've just been stuck at my aunt and uncle's, haven't I?""Come off it!" said Ron. "You've been off with Dumbledore!""It wasn't that exciting. He just wanted me to help him persuade this old teacher to come out of retirement. His name's Horace Slughorn.""Oh," said Ron, looking disappointed. "We thought ?quot;Hermione flashed a warning look at Ron, and Ron changed tack at top speed.

"—we thought it'd be something like that.""You did?" said Harry, amused.

"Yeah . . . yeah, now Umbridge has left, obviously we need a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, don't we? So, er, what's he like?""He looks a bit like a walrus, and he used to be Head of Slytherin," said Harry. "Something wrong, Hermione?"She was watching him as though expecting strange symptoms to manifest themselves at any moment. She rearranged her features hastily in an unconvincing smile.

"No, of course not! So, um, did Slughorn seem like he'll be a good teacher?""Dunno," said Harry. "He can't be worse than Umbridge, can he?""I know someone who's worse than Umbridge," said a voice from the doorway. Ron's younger sister slouched into the room, looking irritable. "Hi, Harry.""What's up with you?" Ron asked.

"It's her," said Ginny, plonking herself down on Harry's bed. "She's driving me mad.""What's she done now?" asked Hermione sympathetically.

"It's the way she talks to me ?you'd think I was about three!""I know," said Hermione, dropping her voice. "She's so full of herself."Harry was astonished to hear Hermione talking about Mrs. Weasley like this and could not blame Ron for saying angrily, "Can't you two lay off her for five seconds?""Oh, that's right, defend her," snapped Ginny. "We all know you can't get enough of her."This seemed an odd comment to make about Ron's mother. Starting to feel that he was missing something, Harry said, "Who are you ??"But his question was answered before he could finish it. The bedroom door flew open again, and Harry instinctively yanked the bedcovers up to his chin so hard that Hermione and Ginny slid off the bed onto the floor.

A young woman was standing in the doorway, a woman of such breathtaking beauty that the room seemed to have become strangely airless. She was tall and willowy with long blonde hair and appeared to emanate a faint, silvery glow. To complete this vision of perfection, she was carrying a heavily laden breakfast tray.

"'Arry," she said in a throaty voice. "Eet 'as been too long!"As she swept over the threshold toward him, Mrs. Weasley was revealed, bobbing along in her wake, looking rather cross.

"There was no need to bring up the tray, I was just about to do it myself!""Eet was no trouble," said Fleur Delacour, setting the tray across Harry's knees and then swooping to kiss him on each cheek: He felt the places where her mouth had touched him burn. "I 'ave been longing to see -=-'itn. You remember my seester, Gabrielle? She never stops talking about 'Arry Potter. She will be delighted to see you again.""Oh ... is she here too?" Harry croaked.

"No, no, silly boy," said Fleur with a tinkling laugh, "I mean next summer, when we ?but do you not know?"Her great blue eyes

widened and she looked reproachfully at Mrs. Weasley, who said, "We hadn't got around to telling him yet."Fleur turned back to Harry, swinging her silvery sheet of hair so that it whipped Mrs. Weasley across the face.

"Bill and I are going to be married!""Oh," said Harry blankly. He could not help noticing how Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, and Ginny were all determinedly avoiding one another's gaze. "Wow. Er ? congratulations!"She swooped down upon him and kissed him again.

"Bill is very busy at ze moment, working very 'ard, and I only work part-time at Gringotts for my Eenglish, so he brought me 'ere for a few days to get to know 'is family properly. I was so pleased to 'ear you would be coming ?zere isn't much to do 'ere, unless you like cooking and chickens! Well ?enjoy your breakfast, 'Arry!"With these words she turned gracefully and seemed to float out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Mrs. Weasley made a noise that sounded like -=-"tchah!""Mum hates her," said Ginny quietly.

"I do not hate her!" said Mrs. Weasley in a cross whisper. "I just think they've hurried into this engagement, that's all!""They've known each other a year," said Ron, who looked oddly groggy and was staring at the closed door.

"Well, that's not very long! I know why it's happened, of course. Its all this uncertainty with You-Know-Who coming back, people think they might be dead tomorrow, so they're rushing all sorts of decisions they'd normally take time over. It was the same last time he was powerful, people eloping left, right, and center ?quot;"Including you and Dad," said Ginny slyly.

"Yes, well, your father and I were made for each other, what was the point in waiting?" said Mrs. Weasley. "Whereas Bill and Fleur . . . well. . . what have they really got in common? He's a hardworking, down-to-earth sort of person, whereas she's ?quot;"A cow," said Ginny,

nodding. "But Bill's not that down-to-earth. He's a Curse-Breaker, isn't he, he likes a bit of adventure, a bit of glamour. ... I expect that's why he's gone for Phlegm.""Stop calling her that, Ginny," said Mrs. Weasley sharply, as Harry and Hermione laughed. "Well, I'd better get on. ... Eat your eggs while they're warm, Harry."Looking careworn, she left the room. Ron still seemed slightly punch-drunk; he was shaking his head experimentally like a dog trying to rid its ears of water.

"Don't you get used to her if she's staying in the same house?" Harry asked.

"Well, you do," said Ron, "but if she jumps out at you unexpectedly, like then ...""It's pathetic," said Hermione furiously, striding away from Ron as far as she could go and turning to face him with her arms folded once she had reached the wall.

"You don't really want her around forever?" Ginny asked Ron incredulously. When he merely shrugged, she said, "Well, Mum's going to put a stop to it if she can, I bet you anything.""How's she going to manage that?" asked Harry.

"She keeps trying to get Tonks round for dinner. I think she's hoping Bill will fall for Tonks instead. I hope he does, I'd much rather have her in the family.""Yeah, that'll work," said Ron sarcastically. "Listen, no bloke in his right mind's going to fancy Tonks when Fleur's around. I mean, Tonks is okay-looking when she isn't doing stupid things to her hair and her nose, but ?quot;"She's a damn sight nicer than Phlegm? said Ginny.

"And she's more intelligent, she's an Auror!" said Hermione from the corner.

"Fleur's not stupid, she was good enough to enter the Triwizard Tournament," said Harry.

"Not you as well!" said Hermione bitterly.

"I suppose you like the way Phlegm says ' 'Any,' do you?" asked Ginny scornfully.

"No," said Harry, wishing he hadn't spoken, "I was just saying, Phlegm ?I mean, Fleur ?quot;"I'd much rather have Tonks in the family," said Ginny. "At least she's a laugh.""She hasn't been much of a laugh lately," said Ron. "Every time I've seen her she's looked more like Moaning Myrtle.""That's not fair," snapped Hermione. "She still hasn't got over what happened . . . you know ... I mean, he was her cousin!"Harry's heart sank. They had arrived at Sirius. He picked up a fork and began shoveling scrambled eggs into his mouth, hoping to deflect any invitation to join in this part of the conversation.

"Tonks and Sirius barely knew each other!" said Ron. "Sirius was in Azkaban half her life and before that their families never met ?quot;"That's not the point," said Hermione. "She thinks it was her limit he died!""How does she work that one out?" asked Harry, in spite of himself.

"Well, she was fighting Bellatrix Lestrange, wasn't she? I think she feels that if only she had finished her off, Bellatrix couldn't have killed Sirius.""That's stupid," said Ron.

"It's survivor's guilt," said Hermione. "I know Lupin's tried to talk her round, but she's still really down. She's actually having trouble with her Metamorphosing!""With her ?"

"She can't change her appearance like she used to," explained Hermione. "I think her powers must have been affected by shock, or something.""I didn't know that could happen," said Harry.

"Nor did I," said Hermione, "but I suppose if you're really depressed ..."The door opened again and Mrs. Weasley popped her head in. "Ginny," she whispered, "come downstairs and help me with the lunch.""I'm talking to this lot!" said Ginny, outraged.

"Now!" said Mrs. Weasley, and withdrew.

"She only wants me there so she doesn't have to be alone with Phlegm!" said Ginny crossly. She swung her long red hair around in a very good imitation of Fleur and pranced across the room with her arms held aloft like a ballerina.

"You lot had better come down quickly too," she said as she left.

Harry took advantage of the temporary silence to eat more breakfast. Hermione was peering into Fred and George's boxes, though every now and then she cast sideways looks at Harry. Ron, who was now helping himself to Harry's toast, was still gazing dreamily at the door.

"What's this?" Hermione asked eventually, holding up what looked like a small telescope.

"Dunno," said Ron, "but if Fred and -=-GeorgeVe left it here, it's probably not ready for the joke shop yet, so be careful""Your mum said the shop's going well," said Harry. "Said Fred and George have got a real flair for business.""That's an understatement," said Ron. "They're raking in the Galleons! I can't wait to see the place, we haven't been to Diagon Alley yet, because Mum says Dad's got to be there for extra security and he's been really busy at work, but it sounds excellent.""And what about Percy?" asked Harry; the third-eldest Weasley brother had fallen out with the rest of the family. "Is he talking to your mum and dad again?""Nope," said Ron.

"But he knows your dad was right all along now about Voldemort being back ?quot;"Dumbledore says people find it far easier to forgive others for being wrong than being right," said Hermione. "I heard him telling your mum, Ron.""Sounds like the sort of mental thing Dumbledore would say," said Ron.

"He's going to be giving me private lessons this year," said Harry conversationally.

Ron choked on his bit of toast, and Hermione gasped.

"You kept that quiet!" said Ron.

"I only just remembered," said Harry honestly. "He told me last night in your broom shed.""Blimey . . . private lessons with Dumbledore!" said Ron, looking impressed. "I wonder why he's . . . ?"His voice tailed away. Harry saw him and Hermione exchange looks. Harry laid down his knife and fork, his heart beating rather fast considering that all he was doing was sitting in bed. Dumbledore had said to do it. ... Why not now? He fixed his eyes on his fork, which was gleaming in the sunlight streaming into his lap, and said, "I don't know exactly why he's going to be giving me lessons, but I think it must be because of the prophecy."Neither Ron nor Hermione spoke. Harry had the impression that both had frozen. He continued, still speaking to his fork, "You know, the one they were trying to steal at the Ministry.""Nobody knows what it said, though," said Hermione quickly. "It got smashed.""Although the Prophet says ?quot; began Ron, but Hermione said, "Shh!""The Prophet's got it right," said Harry, looking up at them both with a great effort: Hermione seemed frightened and Ron amazed. "That glass ball that smashed wasn't the only record of the prophecy. I heard the whole thing in Dumbledore's office, he was the one the prophecy was made to, so he could tell me. From what it said," Harry took a deep breath, "it looks like I'm the one who's got to finish off Voldemort. ... At least, it said neither of us could live while the other survives."The three of them gazed at one another in silence for a moment. Then there was a loud bang and Hermione vanished behind a puff of black smoke.

"Hermione!" shouted Harry and Ron; the breakfast tray slid to the floor with a crash.

Hermione emerged, coughing, out of the smoke, clutching the telescope and sporting a brilliantly purple black eye.

"I squeezed it and it ?it punched me!" she gasped.

And sure enough, they now saw a tiny fist on a long spring protruding from the end of the telescope.

"Don't worry," said Ron, who was plainly trying not to laugh, "Mum'll fix that, she's good at healing minor injuries ?quot;"Oh well, never mind that now!" said Hermione hastily. "Harry, oh, Harry. . ."She sat down on the edge of his bed again.

"We wondered, after we got back from the Ministry . . . Obviously, we didn't want to say anything to you, but from what Lucius Malfoy said about the prophecy, how it was about you and Voldemort, well, we thought it might be something like this. . . . Oh, Harry . . ." She stared at him, then whispered, "Are you scared?""Not as much as I was," said Harry. "When I first heard it, I was . . . but now, it seems as though I always knew I'd have to face him in the end. . . .""When we heard Dumbledore was collecting you in person, we thought he might be telling you something or showing you something to do with the prophecy," said Ron eagerly. "And we were kind of right, weren't we? He wouldn't be giving you lessons if he thought you were a goner, wouldn't waste his time ?he must think you've got a chance!""That's true," said Hermione. "1 wonder what he'll teach you, Harry? Really advanced defensive magic, probably. . . powerful countercurses . . . anti-jinxes . . ."Harry did not really listen. A warmth was spreading through him that had nothing to do with the sunlight; a tight obstruction in his chest seemed to be dissolving. He knew that Ron and Hermione were more shocked than they were letting on, but the mere fact that they were still there on either side of him, speaking bracing words of comfort, not shrinking from him as though he were contaminated or dangerous, was worth more than he could ever tell them.

"...and evasive enchantments generally," concluded Hermione. "Well, at least you know one lesson you'll be having this year, that's one more than Ron and me. I wonder when our OWL results will come?""Cant be long now, it's been a month," said Ron.

"Hang on," said Harry, as another part of last night's conversation came back to him. "I think Dumbledore said our OWL results would be arriving today!""Today?" shrieked Hermione. "Today? But why didn't you ?oh my God ?you should have said ?quot;She leapt to her feet.

"I'm going to see whether any owls have come. ..."But when Harry arrived downstairs ten minutes later, fully dressed and carrying his empty breakfast tray, it was to find Hermione sitting at the kitchen table in great agitation, while Mrs. Weasley tried to lessen her resemblance to half a panda.

"It just won't budge," Mrs. Weasley was saying anxiously, standing over Hermione with her wand in her hand and a copy of The Healer's Helpmate open at "Bruises, Cuts, and Abrasions." "This has always worked before, I just can't understand it.""It'll be Fred and George's idea of a funny joke, making sure it can't come off," said Ginny.

"But it's got to come off!" squeaked Hermione. "I can't go around looking like this forever!""You won't, dear, we'll find an antidote, don't worry," said Mrs. Weasley soothingly.

"Bill told me W Fred and George are very amusing!" said Fleur, smiling serenely.

"Yes, I can hardly breathe for laughing," snapped Hermione.

She jumped up and started walking round and round the kitchen, twisting her fingers together.

"Mrs. Weasley, you're quite, quite sure no owls have arrived this morning?""Yes, dear, I'd have noticed," said Mrs. Weasley patiently. "But it's barely nine, there's still plenty of time. . . .""I know I messed up Ancient Runes," muttered Hermione feverishly, "I definitely made at least one serious mistranslation. And the Defense Against the Dark Arts practical was no good at all. I thought Transfiguration went all right at the time, but looking back ?quot;"Hermione, will you shut up,

you're not the only one who's nervous!" barked Ron. "And when you've got your eleven 'Outstanding Oils .. .""Don't, don't, don't!" said Hermione, flapping her hands hysterically. "I know I've failed everything!""What happens if we fail?" Harry asked the room at large, but it was again Hermione who answered.

"We discuss our options with our Head of House, I asked Professor McGonagall at the end of last term."Harry's stomach squirmed. He wished he had eaten less breakfast.

"At Beauxbatons," said Fleur complacently, "we 'ad a different way of doing things. I think eet was better. We sat our examinations after six years of study, not five, and then ?quot;Fleur's words were drowned in a scream. Hermione was pointing through the kitchen window. Three black specks were clearly visible in the sky, growing larger all the time.

"They're definitely owls," said Ron hoarsely, jumping up to join Hermione at the window.

"And there are three of them," said Harry, hastening to her other side.

"One for each of us," said Hermione in a terrified whisper. "Oh no ... oh no ... oh no ..."She gripped both Harry and Ron tightly around the elbows.

The owls were flying directly at the Burrow, three handsome tawnies, each of which, it became clear as they flew lower over the path leading up to the house, was carrying a large square envelope.

"Oh no!" squealed Hermione.

Mrs. Weasley squeezed past them and opened the kitchen window. One, two, three, the owls soared through it and landed on the table in a neat line. All three of them lifted their right legs.

Harry moved forward. The letter addressed to him was tied to the leg of the owl in the middle. He untied it with fumbling fingers. To his left, Ron was trying to detach his own results; to his right, Hermione's hands were shaking so much she was making her whole owl tremble.

Nobody in the kitchen spoke. At last, Harry managed to detach the envelope. He slit it open quickly and unfolded the parchment inside.

Ordinary Wizarding Level ResultsPass Grades

Outstanding (O)

Exceeds Expectations (E)

Acceptable (A)

Fail Grades

Poor (P)

Dreadful (D)

Troll (T)

Harry James Potter has achieved:Astronomy A

Care of Magical Creatures E

Charms E

Defense Against the Dark Arts ODivination P

Herbology E

History of Magic D

Potions E

Transfiguration E

Harry read the parchment through several times, his breathing becoming easier with each reading. It was all right: He had always known that he would fail Divination, and he had had no chance of passing History of Magic, given that he had collapsed halfway through the examination, but he had passed everything else! He ran his finger down the grades . . . he had passed well in Transfiguration and Herbology, he had even exceeded expectations at Potions! And best of all, he had achieved "Outstanding" at Defense Against the Dark Arts!

He looked around. Hermione had her back to him and her head bent, but Ron was looking delighted.

"Only failed Divination and History of Magic, and who cares about them?" he said happily to Harry. "Here ?swap ?quot;Harry glanced down Ron's grades: There were no "Outstandings" there. . . .

"Knew you'd be top at Defense Against the Dark Arts," said Ron, punching Harry on the shoulder. "We've done all right, haven't we?""Well done!" said Mrs. Weasley proudly, ruffling Ron's hair. "Seven OWLs, that's more than Fred and George got together!""Hermione?" said Ginny tentatively, for Hermione still hadn't turned around. "How did you do?""I--not bad," said Hermione in a small voice.

"Oh, come off it," said Ron, striding over to her and whipping her results out of her hand. "Yep ?ten 'Outstandings' and one 'Exceeds Expectations' at Defense Against the Dark Arts." He looked down at her, half-amused, half-exasperated. "You're actually disappointed, aren't you?"Hermione shook her head, but Harry laughed.

"Well, we're N.E.W.T. students now!" grinned Ron. "Mum, are there any more sausages?"Harry looked back down at his results. They were as good as he could have hoped for. He felt just one tiny twinge of regret. . . . This was the end of his ambition to become an Auror.

He had not secured the required Potions grade. He had known all along that he wouldn't, but he still felt a sinking in his stomach as he looked again at that small black E.

It was odd, really, seeing that it had been a Death Eater in disguise who had first told Harry he would make a good Auror, but somehow the idea had taken hold of him, and he couldn't really think of anything else he would like to be. Moreover, it had seemed the right destiny for him since he had heard the prophecy a few weeks ago. . . . Neither can live while the other survives. . . .Wouldn't he be living up to the prophecy, and giving himself the best chance of survival, if he joined those highly trained wizards whose job it was to find and kill Voldemort?

Chapter 6 Draco's Detour

Harry remained within the confines of the Burrow's garden over the next few weeks. He spent most of his days playing two-a-side Quidditch in the Weasleys' orchard (he and Hermione against Ron and Ginny; Hermione was dreadful and Ginny good, so they were reasonably well matched) and his evenings eating triple helpings of everything Mrs. Weasley put in front of him.

It would have been a happy, peaceful holiday had it not been for the stones of disappearances, odd accidents, even of deaths now appearing almost daily in the Prophet. Sometimes Bill and Mr. Weasley brought home news before it even reached the paper. To Mrs. Weasley's displeasure, Harry's sixteenth birthday celebrations were marred by grisly tidings brought to the party by Remus Lupin, who was looking gaunt and grim, his brown hair streaked liberally with gray, his clothes more ragged and patched than ever.

"There have been another couple of dementor attacks," he announced, as Mrs. Weasley passed him a large slice of birthday cake. "And they've found Igor Karkaroff's body in a shack up north. The Dark Mark had been set over it — well, frankly, I'm surprised he stayed alive for even a year after deserting the Death Eaters; Sirius's brother, Regulus, only managed a few days as far as I can remember."

"Yes, well," said Mrs. Weasley, frowning, "perhaps we should talk about something diff—"

"Did you hear about Florean Fortescue, Remus?" asked Bill, who was being plied with wine by Fleur. "The man who ran —"

"— the ice-cream place in Diagon Alley?" Harry interrupted, with an unpleasant, hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach. "He used to give me free ice creams. What's happened to him?"

"Dragged off, by the look of his place."

"Why?" asked Ron, while Mrs. Weasley pointedly glared at Bill.

"Who knows? He must've upset them somehow. He was a good man, Florean."

"Talking of Diagon Alley," said Mr. Weasley, "looks like Ollivander's gone too."

"The wandmaker?" said Ginny, looking startled.

"That's the one. Shop's empty. No sign of a struggle. No one knows whether he left voluntarily or was kidnapped."

"But wands — what'll people do for wands?"

"They'll make do with other makers," said Lupin. "But Ollivander was the best, and if the other side have got him it's not so good for us."

The day after this rather gloomy birthday tea, their letters and booklists arrived from Hogwarts. Harry's included a surprise: he had been made Quidditch Captain.

"That gives you equal status with prefects!" cried Hermione happily. "You can use our special bathroom now and everything!"

"Wow, I remember when Charlie wore one of these," said Ron, examining the badge with glee. "Harry, this is so cool, you're my Captain — if you let me back on the team, I suppose, ha ha. . . ."

"Well, I don't suppose we can put off a trip to Diagon Alley much longer now you've got these," sighed Mrs. Weasley, looking down Ron’s booklist. "We'll go on Saturday as long as your father doesn't have to go into work again. I'm not going there without him."

"Mum, d'you honestly think You-Know-Who's going to be hiding behind a bookshelf in Flourish and Blotts?" sniggered Ron.

"Fortescue and Ollivander went on holiday, did they?" said Mrs. Weasley, firing up at once. "If you think security's a laughing matter you can stay behind and I'll get your things myself—"

"No, I wanna come, I want to see Fred and George's shop!" said Ron hastily.

"Then you just buck up your ideas, young man, before I decide you're too immature to come with us!" said Mrs. Weasley angrily, snatching up her clock, all nine hands of which were still pointing at "mortal peril," and balancing it on top of a pile of just-laundered towels. "And that goes for returning to Hogwarts as well!"

Ron turned to stare incredulously at Harry as his mother hoisted the laundry basket and the teetering clock into her arms and stormed out of the room.

"Blimey. . . you can't even make a joke round here anymore. . . ."

But Ron was careful not to be flippant about Voldemort over the next few days. Saturday dawned without any more outbursts from Mrs. Weasley, though she seemed very tense at breakfast. Bill, who

would be staying at home with Fleur (much to Hermione and Ginny's pleasure), passed a full money bag across the table to Harry.

"Where's mine?" demanded Ron at once, his eyes wide.

"That's already Harry's, idiot," said Bill. "I got it out of your vault for you, Harry, because it's taking about five hours for the public to get to their gold at the moment, the goblins have tightened security so much. Two days ago Arkie Philpott had a Probity Probe stuck up his ... Well, trust me, this way's easier."

"Thanks, Bill," said Harry, pocketing his gold.

"'E is always so thoughtful," purred Fleur adoringly, stroking Bill's nose. Ginny mimed vomiting into her cereal behind Fleur. Harry choked over his cornflakes, and Ron thumped him on the back.

It was an overcast, murky day. One of the special Ministry of Magic cars, in which Harry had ridden once before, was awaiting them in the front yard when they emerged from the house, pulling on their cloaks.

"It's good Dad can get us these again," said Ron appreciatively, stretching luxuriously as the car moved smoothly away from the Burrow, Bill and Fleur waving from the kitchen window. He, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny were all sitting in roomy comfort in the wide backseat.

"Don't get used to it, it's only because of Harry," said Mr. Weasley over his shoulder. He and Mrs. Weasley were in front with the Ministry driver; the front passenger seat had obligingly stretched into what resembled a two-seater sofa. "He's been given top-grade security status. And we'll be joining up with additional security at the Leaky Cauldron too."

Harry said nothing; he did not much fancy doing his shopping

while surrounded by a battalion of Aurors. He had stowed his Invisibility Cloak in his backpack and felt that, if that was good enough for Dumbledore, it ought to be good enough for the Ministry, though now he came to think of it, he was not sure the Ministry knew about his cloak.

"Here you are, then," said the driver, a surprisingly short while later, speaking for the first time as he slowed in Charing Cross Road and stopped outside the Leaky Cauldron. "I'm to wait for you, any idea how long you'll be?"

"A couple of hours, I expect," said Mr. Weasley. "Ah, good, he's here!"

Harry imitated Mr. Weasley and peered through the window; his heart leapt. There were no Aurors waiting outside the inn, but instead the gigantic, black-bearded form of Rubeus Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, wearing a long beaverskin coat, beaming at the sight of Harry's face and oblivious to the startled stares of passing Muggles.

"Harry!" he boomed, sweeping Harry into a bone-crushing hug the moment Harry had stepped out of the car. "Buckbeak — Witherwings, I mean — yeh should see him, Harry, he's so happy ter be back in the open air —"

"Glad he's pleased," said Harry, grinning as he massaged his ribs. "We didn't know 'security' meant you!"

"I know, jus' like old times, innit? See, the Ministry wanted ter send a bunch o' Aurors, but Dumbledore said I'd do," said Hagrid proudly, throwing out his chest and tucking his thumbs into his pockets. "Lets get goin' then — after yeh, Molly, Arthur —"

The Leaky Cauldron was, for the first time in Harry's memory, completely empty. Only Tom the landlord, wizened and toothless,

remained of the old crowd. He looked up hopefully as they entered, but before he could speak, Hagrid said importantly, "Jus' passin' through today, Tom, sure yeh understand, Hogwarts business, yeh know."

Tom nodded gloomily and returned to wiping glasses; Harry, Hermione, Hagrid, and the Weasleys walked through the bar and out into the chilly little courtyard at the back where the dustbins stood. Hagrid raised his pink umbrella and rapped a certain brick in the wall, which opened at once to form an archway onto a winding cobbled street. They stepped through the entrance and paused, looking around.

Diagon Alley had changed. The colorful, glittering window displays of spellbooks, potion ingredients, and cauldrons were lost to view,

hidden behind the large Ministry of Magic posters that had been pasted over them. Most of these somber purple posters carried blown-up versions of the security advice on the Ministry pamphlets that had been sent out over the summer, but others bore moving black-and-white photographs of Death Eaters known to be on the loose. Bellatrix Lestrange was sneering from the front of the nearest apothecary. A few windows were boarded up, including those of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor. On the other hand, a number of shabby-looking stalls had sprung up along the street. The nearest one, which had been erected outside Flourish and Blotts, under a striped, stained awning, had a cardboard sign pinned to its front:

AMULETS

Effective Against Werewolves, -=-Dement on, and -=-infer!

A seedy-looking little wizard was rattling armfuls of silver symbols on chains at passersby.

"One for your little girl, madam?" he called at Mrs. Weasley as they passed, leering at Ginny. "Protect her pretty neck?"

"If I were on duty . . ." said Mr. Weasley, glaring angrily at the amulet seller.

"Yes, but don't go arresting anyone now, dear, we're in a hurry," said Mrs. Weasley, nervously consulting a list. "I think we'd better do Madam Malkin's first, Hermione wants new dress robes, and Ron's showing much too much ankle in his school robes, and you must need new ones too, Harry, you've grown so much — come on, everyone —"

"Molly, it doesn't make sense for all of us to go to Madam Malkin's," said Mr. Weasley. "Why don't those three go with Hagrid, and we can go to Flourish and Blotts and get everyone's school-books?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Weasley anxiously, clearly torn between a desire to finish the shopping quickly and the wish to stick together in a pack. "Hagrid, do you think —- ?"

"Don' fret, they'll be fine with me, Molly," said Hagrid soothingly, waving an airy hand the size of a dustbin lid. Mrs. Weasley did not look entirely convinced, but allowed the separation, scurrying off toward Flourish and Blotts with her husband and Ginny while Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Hagrid set off for Madam Malkin's.

Harry noticed that many of the people who passed them had the same harried, anxious look as Mrs. Weasley, and that nobody was stopping to talk anymore; the shoppers stayed together in their own tightly knit groups, moving intently about their business. Nobody seemed to be shopping alone.

"Migh' be a bit of a squeeze in there with all of us," said Hagrid, stopping outside Madam Malkin's and bending down to peer through the window. "I'll stand guard outside, all right?"

So Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the little shop together. It appeared, at first glance, to be empty, but no sooner had the door swung shut behind them than they heard a familiar voice issuing from behind a rack of dress robes in spangled green and blue.

". . . not a child, in case you haven't noticed, Mother. I am perfectly capable of doing my shopping alone."

There was a clucking noise and a voice Harry recognized as that of Madam Malkin, the owner, said, "Now, dear, your mother's quite right, none of us is supposed to go wandering around on our own anymore, it's nothing to do with being a child —"

"Watch where you're sticking that pin, will you!"

A teenage boy with a pale, pointed face and white-blond hair appeared from behind the rack, wearing a handsome set of dark

green robes that glittered with pins around the hem and the edges of the sleeves. He strode to the mirror and examined himself; it was a few moments before he noticed Harry, Ron, and Hermione reflected over his shoulder. His light gray eyes narrowed.

"If you're wondering what the smell is, Mother, a Mudblood just walked in," said Draco Malfoy.

"I don't think there's any need for language like that!" said Madam Malkin, scurrying out from behind the clothes rack holding a tape measure and a wand. "And I don't want wands drawn in my shop either!" she added hastily, for a glance toward the door had shown her Harry and Ron both standing there with their wands out and pointing at Malfoy. Hermione, who was standing slightly behind them, whispered, "No, don't, honestly, it's not worth it. "

"Yeah, like you'd dare do magic out of school," sneered Malfoy. "Who blacked your eye, Granger? I want to send them flowers."

"That's quite enough!" said Madam Malkin sharply, looking over her shoulder for support. "Madam — please —"

Narcissa Malfoy strolled out from behind the clothes rack.

"Put those away," she said coldly to Harry and Ron. "If you at-tack my son again, I shall ensure that it is the last thing you ever do."

"Really?" said Harry, taking a step forward and gazing into the smoothly arrogant face that, for all its pallor, still resembled her sister's. He was as tall as she was now. "Going to get a few Death Eater pals to do us in, are you?"

Madam Malkin squealed and clutched at her heart.

"Really, you shouldn't accuse — dangerous thing to say — wands away, please!"

But Harry did not lower his wand. Narcissa Malfoy smiled unpleasantly.

"I see that being Dumbledore's favorite has given you a false sense of security, Harry Potter. But Dumbledore won't always be there to protect you."

Harry looked mockingly all around the shop. "Wow. . . look at that. . . he's not here now! So why not have a go? They might be able to find you a double cell in Azkaban with your loser of a husband!"

Malfoy made an angry movement toward Harry, but stumbled over his overlong robe. Ron laughed loudly.

"Don't you dare talk to my mother like that, Potter!" Malfoy snarled.

"It's all right, Draco," said Narcissa, restraining him with her thin white fingers upon his shoulder. "I expect Potter will be reunited with dear Sirius before I am reunited with Lucius." '

Harry raised his wand higher.

"Harry, no!" moaned Hermione, grabbing his arm and attempting to push it down by his side. "Think. . . . You mustn't. . . . You'll be in such trouble. ..."

Madam Malkin dithered for a moment on the spot, then seemed to decide to act as though nothing was happening in the hope that it wouldn't. She bent toward Malfoy, who was still glaring at Harry.

"I think this left sleeve could come up a little bit more, dear, let me just —"

"Ouch!" bellowed Malfoy, slapping her hand away. "Watch where you're putting your pins, woman! Mother — I don't think I want these anymore —"

He pulled the robes over his head and threw them onto the floor at Madam Malkin's feet.

"You're right, Draco," said Narcissa, with a contemptuous glance at Hermione, "now I know the kind of scum that shops here. . . . We'll do better at Twilfitt and Tatting's."

And with that, the pair of them strode out of the shop, Malfoy taking care to bang as hard as he could into Ron on the way out.

"Well, really? said Madam Malkin, snatching up the fallen robes and moving the tip of her wand over them like a vacuum cleaner, so that it removed all the dust.

She was distracted all through the fitting of Ron's and Harry's new robes, tried to sell Hermione wizard's dress robes instead of witch's, and when she finally bowed them out of the shop it was with an air of being glad to see the back of them.

"Got ev'rything?" asked Hagrid brightly when they reappeared at his side.

"Just about," said Harry. "Did you see the Malfoys?"

"Yeah," said Hagrid, unconcerned. "Bu they wouldn' dare make trouble in the middle o' Diagon Alley, Harry. Don' worry abou1 them."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged looks, but before they could disabuse Hagrid of this comfortable notion, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ginny appeared, all clutching heavy packages of books.

"Everyone all right?" said Mrs. Weasley. "Got your robes? Right then, we can pop in at the Apothecary and Eeylops on the way to Fred and George's — stick close, now. . . ."

Neither Harry nor Ron bought any ingredients at the Apothecary, seeing that they were no longer studying Potions, but both bought

large boxes of owl nuts for Hedwig and Pigwidgeon at Eeylops Owl Emporium. Then, with Mrs. Weasley checking her watch every minute or so, they headed farther along the street in search of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, the joke shop run by Fred and George.

"We really haven't got too long," Mrs. Weasley said. "So we'll just have a quick look around and then back to the car. We must be close, that's number ninety-two . . . ninety-four . . ."

"Whoa,"said Ron, stopping in his tracks.

Set against the dull, poster-muffled shop Fronts around them, Fred and Georges windows hit the eye like a firework display. Casual passersby were looking back over their shoulders at the windows, and a few rather stunned-looking people had actually come to a halt, transfixed. The left-hand window was dazzlingly full of an assortment of goods that revolved, popped, flashed, bounced, and shrieked; Harrys eyes began to water just looking at it. The right-hand window was covered with a gigantic poster, purple like those of the Ministry, but emblazoned with flashing yellow letters:

WHY ARE YOU WORRYING ABOUT

YOU-KNOW-WHO?

YOU SHOULD BE WORRYING ABOUT

U-NO-POO--

THE CONSTIPATION SENSATION

THAT'S GRIPPING THE NATION!

Harry started to laugh. He heard a weak sort of moan beside him and looked around to see Mrs. Weasley gazing, dumbfounded, at the poster. Her lips moved silently, mouthing the name "U-No-Poo."

"They'll be murdered in their beds!" she whispered.

"No they won’t!" said Ron, who, like Harry, was laughing. "This is brilliant!"

And he and Harry led the way into the shop. It was packed with customers; Harry could not get near the shelves. He stared around, looking up at the boxes piled to the ceiling: Here were the Skiving Snackboxes that the twins had perfected during their last, unfinished year at Hogwarts; Harry noticed that the Nosebleed Nougat was most popular, with only one battered box left on the shelf. There were bins full of trick wands, the cheapest merely turning into rubber chickens or pairs of briefs when waved, the most expensive beating the unwary user around the head and neck, and boxes of quills, which came in Self-Inking, Spell-Checking, and Smart-Answer varieties. A space cleared in the crowd, and Harry pushed his way toward the counter, where a gaggle of delighted ten-year-olds was watching a tiny little wooden man slowly ascending the steps to a real set of gallows, both perched on a box that read: reusable hangman — spell it or he'll swing!

"'Patented Daydream Charms

Hermione had managed to squeeze through to a large display near the counter and was reading the information on the back of a box bearing a highly colored picture of a handsome youth and a swooning girl who were standing on the deck of a pirate ship.

"'One simple incantation and you will enter a top-quality, highly realistic, thirty-minute daydream, easy to fit into the average school lesson and virtually undetectable (side effects include vacant expression and minor drooling). Not for sale to under-sixteens. You know," said Hermione, looking up at Harry, "that really is extraordinary magic!"

"For that, Hermione," said a voice behind them, "you can have one for free."

A beaming Fred stood before them, wearing a set of magenta robes that clashed magnificently with his flaming hair.

"How are you, Harry?" They shook hands. "And what's happened to your eye, Hermione?"

"Your punching telescope," she said ruefully.

"Oh blimey, I forgot about those," said Fred. "Here —"

He pulled a tub out of his pocket and handed it to her; she unscrewed it gingerly to reveal a thick yellow paste.

"Just dab it on, that bruise'll be gone within the hour," said Fred. "We had to find a decent bruise remover. We're testing most of our products on ourselves."

Hermione looked nervous. "It is safe, isn't it?" she asked.

"'Course it is," said Fred bracingly. "Come on, Harry, I'll give you a tour."

Harry left Hermione dabbing her black eye with paste and followed Fred toward the back of the shop, where he saw a stand of card and rope tricks.

"Muggle magic tricks!" said Fred happily, pointing them out. "For freaks like Dad, you know, who love Muggle stuff. It's not a big earner, but we do fairly steady business, they're great novelties. . . . Oh, here's George. ..."

Fred's twin shook Harrys hand energetically.

"Giving him the tour? Come through the back, Harry, that's where we're making the real money—pocket anything, you, and you'll pay in more than Galleons!" he added warningly to a small boy who hastily whipped his hand out of the tub labeled edible dark

MARKS----THEY'LL MAKE ANYONE SICK!

George pushed back a curtain beside the Muggle tricks and Harry saw a darker, less crowded room. The packaging on the products lining these shelves was more subdued.

"We've just developed this more serious line," said Fred. "Funny how it happened . . ."

"You wouldn't believe how many people, even people who work at the Ministry, can't do a decent Shield Charm," said George. "'Course, they didn't have you teaching them, Harry."

"That's right. . . . Well, we thought Shield Hats were a bit of a laugh, you know, challenge your mate to jinx you while wearing it and watch his face when the jinx just bounces off. But the Ministry bought five hundred for all its support staff! And we're still getting massive orders!"

"So we've expanded into a range of Shield Cloaks, Shield Gloves ..."

"... I mean, they wouldn't help much against the Unforgivable Curses, but for minor to moderate hexes or jinxes . . ."

"And then we thought we'd get into the whole area of Defense Against the Dark Arts, because it's such a money spinner," continued George enthusiastically. "This is cool. Look, Instant Darkness Powder, we're importing it from Peru. Handy if you want to make

a quick escape."

"And our Decoy Detonators are just walking off the shelves, look," said Fred, pointing at a number of weird-looking black horn-type objects that were indeed attempting to scurry out of sight. "You just drop one surreptitiously and it'll run off and make a nice loud noise out of sight, giving you a diversion if you need one.

"Handy," said Harry, impressed.

"Here," said George, catching a couple and throwing them to Harry.

A young witch with short blonde hair poked her head around the curtain; Harry saw that she too was wearing magenta staff robes.

"There's a customer out here looking for a joke cauldron, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley," she said.

Harry found it very odd to hear Fred and George called "Mr. Weasley," but they took it in their stride.

"Right you are, Verity, I'm coming," said George promptly. "Harry, you help yourself to anything you want, all right? No charge."

"I can't do that!" said Harry, who had already pulled out his money bag to pay for the Decoy Detonators.

"You don't pay here," said Fred firmly, waving away Harry's gold.

"But—"

"You gave us our start-up loan, we haven't forgotten," said George sternly "Take whatever you like, and just remember to tell people where you got it, if they ask."

George swept off through the curtain to help with the customers, and Fred led Harry back into the main part of the shop to find Hermione and Ginny still poring over the Patented Daydream Charms.

"Haven't you girls found our special WonderWitch products yet?" asked Fred. "Follow me, ladies. . . ."

Near the window was an array of violently pink products around which a cluster of excited girls was giggling enthusiastically. Hermione and Ginny both hung back, looking wary.

"There you go," said Fred proudly. "Best range of love potions you'll find anywhere."

Ginny raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Do they work?" she asked.

"Certainly they work, for up to twenty-four hours at a time depending on the weight of the boy in question —"

"— and the attractiveness of the girl," said George, reappearing suddenly at their side. "But we're not selling them to our sister," he added, becoming suddenly stern, "not when she's already got about five boys on the go from what we've —"

"Whatever you've heard from Ron is a big fat lie," said Ginny calmly, leaning forward to take a small pink pot off the shelf. "What's this?"

"Guaranteed ten-second pimple vanisher," said Fred. "Excellent on everything from boils to blackheads, but don't change the subject. Are you or are you not currently going out with a boy called Dean Thomas?"

"Yes, I am," said Ginny. "And last time I looked, he was definitely one boy, not five. What are those?"

She was pointing at a number of round balls of fluff in shades of pink and purple, all rolling around the bottom of a cage and emitting high-pitched squeaks.

"Pygmy Puffs," said George. "Miniature puffskeins, we can’t breed them fast enough. So what about Michael Corner?"

"I dumped him, he was a bad loser," said Ginny, putting a finger through the bars of the cage and watching the Pygmy Puffs crowd around it. "They're really cute!"

"They're fairly cuddly, yes," conceded Fred. "But you're moving through boyfriends a bit fast, aren't you?"

Ginny turned to look at him, her hands on her hips. There was such a Mrs. Weasley-ish glare on her face that Harry was surprised Fred didn't recoil.

"It's none of your business. And I'll thank you" she added angrily to Ron, who had just appeared at George's elbow, laden with merchandise, "not to tell tales about me to these two!"

"That's three Galleons, nine Sickles, and a Knut," said Fred, examining the many boxes in Ron's arms. "Cough up."

"I'm your brother!"

"And that's our stuff you're nicking. Three Galleons, nine Sickles. I'll knock off the Knut."

"But I haven't got three Galleons, nine Sickles!"

"You'd better put it back then, and mind you put it on the right shelves."

Ron dropped several boxes, swore, and made a rude hand gesture at Fred that was unfortunately spotted by Mrs. Weasley, who had chosen that moment to appear.

"If I see you do that again I'll jinx your fingers together," she said sharply.

"Mum, can I have a Pygmy Puff?" said Ginny at once.

"A what?" said Mrs. Weasley warily.

"Look, they're so sweet. . . ."

Mrs. Weasley moved aside to look at the Pygmy Puffs, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione momentarily had an unimpeded view out of the window. Draco Malfoy was hurrying up the street alone. As he passed Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, he glanced over his shoulder.

Seconds later, he moved beyond the scope of the window and they lost sight of him.

"Wonder where his mummy is?" said Harry, frowning.

"Given her the slip by the looks of it," said Ron.

"Why, though?" said Hermione.

Harry said nothing; he was thinking too hard. Narcissa Malfoy would not have let her precious son out of her sight willingly; Malfoy must have made a real effort to free himself from her clutches.

Harry, knowing and loathing Malfoy, was sure the reason could not be innocent.

He glanced around. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were bending over the Pygmy Puffs. Mr. Weasley was delightedly examining a pack of Muggle marked playing cards. Fred and George were both helping customers. On the other side of the glass, Hagrid was standing with his back to them, looking up and down the street.

"Get under here, quick," said Harry, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his bag.

"Oh — I don't know, Harry," said Hermione, looking uncertainly toward Mrs. Weasley.

"Come on\" said Ron.

She hesitated for a second longer, then ducked under the cloak with Harry and Ron. Nobody noticed them vanish; they were all too interested in Fred and George's products. Harry, Ron, and Hermione squeezed their way out of the door as quickly as they could, but by the time they gained the street, Malfoy had disappeared just as successfully as they had.

"He was going in that direction," murmured Harry as quietly as possible, so that the humming Hagrid would not hear them. “Cmon.”

They scurried along, peering left and right, through shop windows and doors, until Hermione pointed ahead.

"That's him, isn't it?" she whispered. "Turning left?"

"Big surprise," whispered Ron.

For Malfoy had glanced around, then slid into Knockturn Alley and out of sight.

"Quick, or we'll lose him," said Harry, speeding up.

"Our feet'll be seen!" said Hermionc anxiously, as the cloak flapped a little around their ankles; it was much more difficult hiding all three of them under the cloak nowadays.

"It doesn't matter," said Harry impatiently. "Just hurry!"

But Knockturn Alley, the side street devoted to the Dark Arts, looked completely deserted. They peered into windows as they passed, but none of the shops seemed to have any customers at all. Harry supposed it was a bit of a giveaway in these dangerous and suspicious times to buy Dark artifacts — or at least, to be seen buying them.

Hermione gave his arm a hard pinch.

"Ouch!"

"Shh! Look! He's in there!" she breathed in Harry's ear.

They had drawn level with the only shop in Knockturn Alley that Harry had ever visited, Borgin and Burkes, which sold a wide variety of sinister objects. There in the midst of the cases full of skulls and old bottles stood Draco Malfoy with his back to them, just visible beyond

the very same large black cabinet in which Harry had once hidden to avoid Malfoy and his father. Judging by the movements of Malfoy's hands, he was talking animatedly. The proprietor of the shop, Mr. Borgin, an oily-haired, stooping man, stood facing Malfoy. He was wearing a curious expression of mingled resentment and fear.

"If only we could hear what they're saying!" said Hermione.

"We can!" said Ron excitedly. "Hang on — damn —"

He dropped a couple more of the boxes he was still clutching as he fumbled with the largest.

"Extendable Ears, look!"

"Fantastic!" said Hermione, as Ron unraveled the long, flesh-

colored strings and began to feed them toward the bottom of the door. "Oh, I hope the door isn't Imperturbable —"

"No!" said Ron gleefully. "Listen!"

They put their heads together and listened intently to the ends of the strings, through which Malfoy's voice could be heard loud and clear, as though a radio had been turned on.

". . . you know how to fix it?"

"Possibly," said Borgin, in a tone that suggested he was unwilling to commit himself. "I'll need to see it, though. Why don't you bring it into the shop?"

"I can't," said Malfoy. "It's got to stay put. I just need you to tell me how to do it."

Harry saw Borgin lick his lips nervously.

"Well, without seeing it, I must say it will be a very difficult job, perhaps impossible. I couldn't guarantee anything."

"No?" said Malfoy, and Harry knew, just by his tone, that Malfoy was sneering. "Perhaps this will make you more confident."

He moved toward Borgin and was blocked from view by the cabinet. Harry, Ron, and Hermione shuffled sideways to try and keep him in sight, but all they could see was Borgin, looking very frightened.

"Tell anyone," said Maifoy, "and there will be retribution. You know Fenrir Greyback? He's a family friend. He'll be dropping in from time to time to make sure you're giving the problem your full attention."

"There will be no need for —"

"I'll decide that," said Malfoy. "Well, I'd better be off. And don't forget to keep that one safe, I'll need it."

"Perhaps you'd like to take it now?"

"No, of course I wouldn't, you stupid, little man, how would I look carrying that down the street? Just don't sell it."

"Of course not. . . sir."

Borgin made a bow as deep as the one Harry had once seen him give Lucius Malfoy.

"Not a word to anyone, Borgin, and that includes my mother, understand?"

"Naturally, naturally," murmured Borgin, bowing again.

Next moment, the bell over the door tinkled loudly as Malfoy stalked out of the shop looking very pleased with himself. He passed so close to Harry, Ron, and Hermione that they felt the cloak flutter around

their knees again. Inside the shop, Borgin remained frozen; his unctuous smile had vanished; he looked worried.

"What was that about?" whispered Ron, reeling in the Extendable Ears.

"Dunno," said Harry, thinking hard. "He wants something mended . . . and he wants to reserve something in there. . . . Could you see what he pointed at when he said 'that one'?"

"No, he was behind that cabinet —"

"You two stay here," whispered Hermione.

"What are you — ?"

But Hermione had already ducked out from under the cloak. She checked her hair in the reflection in the glass, then marched into the shop, setting the bell tinkling again. Ron hastily fed the Extendable Ears back under the door and passed one of the strings to Harry.

"Hello, horrible morning, isn't it?" Hermione said brightly to Borgin, who did not answer, but cast her a suspicious look. Humming cheerily, Hermione strolled through the jumble of objects on display.

"Is this necklace for sale?" she asked, pausing beside a glass-fronted case.

"If you've got one and a half thousand Galleons," said Mr.

Borgin coldly.

"Oh — er — no, I haven't got quite that much," said Hermione, walking on. "And . . . what about this lovely — um — skull?"

"Sixteen Galleons."

"So it's for sale, then? It isn't being . . . kept for anyone?"

Mr. Borgin squinted at her. Harry had the nasty feeling he knew exactly what Hermione was up to. Apparently Hermione felt she had been rumbled too because she suddenly threw caution to the

winds.

"The thing is, that — er — boy who was in here just now, Draco Malfoy, well, he's a friend of mine, and I want to get him a birthday present, but if he's already reserved anything, I obviously don't want to get him the same thing, so ... um ..."

It was a pretty lame story in Harry's opinion, and apparently Borgin thought so too.

"Out," he said sharply. "Get out!"

Hermione did not wait to be asked twice, but hurried to the door with Borgin at her heels. As the bell tinkled again, Borgin slammed the door behind her and put up the closed sign.

"Ah well," said Ron, throwing the cloak back over Hermione. "Worth a try, but you were a bit obvious —"

"Well, next time you can show me how it's done, Master of Mystery!" she snapped.

Ron and Hermione bickered all the way back to Weasleys'

Chapter 7: The Slug Club

Harry spent a lot of the last week of the holidays pondering the meaning of Malfoy's behavior in Knockturn Alley. What disturbed him most was the satisfied look on Malfoy's face as he had left the shop. Nothing that made Malfoy look that happy could be good news. To his slight annoyance, however, neither Ron nor Hermione seemed quite as curious about Malfoy's activities as he was; or at least, they seemed to get bored of discussing it after a few days.

"Yes, I've already agreed it was fishy, Harry," said Hermione a little impatiently. She was sitting on the windowsill in Fred and George's room with her feet up on one of the cardboard boxes and had only grudgingly looked up from her new copy of Advanced Rune Translation. "But haven't we agreed there could be a lot of explanations?""Maybe he's broken his Hand of Glory" said Ron vaguely, as he attempted to straighten his broomstick's bent tail twigs. "Remember that shriveled-up arm Malfoy had?""But what about when he said, 'Don't forget to keep that one safe'?" asked Harry for the umpteenth time. "That sounded to me like Borgin's got another one of the broken objects, and Malfoy wants both.""You reckon?" said Ron, now trying to scrape some dirt off his broom handle.

"Yeah, I do," said Harry. When neither Ron nor Hermione answered, he said, "Malfoy's father's in Azkaban. Don't you think Malfoy'd like revenge?"Ron looked up, blinking.

"Malfoy, revenge? What can he do about it?""That's my point, I don't know!" said Harry, frustrated. "But he's up to something and I think we should take it seriously. His father's a Death Eater and ? quot;Harry broke off, his eyes fixed on the window behind Hermione, his mouth open. A startling thought had just occurred to him.

"Harry?" said Hermione in an anxious voice. "What's wrong?""Your scar's not hurting again, is it?" asked Ron nervously.

"He's a Death Eater," said Harry slowly. "He's replaced his father as a Death Eater!"There was a silence; then Ron erupted in laughter. "Malfoy? He's sixteen, Harry! You think You-Know-Who would let Malfoy join?""It seems very unlikely, Harry," said Hermione in a repressive sort of voice. "What makes you think ??""In Madam Malkin's. She didn't touch him, but he yelled and jerked his arm away from her when she went to roll up his sleeve. It was his left arm. He's been branded with the Dark Mark."Ron and Hermione looked at each other.

"Well.. ." said Ron, sounding thoroughly unconvinced.

"I think he just wanted to get out of there, Harry," said Hermione.

"He showed Borgin something we couldn't see," Harry pressed on stubbornly. "Something that seriously scared Borgin. It was the Mark, I know it ?he was showing Borgin who he was dealing with, you saw how seriously Borgin took him!"Ron and Hermione exchanged another look.

"I'm not sure, Harry. . . ."

"Yeah, I still don't reckon You-Know-Who would let Malfoy join.. . ."Annoyed, but absolutely convinced he was right, Harry snatched up a pile of filthy Quidditch robes and left the room; Mrs. Weasley had been urging them for days not to leave their washing and packing until the last moment. On the landing he bumped into Ginny, who was returning to her room carrying a pile of freshly laundered clothes.

"I wouldn't go in the kitchen just now," she warned him. "There's a lot of Phlegm around.""I'll be careful not to slip in it." Harry smiled.

Sure enough, when he entered the kitchen it was to find Fleur sitting at the kitchen table, in full flow about plans for her wedding to Bill, while Mrs. Weasley kept watch over a pile of self-peeling sprouts, looking bad-tempered.

". . . Bill and I 'ave almost decided on only two bridesmaids, Ginny and Gabrielle will look very sweet togezzer. I am theenking of dressing zem in pale gold ?pink would of course be 'orrible with Ginny's 'air ?quot;"Ah, Harry!" said Mrs. Weasley loudly, cutting across Fleur's monologue. "Good, I wanted to explain about the security arrangements for the journey to Hogwarts tomorrow. We've got Ministry cars again, and there will be Aurors waiting at the station ?quot;"Is Tonks going to be there?" asked Harry, handing over his Quidditch things.

"No, I don't think so, she's been stationed somewhere else from what Arthur said.""She has let 'erself go, zat Tonks," Fleur mused, examining her own stunning reflection in the back of a teaspoon. "A big mistake if you ask?quot;"Yes, thank you," said Mrs. Weasley tartly, cutting across Fleur again. "You'd better get on, Harry, I want the trunks ready tonight, if possible, so we don't have the usual last-minute scramble."And in fact, their departure the following morning was smoother than usual. The Ministry cars glided up to the front of the Burrow to find them waiting, trunks packed; Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, safely enclosed in his traveling basket; and Hedwig; Ron's owl, Pig-widgeon; and Ginny's new purple Pygmy Puff, Arnold, in cages.

"Au revoir, 'Any," said Fleur throatily, kissing him good-bye. Ron hurried forward, looking hopeful, but Ginny stuck out her foot and Ron fell, sprawling in the dust at Fleur's feet. Furious, red-faced, and dirt-spattered, he hurried into the car without saying good-bye.

There was no cheerful Hagrid waiting for them at King's Cross Station. Instead, two grim-faced, bearded Aurors in dark Muggle suits moved forward the moment the cars stopped and, flanking the party, marched them into the station without speaking.

"Quick, quick, through the barrier," said Mrs. Weasley, whoseemed a little flustered by this austere efficiency. "Harry had better go first, with ?quot;She looked inquiringly at one of the Aurors, who nodded briefly,

seized Harry's upper arm, and attempted to steer him toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten.

"I can walk, thanks," said Harry irritably, jerking his arm out of the Auror's grip. He pushed his trolley directly at the solid barrier, ignoring his silent companion, and found himself, a second later, standing on platform nine and three-quarters, where the scarlet Hogwarts Express stood belching steam over the crowd.

Hermione and the Weasleys joined him within seconds. Without waiting to consult his grim-faced Auror, Harry motioned to Ron and Hermione to follow him up the platform, looking for an empty compartment.

"We can't, Harry," said Hermione, looking apologetic. "Ron and I've got to go to the prefects' carriage first and then patrol the corridors for a bit.""Oh yeah, I forgot," said Harry.

"You'd better get straight on the train, all of you, you've only got a few minutes to go," said Mrs. Weasley, consulting her watch. "Well, have a lovely term, Ron. . . .""Mr. Weasley, can I have a quick word?" said Harry, making up his mind on the spur of the moment.

"Of course," said Mr. Weasley, who looked slightly surprised, but followed Harry out of earshot of the others nevertheless.

Harry had thought it through carefully and come to the conclusion that, if he was to tell anyone, Mr. Weasley was the right person; firstly, because he worked at the Ministry and was therefore in the best position to make further investigations, and secondly,because he thought that there was not too much risk of Mr. Weasley exploding with anger.

He could see Mrs. Weasley and the grim-faced Auror casting the pair of them suspicious looks as they moved away.

"When we were in Diagon Alley," Harry began, but Mr. Weasley forestalled him with a grimace.

"Am I about to discover where you, Ron, and Hermione disappeared to while you were supposed to be in the back room of Fred and George's shop?""How did you ??"

"Harry, please. You're talking to the man who raised Fred and George.""Er . . . yeah, all right, we weren't in the back room." "Very well, then, let's hear the worst.""Well, we followed Draco Malfoy. We used my Invisibility Cloak.""Did you have any particular reason for doing so, or was it a mere whim?""Because I thought Malfoy was up to something," said Harry, disregarding Mr. Weasley's look of mingled exasperation and amusement. "He'd given his mother the slip and I wanted to know why.""Of course you did," said Mr. Weasley, sounding resigned. "Well? Did you find out why?""He went into Borgin and Burkes," said Harry, "and started bullying the bloke in there, Borgin, to help him fix something. And he said he wanted Borgin to keep something else for him. He made it sound like it was the same kind of thing that needed fixing. Like they were a pair. And ..."Harry took a deep breath.

"There's something else. We saw Malfoy jump about a mile when Madam Malkin tried to touch his left arm. I think he's been branded with the Dark Mark. 1 think he's replaced his father as a Death Eater."Mr. Weasley looked taken aback. After a moment he said, "Harry, I doubt whether You-Know-Who would allow a sixteen-year-old ?quot;"Does anyone really know what You-Know-Who would or wouldn't do?" asked Harry angrily. "Mr. Weasley, I'm sorry, but isn't it worth investigating? If Malfoy wants something fixing, and he needs to threaten Borgin to get it done, it's probably something Dark or dangerous, isn't it?""I doubt it, to be honest, Harry," said Mr. Weasley slowly. "You see, when Lucius Malfoy was arrested, we raided his house. We took away everything that might have been dangerous." "I think you missed something," said Harry stubbornly. "Well, maybe,"

said Mr. Weasley, but Harry could tell that Mr. Weasley was humoring him.

There was a whistle behind them; nearly everyone had boarded the train and the doors were closing.

"You'd better hurry!' said Mr. Weasley, as Mrs. Weasley cried, "Harry, quickly!"He hurried forward and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley helped him load his trunk onto the train.

"Now, dear, you're coming to us for Christmas, it's all fixed with Dumbledore, so we'll see you quite soon," said Mrs. Weasley through the window, as Harry slammed the door shut behind him and the train began to move. "You make sure you look after yourself and ?quot;The train was gathering speed.

"?be good and ?quot; , She was jogging to keep up now.

"?stay safe!"

Harry waved until the train had turned a corner and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were lost to view, then turned to see where the others had got to. He supposed Ron and Hermione were cloistered in the prefects' carriage, but Ginny was a little way along the corridor, chatting to some friends. He made his way toward her, dragging his trunk.

People stared shamelessly as he approached. They even pressed their faces against the windows of their compartments to get a look at him. He had expected an upswing in the amount of gaping and gawping he would have to endure this term after all the "Chosen One" rumors in the Daily Prophet, but he did not enjoy the sensation of standing in a very bright spotlight. He tapped Ginny on the shoulder.

"Fancy trying to find a compartment?""I can't, Harry, I said I'd meet Dean," said Ginny brightly. "See you later.""Right," said Harry. He felt

a strange twinge of annoyance as she walked away, her long red hair dancing behind her; he had become so used to her presence over the summer that he had almost forgotten that Ginny did not hang around with him, Ron, and Hermione while at school. Then he blinked and looked around: He was surrounded by mesmerized girls.

"Hi, Harry!" said a familiar voice from behind him.

"Neville!" said Harry in relief, turning to see a round-faced boy struggling toward him.

"Hello, Harry," said a girl with long hair and large misty eyes, who was just behind Neville.

"Luna, hi, how are you?"

"Very well, thank you," said Luna. She was clutching a magazine to her chest; large letters on the front announced that there was a pair of free Spectrespecs inside.

"Quibbler still going strong, then?" asked Harry, who felt a certain fondness for the magazine, having given it an exclusive interview the previous year.

"Oh yes, circulation's well up," said Luna happily.

"Let's find seats," said Harry, and the three of them set off along the train through hordes of silently staring students. At last they found an empty compartment, and Harry hurried inside gratefully.

"They're even staring at us? said Neville, indicating himself and Luna. "Because we're with you!""They're staring at you because you were at the Ministry too," said Harry, as he hoisted his trunk into the luggage rack. "Our little adventure there was all over the Daily Prophet, you must'veseen it."

"Yes, I thought Gran would be angry about all the publicity," said Neville, "but she was really pleased. Says I'm starting to live up to my dad at long last. She bought me a new wand, look!"He pulled it out and showed it to Harry.

"Cherry and unicorn hair," he said proudly. "We think it was one of the last Ollivander ever sold, he vanished next day ?oi, come back here, Trevor!"And he dived under the seat to retrieve his toad as it made one of its frequent bids for freedom.

"Are we still doing D.A. meetings this year, Harry?" asked Luna,who was detaching a pair of psychedelic spectacles from the middle of The Quibbler.

"No point now we've got rid of Umbridge, is there?" said Harry, sitting down. Neville bumped his head against the seat as he emerged from under it. He looked most disappointed.

"I liked the D.A.! I learned loads with you!""I enjoyed the meetings too," said Luna serenely. "It was like having friends."This was one of those uncomfortable things Luna often said and which made Harry feel a squirming mixture of pity and embarrassment. Before he could respond, however, there was a disturbance outside their compartment door; a group of fourth-year girls was whispering and giggling together on the other side of the glass.

"You ask him!"

No, you!

"I'll do it!"

And one of them, a bold-looking girl with large dark eyes, a prominent chin, and long black hair pushed her way through the door.

"Hi, Harry, I'm Romilda, Romilda Vane," she said loudly and confidently. "Why don't you join us in our compartment? You don't

have to sit with them," she added in a stage whisper, indicating Neville's bottom, which was sticking out from under the seat again as he groped around for Trevor, and Luna, who was now wearing her free Spectrespecs, which gave her the look of a demented, multicolored owl.

"They're friends of mine," said Harry coldly.

"Oh," said the girl, looking very surprised. "Oh. Okay."And she withdrew, sliding the door closed behind her.

"People expect you 10 have cooler friends than us," said Luna, once again displaying her knack for embarrassing honesty.

"You are cool," said Harry shortly. "None of them was at the Ministry. They didn't fight with me.""That's a very nice thing to say," beamed Luna. Then she pushed her Spectrespecs farther up her nose and settled down to read TheQuibbler.

"We didn't face him, though," said Neville, emerging from under the seat with fluff and dust in his hair and a resigned-looking Trevor in his hand. "You did. You should hear my gran talk about you. 'That Harry Potter's got more backbone than the whole Ministry of Magic put together!' She'd give anything to have you as a grand-son. . . .

Harry laughed uncomfortably and changed the subject to OWL. results as soon as he could. While Neville recited his grades and wondered aloud whether he would be allowed to take a Transfiguration NEWT, with only an "Acceptable," Harry watched him without really listening.

Neville's childhood had been blighted by Voldemort just as much as Harry's had, but Neville had no idea how close he had come to having Harry's destiny. The prophecy could have referred to either of them, yet, for his own inscrutable reasons, Voldemort had chosen to believe that Harry was the one meant.

Had Voldemort chosen Neville, it would be Neville sitting opposite Harry bearing the lightning-shaped scar and the weight of the prophecy. ... Or would it? Would Neville's mother have died to save him, as Lily had died for Harry? Surely she would. . . . But what if she had been unable to stand between her son and Voldemort? Would there then have been no "Chosen One" at all? An empty seat where Neville now sat and a scarless Harry who would have been kissed good-bye by his own mother, not Ron's?

"You all right, Harry? You look funny," said Neville.

Harry started. "Sorry ?I ?quot;"Wrackspurt got you?" asked Luna sympathetically, peering at Harry through her enormous colored spectacles.

"I —what?"

"A Wrackspurt. . . They're invisible. They float in through your ears and make your brain go fuzzy," she said. "I thought I felt one zooming around in here."She flapped her hands at thin air, as though beating off large invisible moths. Harry and Neville caught each other's eyes and hastily began to talk of Quidditch.

The weather beyond the train windows was as patchy as it had been all summer; they passed through stretches of the chilling mist, then out into weak, clear sunlight. It was during one of the clear spells, when the sun was visible almost directly overhead, that Ron and Hermione entered the compartment at last.

"Wish the lunch trolley would hurry up, I'm starving," said Ron longingly, slumping into the seat beside Harry and rubbing his stomach. "Hi, Neville. Hi, Luna. Guess what?" he added, turning to Harry. "Malfoy s not doing prefect duty. He's just sitting in his compartment with the other Slytherins, we saw him when we passed."Harry sat up straight, interested. It was not like Malfoy to pass up the chance to demonstrate his power as prefect, which he had happily abused all the previous year.

"What did he do when he saw you?""The usual," said Ron indifferently, demonstrating a rude handgesture. "Not like him, though, is it? Well ?that is" ?he did the hand gesture again ?"but why isn't he out there bullying first years?

"Dunno," said Harry, but his mind was racing. Didn't this look as though Malfoy had more important things on his mind than bullying younger students?

"Maybe he preferred the Inquisitorial Squad," said Hermione. "Maybe being a prefect seems a bit tame after that.""I don't think so," said Harry. "I think he's ?quot;But before he could expound on his theory, the compartment door slid open again and a breathless third-year girl stepped inside.

"I'm supposed to deliver these to Neville Longbottom and Harry P-Potter," she faltered, as her eyes met Harry's and she turned scarlet. She was holding out two scrolls of parchment tied with violet ribbon. Perplexed, Harry and Neville took the scroll addressed to each of them and the girl stumbled back out of the compartment.

"What is it?" Ron demanded, as Harry unrolled his.

"An invitation," said Harry.?/p>Harry,

I would be delighted if you would join me for a bite of lunch in compartment C.

Sincerely, . , .

"But what does he want me for?" asked Neville nervously, as though he was expecting detention.

"No idea," said Harry, which was not entirely true, though he had no proof yet that his hunch was correct. "Listen," he added, seized by a sudden brain wave, "let's go under the Invisibility Cloak, then we might get a good look at Malfoy on the way, see what he's up to."This

idea, however, came to nothing: The corridors, which were packed with people on the lookout for the lunch trolley, were impossible to negotiate while wearing the cloak. Harry stowed it regretfully back in his bag, reflecting that it would have been nice to wear it just to avoid all the staring, which seemed to have increased in intensity even since he had last walked down the train. Every now and then, students would hurtle out of their compartments to get a better look at him. The exception was Cho Chang, who darted into her compartment when she saw Harry coming. As Harry passed the window, he saw her deep in determined conversation with her friend Marietta, who was wearing a very thick layer of makeup that did not entirely obscure the odd formation of pimples still etched across her face. Smirking slightly, Harry pushed on.

When they reached compartment C, they saw at once that they were not Slughorn's only invitees, although judging by the enthusiasm of Slughorn's welcome, Harry was the most warmly anticipated.

"Harry, m'boy!" said Slughorn, jumping up at the sight of him so that his great velvet-covered belly seemed to fill all the remaining space in the compartment. His shiny bald head and great silvery mustache gleamed as brightly in the sunlight as the goldenbuttons on his waistcoat. "Good to see you, good to see you! And you must be Mr. Longbottom!"Neville nodded, looking scared. At a gesture from Slughorn, they sat down opposite each other in the only two empty seats, which were nearest the door. Harry glanced around at their fellow guests. He recognized a Slytherin from their year, a tall black boy with high cheekbones and long, slanting eyes; there were also two seventh-year boys Harry did not know and, squashed in the corner beside Slughorn and looking as though she was not entirely sure how she had got there, Ginny.

"Now, do you know everyone?" Slughorn asked Harry and Neville. "Blaise Zabini is in your year, of course -?"Zabini did not make any sign of recognition or greeting, nor did Harry or Neville: Gryffindor and Slytherin students loathed each other on principle.

"This is Cormac McLaggen, perhaps you've come across each other ?? No?"McLaggen, a large, wiry-haired youth, raised a hand, and Harry and Neville nodded back at him.

"?and this is Marcus Belby, I don't know whether ??"Belby, who was thin and nervous-looking, gave a strained smile.

"?and this charming young lady tells me she knows you!" Slughorn finished.

Ginny grimaced at Harry and Neville from behind Slughorn's back.

"Well now, this is most pleasant," said Slughorn cozily. "A chance to get to know you all a little better. Here, take a napkin. I've packed my own lunch; the trolley, as I remember it, is heavy onlicorice wands, and a poor old man's digestive system isn't quite up to such things. . . . Pheasant, Belby?"Belby started and accepted what looked like half a cold pheasant.

"I was just telling young Marcus here that I had the pleasure of teaching his Uncle Damocles," Slughorn told Harry and Neville, now passing around a basket of rolls. "Outstanding wizard, outstanding, and his Order of Merlin most well-deserved. Do you see much of your uncle, Marcus?"Unfortunately, Beiby had just taken a large mouthful of pheasant; in his haste to answer Slughorn he swallowed too fast, turned purple, and began to choke.

"Anapneo," said Slughorn calmly, pointing his wand at Belby, whose airway seemed to clear at once.

"Not. . . not much of him, no," gasped Belby, his eyes streaming.

"Well, of course, I daresay he's busy," said Slughorn, looking questioningly at Belby. "I doubt he invented the Wolfsbane Potion without considerable hard work!""I suppose . . ." said Belby, who seemed afraid to take another bite of pheasant until he was sure that Slughorn had finished with him. "Er ... he and my dad don't get on

very well, you see, so I don't really know much about..."His voice tailed away as Slughorn gave him a cold smile and turned to McLaggen instead.

"Now, you, Cormac," said Slughorn, "I happen to know you see a lot of your Uncle Tiberius, because he has a rather splendid picture of the two of you hunting nogtails in, I think, Norfolk?""Oh, yeah, that was fun, that was," said McLaggen. "We went with Bertie Higgs and Rufus Scrimgeour ?this was before he became Minister, obviously ?quot;"Ah, you know Bertie and Rufus too?" beamed Slughorn, now offering around a small tray of pies; somehow, Belby was missed out. "Now tell me . . ."It was as Harry had suspected. Everyone here seemed to have been invited because they were connected to somebody well-known or influential ?everyone except Ginny. Zabini, who was interrogated after McLaggen, turned out to have a famously beautiful witch for a mother (from what Harry could make out, she had been married seven times, each of her husbands dying mysteriously and leaving her mounds of gold). It was Neville's turn next: This was a very uncomfortable ten minutes, for Neville's parents, well-known Aurors, had been tortured into insanity by Bellatrix Lestrange and a couple of Death Eater cronies. At the end of Neville's interview, Harry had the impression that Slughorn was reserving judgment on Neville, yet to see whether he had any of his parents' flair.

"And now," said Slughorn, shifting massively in his seat with the air of a compere introducing his star act. "Harry Potter! Where to begin? I feel I barely scratched the surface when we met over the summer!" He contemplated Harry for a moment as though he was a particularly large and succulent piece of pheasant, then said, "'The Chosen One,' they're calling you now!"Harry said nothing. Belby, McLaggen, and Zabini were all staring at him.

"Of course," said Slughorn, watching Harry closely, "there have been rumors for years. ... I remember when ?well ?after that terrible night ?Lily ?James ?and you survived ?and the word was that you must have

powers beyond the ordinary ?quot;Zabini gave a tiny little cough that was clearly supposed toindicate amused skepticism. An angry voice burst out from behind Slughorn.

"Yeah, Zabini, because you're so talented ... at posing. . . .""Oh dear!" chuckled Slughorn comfortably, looking around at Ginny, who was glaring at Zabini around Slughorn's great belly. "You want to be careful, Blaise! I saw this young lady perform the most marvelous Bat-Bogey Hex as I was passing her carriage! I wouldn't cross her!"Zabini merely looked contemptuous.

"Anyway," said Slughorn, turning back to Harry. "Such rumors this summer. Of course, one doesn't know what to believe, the Prophet has been known to print inaccuracies, make mistakes ?but there seems little doubt, given the number of witnesses, that there was quite a disturbance at the Ministry and that you were there in the thick of it all!"Harry, who could not see any way out of this without flatly lying, nodded but still said nothing. Slughorn beamed at him.

"So modest, so modest, no wonder Dumbledore is so fond ?you were there, then? But the rest of the stories ?so sensational, of course, one doesn't know quite what to believe ?this fabled prophecy, for instance ?quot;"We never heard a prophecy," said Neville, turning geranium pink as he said it.

"That's right," said Ginny staunchly. "Neville and I were both there too, and all this 'Chosen One' rubbish is just the Prophet making things up as usual.""You were both there too, were you?" said Slughorn with great interest, looking from Ginny to Neville, but both of them sat clam-like before his encouraging smile.

"Yes. . . well... it is true that the Prophet often exaggerates, of course. . . ." Slughorn said, sounding a little disappointed. "I remember dear Gwenog telling me (Gwenog Jones, I mean, of course, Captain of the Holyhead Harpies) ?quot;He meandered off into a long-winded reminiscence, but Harry had the distinct impression that Slughorn

had not finished with him, and that he had not been convinced by Neville and Ginny.

The afternoon wore on with more anecdotes about illustrious wizards Slughorn had taught, all of whom had been delighted to join what he called the "Slug Club" at Hogwarts. Harry could not wait to leave, but couldn't see how to do so politely. Finally the train emerged from yet another long misty stretch into a red sunset, and Slughorn looked around, blinking in the twilight.

"Good gracious, it's getting dark already! I didn't notice that they'd lit the lamps! You'd better go and change into your robes, all of you. McLaggen, you must drop by and borrow that book on nogtails. Harry, Blaise ?any time you're passing. Same goes for you, miss," he twinkled at Ginny. "Well, off you go, off you go!"As he pushed past Harry into the darkening corridor, Zabini shot him a filthy look that Harry returned with interest. He, Ginny, and Neville followed Zabini back along the train.

"I'm glad that's over," muttered Neville. "Strange man, isn't he?" "Yeah, he is a bit," said Harry, his eyes on Zabini. "How come you ended up in there, Ginny?""He saw me hex Zacharias Smith," said Ginny. "You remember that idiot from Hufflepuff who was in the D.A.? He kept on and on asking about what happened at the Ministry and in the end he annoyed me so much I hexed him ?when Slughorn came in Ithought I was going to got detention, but he just thought it was ;i really good hex and invited me to lunch! Mad, eh?""Better reason for inviting someone than because their mother's famous," said Harry, scowling at the back of Zabini's head, "or because their uncle ? quot;But he broke off. An idea had just occurred to him, a reckless but potentially wonderful idea. ... In a minute's time, Zabini was going to reenter the Slytherin sixth-year compartment and Malfoy would be sitting there, thinking himself unheard by anybody except fellow Slytherins. ... If Harry could only enter, unseen, behind him, what might he not see or hear? True, there was little of the journey left ? Hogsmeade Station had to be less than half an hour away, judging by

the wildness of the scenery flashing by the windows ?but nobody else seemed prepared to take Harry's suspicions seriously, so it was down to him to prove them.

"I'll see you two later," said Harry under his breath, pulling out his Invisibility Cloak and flinging it over himself.

"But what're you ??" asked Neville.

"Later!" whispered Harry, darting after Zabini as quietly as possible, though the rattling of the train made such caution almost pointless.

The corridors were almost completely empty now. Nearly everyone had returned to their carriages to change into their school robes and pack up their possessions. Though he was as close as he could get to Zabini without touching him, Harry was not quick enough to slip into the compartment when Zabini opened the door. Zabini was already sliding it shut when Harry hastily stuck out his foot to prevent it closing.

"What's wrong with this thing?" said Zabini angrily as he smashed the sliding door repeatedly into Harry's foot.

Harry seized the door and pushed it open, hard; Zabini, still clinging on to the handle, toppled over sideways into Gregory Goyle's lap, and in the ensuing ruckus, Harry darted into the compartment, leapt onto Zabini's temporarily empty seat, and hoisted himself up into the luggage rack. It was fortunate that Goyle and Zabini were snarling at each other, drawing all eyes onto them, for Harry was quite sure his feet and ankles had been revealed as the cloak had flapped around them; indeed, for one horrible moment he thought he saw Malfoy's eyes follow his trainer as it whipped upward out of sight. But then Goyle slammed the door shut and flung Zabini off him; Zabini collapsed into his own seat looking ruffled, Vincent Crabbe returned to his comic, and Malfoy, sniggering, lay back down across two seats with his head in Pansy Parkinsons lap. Harry lay curled uncomfortably under the cloak to ensure that every inch of him

remained hidden, and watched Pansy stroke the sleek blond hair off Malfoy's forehead, smirking as she did so, as though anyone would have loved to have been in her place. The lanterns swinging from the carriage ceiling cast a bright light over the scene: Harry could read every word of Crabbe's comic directlybelow him.

"So, Zabini," said Malfoy, "what did Slughorn want?""Just trying to make up to well-connected people," said Zabini,who was still glowering at Goyle. "Not that he managed to findmany."

This information did not seem to please Malfoy. "Who else had he invited?" he demanded.

"McLaggen from Gryffindor," said Zabini.

"Oh yeah, his uncle's big in the Ministry," said Malfoy.

"?someone else called Belby, from Ravenclaw ?quot;"Not him, he's a prat!" said Pansy.

"?and Longbottom, Potter, and that Weasley girl," finished Zabini.

Malfoy sat up very suddenly, knocking Pansy's hand aside.

"He invited Longbottom?."

"Well, I assume so, as Longbottom was there," said Zabini indifferently.

"What's Longbottom got to interest Slughorn?"Zabini shrugged.

"Potter, precious Potter, obviously he wanted a look at 'the Chosen One,'" sneered Malfoy, "but that Weasley girl! What's so special about her??/p>"A lot of boys like her," said Pansy, watching Malfoy out of the corner of her eyes for his reaction. "Even you think she's good-looking, don't you, Blaise, and we all know how hard you are to please!

"I wouldn't touch a filthy little blood traitor like her whatever she looked like," said Zabini coldly, and Pansy looked pleased. Malfoy sank back across her lap and allowed her to resume the stroking of his hair.

"Well, I pity Slughorn's taste. Maybe he's going a bit senile. Shame, my father always said he was a good wizard in his day. My father used to be a bit of a favorite of his. Slughorn probably hasn't heard I'm on the train, or ?quot;"I wouldn't bank on an invitation," said Zabini. "He asked me about Notts father when I first arrived. They used to be oldfriends, apparently, but when he heard he'd been caught at the Ministry he didn't look happy, and Nott didn't get an invitation, did he? 1 don't think Slughorn's interested in Dearh Eaters."Malfoy looked angry, but forced out a singularly humorless laugh.

"Well, who cares what he's interested in? What is he, when you come down to it? Just some stupid teacher." Malfoy yawned ostentatiously. "I mean, I might not even be at Hogwarts next year, what's it matter to me if some fat old has-been likes me or not?""What do you mean, you might not be at Hogwarts next year?" said Pansy indignantly, ceasing grooming Malfoy at once.

"Well, you never know," said Malfoy with the ghost of a smirk. "I might have ?er ?moved on to bigger and better things."Crouched in the luggage rack under his cloak, Harry's heart began to race. What would Ron and Hermione say about this? Crabbe and Goyle were gawping at Malfoy; apparently they had had no inkling of any plans to move on to bigger and better things. Even Zabini had allowed a look of curiosity to mar his haughty features. Pansy resumed the slow stroking of Malfoy s hair, looking dumbfounded.

"Do you mean —“

Malfoy shrugged.

"Mother wants me to complete my education, but personally, I don't see it as that important these days. I mean, think about it. ... When the Dark Lord takes over, is he going to care how many OWLs or N.E.W.T.S anyone's got? Of course he isn't?It'll be all about the kind of service he received, the level of devotion he was shown.""And you think you'll be able to do something for him?" askedZabini scathingly. "Sixteen years old and noi even fully qualified yet?""I've just said, haven't I? Maybe he doesn't care if I'm qualified. Maybe the job he wants me to do isn't something that you need to be qualified for," said Malfoy quietly.

Crabbe and Goyle were both sitting with their mouths open like gargoyles. Pansy was gazing down at Malfoy as though she had never seen anything so awe-inspiring.

"I can see Hogwarts," said Malfoy, clearly relishing the effect he had created as he pointed out of the blackened window. "We'd better get our robes on."Harry was so busy staring at Malfoy, he did not notice Goyle reaching up for his trunk; as he swung it down, it hit Harry hard on the side of the head. He let out an involuntary gasp of pain, and Malfoy looked up at the luggage rack, frowning.

Harry was not afraid of Malfoy, but he still did not much like the idea of being discovered hiding under his Invisibility Cloak by a group of unfriendly Slytherins. Eyes still watering and head still throbbing, he drew his wand, careful not to disarrange the cloak, and waited, breath held. To his relief, Malfoy seemed to decide that he had imagined the noise; he pulled on his robes like the others, locked his trunk, and as the train slowed to a jerky crawl, fastened a thick new traveling cloak round his neck.

Harry could see the corridors filling up again and hoped that Hermione and Ron would take his things out onto the platform for him; he was stuck where he was until the compartment had quite emptied. At last, with a final lurch, the train came to a complete halt.

Goyle threw the door open and muscled his way outinto a crowd of second years, punching them aside; Crabbe and Zabini followed.

"You go on," Malfoy told Pansy, who was waiting for him with her hand held out as though hoping he would hold it. "I just want to check something."Pansy left. Now Harry and Malfoy were alone in the compartment. People were filing past, descending onto the dark platform. Malfoy moved over to the compartment door and let down the blinds, so that people in the corridor beyond could not peer in. He then bent down over his trunk and opened it again.

Harry peered down over the edge of the luggage rack, his heart pumping a little faster. What had Malfoy wanted to hide from Pansy? Was he about to see the mysterious broken object it was so important to mend?

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Without warning, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry, who was instantly paralyzed. As though in slow motion, he toppled out of the luggage rack and fell, with an agonizing, floor-shaking crash, at Malfoy's feet, the Invisibility Cloak trapped beneath him, his whole body revealed with his legs still curled absurdly into the cramped kneeling position. He couldn't move a muscle; he could only gaze up at Malfoy, who smiled broadly.

"I thought so," he said jubilantly. "I heard Goyle's trunk hit you. And I thought I saw something white flash through the air after Zabini came back. . . ."His eyes lingered for a moment upon Harry's trainers.

"You didn't hear anything I care about, Potter. But while I've got you here . . ."-=-Him

And he stamped, hard, on Harry's face. Harry felt his nose break; blood spurted everywhere.

"That's from my father. Now, let's see. . . ."Malfoy dragged the cloak out from under Harry's immobilized body and threw it over him.

"I don't reckon they'll find you till the trains back in London," he said quietly. "See you around, Potter ... or not."And taking care to tread on Harry's fingers, Malfoy left the compartment.

Chapter 8 Victorious Snape

Harry could not move a muscle. He lay there beneath the _ Invisibility Cloak feeling the blood from his nose flow, hot and wet, over his face, listening to the voices and footsteps in the corridor beyond. His immediate thought was that someone, would surely, would check the compartments before the train departed again. But at once came the dispiriting realization that even if somebody looked into the compartment, he would be neither seen nor heard. His best hope was that somebody else would walk in and step on him.

Harry had never hated Malfoy more than as he lay there, like an absurd turtle on its back, blood dripping sickeningly into his open mouth. What a stupid situation to have landed himself in... and now the last few footsteps were dying away; everyone was shuffling along the dark platform outside; he could hear the scraping of trunks and loud babble of talk.

Ron and Hermione would think that he had left the train without them. Once they arrived at Hogwarts and took their places in the Great Hall, looked up and down the Gryffindor table a few times, and finally realized that he was not there, he, no doubt, would be halfway back to London.

He tried to make a sound, even a grunt, but it was impossible. Then he remembered that some wizards, like Dumbledore, could perform spells without speaking, so he tried to summon his wand, which had fallen out of his hand, by saying the words "Accio Wand!" over and over again in his head, but nothing happened.

He thought he could hear the rustling of the trees that surrounded the lake, and the far-off hoot of an owl, but no hint of a search being made or even (he despised himself slightly for hoping it) panicked voices wondering where Harry Potter had gone. A feeling of hopelessness spread through him as he imagined the convoy of

thestral-drawn carriages trundling up to the school and the muffled yells of laughter issuing from whichever carriage Malfoy was riding in, where he could be recounting his attack on Harry to Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, and Pansy Parkinson.

The train lurched, causing Harry to roll over onto his side. Now he was staring at the dusty underside of the seats instead of the ceiling. The floor began to vibrate as the engine roared into life. The Express was leaving and nobody knew he was still on it...

Then he felt his Invisibility Cloak fly off him and a voice overhead said, "Wotcher, Harry."There was a flash of red light and Harry's body unfroze; he was able to push himself into a more dignified sitting position, hastily wipe the blood off his bruised race with the back of his hand, and raise his head to look up at Tonks, who was holding the Invisibiliiv Cloak she had just pulled away.

We'd better get out of here, quickly," she said, as the train windows became obscured with steam and they began to move out of the station. "Come on, we'll jump."Harry hurried after her into the corridor. She pulled open the train door and leapt onto the platform, which seemed to be sliding underneath them as the train gathered momentum. He followed her, staggered a little on landing, then straightened up in time to see the gleaming scarlet steam engine pick up speed, round the corner, and disappear from view.

The cold night air was soothing on his throbbing nose. Tonks was looking at him; he felt angry and embarrassed that he had been discovered in such a ridiculous position. Silently she handed him back the Invisibility Cloak.

“Who did it?"

“Draco Malfoy,” said Harry bitterly. "Thanks for... well...""No problem,” said Tonks, without smiling. From what Harry could see in the darkness, she was as mousy-haired and miserable-lookinng as she had been when he had met her at the Burrow. "I can fix your nose if

you stand still."Harry did not think much of this idea; he had been intending to visit Madam Pomfrey, the matron, in whom he had a little more confidence when it came to Healing Spells, but it seemed rude to say this, so he stayed stock-still and closed his eyes,“Episkey" said Tonks.

Harry’s nose felt very hot, and then very cold. He raised a hand and felt gingerly. It seemed to be mended.

“Thanks a lot!"

“You'd better put that cloak back on, and we can walk up to the school," said Tonks, still unsmiling. As Harry swung the cloak back over himself, she waved her wand; an immense silvery four-legged creature erupted from it and streaked off into the darkness.

"Was that a Patronus?" asked Harry, who had seen Dumbledore send messages like this.

"Yes, I'm sending word to the castle that I've got you or they'll worry. Come on, we'd better not dawdle."They set off toward the lane that led to the school.

"How did you find me?"

"I noticed you hadn't left the train and I knew you had that cloak. I thought you might be hiding for some reason. When I saw the blinds were drawn down on that compartment I thought I’d check.""But what are you doing here, anyway?" Harry asked.

"I'm stationed in Hogsmeade now, to give the school extra protection," said Tonks.

"Is it just you who's stationed up here, or — ?""No, Proudfoot, Savage, and Dawlish are here too.""Dawlish, that Auror Dumbledore attacked last year?""That's right."

They trudged up the dark, deserted lane, following the freshly made carriage tracks. Harry looked sideways at Tonks under his cloak. Last year she had been inquisitive (to the point of being a little annoying at times), she had laughed easily, she had made jokes. Now she seemed older and much more serious and purposeful. Was this all the effect of what had happened at the Ministry? He reflected uncomfortably that Hermione would have suggested he say something consoling about Sirius to her, that it hadn't been her fault at all, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He was far from blaming her for Sirius's death; it was no more her fault than anyone else's (and much less than his), but he did not like talking about Sirius if he could avoid it. And so they tramped on through the cold night in silence, Tonks's long cloak whispering on the ground behind them.

Having always traveled there by carriage, Harry had never before appreciated just how far Hogwarts was from Hogsmeade Station. With great relief he finally saw the tall pillars on either side of the gates, each topped with a winged boar. He was cold, he was hungry and he was quite keen to leave this new, gloomy Tonks behind. But when he put out a hand to push open the gates, he found them chained shut.

“Alohomora!" he said confidently, pointing his wand at the padlock, but nothing happened.

“That won't work on these," said Tonks. "Dumbledore bewitched them himself."Harry looked around, I could climb a wall," he suggested.

“No, you couldn't," said Tonks flatly. "Anti-intruder jinxes on all of them. Security's been tightened a hundredfold this summer."“Well then,” said Harry, starting to feel annoyed at her lack of helpfulness, “I suppose I'll just have to sleep out here and wait for morning.”

“Someone's coming down for you," said Tonks, "Look."A lantern was bobbing at the distant foot of the castle. Harry was so pleased to see it he felt he could even endure Filch's wheezy criticisms of his

tardiness and rants about how his timekeeping would improve with the regular application of thumbscrews. It was not until the glowing yellow light was ten feet away from them, and had pulled off his Invisibility Cloak so that he could be seen, that he recognized, with a rush of pure loathing, the uplit hooked nose and long, black, greasy hair of Severus Snape.

"Well, well, well," sneered Snape, taking out his wand and tapping the padlock once, so that the chains snaked backward and the gates creaked open. "Nice of you to turn up, Potter, although you have evidently decided that the wearing of school robes would detract from your appearance.""I couldn't change, I didn't have my —" Harry began, but Snape cut across him.

"There is no need to wait, Nymphadora, Potter is quite — ah— safe in my hands."

"I meant Hagrid to get the message," said Tonks, frowning.

"Hagrid was late for the start-of-term feast, just like Potter here, so I took it instead. And incidentally," said Snape, standing back to allow Harry to pass him, "I was interested to see your new Patronus."He shut the gates in her face with a loud clang and tapped the chains with his wand again, so that they slithered, clinking, back into place.

"I think you were better off with the old one," said Snape, the malice in his voice unmistakable. "The new one looks weak."As Snape swung the lantern about, Harry saw, fleetingly, a look of shock and anger on Tonks's face. Then she was covered in darkness once more.

"Good night," Harry called to her over his shoulder, as he began the walk up to the school with Snape. "Thanks for ... everything,""See you, Harry."

Snape did not speak for a minute or so. Harry felt as though his body was generating waves of hatred so powerful that it seemed incredibie that Snape could not feel them burning him. He had loathed Snape

from their first encounter, but Snape had placed himself forever and irrevocably beyond the possibility of Harry's forgiveness by his attitude toward Sirius. Whatever Dumbledore said, Harry had had time to think over the summer, and had concluded that Snape's snide remarks to Sirius about remaining safely hidden while the rest of the Order of the Phoenix were off fighting Voldemort had probably been a powerful factor in Sirius rushing off to the Ministry the night that he had died. Harry clung to this notion, because it enabled him to blame Snape, which felt satisfying, and also because he knew that if anyone was not sorry that Sirius was dead, it was the man now striding next to him in the darkness.

“Fifty points from Gryffindor for lateness, I think," said Snape. “And, let me see, another twenty for your Muggle attire. You know, I don’t believe any House has ever been in negative figures this early in the term: We haven't even started pudding. You might have set a record, Potter."The fury and hatred bubbling inside Harry seemed to blaze white-hot, but he would rather have been immobilized all the wayback to London than tell Snape why he was late.

“I suppose you wanted to make an entrance, did you?" Snapecontinued. "And with no flying car available you decided thatbursting into the Great Hall halfway through the feast ought tocreate a dramatic effect."

Still Harry remained silent, though he thought his chest mightexplode. He knew that Snape had come to fetch him for this, forthe few minutes when he could needle and torment Harry withoutanyone else listening.

They reached the castle steps at last and as the great oaken front doors swung open into the vast flagged entrance hall, a burst of talk and laughter and of tinkling plates and glasses greeted them through the doors standing open into the Great Hail. Harry wondered whether he could slip his Invisibility Cloak back on, thereby gaining his seat at the long Gryffindor table (which, inconveniently, was the farthest from

the entrance hall) without being noticed. As though he had read Harry's mind, however, Snape said, "No cloak. You can walk in so that everyone sees you, which is what you wanted, I'm sure."Harry turned on the spot and marched straight through the open doors: anything to get away from Snape. The Great Hall with its four long House tables and its staff table set at the top of the room, was decorated as usual with floating candles that made the plates below glitter and glow. It was ail a shimmering blur to Harry, however, who walked so fast that he was passing the Hufflepuff table before people really started to stare, and by the time they were standing up to get a good look at him, he had spotted Ron and Hermione, sped along the benches toward them, .mil forced his way in between them.

"Where've you — blimey, what've you done to your face?" said Ron, goggling at him along with everyone else in the vicinity. I"Why, what's wrong with it?" said Harry, grabbing a spoon and squinting at his distorted reflection.

"You're covered in blood!" said Hermione. "Come here —"She raised her wand, said "Tergeo!" and siphoned off the dried blood.

"Thanks," said Harry, feeling his now clean face. "How's my nose looking?

“Normal," said Hermoine anxiously. "Why shouldn't it? Harry, what happened? We've been terrified!"“I'll tell you later," said Harry curtly. He was very conscious that Ginny, Neville, Dean, and Seamus were listening in; even Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, had come floating along the bench to eavesdrop.

“But —" said Hermione.

“Not now, Hermione," said Harry, in a darkly significant voice. He hoped very much that they would all assume he had been involved in something heroic, preferably involving a couple of Death Eaters and a dementor. Of course, Malfoy would spread the story as wide as he

could, but there was always a chance it wouldn't reach too many Gryffindor ears.

He reached across Ron for a couple of chicken legs and a handful chips, but before he could take them they vanished, to be replaced with puddings.

“You missed the Sorting, anyway," said Hermione, as Ron dived a largt: chocolate gateau.

“Hat say anything interesting?" asked Harry, taking a piece of treacle tart.

“More of the same, really . . . advising us all to unite in the face enemies, you know."“Dumbledore mentioned Voldemort at all?" Not yet, but he always saves his proper speech for after the the feast doesn't he? It can't be long now."“Snape said Hagrid was late for the feast —"“You've seen Snape? How come?" said Ron between frenzied mouthfuls of gateau.

"Bumped into him," said Harry evasively.

"Hagrid was only a few minutes late," said Hermione. "Look, he's waving at you, Harry."Harry looked up at the staff table and grinned at Hagrid, who was indeed waving at him. Hagrid had never quite managed to comport himself with the dignity of Professor McGonagall, Head of Gryffindor House, the top of whose head came up to somewhere between Hagrid's elbow and shoulder as they were sitting side by side, and who was looking disapprovingly at this enthusiastic greeting. Harry was surprised to see the Divination teacher, Professor Trelawney, sitting on Hagrid's other side; she rarely left her tower room, and he had never seen her at the start-of-term feast before. She looked as odd as ever, glittering with beads and trailing shawls, her eyes magnified to enormous size by her spectacles. Having always considered her a bit of a fraud, Harry had been shocked to discover at the end of the previous term that it had been she who had made the prediction that caused Lord Voldemort

to kill Harry's parents and attack Harry himself. The knowledge made him even less eager to find himself in her company, thankfully, this year he would be dropping Divination. Her great beaconlike eyes swiveled in his direction; he hastily looked away toward the Slytherin table. Draco Malfoy was miming the shatterering of a nose to raucous laughter and applause. Harry dropped his gaze to his treacle tart, his insides burning again. What he would give to fight Malfoy one-on-one...

"So what did Professor Slughorn want?" Hermione asked.

"To know what really happened at the Ministry." said Harry.

"Him and everyone else here," sniffed Hermione. "People were interrogating us about it on the train, weren't they, Ron?""Yeah," said Ron. "All wanting to know if you really are 'the Chosen One' —""There has been much talk on that very subject even amongst the ghosts," interrupted Nearly Headless Nick, inclining his barely connected head toward Harry so that it wobbled dangerously on its ruff. "I am considered something of a Potter authority; it is widely known that we are friendly. I have assured the spirit community that I will not pester you for information, however. 'Harry Potter knows that he can confide in me with complete confidence,' I told them. 'I would rather die than betray his trust.'"“That's nor saying much, seeing as you're already dead," Ron observed.

“Once again, you show all the sensitivity of a blunt axe," said Nearly Headless Nick in affronted tones, and he rose into the air glided back toward the far end of the Gryffindor table just as Dumbledore got to his feet at the staff table. The talk and laughter echoing around the Hall died away almost instantly.

"The very best of evenings to you!" he said, smiling broadly, his arms opened wide as though to embrace the whole room.

“What happened to his hand?" gasped Hermione.

She was not the only one who had noticed. Dumbledore's right hand was as blackened and dead-looking as it had been on the night he had come to fetch Harry from the Dursleys. Whispers it the room; Dumbledore, interpreting them correctly, merely smiled and shook his purple-and-gold sleeve over his injury.

“Nothing to worry about," he said airily. "Now ... to our new students, welcome, to our old students, welcome back! Another year full of magical education awaits you . ..""His hand was like that when I saw him over the summer,"Harry whispered to Hermione. "I thought he'd have cured it by now, though ... or Madam Pomfrey would've done.""It looks as if it's died," said Hermione, with a nauseated expression. "But there are some injuries you can't cure... old curses…and there are poisons without antidotes. . . ."". . . and Mr. Filch, our caretaker, has asked me to say chat there is a blanket ban on any joke items bought at the shop called Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

"Those wishing to play for their House Quidditch teams should give their names to their Heads of House as usual. We are also looking for new Quidditch commentators, who should do likewise.

"We are pleased to welcome a new member of staff this year, Professor Slughorn"— Slughorn stood up, his bald head gleaming in the candlelight, his big waistcoated belly casting the table into shadow — "is a former colleague of mine who has agreed resume his old post of Potions master.""Potions?"

"Potions?"

The word echoed all over the Hall as people wondered wheel they had heard right.

"Potions?" said Ron and Hermione together, turning to stare Harry. "But you said —""Professor Snape, meanwhile," said Dumbledore, raising voice so that it carried over all the muttering, "will be taking the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.""No!" said Harry, so loudly that many heads turned in his direction. He did not care; he

was staring up at the staff table, incensed. How could Snape be given the Defense Against the Dark Arts job after all this time? Hadn't it been widely known for years that Dumbledore did not trust him to do it?

“But Harry, you said that Slughorn was going to be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts!" said Hermione.

"I thought he was!" said Harry, racking his brains to remember when Dumbledore had told him this, but now that he came to think of it, he was unable to recall Dumbledore ever telling him what Slughorn would be teaching.

Snape, who was sitting on Dumbledore's right, did not stand up his mention of his name; he merely raised a hand in lazy acknowledgment of the applause from the Slytherin table, yet Harry was sure he could detect a look of triumph on the features he loathed so much.

“Well, there's one good thing," he said savagely. "Snape'll be gone by the end of the year."“What do you mean?" asked Ron.

“That job's jinxed. No ones lasted more than a year. . . . Quirrell actually died doing it. . . . Personally, I'm going to keep my fingers crossed for another death. . . .”“Harry!" said Hermione, shocked and reproachful.

“He might just go back to teaching Potions at the end of the year" said Ron reasonably. "That Slughorn bloke might not want to stay long-term. Moody didn't."“Dumbledore cleared his throat. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were not the only ones who had been talking; the whole Hall had erupted in a buzz of conversation at the news that Snape had finally achieved his heart’s desire. Seemingly oblivious to the sensational nature of the news he had just imparted, Dumbledore said nothing more about staff appointments, but waited a few seconds to ensure that the silence was absolute before continuing.

"Now, as everybody in this Hall knows, Lord Voldemort and his followers are once more at large and gaining in strength."The silence seemed to tauten and strain as Dumbledore spoke. Harry glanced at Malfoy. Malfoy was not looking at Dumbledore, but making his fork hover in midair with his wand, as though he found the headmaster's words unworthy of his attention.

"I cannot emphasize strongly enough how dangerous the present situation is, and how much care each of us at Hogwarts must take to ensure that we remain safe. The castle's magical fortifications have been strengthened over the summer, we are protected in new and more powerful ways, but we must still guard scrupulously against carelessness on the part of any student or member of staff. I urge you, therefore, to abide by any security restrictions that you teachers might impose upon you, however irksome you might find them — in particular, the rule that you are not to be out of after hours. I implore you, should you notice anything strange or suspicious within or outside the castle, to report it to a member of staff immediately. I trust you to conduct yourselves, always, with the utmost regard for your own and others' safety."Dumbledore's blue eyes swept over the students before he smiled once more.

"But now, your beds await, as warm and comfortable as you could possibly wish, and I know that your top priority is to be well-rested for your lessons tomorrow. Let us therefore say good night. Pip pip!"With the usual deafening scraping noise, the benches moved back and the hundreds of students began to file out of the Great Hall toward their dormitories. Harry, who was in no hurry at all to leave with the gawping crowd, nor to get near enough to Malfoy to allow him to retell the story of the nose-stamping, lagged behind, pretending to retie the lace on his trainer, allowing most of Gryffindors to draw ahead of him. Hermione had darted ahead to fulfill her prefect's duty of shepherding the first years, but Ron remained with Harry.

"What really happened to your nose?" he asked, once they were at the very back of the throng pressing out of the Hall, and out of

earshot of anyone else.

Harry told him. It was a mark of the strength of their friendship that Ron did not laugh.

“I saw Malfoy miming something to do with a nose," he said darkly.

“Yeah, well, never mind that," said Harry bitterly. "Listen to what he was saying before he found out I was there . . . .“Harry had expected Ron to be stunned by Malfoys boasts. With what Harry considered pure pigheadedness, however, Ron was unimpressed.

“Come on, Harry, he was just showing off for Parkinson….

What kind of mission would You-Know-Who have given him?"“How d'you know Voldemort doesn't need someone at Hogwarts? It wouldn't be the first —"“I wish yeh'd stop sayin' tha name, Harry," said a reproachful voice behind them. Harry looked over his shoulder to see Hagtid shaking his head.

"Dumbledore uses that name," said Harry stubbornly“Yeah, well, tha's Dumbledore, innit?" said Hagrid mysteriously.

“So how come yeh were late, Harry? I was worried.""Got held up on the train," said Harry. "Why were you late?""I was with Grawp," said Hagrid happily. "Los' track o' the time. He's got a new home up in the mountains now, Dumbledore fixed it — nice big cave. He's much happier than he was in the forest. We were havin' a good chat.""Really?" said Harry, taking care not to catch Ron's eye; the last time he had met Hagrid's half-brother, a vicious giant with a talent for ripping up trees by the roots, his vocabulary had comprised five words, two of which he was unable to pronounce properly.

"Oh yeah, he's really come on," said Hagrid proudly. "Yeh'll be amazed. I'm thinkin' o' trainin' him up as me assistant."Ron snorted loudly, but managed to pass it off as a violent sneeze. They were now standing beside the oak front doors.

"Anyway, I'll see yeh tomorrow, firs' lesson's straight after lunch. Come early an' yeh can say hello ter Buck — I mean, Witherwings!”

Raising an arm in cheery farewell, he headed out of the doors into the darkness.

Harry and Ron looked at each other. Harry could tell that Ku| was experiencing the same sinking feeling as himself.

"You're not taking Care of Magical Creatures, are you?"Ron shook his head. "And you're not either, are you?"Harry shook his head too.

"And Hermione," said Ron, "she's not, is she?"Harry shook his head again. Exactly what Hagrid would say when he realized his three favorite students had given up his subject, he did not like to think.

Chapter 9 The Half-Blood Prince

Harry and Ron met Hermione in the common room before breakfast next morning. Hoping for some support in his theory, Harry lost no time in telling Hermione what he had overheard Malfoy saying on the Hogwarts Express.

"But he was obviously showing off for Parkinson, wasn't he?" interjected Ron quickly, before Hermione could say anything.

"Well," she said uncertainly, "I don't know. ... It would be like Malfoy make himself seem more important than he is ... but that's a big lie to tell. . . .""Exactly," said Harry, but he could nor press the point, because so many people were trying to listen in to his conversation, not to mention staring at him and whispering behind their hands.

"It's rude to point," Ron snapped at a particularly minuscule first-year boy as they joined the queue to climb out of the portrait hole. The boy, who had been muttering something about Harry behind his hand to his friend, promptly turned scarlet and toppled out of the hole in alarm. Ron sniggered. "I love being a sixth year. And were going to be getting free time this year. Whole periods when we can just sit up here and relax.""We're going to need that time for studying, Ron!" said Hermione, as they set off down the corridor.

"Yeah, but not today," said Ron. "Today's going to be a real doss, I reckon.""Hold it!" said Hermione, throwing out an arm and halting a passing fourth year, who was attempting to push past her with a lime-green disk clutched tightly in his hand. "Fanged Frisbees banned, hand it over," she told him sternly. The scowling boy handed over the snarling Frisbee, ducked under her arm, and took off after his friends. Ron waited for him to vanish, then tugged the Frisbee from Hermione's grip.

"Excellent, I've always wanted one of these."Hermione's remonstration was drowned by a loud giggle; Lavender Brown had apparently found Ron's remark highly amusing. She continued to laugh as she passed them, glancing back at Ron over her shoulder. Ron looked rather pleased with himself.

The ceiling of the Great Hall was serenely blue and streaked with frail, wispy clouds, just like the squares of sky visible through the high mullioned windows. While they tucked into porridge and eggs and bacon, Harry and Ron told Hermione about their embarassing conversation with Hagrid the previous evening.

"But he can't really think we'd continue Care of Magical Creatures !" she said, looking distressed. "I mean, when has any of us expressed . . . you know . . . any enthusiasm?""That's it, though, innit?" said Ron, swallowing an entire fried egg whole. "We were the ones who made the most effort in classes because we like Hagrid. But he thinks we liked the stupid subject. D'ya reckon anyone's going to go on to N.E.W.T.?"Neither Harry nor Hermione answered; there was no need. They knew perfectly well that nobody in their year would want to continue Care of Magical Creatures. They avoided Hagrid's eye and returned his cheery wave only half-heartedly when he left the staff table ten minutes later.

After they had eaten, they remained in their places, awaiting Professor McGonagall's descent from the staff table. The distribution of class schedules was more complicated than usual this year, for Professor McGonagall needed first to confirm that everybody had achieved the necessary O.W.L. grades to continue with their chosen N.E.W.T.s.

Hermione was immediately cleared to continue with Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Herbology, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Potions, and shot off to a first period Ancient Runes class without further ado. Neville took a little longer to

sort out; his round face was anxious as Professor McGonagall looked down his application and then consulted his O.W.L results.

"Herbology, fine," she said. "Professor Sprout will be delighted to see you back with an 'Outstanding' O.W.L. And you qualify for Defense Against the Dark Arts with 'Exceeds Expectations.' But the problem is Transfiguration. I'm sorry, Longbottom, but an 'Acceptable' really isn't good enough to continue to N.E.W.T. level. Just don't think you'd be able to cope with the coursework."Neville hung his head. Professor McGonagall peered at him through her square spectacles.

"Why do you want to continue with Transfiguration, anyway? I've never had the impression that you particularly enjoyed it."Neville looked miserable and muttered something about "my grandmother wants.""Hmph," snorted Professot McGonagall. "It's high time your grandmother learned to be proud of the grandson she's got, rather than the one she thinks she ought to have - particularly after what happened at the Ministry."Neville turned very pink and blinked confusedly; Professor McGonagall had never paid him a compliment before.

"I'm sorry, Longbottom, but I cannot let you into my N.E.W.T. class. I see that you have an 'Exceeds Expectations' in Charm however - why not try for a N.E.W.T. in Charms?""My grandmother thinks Charms is a soft option," mumbled Neville.

"Take Charms," said Professor McGonagall, "and I shall drop Augusta a line reminding her that just because she failed her Charms O.W.L., the subject is not necessarily worthless." Smiling slightly at the look of delighted incredulity on Neville's face, Professor McGonagall tapped a blank schedule with the tip of her wand and handed it, now carrying details of his new classes, to Neville.

Professor McGonagall turned next to Parvati Patil, whose first question was whether Firenze, the handsome centaur, was still teaching Divination.

"He and Professor Trelawney are dividing classes between them this year," said Professor McGonagall, a hint of disapproval in her voice; it was common knowledge that she despised the subject of Divination. "The sixth year is being taken by Professor Trelawney."Parvati set off for Divination five minutes later looking slightly crestfallen.

"So, Potter, Potter . . ." said Professor McGonagall, consulting her notes as she turned to Harry. "Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Transfiguration ... all fine. I must say, I was pleased with your Transfiguration mark, Potter, very pleased. Now, why haven't you applied to continue with Potions? I thought it was your ambition to become an Auror?""It was, but you told me I had to get an 'Outstanding' in my O.W.L., Professor.""And so you did when Professor Snape was teaching the subject. Professor Slughorn, however, is perfectly happy to accept N.E.W.T. students with 'Exceeds Expectations' at O.W.L. Do you wish to proceed with Potions?""Yes," said Harry, "but I didn't buy the books or any ingredients or anything-""I'm sure Professor Slughorn will be able to lend you some," said Professor McGonagall. "Very well, Potter, here is your schedule. Oh, by the way- twenty hopefuls have already put down their names for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. I shall pass the list to you in due course and you can fix up trials at your leisure."A few minutes later, Ron was cleared to do the same subjects as Harry, and the two of them left the table together.

"Look," said Ron delightedly, gazing ar his schedule, "we've got a free period now. . . and a free period after break . . . and after lunch . . . excellent."They returned to the common room, which was empty apart from a half dozen seventh years, including Katie Bell, the only remaining member of the original Gryffindor Quidditch team that Harry had joined in his first year.

"I thought you'd get that, well done," she called over, pointing. at the Captains badge on Harry's chest. "Tell me when you call trials!""Don't be stupid," said Harry, "you don't need to try out, I watched you play for five years. . . .""You mustn't start off like that," she said warningly.

"For all you know, there's someone much better than me out there. Good teams have been ruined before now because Captains just kept playing the old faces, or letting in their friends. ..."Ron looked a little uncomfortable and began playing with the Fanged Frisbee Hermione had taken from the fourth-year student. It zoomed around the common room, snarling and attempting to take bites of the tapestry. Crookshanks's yellow eyes followed it and he hissed when it came too close.

An hour later they reluctantly left the sunlit common room for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom four floors below. Hermione was already queuing outside, carrying an armful of heavy books and looking put-upon.

"We got so much homework for Runes," she said anxiously when Harry and Ron joined her. "A fifteen-inch essay, two translations, and I've got to read these by Wednesday!""Shame," yawned Ron.

"You wait," she said resentfully. "I bet Snape gives us loads."The classroom door opened as she spoke, and Snape stepped into the corridor, his sallow face framed as ever by two curtains of greasy black hair. Silence fell over the queue immediately.

"Inside," he said.

Harry looked around as they entered. Snape had imposed his personality upon the room already; it was gloomier than usual, as curtains had been drawn over the windows, and was lit by candlelight. New pictures adorned the walls, many of them showing people who appeared to be in pain, sporting grisly injuries or strangely contorted body parts. Nobody spoke as they settled down, looking around at the shadowy, gruesome pictures.

"I have not asked you to take out your books," said Snape, closing the door and moving to face the class from behind his desk; Hermione hastily dropped her copy of Confronting the Faceless back into her bag and stowed it under her chair. "I wish to speak to you, and I want

your fullest attention."His black eyes roved over their upturned faces, lingering for a fraction of a second longer on Harry's than anyone else's.

"You have had five teachers in this subject so far, I believe."You believe . . . like you haven't watched them all come and go, hoping you'd be next, thought Harry scathingly.

Naturally, these teachers will all have had their own methods and priorities. Given this confusion I am surprised so many of you scraped an O.WL. in this subject. I shall be even more surprised if all of you manage to keep up with the N.E.W.T. work, which will be more advanced."Snape set off around the edge of the room, speaking now in a lower voice; the class craned their necks to keep him in view. The Dark Arts," said Snape, "are many, varied, ever-changing, and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before. You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible."Harry stared at Snape. It was surely one thing to respect theDark Arts as a dangerous enemy, another to speak of them, as Snape was doing, with a loving caress in his voice?

"Your defenses," said Snape, a little louder, "must therefore be as flexible and inventive as rhe arts you seek to undo. These pictures - he indicated a few of them as he swept past - "give a fair representation of what happens to those who suffer, for instance, the Cruciatus Curse" - he waved a hand toward a witch who was clearly shrieking in agony - "feel the Dementor's Kiss" - a wizard lying huddled and blank-eyed, slumped against a wall - "or provoke the aggression of the Inferius" - a bloody mass upon ground.

"Has an Inferius been seen, then?" said Parvati Patil in a high pitched voice. "Is it definite, is he using them?""The Dark Lord has used Inferi in the past," said Snape, "which means you would be well-advised to assume he might use them again. Now. . . "He set off again around the other side of the classroom toward his desk, and again, they

watched him as he walked, his dark robes billowing behind him. ,". . . you are, I believe, complete novices in the use of nonverbal spells. What is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?"Hermione's hand shot into the air. Snape took his time looking around at everybody else, making sure he had no choice, before saying curtly, "Very well - Miss Granger?""Your adversary has no warning about what kind of magic you're about to perform," said Hermione, "which gives you a split-second advantage.""An answer copied almost word for word from The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Six," said Snape dismissively (over in the corner, Malfoy sniggered), "but correct in essentials. Yes, those who progress in using magic without shouting incantations gain an element of surprise in their spell-casting. Not all wizards can do this, of course; it is a question of concentration and mind power which some" -

his gaze lingered maliciously upon Harry once more - "lack."Harry knew Snape was thinking of their disastrous Occlumency lessons of the previous year. He refused to drop his gaze, but glowered at Snape until Snape looked away.

"You will now divide," Snape went on, "into pairs. One partner will attempt jinx the other without speaking. The other will attempt to repel the jinx in equal silence. Carry on."Although Snape did not know it, Harry had taught at least half the class (everyone who had been a member of the D.A.) how to perform a Shield Charm the previous year. None of them had ever cast the charm without speaking, however. A reasonable amount of cheating ensued; many people were merely whispering the incantation instead of saying it aloud. Typically, ten minutes into the lesson Hermione managed to repel Neville's muttered Jelly-Legs Jinx without uttering a single word, a feat that would surely have earned her twenty points for Gryffindor from any reasonable teacher, thought Harry bitterly, but which Snape ignored. Heswept between them as they practiced, looking just as much like an overgrown bat as ever, lingering to watch Harry and Ron struggling with the task.

Ron, who was supposed to be jinxing Harry, was purple in the face, his lips tightly compressed to save himself from the temptation of muttering the incantation. Harry had his wand raised, waitingon tenterhooks to repel a jinx that seemed unlikely ever to come.

"Pathetic, Weasley," said Snape, after a while. "Here -- let me show you -"He turned his wand on Harry so fast that Harry reacted instinctively; all thought of nonverbal spells forgotten, he yelled, "Protego!"His Shield Charm was so strong Snape was knocked off-balance and hit a desk. The whole class had looked around and now watched as Snape righted himself, scowling.

"Do you remember me telling you we are practicing nonverbal spells, Potter?""Yes," said Harry stiffly.

"Yes, sir."

"There's no need to call me 'sir,' Professor." The words had escaped him before he knew what he was saying. Several people gasped, including Hermione. Behind Snape, however , Ron, Dean, and Seam us grinned appreciatively.

"Detention, Saturday night, my office," said Snape. "I do not take cheek from anyone, Potter . . . not even 'the Chosen One.'""That was brilliant, Harry!" chortled Ron, once they were safely on their way to break a short while later.

"You really shouldn't have said it," said Hermione, frowning at Ron. "What made you?""He tried to jinx me, in case you didn't notice!" fumed Harry. I had enough of that during those Occlumency lessons! Why doesn't he use another guinea pig for a change? What's Dumbledore playing at, anyway, letting him teach Defense? Did you hear him talking about the Dark Arts? He loves them! All that unfixed, tndestructble stuff --

"Well," said Hermione, "I thought he sounded a bit like you.""Like me?"

"Yes, when you were telling us what it's like to face Voldemort. You said it wasn't just memorizing a bunch of spells, you said it was just you and your brains and your guts - well, wasn't that what Snape was saying? That it really comes down to being brave and quick-thinking?"Harry was so disarmed that she had thought his words as well worth memorizing as The Standard Book of Spells that he did not argue.

"Harry! Hey, Harry!"

Harry looked around; Jack Sloper, one of the Beaters on last year's Gryffindor Quidditch team, was hurrying toward him holding a roll of parchment.

"For you," panted Sloper. "Listen, 1 heard you're the new Captain. When're you holding trials?""I'm not sure yet," said Harry, thinking privately that Sloper would be very lucky to get back on the team. "I'll let you know.""Oh, right. I was hoping it'd be this weekend -""But Harry was not listening; he had just recognized the thin, slanting writing on the parchment. Leaving Sloper in mid-sentence, he hurried away with Ron and Hermione, unrolling the parchment as he went.

Dear Harry,

I would like to start our private lessons this Saturday. Kindly come along to my office at 8 P.M. I hope you are enjoying your first day back at school.

Yours sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

P.S. I enjoy Acid Pops.

"He enjoys Acid Pops?" said Ron, who had read the message over Harry's shoulder and was looking perplexed.

"It's the password to get past the gargoyle outside his study," said Harry in a low voice. "Ha! Snape's not going to be pleased. . . . I won't be able to do his detention!"He, Ron, and Hermione spent the whole of break speculating on what Dumbledore would teach Harry. Ron thought it most likely to be spectacular jinxes and hexes of the type the Death Eaters would not know. Hermione said such things were illegal, and thought it much more likely that Dumbledore wanted to teach Harry advanced Defensive magic. After break, she went off to Arithmancy while Harry and Ron returned to the common room where they grudgingly started Snape's homework. This turned out to be so complex that they still had not finished when Hermione joined them for their after-lunch free period (though she considerably speeded up the process). They had only just finished when the bell rang for the afternoon's double Potions and they beat the familiar path down to the dungeon classroom that had, for so long, been Snape's.

When they arrived in the corridor they saw that there were only a dozen people progressing to N.E.W.T. level. Crabbe and Goyle had evidently failed to achieve the required O.W.L. grade, but four Slytherins had made it through, including Malfoy. Four Ravenclaws were there, and one Hufflepuff, Ernie Macmillan, whom Harry liked despite his rather pompous manner.

"Harry," Ernie said portentously, holding out his hand as Harry approached, "didn't get a chance to speak in Defense Against The Dark Arts this morning. Good lesson, I thought, but Shield Charms are old hat, of course, for us old D.A. lags . . . And how are you, Ron -- Hermione?"Before they could say more than "fine," the dungeon door opened and Slughorn's belly preceded him out of the door. As they filed into the room, his great walrus mustache curved above his beaming mouth, and he greeted Harry and Zabini with particular enthusiasm.

The dungeon was, most unusually, already full of vapors and odd smells. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sniffed interestedly as they passed large, bubbling cauldrons. The four Slytherins took a table together,

as did the four Ravenclaws. This left Harry, Ron, and Hermione to share a table with Ernie. They chose the one nearest a gold-colored cauldron that was emitting one of the most seductive scents Harry had ever inhaled: Somehow it reminded him simultaneously of treacle tart, the woody smell of a broomstick handle, and something flowery he thought he might have smelled at the Burrow. He found that he was breathing very slowly and deeply and that the potion's fumes seemed to be filling him up like drink. A great contentment stole over him; he grinned across at Ron, who grinned back lazily.

"Now then, now then, now then," said Slughorn, whose massive outline was quivering through the many shimmering vapors. "Scales out, everyone, and potion kits, and don't forget your copiesof Advanced Potion-Making. . . .""Sir?" said Harry, raising his hand.

"Harry, m'boy?"

"I haven't got a book or scales or anything - nor's Ron - we didn't realize we'd be able to do the N.E.W.T., you see -""Ah, yes, Professor McGonagall did mention . . . not to worry, my dear boy, not to worry at all. You can use ingredients from the store cupboard today, and I'm sure we can lend you some scales, and we've got a small stock of old books here, they'll do until you can write to Flourish and Blotts. . . ."Slughorn strode over to a corner cupboard and, after a moment's foraging, emerged with two very battered-looking copies of Advanced Potion-Making by Libatius Borage, which he gave to Harry and Ron along with two sets of tarnished scales.

"Now then," said Slughorn, returning to the front of the class and inflating his already bulging chest so that the buttons on his waistcoat threatened to burst off, "I've prepared a few potions for you to have a look at, just out of interest, you know. These are the kind of thing you ought to be able to make after completing your N.E.W.T.s. You ought to have heard of 'em, even if you haven't made 'em yet. Anyone tell me what this one is?"He indicated the cauldron nearest the Slytherin

table. Harry raised himself slighty in his seat and saw what looked like plain water boiling away inside it.

Hermione's well-practiced hand hit the air before anybody else's; Slughorn pointed at her.

"It's Veritaserum, a colorless, odorless potion thar forces the, drinker to tell the truth," said Hermione.

"Very good, very good!" said Slughorn happily. "Now," he continued, pointing at the cauldron nearest the Ravenclaw table, "this one here is pretty well known. . . . Featured in a few Ministry leaflets lately too . . . Who can - ?"Hermione's hand was fastest once more.

"It's Polyjuice Potion, sir," she said.

Harry too had recognized the slow-bubbling, mudlike substance the second cauldron, but did not resent Hermione getting the credit for answering the question; she, after all, was the one who had succeeded in making it, back in their second year. "Excellent, excellent! Now, this one here . . . yes, my dear?" said Slughorn, now looking slightly bemused, as Hermione's hand punched the air again.

"It's Amortentia!"

"It is indeed. Ir seems almost foolish to ask," said Slughorn, who was looking mightily impressed, "but I assume you know what it does?"It's the most powerful love porion in the world!" said Hermione.

'Quire right! You recognized it, I suppose, by its distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen?""And the steam rising in characteristic spirals," said Hermione enthusiastically, "and it's supposed to smell differently to each of according to what attracts us, and I can smell freshly mown grass and new parchment and -"But she turned slightly pink and did not complete the sentence.

'May I ask your name, my dear?" said Slughorn, ignoring Hermione's embarrassment.

Hermione Granger, sir."

"Granger? Granger? Can you possibly be related to Hector Dagworth-Granger, who founded the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers?""No. I don't think so, sir. I'm Muggle-born, you see."Harry saw Malfoy lean close to Nott and whisper something; both of them sniggered, but Slughorn showed no dismay; on the contrary, he beamed and looked from Hermione to Harry, who was sitting next to her.

"Oho! 'One of my best friends is Muggle-born, and she's the best in our year!' I'm assuming this is the very friend of whom you spoke, Harry?""Yes, sir," said Harry.

"Well, well, take twenty well-earned points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger," said Slughorn genially.

Malfoy looked rather as he had done the time Hermione had punched him in the face. Hermione turned to Harry with a radiant expression and whispered, "Did you really tell him I'm the best in the year? Oh, Harry!""Well, what's so impressive about that?" whispered Ron, who for some reason looked annoyed. "You are the best in the year - I'd've told him so if he'd asked me!"Hermione smiled but made a "shhing" gesture, so that they could hear what Slughorn was saying. Ron looked slightly disgruntled.

"Amortentia doesn't really create love, of course. It is impossible to manufacture or imitate love. No, this will simply cause a powerful infatuation or obsession. It is probably the most dangerous and powerful potion in this room - oh yes," he said, nodding gravely at Maifoy and Nott, both of whom were smirking skeptically. "When you have seen as much of life as I have, you will not underestimate the power of obsessive love. ...

"And now," said Slughorn, "it is time for us to start work.""Sir, you haven't told us what's in this one," said Ernie Macmillan , pointing at a small black cauldron standing on Slughorn's desk. The potion within was splashing about merrily; it was the color of molten gold, and large drops were leaping like goldfish above the surface, though not a particle had spilled.

"Oho," said Slughorn again. Harry was sure that Slughorn had not forgotten the potion at all, but had waited to be asked for dramatic effect. "Yes. That. Well, that one, ladies and gentlemen, is a most curious little potion called Felix Felicis. I take it," he turned, smiling, to look at Hermione, who had let out an audible gasp, "that you know what Felix Felicis does, Miss Granger?""It's liquid luck," said Hermione excitedly. "It makes you lucky!"The whole class seemed to sit up a little straighter. Now all Harry could see of Malfoy was the back of his sleek blond head, because he was at last giving Slughorn his full and undivided attention.

"Quite right, take another ten points for Gryffindor. Yes, it's a funny little potion, Felix Felicis," said Slughorn. "Desperately tricky to make, and disastrous to get wrong. However, if brewed correctly, as this has been, you will find that all your endeavors tend to succeed ... at least until the effects wear off.""Why don't people drink it all the time, sir?" said Terry Boot eagerly.

"Because if taken in excess, it causes giddiness, recklessness, and dangerous overconfidence," said Slughorn. "Too much of a good thing, you know. . . highly toxic in large quantities. But takensparingly, and very occasionally . . .""Have you ever taken it, sir?" asked Michael Corner with great interest.

"Twice in my life," said Slughorn. "Once when I was twenty-four, once when I was fifty-seven. Two tablespoonfuls taken with breakfast. Two perfect days."He gazed dreamily into the distance. Whether he was playacting or not, thought Harry, the effect was good.

"And that," said Slughorn, apparently coming back to earth, "is what I shall be offering as a prize in this lesson."There was silence in which every bubble and gurgle of the surrounding potions seemed magnified tenfold.

"One tiny bottle of Felix Felicis," said Slughorn, taking a minuscule glass bottle with a cork in it out of his pocket and showing it to them all. "Enough for twelve hours' luck. From dawn till dusk, you will be lucky in everything you attempt.""Now, I must give you warning that Felix Felicis is a banned substance in organized competitions . . . sporting events, for instance, examinations, or elections. So the winner is to use it on an ordinary day only . . . and watch how that ordinary day becomes extraordinary!""So," said Slughorn, suddenly brisk, "how are you to win fabulous prize? Well, by turning to page ten of Advanced Potion Making. We have a little over an hour left to us, which should be time for you to make a decent attempt at the Draught of Living Death. I know it is more complex than anything you have attempted before, and I do not expect a perfect potion from anybody. The person who does best, however, will win little Felix here. Off you go!"There was a scraping as everyone drew their cauldrons toward them and some loud clunks as people began adding weights to their scales, but nobody spoke. The concentration within the room was almost tangible. Harry saw Malfoy riffling feverishly through his copy of Advanced Potion-Making., It could not have been clearer that Malfoy really wanted that lucky day. Harry bent swiftly over the tattered book Slughorn had lent him.

To his annoyance he saw that the previous owner had scribbled all over the pages, so that the margins were as black as the printed portions. Bending low to decipher the ingredients (even here, the previous owner had made annotations and crossed things out) Harry hurried off toward the store cupboard to find what he needed. As he dashed back to his cauldron, he saw Malfoy cutting up Valerian roots as fast as he could.

Everyone kept glancing around at what the rest of the class was doing; this was both an advantage and a disadvantage of Potions, that it was hard to keep your work private. Within ten minutes, thewhole place was full of bluish steam. Hermione, of course, seemed to have progressed furthest. Her potion already resembled the "smooth, black currant-colored liquid" mentioned as the ideal halfway stage.

Having finished chopping his roots, Harry bent low over his book again. It was really very irritating, having to try and decipher the directions under all the stupid scribbles of the previous owner,who for some reason had taken issue with the order to cut up the sopophorous bean and had written in the alternative instruction:Crush with flat side of silver dagger,releases juice better than cutting.

"Sir, I think you knew my grandfather, Abraxas Malfoy?" Harry looked up; Slughorn was just passing the Slytherin table.

"Yes," said Slughorn, without looking at Malfoy, "I was sorry to hear he had died, although of course it wasn't unexpected, dragon pox at his age. . . ."And he walked away. Harry bent back over his cauldron, smirking. He could tell that Malfoy had expected to be treated like Harry or Zabini; perhaps even hoped for some preferential treatment of the type he had learned to expect from Snape. It looked as though Malfoy would have to rely on nothing but talent to win the bottle of Felix Felicis.

The sopophorous bean was proving very difficult to cut up. Harry turned to Hermione.

"Can I borrow your silver knife?"She nodded impatiently, not taking her eyes off her potion, which was still deep purple, though according to the book ought to be turning a light shade of lilac by now.

Harry crushed his bean with the flat side of the dagger. To his astonishment, it immediately exuded so much juice he was amazed

the shriveled bean could have held it all.

Hastily scooping it all into the cauldron he saw, to his surprise, that the potion immediately turned exactly the shade of lilac described by the textbook.

His annoyance with the previous owner vanishing on the spot, Harry now squinted at the next line of instructions. According the book, he had to stir counterclockwise until the potion turned clear as water. According to the addition the previous owner made, however, he ought to add a clockwise stir after every seventh counterclockwise stir. Could the old owner be right twice?

Harry stirred counterclockwise, held his breath, and stirred once clockwise. The effect was immediate. The potion turned pale pink.

"How are you doing that?" demanded Hermione, who was redfaced and whose hair was growing bushier and bushier in the fumes from her cauldron; her potion was still resolutely purple.

"Add a clockwise stir -"

"No, no, the book says counterclockwise!" she snapped.

Harry shrugged and continued what he was doing. Seven stirs counterdockwise, one clockwise, pause . . . seven stirs counterclockwise, one stir clockwise . . .

Across the table, Ron was cursing fluently under his breath; his potion looked like liquid licorice. Harry glanced around. As far as he could see, no one else's potion had turned as pale as his. He felt elated, something that had certainly never happened before in this dungeon.

"And time's . . . up!" called Slughorn. "Stop stirring, please!"Slughorn moved slowly among the tables, peering into cauldrons. He made no comment, but occasionally gave the potions a stir or a sniff. At last he

reached the table where Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ernie were sitting. He smiled ruefully at the tarlike substance in Ron's cauldron. He passed over Ernie's navy concoction. Hermione's potion he gave an approving nod. Then he saw Harry's, and a look of incredulous delight spread over his face.

"The clear winner!" he cried to the dungeon. "Excellent, excellent, Harry! Good lord, it's clear you've inherited your mother's talent. She was a dab hand at Potions, Lily was! Here you are, then, here you are - one bottle of Felix Felicis, as promised, and use it well!"Harry slipped the tiny bottle of golden liquid into his inner pocket, feeling an odd combination of delight at the furious looks on the Slytherins' faces and guilt at the disappointed expression on Hermione's. Ron looked simply dumbfounded.

"How did you do that?" he whispered to Harry as they left the dungeon.

"Got lucky, I suppose," said Harry, because Malfoy was within earshot.

Once they were securely ensconced at the Gryffindor table for dinner, however, he felt safe enough to tell them. Hermione's face became stonier with every word he uttered.

"I s'pose you think I cheated?" he finished, aggravated by her expression.

"Well, it wasn't exactly your own work, was it?" she said stiffly.

"He only followed different instructions to ours," said Ron, "Could've been a catastrophe, couldn't it? But he took a risk and it paid off." He heaved a sigh. "Slughorn could've handed me that book, but no, I get the one no one's ever written on. Puked on, by the look of page fifty-two, but-""Hang on," said a voice close by Harry's left ear and he caught a sudden waft of that flowery smell he had picked up in Slughorn's dungeon. He looked around and saw that Ginny had

joined them. "Did I hear right? You've been taking orders from something someone wrote in a book, Harry?"She looked alarmed and angry. Harry knew what was on her mind at once.

"It's nothing," he said reassuringly, lowering his voice. "It's not like, you know, Riddle's diary. It's just an old textbook someone's scribbled on.""But you're doing what it says?""I just tried a few of the tips written in the margins, honestly, Ginny, there's nothing funny -""Ginny's got a point," said Hermione, perking up at once. "We ought to check that there's nothing odd about it. I mean, all these funny instructions, who knows?""Hey!" said Harry indignantly, as she pulled his copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag and raised her wand. "Specialis Revelio!" she said, rapping it smartly on the front cover. Nothing whatsoever happened. The book simply lay there, looking old and dirty and dog-eared.

"Finished?" said Harry irritably. "Or d'you want to wait and see if it does a few backflips?""It seems all right," said Hermione, still staring at the book suspiciously. "I mean, it really does seem to be ... just a textbook.""Good. Then I'll have it back," said Harry, snatching it off the table, but it slipped from his hand and landed open on the floor. Nobody else was looking. Harry bent low to retrieve the book, and as he did so, he saw something scribbled along the bottom of the back cover in the same small, cramped handwriting as the instructions that had won him his bottle of Felix Felicis, now safely hidden inside a pair of socks in his trunk upstairs.

This book is the property of the Half Blood Prince.

Chapter 10 The house of count

For or the rest of the week's Potions lessons Harry continued to follow the Half-Blood Prince's instructions wherever they de-viated from Libatius Borage's, with the result that by their fourth lesson Slughorn was raving about Harrys abilities, saying that he had rarely taught anyone so talented. Neither Ron nor Hermione was delighted by this. Although Harry had offered to share his book with both of them, Ron had more difficulty deciphering the handwriting than Harry did, and could not keep asking Harry to read aloud or it might look suspicious. Hermione, meanwhile, was resolutely plowing on with what she called the "official" instruc-tions, but becoming increasingly bad-tempered as they yielded poorer results than the Prince's.

Harry wondered vaguely who the Half-Blood Prince had been. Although the amount of homework they had been given prevented him from reading the whole of his copy of Advanced Potion-Making, he had skimmed through it sufficiently to see that there was barely a page on which the Prince had not made additional notes, not all of them concerned with potion-making. Here and there were direc-tions for what looked like spells that the Prince had made up himself.

"Or herself," said Hermione irritably, overhearing Harry point-ing some of these out to Ron in the common room on Saturday evening. "It might have been a girl. I think the handwriting looks more like a girl's than a boy's.""The Half-Blood Prince, he was called," Harry said. "How many girls have been Princes?"Hermione seemed to have no answer to this. She merely scowled and twitched her essay on The Principles of Rematerialization away from Ron, who was trying to read it upside down.

Harry looked at his watch and hurriedly put the old copy of Advanced Potion-Making back into his bag.

"It's five to eight, I'd better go, I'll be late for Dumbledore.""Ooooh!" gasped Hermione, looking up at once. "Good luck! We'll wait up, we want to hear what he teaches you!""Hope it goes okay," said Ron, and the pair of them watched Harry leave through the portrait hole.

Harry proceeded through deserted corridors, though he had to step hastily behind a statue when Professor Trelawney appeared around a corner, muttering to herself as she shuffled a pack of dirty-looking playing cards, reading them as she walked.

"Two of spades: conflict," she murmured, as she passed the place where Harry crouched, hidden. "Seven of spades: an ill omen. Ten of spades: violence. Knave of spades: a dark young man, possibly troubled, one who dislikes the questioner —"She stopped dead, right on the other side of Harry's statue.

"Well, that can't be right," she said, annoyed, and Harry heard her reshuffling vigorously as she set off again, leaving nothing but a whiff of cooking sherry behind her. Harry waited until he was quite sure she had gone, then hurried off again until he reached the spot in the seventh-floor corridor where a single gargoyle stood against the wall.

"Acid Pops," said Harry, and the gargoyle leapt aside; the wall behind it slid apart, and a moving spiral stone staircase was re-vealed, onto which Harry stepped, so that he was carried in smooth circles up to the door with the brass knocker that led to Dumbledore's Office.

Harry knocked.

"Come in," said Dumbledore s voice.

"Good evening, sir," said Harry, walking into the headmaster's office.

"Ah, good evening, Harry. Sit down," said Dumbledore, smil-ing. "I hope you've had an enjoyable first week back at school?" "Yes, thanks, sir," said Harry.

"You must have been busy, a detention under your belt already!" "Er," began Harry awkwardly, but Dumbledore did not look too stern.

"I have arranged with Professor Snape that you will do your detention next Saturday instead.""Right," said Harry, who had more pressing matters on his mind than Snapes detention, and now looked around surreptitiously for some indication of what Dumbledore was planning to do with him this evening. The circular office looked just as it always did; the delicate silver instruments stood on spindle-legged tables, puff-ing smoke and whirring; portraits of previous headmasters and headmistresses dozed in their frames, and Dumbledore's magnifi-cent phoenix, Fawkes, stood on his perch behind the door, watch-ing Harry with bright interest. It did not even look as though Dumbledore had cleared a space for dueling practice.

"So, Harry," said Dumbledore, in a businesslike voice. "You have been wondering, I am sure, what I have planned for you dur-ing these — for want of a better word — lessons?""Yes, sir."

"Well, I have decided that it is time, now that you know what prompted Lord Voldemort to try and kill you fifteen years ago, for you to be given certain information." There was a pause.

"You said, at the end of last term, you were going to tell me everything," said Harry. It was hard to keep a note of accusation from his voice. "Sir," he added.

"And so I did," said Dumbledore placidly. "I told you everything I know. From this point forth, we shall be leaving the firm founda-tion of fact and journeying together through the murky marshes of memory into thickets of wildest guesswork. From here on in, Harry, I may be as woefully wrong as Humphrey Belcher, who be-lieved the time was ripe for a cheese cauldron.""But you think you're right?" said Harry.

"Naturally I do, but as I have already proven to you, I make mis-takes like the next man. In fact, being — forgive me — rather clev-erer than most men, my mistakes tend to be correspondingly huger.""Sir," said

Harry tentatively, "does what you're going to tell me have anything to do with the prophecy? Will it help me . . . survive?""It has a very great deal to do with the prophecy," said Dumble-dore, as casually as if Harry had asked him about the next days weather, "and I certainly hope that it will help you to survive,."Dumbledore got to his feet and walked around the desk, past Harry, who turned eagerly in his seat to watch Dumbledore bend-ing over the cabinet beside the door. When Dumbledore straight-ened up, he was holding a familiar shallow stone basin etched with odd markings around its rim. He placed the Pensieve on the desk in front of Harry.

"You look worried."

Harry had indeed been eyeing the Pensieve with some appre-hension. His previous experiences with the odd device that stored and revealed thoughts and memories, though highly instructive, had also been uncomfortable. The last time he had disturbed its contents, he had seen much more than he would have wished. But Dumbledore was smiling.

"This time, you enter the Pensieve with me . . . and, even more unusually, with permission.""Where are we going, sir?"

"For a trip down Bob Ogden's memory lane," said Dumbledore, pulling from his pocket a crystal bottle containing a swirling silvery-white substance.

"Who was Bob Ogden?"

"He was employed by the Department of Magical Law Enforce-ment," said Dumbledore. "He died some time ago, but not before I had tracked him down and persuaded him to confide these recol-lections to me. We are about to accompany him on a visit he made in the course of his duties. If you will stand, Harry ..."But Dumbledore was having difficulty pulling out the stopper of the crystal bottle: His injured hand seemed stiff and painful.

"Shall —shall I, sir?"

"No matter, Harry —"

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the bottle and the cork flew out.

"Sir — how did you injure your hand?" Harry asked again, look-ing at the blackened fingers with a mixture of revulsion and pity.

"Now is not the moment for that story, Harry. Not yet. We have an appointment with Bob Ogden."

Dumbledore tipped the silvery contents of the bottle into the Pensieve, where they swirled and shimmered, neither liquid nor gas. "After you," said Dumbledore, gesturing toward the bowl. Harry bent forward, took a deep breath, and plunged his face into the silvery substance. He felt his feet leave the office floor; he was falling, falling through whirling darkness and then, quite sud-denly, he was blinking in dazzling sunlight. Before his eyes had adjusted, Dumbledore landed beside him.

They were standing in a country lane bordered by high, tangled hedgerows, beneath a summer sky as bright and blue as a forget-me-not. Some ten feet in front of them stood a short, plump man wearing enormously thick glasses that reduced his eyes to molelike specks. He was reading a wooden signpost that was sticking out of the brambles on the left-hand side of the road. Harry knew this must be Ogden; he was the only person in sight, and he was also wearing the strange assortment of clothes so often chosen by inex-perienced wizards trying to look like Muggles: in this case, a frock coat and spats over a striped one-piece bathing costume. Before Harry had time to do more than register his bizarre appearance, however, Ogden had set off at a brisk walk down the lane.

Dumbledore and Harry followed. As they passed the wooden sign, Harry looked up at its two arms. The one pointing back the way they

had come read: Great Hangleton, 5 miles. The arm pointing after Ogden said Little Hangleton, 1 mile.

They walked a short way with nothing to see but the hedgerows, the wide blue sky overhead and the swishing, frock-coated figure ahead. Then the lane curved to the left and fell away, sloping steeply down a hillside, so that they had a sudden, unexpected view of a whole valley laid out in front of them. Harry could see a vil-lage, undoubtedly Little Hangleton, nestled between two steep hills, its church and graveyard clearly visible. Across the valley, set on the opposite hillside, was a handsome manor house surrounded by a wide expanse of velvety green lawn.

Ogden had broken into a reluctant trot due to the steep down-ward slope. Dumbledore lengthened his stride, and Harry hurried to keep up. He thought Little Hangleton must be their final desti-nation and wondered, as he had done on the night they had found Slughorn, why they had to approach it from such a distance. He soon discovered that he was mistaken in thinking that they were going to the village, however. The lane curved to the right and when they rounded the corner, it was to see the very edge of Ogden's frock coat vanishing through a gap in the hedge.

Dumbledore and Harry followed him onto a narrow dirt track bordered by higher and wilder hedgerows than those they had left behind. The path was crooked, rocky, and potholed, sloping down-hill like the last one, and it seemed to be heading for a patch of dark trees a little below them. Sure enough, the track soon opened upat the copse, and Dumbledore and Harry came to a halt behind Ogden, who had stopped and drawn his wand.

Despite the cloudless sky, the old trees ahead cast deep, dark, cool shadows, and it was a few seconds before Harry's eyes discerned the building half-hidden amongst the tangle of trunks. It seemed to him a very strange location to choose for a house, or else an odd decision to leave the trees growing nearby, blocking all light and the

view of the valley below. He wondered whether it was inhabited; its walls were mossy and so many tiles had fallen off the roof that the rafters were visible in places. Nettles grew all around it, their tips reaching the windows, which were tiny and thick with grime. Just as he had concluded that nobody could possibly live there, however, one of the windows was thrown open with a clatter, and a thin trickle of steam or smoke issued from it, as though somebody was cooking.

Ogden moved forward quietly and, it seemed to Harry, rather cautiously. As the dark shadows of the trees slid over him, he stopped again, staring at the front door, to which somebody had nailed a dead snake.

Then there was a rustle and a crack, and a man in rags dropped from the nearest tree, landing on his feet right in front of Ogden, who leapt backward so fast he stood on the tails of his frock coat and stumbled.

"You're not welcome."

The man standing before them had thick hair so matted with dirt it could have been any color. Several of his teeth were missing. His eyes were small and dark and stared in opposite directions. He might have looked comical, but he did not; the effect was frighten-ing, and Harry could not blame Ogden for backing away several more paces before he spoke.

"Er — good morning. I'm from the Ministry of Magic —" "You're not welcome.""Er — I'm sorry — I don't understand you," said Ogden nervously.

Harry thought Ogden was being extremely dim; the stranger was making himself very clear in Harry's opinion, particularly as he was brandishing a wand in one hand and a short and rather bloody knife in the other.

"You understand him, I'm sure, Harry?" said Dumbledore quietly. "Yes, of course," said Harry, slightly nonplussed. "Why can't Ogden

— ?"But as his eyes found the dead snake on the door again, he suddenly understood.

"He's speaking Parseltongue?""Very good," said Dumbledore, nodding and smiling.

The man in rags was now advancing on Ogden, knife in one hand, wand in the other.

"Now, look —" Ogden began, but too late: There was a bang, and Ogden was on the ground, clutching his nose, while a nasty yellowish goo squirted from between his fingers.

"Morfin!" said a loud voice.

An elderly man had come hurrying out of the cottage, banging the door behind him so that the dead snake swung pathetically. This man was shorter than the first, and oddly proportioned; his shoulders were very broad and his arms overlong, which, with his bright brown eyes, short scrubby hair, and wrinkled face, gave him the look of a powerful, aged monkey. He came to a halt beside the man with the knife, who was now cackling with laughter at the sight of Ogden on the ground.

"Ministry, is it?" said the older man, looking down at Ogden. "Correct!" said Ogden angrily, dabbing his face. "And you, I take it, are Mr. Gaunt?""S'right," said Gaunt. "Got you in the face, did he?" "Yes, he did!" snapped Ogden.

"Should've made your presence known, shouldn't you?" said Gaunt aggressively. "This is private property. Can't just walk in here and not expect my son to defend himself.""Defend himself against what, man?" said Ogden, clambering back to his feet.

"Busybodies. Intruders. Muggles and filth." Ogden pointed his wand at his own nose, which was still issuing large amounts of what looked like yellow pus, and the flow stopped at once. Mr. Gaunt spoke out of

the corner of his mouth to Morfin. "Get in the house. Don't argue."This time, ready for it, Harry recognized Parseltongue; even while he could understand what was being said, he distinguished the weird hissing noise that was all Ogden could hear. Morfin seemed to be on the point of disagreeing, but when his father cast him a threatening look he changed his mind, lumbering away to the cottage with an odd rolling gait and slamming the front door behind him, so that the snake swung sadly again.

"It's your son I'm here to see, Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, as he mopped the last of the pus from the front of his coat. "That was Morfin, wasn't it?""At, that was Morfin," said the old man indifferently. "Are you pure-blood?" he asked, suddenly aggressive.

"That's neither here nor there," said Ogden coldly, and Harry felt his respect for Ogden rise. Apparently Gaunt felt rather differently.

He squinted into Ogdens lace and muttered, in what was clearly supposed to be an offensive tone, "Now I come to think about it, I've seen noses like yours down in the village.""I don't doubt it, if your sons been let loose on them," said Og-den. "Perhaps we could continue this discussion inside?""Inside?"

"Yes, Mr. Gaunt. I've already told you. I'm here about Morfin. We sent an owl —""I've no use for owls," said Gaunt. "I don't open letters.""Then you can hardly complain that you get no warning of vis-itors," said Ogden tartly. "I am here following a serious breach of Wizarding law, which occurred here in the early hours of this morning —""All right, all right, all right!" bellowed Gaunt. "Come in the bleeding house, then, and much good it'll do you!"The house seemed to contain three tiny rooms. Two doors led off the main room, which served as kitchen and living room com-bined. Morfin was sitting in a filthy armchair beside the smoking fire, twisting a live adder between his thick fingers and crooning softly at it in Parseltongue:Hissy, hissy, little snakey,

Slither on the floor

You be good to Morfin

Or he'll nail you to the door.

There was a scuffling noise in the corner beside the open win-dow, and Harry realized that there was somebody else in the room, a girl whose ragged gray dress was the exact color of the dirty stonewall behind her. She was standing beside a steaming pot on a grimy black stove, and was fiddling around with the shelf of squalid-looking pots and pans above it. Her hair was lank and dull and she had a plain, pale, rather heavy face. Her eyes, like her brother's, stared in opposite directions. She looked a little cleaner than the two men, but Harry thought he had never seen a more defeated-looking person.

"M'daughter, Merope," said Gaunt grudgingly, as Ogden lookedinquiringly toward her.

"Good morning," said Ogden.

She did not answer, but with a frightened glance at her father turned her back on the room and continued shifting the pots on the shelf behind her.

"Well, Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, "to get straight to the point, we have reason to believe that your son, Morfin, performed magic in front of a Muggle late last night."There was a deafening clang. Merope had dropped one of the pots.

"Pick it up!" Gaunt bellowed at her. "That's it, grub on the floor like some filthy Muggle, what's your wand for, you useless sack of muck?""Mr. Gaunt, please!" said Ogden in a shocked voice, as Merope, who had already picked up the pot, flushed blotchily scarlet, lost her grip on the pot again1 drew her wand shakily from her pocket, pointed it at the pot, and muttered a hasty, inaudible spell that caused

the pot to shoot across the floor away from her, hit the op-posite wall, and crack in two.

Morfin let out a mad cackle of laughter. Gaunt screamed, "Mend it, you pointless lump, mend it!"Merope stumbled across the room, but before she had time to raise her wand, Ogden had lifted his own and said firmly, "Reparo. " The pot mended itself instantly.

Gaunt looked for a moment as though he was going to shout at Ogden, but seemed to think better of it: Instead, he jeered at his daughter, "Lucky the nice man from the Ministry's here, isn't it? Perhaps he'll take you off my hands, perhaps he doesn't mind dirty Squibs. . . ."Without looking at anybody or thanking Ogden, Merope picked up the pot and returned it, hands trembling, to its shelf. She then stood quite still, her back against the wall between the filthy window and the stove, as though she wished for nothing more than to sink into the stone and vanish.

"Mr. Gaunt," Ogden began again, "as I've said: the reason for my visit —""I heard you the first time!" snapped Gaunt. "And so what? Morfin gave a Muggle a bit of what was coming to him — what about it, then?""Morfin has broken Wizarding law," said Ogden sternly.

"'Morfin has broken Wizarding law.'" Gaunt imitated Ogdens voice, making it pompous and singsong. Morfin cackled again. "He taught a filthy Muggle a lesson, that's illegal now, is it?""Yes," said Ogden. "I'm afraid it is."He pulled from an inside pocket a small scroll of parchment and unrolled it.

"What's that, then, his sentence?" said Gaunt, his voice rising angrily.

"It is a summons to the Ministry for a hearing —""Summons! Summons? Who do you think you are, summoning my son anywhere?""I'm Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad," said Ogden.

"And you think we're scum, do you?" screamed Gaunt, advanc-ing on Ogden now, with a dirty yellow-nailed finger pointing at his chest. "Scum who'll come running when the Ministry tells 'em to? Do you know who you're talking to, you filthy little Mudblood, do you?""I was under the impression that I was speaking to Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, looking wary, but standing his ground.

"That's right!" roared Gaunt. For a moment, Harry thought Gaunt was making an obscene hand gesture, but then realized that he was showing Ogden the ugly, black-stoned ring he was wearing on his middle finger, waving it before Ogden's eyes. "See this? See this? Know what it is? Know where it came from? Centuries it's been in our family, that's how far back we go, and pure-blood all the way! Know how much I've been offered for this, with the Peverell coat of arms engraved on the stone?""I've really no idea," said Ogden, blinking as the ring sailed within an inch of his nose, "and it's quite beside the point, Mr. Gaunt. Your son has committed —"With a howl of rage, Gaunt ran toward his daughter. For a split second, Harry thought he was going to throttle her as his hand flew to her throat; next moment, he was dragging her toward Ogden by a gold chain around her neck.

"See this?" he bellowed at Ogden, shaking a heavy gold locket at him, while Merope spluttered and gasped for breath.

"I see it, I see it!" said Ogden hastily.

"Slytherins!" yelled Gaunt. "Salazar Slytherin's! We're his last liv-ing descendants, what do you say to that, eh?""Mr. Gaunt, your daughter!" said Ogden in alarm, but Gaunt had already released Merope; she staggered away from him, back to her corner, massaging her neck and gulping for air.

"So!" said Gaunt triumphantly, as though he had just proved a complicated point beyond all possible dispute. "Don't you go talk-ing to us as if we're dirt on your shoes! Generations of purebloods, wizards all — more than you can say, I don't doubt!"And he spat on

the floor at Ogdens feet. Morfin cackled again. Merope, huddled beside the window, her head bowed and her face hidden by her lank hair, said nothing.

"Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden doggedly, "I am afraid that neither your ancestors nor mine have anything to do with the matter in hand. I am here because of Morfin, Morfin and the Muggle he ac-costed late last night. Our information" — he glanced down at his scroll of parchment — "is that Morfin performed a jinx or hex on the said Muggle, causing him to erupt in highly painful hives."Morfin giggled.

"Be quiet, boy," snarled Gaunt in Parseltongue, and Morfin fell silent again.

"And so what if he did, then?" Gaunt said defiantly to Ogden, "I expect you've wiped the Muggle's filthy face clean for him, and his memory to boot —""That's hardly the point, is it, Mr. Gaunt?" said Ogden. "This was an unprovoked attack on a defenseless —""Ar, I had you marked out as a Muggle-lover the moment I saw you," sneered Gaunt, and he spat on the floor again.

"This discussion is getting us nowhere," said Ogden firmly. "It is clear from your son's attitude that he feels no remorse for his ac-tions." He glanced down at his scroll of parchment again. "Morfin will attend a hearing on the fourteenth of September to answer the charges of using magic in front of a Muggle and causing harm and distress to that same Mugg —"Ogden broke off. The jingling, clopping sounds of horses and loud, laughing voices were drifting in through the open window. Apparently the winding lane to the village passed very close to the copse where the house stood. Gaunt froze, listening, his eyes wide. Morfin hissed and turned his face toward the sounds, his expression hungry. Merope raised her head. Her face, Harry saw, was starkly white.

"My God, what an eyesore!" rang out a girl's voice, as clearly au-dible through the open window as if she had stood in the room be-side

them. "Couldn't your father have that hovel cleared away, Tom?""It's not ours," said a young man's voice. "Everything on the other side of the valley belongs to us, but that cottage belongs to an old tramp called Gaunt, and his children. The son's quite mad, you should hear some of the stories they tell in the village —"The girl laughed. The jingling, clopping noises were growing louder and louder. Morfin made to get out of his armchair. , "Keep your seat," said his father warningly, in Parseltongue.

"Tom," said the girl's voice again, now so close they were clearly right beside the house, "I might be wrong — but has somebody nailed a snake to that door?""Good lord, you're right!" said the man's voice. "That'll be the son, I told you he's not right in the head. Don't look at it, Cecilia, darling.

The jingling and clopping sounds were now growing faint again.

"'Darling,'" whispered Morfin in Parseltongue, looking at his sister. "'Darling, he called her. So he wouldn't have you anyway."Merope was so white Harry felt sure she was going to faint.

"What's that?" said Gaunt sharply, also in Parseltongue, looking from his son to his daughter. "What did you say, Morfin?""She likes looking at that Muggle, "said Morfin, a vicious expression on his face as he stared at his sister, who now looked terrified. "Always in the garden when he passes, peering through the hedge at him, isn't she? And last night — "Merope shook her head jerkily, imploringly, but Morfin went on ruthlessly, "Hanging out of the window waiting for him to ride home, wasn't she?""Hanging out of the window to look at a Muggle?" said Gaunt quietly.

All three of the Gaunts seemed to have forgotten Ogden, who was looking both bewildered and irritated at this renewed outbreak of incomprehensible hissing and rasping.

"Is it true?" said Gaunt in a deadly voice, advancing a step or two toward the terrified girl. "My daughter—pure-blooded descendant of

Salazar Slytherin — hankering after a filthy, dirt-veined Muggle?"Merope shook her head frantically, pressing herself into the wall, apparently unable to speak.

"But I got him, Father!" cackled Morfin. "I got him as he went by and he didn't look so pretty with hives all over him, did he, Merope?""You disgusting little Squib, you filthy little blood traitor!" roared Gaunt, losing control, and his hands closed around his daughter's throat.

Both Harry and Ogden yelled "No!" at the same time; Ogden raised his wand and cried, "Relaskio!"Gaunt was thrown backward, away from his daughter; he tripped over a chair and fell flat on his back. With a roar of rage, Morfin leapt out of his chair and ran at Ogden, brandishing his bloody knife and firing hexes indiscriminately from his wand.

Ogden ran for his life. Dumbledore indicated that they ought to follow and Harry obeyed, Merope's screams echoing in his ears.

Ogden hurtled up the path and erupted onto the main lane, his arms over his head, where he collided with the glossy chestnut horse ridden by a very handsome, dark-haired young man. Both he and the pretty girl riding beside him on a gray horse roared with laughter at the sight of Ogden, who bounced off the horse's flank and set off again, his frock coat flying, covered from head to foot in dust, running pell-mell up the lane.

"I think that will do, Harry," said Dumbledore. He took Harry by the elbow and tugged. Next moment, they were both soaring weightlessly through darkness, until they landed squarely on their feet, back in Dumbledore's now twilit office.

"What happened to the girl in the cottage?" said Harry at once, as Dumbledore lit extra lamps with a flick of his wand. "Merope, or whatever her name was?""Oh, she survived," said Dumbledore, reseating himself behind his desk and indicating that Harry should sit down too. "Ogden Apparated back to the Ministry and returned with

reinforcements within fifteen minutes. Morfin and his father attempted to fight, but both were overpowered, removed from the cottage, and subse-quently convicted by the Wizengamot. Morfin, who already had a record of Muggle attacks, was sentenced to three years in Azkaban. Marvolo, who had injured several Ministry employees addition to Ogden, received six months.""Marvolo?" Harry repeated wonderingly.

"That's right," said Dumbledore, smiling in approval. "I am glad to see you're keeping up.""That old man was — ?"

"Voldemort's grandfather, yes," said Dumbledore. "Marvolo, his son, Morfin, and his daughter, Merope, were the last of the Gaunts, a very ancient Wizarding family noted for a vein of insta-bility and violence that flourished through the generations due to their habit of marrying their own cousins. Lack of sense coupled with a great liking for grandeur meant that the family gold was squandered several generations before Marvolo was born. He, as you saw, was left in squalor and poverty, with a very nasty temper, a fantastic amount of arrogance and pride, and a couple of family heirlooms that he treasured just as much as his son, and rather more than his daughter.""So Merope," said Harry, leaning forward in his chair and star-ing at Dumbledore, "so Merope was . . . Sir, does that mean she was . . . Voldemort's mother?""It does," said Dumbledore. "And it so happens that we also had a glimpse of Voldemort's father. I wonder whether you noticed?""The Muggle Morfin attacked? The man on the horse?""Very good indeed," said Dumbledore, beaming. "Yes, that was Tom Riddle senior, the handsome Muggle who used to go riding past the Gaunt cottage and for whom Merope Gaunt cherished a secret, burning passion.""And they ended up married?" Harry said in disbelief, unable to imagine two people less likely to fall in love.

"I think you are forgetting," said Dumbledore, "that Merope was a witch. I do not believe that her magical powers appeared to their best advantage when she was being terrorized by her father. Once Marvolo and Morfin were safely in Azkaban, once she was alone and

free for the first time in her life, then, I am sure, she was able to give full rein to her abilities and to plot her escape from the desperate life she had led for eighteen years.""Can you not think of any measure Merope could have taken to make Tom Riddle forget his Muggle companion, and fall in love with her instead?""The Imperius Curse?" Harry suggested. "Or a love potion?""Very good. Personally, I am inclined to think that she used a love potion. I am sure it would have seemed more romantic to her, and I do not think it would have been very difficult, some hot day, when Riddle was riding alone, to persuade him to take a drink of water. In any case, within a few months of the scene we have just witnessed, the village of Little Hangleton enjoyed a tremendous scandal. You can imagine the gossip it caused when the squire's son ran off with the tramp's daughter, Merope.""But the villagers' shock was nothing to Marvolo's. He returned from Azkaban, expecting to find his daughter dutifully awaiting his return with a hot meal ready on his table. Instead, he found a clear inch of dust and her note of farewell, explaining what she had done.""From all that I have been able to discover, he never mentioned her name or existence from that time forth. The shock of her de-sertion may have contributed to his early death — or perhaps he had simply never learned to feed himself. Azkaban had greatly weakened Marvolo, and he did not live to see Morfin return to the cottage.""And Merope? She . .. she died, didn't she? Wasn't Voldemort brought up in an orphanage?""Yes, indeed," said Dumbledore. "We must do a certain amount of guessing here, although I do not think it is difficult to deduce what happened. You see, within a few months of their runaway marriage, Tom Riddle reappeared at the manor house in Little Hangleton without his wife. The rumor flew around the neighbor-hood that he was talking of being 'hoodwinked' and 'taken in.' What he meant, I am sure, is that he had been under an enchant-ment that had now lifted, though I daresay he did not dare use those precise words for fear of being thought insane. When they heard what he was saying, however, the villagers guessed that Merope had lied to Tom Riddle, pretending that she was going to have his baby, and that he had married her for this reason.""But she did have his baby."

"But not until a year after they were married. Tom Riddle left her while she was still pregnant.""What went wrong?" asked Harry. "Why did the love potion stop working?""Again, this is guesswork," said Dumbledore, "but I believe that Merope, who was deeply in love with her husband, could not bear to continue enslaving him by magical means. I believe that she made the choice to stop giving him the potion. Perhaps, besotted as she was, she had convinced herself that he would by now have fallen in love with her in return. Perhaps she thought he would stay for the baby's sake. If so, she was wrong on both counts. He left her, never saw her again, and never troubled to discover what became of his son."The sky outside was inky black and the lamps in Dumbledore's office seemed to glow more brightly than before.

"I think that will do for tonight, Harry," said Dumbledore after a moment or two.

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

He got to his feet, but did not leave.

"Sir ... is it important to know all this about Voldemort's past?""Very important, I think," said Dumbledore.

"And it... it's got something to do with the prophecy?""It has everything to do with the prophecy.""Right," said Harry, a little confused, but reassured all the same.

He turned to go, then another question occurred to him, and he turned back again. "Sir, am I allowed to tell Ron and Hermione everything you've told me?"Dumbledore considered him for a moment, then said, "Yes, I think Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger have proved themselves trust-worthy. But Harry, I am going to ask you to ask them not to repeat any of this to anybody else. It would not be a good idea if word got around how much I know, or suspect, about Lord Voldemort's secrets.""No, sir, I'll make sure it's just Ron and Hermione. Good night."He turned away again, and was almost at the

door when he saw it. Sitting on one of the little spindle-legged tables that supported so many frail-looking silver instruments, was an ugly gold ring set with a large, cracked, black stone.

"Sir," said Harry, staring at it. "That ring—""Yes?" said Dumbledore.

"You were wearing it when we visited Professor Slughorn that night.""So I was," Dumbledore agreed.

"But isn't it... sir, isn't it the same ring Marvolo Gaunt showed Ogden?"Dumbledore bowed his head. "The very same.""But how come — ? Have you always had it?""No, I acquired it very recently," said Dumbledore. "A few days before I came to fetch you from your aunt and uncle's, in fact.""That would be around the time you injured your hand, then, sir?""Around that time, yes, Harry."Harry hesitated. Dumbledore was smiling.

"Sir, how exactly — ?"

"Too late, Harry! You shall hear the story another time. Good night.""Good night, sir."

Chapter 11: Hermione's helping hand

As Hermione had predicted, the sixth years' free periods were not the hours of blissful relaxation Ron had antici-pated, but times in which to attempt to keep up with the vast amount of homework they were being set. Not only were they studying as though they had exams every day, but the lessons them-selves had become more demanding than ever before. Harry barely understood half of what Professor McGonagall said to them these days; even Hermione had had to ask her to repeat instructions once or twice. Incredibly, and to Hermione's increasing resentment, Harry's best subject had suddenly become Potions, thanks to the Half-Blood Prince.

Nonverbal spells were now expected, not only in Defense Against the Dark Arts, but in Charms and Transfiguration too. Harry frequently

looked over at his classmates in the common room or at mealtimes to see them purple in the face and straining as though they had overdosed on U-No-Poo; but he knew that they were really struggling to make spells work without saying incanta-tions aloud. It was a relief to get outside into the greenhouses; they were dealing with more dangerous plants than ever in Herbology, but at least they were still allowed to swear loudly if the Venomous Tentacula seized them unexpectedly from behind.

One result of their enormous workload and the frantic hours of practicing nonverbal spells was that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had so far been unable to find time to go and visit Hagrid. He had stopped coming to meals at the staff table, an ominous sign, and on the few occasions when they had passed him in the corridors or out in the grounds, he had mysteriously failed to notice them or hear their greetings.

"We've got to go and explain," said Hermione, looking up at Hagrid's huge empty chair at the staff table the following Saturday at breakfast.

"We've got Quidditch tryouts this morning!" said Ron. "And we're supposed to be practicing that Aguamenti Charm from Flitwick! Anyway, explain what? How are we going to tell him we hated his stupid subject?""We didn't hate it!" said Hermione.

"Speak for yourself, I haven't forgotten the skrewts," said Ron darkly. "And I'm telling you now, we've had a narrow escape. You didn't hear him going on about his gormless brother — we'd have been teaching Grawp how to tie his shoelaces if we'd stayed.""I hate not talking to Hagrid," said Hermione, looking upset.

"We'll go down after Quidditch," Harry assured her. He too was missing Hagrid, although like Ron he thought that they were bet-ter off without Grawp in their lives. "But trials might take all morning, the number of people who have applied." He felt slightly nervous at

confronting the first hurdle of his Captaincy. "I dunno why the team's this popular all of a sudden.""Oh, come on, Harry," said Hermione, suddenly impatient. "It's not Quidditch that's popular, it's you! You've never been more in-teresting, and frankly, you've never been more fanciable."Ron gagged on a large piece of kipper. Hermione spared him one look of disdain before turning back to Harry.

"Everyone knows you've been telling the truth now, don't they? The whole Wizarding world has had to admit that you were right about Voldemort being back and that you really have fought him twice in the last two years and escaped both times. And now they're calling you 'the Chosen One' — well, come on, can't you see why people are fascinated by you?"Harry was finding the Great Hall very hot all of a sudden, even though the ceiling still looked cold and rainy.

"And you've been through all that persecution from the Ministry when they were trying to make out you were unstable and a liar. You can still see the marks on the back of your hand where that evil woman made you write with your own blood, but you stuck to your story anyway. ...""You can still see where those brains got hold of me in the Min-istry, look," said Ron, shaking back his sleeves.

"And it doesn't hurt that you've grown about a foot over the summer either," Hermione finished, ignoring Ron.

"I'm tall," said Ron inconsequentially.

The post owls arrived, swooping down through rain-flecked windows, scattering everyone with droplets of water. Most people were receiving more post than usual; anxious parents were keen to hear from their children and to reassure them, in turn, that all was well at home. Harry had received no mail since the start of term; his only regular correspondent was now dead and although he had hoped that Lupin might write occasionally, he had so far been disappointed. He was very surprised, therefore, to see the snowy white Hedwig circling amongst all the brown and gray owls. She landed in front of

him carrying a large, square package. A moment later, an identical package landed in front of Ron, crushing beneath it his minuscule and exhausted owl, Pigwidgeon.

"Ha!" said Harry, unwrapping the parcel to reveal a new copy of Advanced Potion-Making, fresh from Flourish and Blotts.

"Oh good," said Hermione, delighted. "Now you can give that graffitied copy back.""Are you mad?" said Harry. "I'm keeping it! Look, I've thought it out —"He pulled the old copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag and tapped the cover with his wand, muttering, "Dijjindo!" The cover fell off. He did the same thing with the brand-new book (Hermione looked scandalized). He then swapped the covers, tapped each, and said, "Reparo!"There sat the Prince's copy, disguised as a new book, and there sat the fresh copy from Flourish and Blotts, looking thoroughly secondhand.

"I'll give Slughorn back the new one, he can't complain, it cost nine Galleons."Hermione pressed her lips together, looking angry and disap-proving, but was distracted by a third owl landing in front of her carrying that day's copy of the Daily Prophet. She unfolded it hastily and scanned the front page.

"Anyone we know dead?" asked Ron in a determinedly casual voice; he posed the same question every time Hermione opened her paper.

"No, but there have been more dementor attacks," said Hermi-one. "And an arrest.""Excellent, who?" said Harry, thinking of Bellatrix Lestrange. "Stan Shunpike," said Hermione.

"What?" said Harry, startled.

"'Stanley Shunpike, conductor on the popular Wizarding con-veyance the Knight Bus, has been arrested on suspicion of Death Eater activity. Mr. Shunpike, 21, was taken into custody late last night after a raid on his Clapham home. . .'""Stan Shunpike, a Death Eater?" said Harry, remembering the spotty youth he had first met three years

before. "No way!""He might have been put under the Imperius Curse," said Ron reasonably. "You never can tell.""It doesn't look like it," said Hermione, who was still reading. "It says here he was arrested after he was overheard talking about the Death Eaters' secret plans in a pub." She looked up with a troubled expression on her face. "If he was under the Imperius Curse, he'd hardly stand around gossiping about their plans, would he?""It sounds like he was trying to make out he knew more than he did," said Ron. "Isn't he the one who claimed he was going to be-come Minister of Magic when he was trying to chat up those veela?""Yeah, that's him," said Harry. "I dunno what they're playing at, taking Stan seriously.""They probably want to look as though they're doing some-thing," said Hermione, frowning. "People are terrified — you know the Patil twins' parents want them to go home? And Eloise Midgen has already been withdrawn. Her father picked her up last night.""What!" said Ron, goggling at Hermione. "But Hogwarts is safer than their homes, bound to be! We've got Aurors, and all those extra protective spells, and we've got Dumbledore!""I don't think we've got him all the time," said Hermione very quietly, glancing toward the staff table over the top of the Prophet. "Haven't you noticed? His seat's been empty as often as Hagrid's this past week."Harry and Ron looked up at the staff table. The headmaster's chair was indeed empty. Now Harry came to think of it, he had not seen Dumbledore since their private lesson a week ago.

"I think he's left the school to do something with the Order," said Hermione in a low voice. "I mean . . . it's all looking serious, isn't it?"Harry and Ron did not answer, but Harry knew that they were all thinking the same thing. There had been a horrible incident the day before, when Hannah Abbott had been taken out of Herbology to be told her mother had been found dead. They had not seen Hannah since.

When they left the Gryffindor table five minutes later to head down to the Quidditch pitch, they passed Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil. Remembering what Hermione had said about the Patil twins' parents

wanting them to leave Hogwarts, Harry was unsurprised to see that the two best friends were whispering to-gether, looking distressed. What did surprise him was that when Ron drew level with them, Parvati suddenly nudged Lavender, who looked around and gave Ron a wide smile. Ron blinked at her, then returned the smile uncertainly. His walk instantly became something more like a strut. Harry resisted the temptation to laugh, re-membering that Ron had refrained from doing so after Malfoy had broken Harry's nose; Hermione, however, looked cold and distant all the way down to the stadium through the cool, misty drizzle, and departed to find a place in the stands without wishing Ron good luck.

As Harry had expected, the trials took most of the morning. Half of Gryffindor House seemed to have turned up, from first years who were nervously clutching a selection of the dreadful old school brooms, to seventh years who towered over the rest, looking coolly intimidating. The latter included a large, wiry-haired boy Harry recognized immediately from the Hogwarts Express.

"We met on the train, in old Sluggy's compartment," he said confidently, stepping out of the crowd to shake Harry's hand. "Cormac McLaggen, Keeper.""You didn't try out last year, did you?" asked Harry, taking note of the breadth of McLaggen and thinking that he would probably block all three goal hoops without even moving.

"I was in the hospital wing when they held the trials," said McLaggen, with something of a swagger. "Ate a pound of doxy eggs for a bet.""Right," said Harry. "Well. . . if you wait over there ..." He pointed over to the edge of the pitch, close to where Hermi-one was sitting. He thought he saw a flicker of annoyance pass over McLaggen's face and wondered whether McLaggen expected pref-erential treatment because they were both "old Sluggy's" favorites. Harry decided to start with a basic test, asking all applicants for the team to divide into groups of ten and fly once around the pitch. This was a good decision: the first ten was made up of first years, and it could not have

been plainer that they had hardly ever flown before. Only one boy managed to remain airborne for more than a few seconds, and he was so surprised he promptly crashed into one of the goal posts.

The second group was comprised of ten of the silliest girls Harry had ever encountered, who, when he blew his whistle, merely fell about giggling and clutching one another. Romilda Vane was amongst them. When he told them to leave the pitch, they did so quite cheerfully and went to sit in the stands to heckle everyone else.

The third group had a pileup halfway around the pitch. Most of the fourth group had come without broomsticks. The fifth group were Hufflepuffs.

"If there's anyone else here who's not from Gryffindor," roared Harry, who was starting to get seriously annoyed, "leave now, please!

There was a pause, then a couple of little Ravenclaws went sprinting off the pitch, snorting with laughter.

After two hours, many complaints, and several tantrums, one involving a crashed Comet Two Sixty and several broken teeth, Harry had found himself three Chasers: Katie Bell, returned to the team after an excellent trial; a new find called Demelza Robins, who was particularly good at dodging Bludgers; and Ginny Weasley, who had outflown all the competition and scored seventeen goals to boot. Pleased though he was with his choices, Harry had also shouted himself hoarse at the many complainers and was now enduring a similar battle with the rejected Beaters.

"That's my final decision and if you don't get out of the way of the Keepers I'll hex you," he bellowed.

Neither of his chosen Beaters had the old brilliance of Fred and George, but he was still reasonably pleased with them: Jimmy Peakes, a short but broad-chested third-year boy who had managed to raise a lump the size of an egg on the back of Harry's head with a

ferociously hit Bludger, and Ritchie Coote, who looked weedy but aimed well. They now joined Katie, Demelza, and Ginny in the stands to watch the selection of their last team member.

Harry had deliberately left the trial of the Keepers until last, hoping for an emptier stadium and less pressure on all concerned. Unfortunately, however, all the rejected players and a number of people who had come down to watch after a lengthy breakfast had joined the crowd by now, so that it was larger than ever. As each Keeper flew up to the goal hoops, the crowd roared and jeered in equal measure. Harry glanced over at Ron, who had always had a problem with nerves; Harry had hoped that winning their final match last term might have cured it, but apparently not: Ron was a delicate shade of green.

None of the first five applicants saved more than two goals apiece. To Harry's great disappointment, Cormac McLaggen saved four penalties out of five. On the last one, however, he shot off in completely the wrong direction; the crowd laughed and booed and McLaggen returned to the ground grinding his teeth.

Ron looked ready to pass out as he mounted his Cleansweep Eleven. "Good luck!" cried a voice from the stands. Harry looked around, expecting to see Hermione, but it was Lavender Brown. He would have quite liked to have hidden his face in his hands, as she did a moment later, but thought that as the Captain he ought to show slightly more grit, and so turned to watch Ron do his trial.

Yet he need not have worried: Ron saved one, two, three, four, five penalties in a row. Delighted, and resisting joining in the cheers of the crowd with difficulty, Harry turned to McLaggen to tell him that, most unfortunately, Ron had beaten him, only to find McLaggen's red face inches from his own. He stepped back hastily.

"His sister didn't really try," said McLaggen menacingly. There was a vein pulsing in his temple like the one Harry had often ad-mired in

Uncle Vernon's. "She gave him an easy save.""Rubbish," said Harry coldly. "That was the one he nearly missed."McLaggen took a step nearer Harry, who stood his ground this time.

"Give me another go."

"No," said Harry. "You've had your go. You saved four. Ron saved five. Ron's Keeper, he won it fair and square. Get out of my way."He thought for a moment that McLaggen might punch him, but he contented himself with an ugly grimace and stormed away, growling what sounded like threats to thin air.

Harry turned around to find his new team beaming at him.

"Well done," he croaked. "You flew really well —""You did brilliantly, Ron!"

This time it really was Hermione running toward them from the stands; Harry saw Lavender walking off the pitch, arm in arm with Parvati, a rather grumpy expression on her face. Ron looked extremely pleased with himself and even taller than usual as he grinned at the team and at Hermione.

After fixing the time of their first full practice for the following Thursday, Harry, Ron, and Hermione bade good-bye to the rest of the team and headed off toward Hagrid's. A watery sun was trying to break through the clouds now and it had stopped drizzling at last. Harry felt extremely hungry; he hoped there would be some-thing to eat at Hagrid's.

"I thought I was going to miss that fourth penalty," Ron was say-ing happily. "Tricky shot from Demelza, did you see, had a bit of spin on it —""Yes, yes, you were magnificent," said Hermione, looking amused.

"I was better than that McLaggen anyway," said Ron in a highly satisfied voice. "Did you see him lumbering off in the wrong direc-tion on his fifth? Looked like he'd been Confunded. ..."To Harry's surprise,

Hermione turned a very deep shade of pink at these words. Ron noticed nothing; he was too busy describing each of his other penalties in loving detail.

The great gray hippogriff, Buckbeak, was tethered in front of Hagrid's cabin. He clicked his razor-sharp beak at their approach and turned his huge head toward them.

"Oh dear," said Hermione nervously. "He's still a bit scary, isn't he?""Come off it, you've ridden him, haven't you?" said Ron. Harry stepped forward and bowed low to the hippogriff without breaking eye contact or blinking. After a few seconds, Buckbeak sank into a bow too.

"How are you?" Harry asked him in a low voice, moving for-ward to stroke the feathery head. "Missing him? But you're okay here with Hagrid, aren't you?""Oi!" said a loud voice.

Hagrid had come striding around the corner of his cabin wearing a large flowery apron and carrying a sack of potatoes. His enormous boarhound, Fang, was at his heels; Fang gave a booming bark and bounded forward.

"Git away from him! He'll have yer fingers — oh. It's yeh lot."Fang was jumping up at Hermione and Ron, attempting to lick their ears. Hagrid stood and looked at them all for a split second, then turned and strode into his cabin, slamming the door behind him.

"Oh dear!" said Hermione, looking stricken.

"Don't worry about it," said Harry grimly. He walked over to the door and knocked loudly. "Hagrid! Open up, we want to talk to you!"There was no sound from within.

"If you don't open the door, we'll blast it open!" Harry said, pulling out his wand.

"Harry!" said Hermione, sounding shocked. "You can't pos-sibly —""Yeah, I can!" said Harry. "Stand back —"But before he could say anything else, the door flew open again as Harry had known it would, and there stood Hagrid, glowering down at him and looking, despite the flowery apron, positively alarming.

"I'm a teacher!" he roared at Harry. "A teacher, Potter! How dare yeh threaten ter break down my door!""I'm sorry, sir" said Harry, emphasizing the last word as he stowed his wand inside his robes.

Hagrid looked stunned. "Since when have yeh called me 'sir'?""Since when have you called me 'Potter'?""Oh, very clever," growled Hagrid. "Very amusin'. That's me outsmarted, innit? All righ', come in then, yeh ungrateful little . . ."Mumbling darkly, he stood back to let them pass. Hermione scurried in after Harry, looking rather frightened.

"Well?" said Hagrid grumpily, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down around his enormous wooden table, Fang laying his head im-mediately upon Harry's knee and drooling all over his robes. "What's this? Feelin' sorry for me? Reckon I'm lonely or summat?""No," said Harry at once. "We wanted to see you.""We've missed you!" said Hermione tremulously.

"Missed me, have yeh?" snorted Hagrid. "Yeah. Righ'."He stomped around, brewing up tea in his enormous copper kettle, muttering all the while. Finally he slammed down three bucket-sized mugs of mahogany-brown tea in front of them and a plate of his rock cakes. Harry was hungry enough even for Hagrid's cooking, and took one at once.

"Hagrid," said Hermione timidly, when he joined them at the table and started peeling his potatoes with a brutality that sug-gested that each tuber had done him a great personal wrong, "we really wanted to carry on with Care of Magical Creatures, you know." Hagrid gave another great snort. Harry rather thought some bo-geys landed on

the potatoes, and was inwardly thankful that they were not staying for dinner.

"We did!" said Hermione. "But none of us could fit it into our schedules!""Yeah. Righ'," said Hagrid again.

There was a funny squelching sound and they all looked around: Hermione let out a tiny shriek, and Ron leapt out of his seat and hurried around the table away from the large barrel standing in the corner that they had only just noticed. It was full of what looked like foot-long maggots, slimy, white, and writhing.

"What are they, Hagrid?" asked Harry, trying to sound interested rather than revolted, but putting down his rock cake all the same.

"Jus' giant grubs," said Hagrid.

"And they grow into ... ?" said Ron, looking apprehensive.

"They won' grow inter nuthin'," said Hagrid. "I got 'em ter feed ter Aragog."And without warning, he burst into tears.

"Hagrid!" cried Hermione, leaping up, hurrying around the table the long way to avoid the barrel of maggots, and putting an arm around his shaking shoulders. "What is it?""It's. . . him . .." gulped Hagrid, his beetle-black eyes stream-ing as he mopped his face with his apron. "It's . . . Aragog. ... I think he's dyin'. . , . He got ill over the summer an' he's not gettin' better.... I don' know what I'll do if he ... if he ... We've bin tergether so long. ..."Hermione patted Hagrid's shoulder, looking at a complete loss for anything to say. Harry knew how she felt. He had known Ha-grid to present a vicious baby dragon with a teddy bear, seen him croon over giant scorpions with suckers and stingers, attempt to reason with his brutal giant of a half-brother, but this was perhaps the most incomprehensible of all his monster fancies: the gigantic talking spider, Aragog, who dwelled deep in the Forbidden Forest and which he and Ron had only narrowly escaped four years previously.

"Is there — is there anything we can do?" Hermione asked, ig-noring Ron's frantic grimaces and head-shakings.

"I don' think there is, Hermione," choked Hagrid, attempting to stem the flood of his tears. "See, the rest o' the tribe ... Aragog's family . . . they're gettin' a bit funny now he's ill... bit restive ...""Yeah, I think we saw a bit of that side of them," said Ron in an undertone.

"... I don' reckon it'd be safe fer anyone but me ter go near the colony at the mo'," Hagrid finished, blowing his nose hard on his apron and looking up. "But thanks fer offerin', Hermione. ... It means a lot. . .."After that, the atmosphere lightened considerably, for although neither Harry nor Ron had shown any inclination to go and feed giant grubs to a murderous, gargantuan spider, Hagrid seemed to take it for granted that they would have liked to have done and be-came his usual self once more.

"Ar, I always knew yeh'd find it hard ter squeeze me inter yer timetables," he said gruffly, pouring them more tea. "Even if yeh applied fer Time-Turners —""We couldn't have done," said Hermione. "We smashed the en-tire stock of Ministry Time-Turners when we were there last sum-mer. It was in the Daily Prophet.""Ar, well then," said Hagrid. "There's no way yeh could've done it. ... I'm sorry I've bin — yeh know — I've jus' bin worried about Aragog ... an I did wonder whether, if Professor Grubbly-Plank had bin teachin' yeh —"At which all three of them stated categorically and untruthfully that Professor Grubbly-Plank, who had substituted for Hagrid a few times, was a dreadful teacher, with the result that by the time Hagrid waved them off the premises at dusk, he looked quite cheerful.

"I'm starving," said Harry, once the door had closed behind them and they were hurrying through the dark and deserted grounds; he had abandoned the rock cake after an ominous crack-ing noise from one of his back teeth. "And I've got that detention with Snape tonight, I haven't got much time for dinner. ..."As they came into the castle they spotted Cormac McLaggen en-tering the Great Hall. It took him two

attempts to get through the doors; he ricocheted off the frame on the first attempt. Ron merely guffawed gloatingly and strode off into the Hall after him, but Harry caught Hermione's arm and held her back.

"What?" said Hermione defensively.

"If you ask me," said Harry quietly, "McLaggen looks like he was Confunded this morning. And he was standing right in front of where you were sitting."Hermione blushed.

"Oh, all right then, I did it," she whispered. "But you should have heard the way he was talking about Ron and Ginny! Any-way, he's got a nasty temper, you saw how he reacted when he didn't get in — you wouldn't have wanted someone like that on the team.""No," said Harry. "No, I suppose that's true. But wasn't that dis-honest, Hermione? I mean, you're a prefect, aren't you?""Oh, be quiet," she snapped, as he smirked.

"What are you two doing?" demanded Ron, reappearing in the doorway to the Great Hall and looking suspicious.

"Nothing," said Harry and Hermione together, and they hurried after Ron. The smell of roast beef made Harry's stomach ache with hunger, but they had barely taken three steps toward the Gryffindor table when Professor Slughorn appeared in front of them, blocking their path.

"Harry, Harry, just the man I was hoping to see!" he boomed ge-nially, twiddling the ends of his walrus mustache and puffing out his enormous belly, "I was hoping to catch you before dinner! What do you say to a spot of supper tonight in my rooms instead? We're having a little party, just a few rising stars, I've got McLaggen com-ing and Zabini, the charming Melinda Bobbin — I don't know whether you know her? Her family owns a large chain of apothe-caries — and, of course, I hope very much that Miss Granger will favor me by coming too."Slughorn made Hermione a little bow as he finished speaking. It

was as though Ron was not present; Slughorn did not so much as look at him.

"I can't come, Professor," said Harry at once. "I've got a deten-tion with Professor Snape.""Oh dear!" said Slughorn, his face falling comically. "Dear, dear, I was counting on you, Harry! Well, now, I'll just have to have a word with Severus and explain the situation. I'm sure I'll be able to per-suade him to postpone your detention. Yes, I'll see you both later!" He bustled away out of the Hall.

"He's got no chance of persuading Snape," said Harry, the mo-ment Slughorn was out of earshot. "This detentions already been postponed once; Snape did it for Dumbledore, but he won't do it for anyone else.""Oh, I wish you could come, I don't want to go on my own!" said Hermione anxiously; Harry knew that she was thinking about McLaggen.

"I doubt you'll be alone, Ginny'll probably be invited," snapped Ron, who did not seem to have taken kindly to being ignored by Slughorn.

After dinner they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower. The common room was very crowded, as most people had finished dinner by now, but they managed to find a free table and sat down; Ron, who had been in a bad mood ever since the encounter with Slughorn, folded his arms and frowned at the ceiling. Hermione reached out for a copy of the Evening Prophet, which somebody had left abandoned on a chair.

"Anything new?" said Harry.

"Not really. . ." Hermione had opened the newspaper and was scanning the inside pages. "Oh, look, your dad's in here, Ron — he's all right!" she added quickly, for Ron had looked around in alarm. "It just says he's been to visit the Malfoys' house. 'This sec-ond search of the Death Eaters residence does not seem to have yielded any results. Arthur Weasley of the Office for the Detection and Confis-cation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects said

that his team had been acting upon a confidential tip-off.""Yeah, mine!" said Harry. "I told him at Kings Cross about Malfoy and that thing he was trying to get Borgin to fix! Well, if it's not at their house, he must have brought whatever it is to Hogwarts with him —""But how can he have done, Harry?" said Hermione, putting down the newspaper with a surprised look. "We were all searched when we arrived, weren't we?""Were you?" said Harry, taken aback. "I wasn't!""Oh no, of course you weren't, I forgot you were late. . .. Well, Filch ran over all of us with Secrecy Sensors when we got into the entrance hall. Any Dark object would have been found, I know for a fact Crabbe had a shrunken head confiscated. So you see, Malfoy can't have brought in anything dangerous!"Momentarily stymied, Harry watched Ginny Weasley playing with Arnold the Pygmy Puff for a while before seeing a way around this objection.

"Someone's sent it to him by owl, then," he said. "His mother or someone.""All the owls are being checked too," said Hermione. "Filch told us so when he was jabbing those Secrecy Sensors everywhere he could reach."Really stumped this time, Harry found nothing else to say. There did not seem to be any way Malfoy could have brought a dangerous or Dark object into the school. He looked hopefully at Ron, who was sitting with his arms folded, staring over at Lavender Brown.

"Can you think of any way Malfoy — ?""Oh, drop it, Harry," said Ron.

"Listen, it's not my fault Slughorn invited Hermione and me to his stupid party, neither of us wanted to go, you know!" said Harry, firing up.

"Well, as I'm not invited to any parties," said Ron, getting to his feet again, "I think I'll go to bed."He stomped off toward the door to the boys' dormitories, leav-ing Harry and Hermione staring after him.

"Harry?" said the new Chaser, Demelza Robins, appearing suddenly at his shoulder. "I've got a message for you.""From Professor Slughorn?" asked Harry, sitting up hopefully.

"No .. . from Professor Snape," said Demelza. Harry's heart sank. "He says you're to come to his office at half past eight tonight to do your detention — er — no matter how many party invita-tions you've received. And he wanted you to know you'll be sorting out rotten flobberworms from good ones, to use in Potions and — and he says there's no need to bring protective gloves.""Right," said Harry grimly. "Thanks a lot, Demelza."

Chapter 11 Hermione's helping hand

As Hermione had predicted, the sixth years' free periods were not the hours of blissful relaxation Ron had antici-pated, but times in which to attempt to keep up with the vast amount of homework they were being set. Not only were they studying as though they had exams every day, but the lessons them-selves had become more demanding than ever before. Harry barely understood half of what Professor McGonagall said to them these days; even Hermione had had to ask her to repeat instructions once or twice. Incredibly, and to Hermione's increasing resentment, Harry's best subject had suddenly become Potions, thanks to the Half-Blood Prince.

Nonverbal spells were now expected, not only in Defense Against the Dark Arts, but in Charms and Transfiguration too. Harry frequently looked over at his classmates in the common room or at mealtimes to see them purple in the face and straining as though they had overdosed on U-No-Poo; but he knew that they were really struggling to make spells work without saying incanta-tions aloud. It was a relief to get outside into the greenhouses; they were dealing with more dangerous plants than ever in Herbology, but at least they were still allowed to swear loudly if the Venomous Tentacula seized them unexpectedly from behind.

One result of their enormous workload and the frantic hours of practicing nonverbal spells was that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had so far been unable to find time to go and visit Hagrid. He had stopped coming to meals at the staff table, an ominous sign, and on the few occasions when they had passed him in the corridors or out in the grounds, he had mysteriously failed to notice them or hear their greetings.

"We've got to go and explain," said Hermione, looking up at Hagrid's huge empty chair at the staff table the following Saturday at breakfast.

"We've got Quidditch tryouts this morning!" said Ron. "And we're supposed to be practicing that Aguamenti Charm from Flitwick! Anyway, explain what? How are we going to tell him we hated his stupid subject?""We didn't hate it!" said Hermione.

"Speak for yourself, I haven't forgotten the skrewts," said Ron darkly. "And I'm telling you now, we've had a narrow escape. You didn't hear him going on about his gormless brother — we'd have been teaching Grawp how to tie his shoelaces if we'd stayed.""I hate not talking to Hagrid," said Hermione, looking upset.

"We'll go down after Quidditch," Harry assured her. He too was missing Hagrid, although like Ron he thought that they were bet-ter off without Grawp in their lives. "But trials might take all morning, the number of people who have applied." He felt slightly nervous at confronting the first hurdle of his Captaincy. "I dunno why the team's this popular all of a sudden.""Oh, come on, Harry," said Hermione, suddenly impatient. "It's not Quidditch that's popular, it's you! You've never been more in-teresting, and frankly, you've never been more fanciable."Ron gagged on a large piece of kipper. Hermione spared him one look of disdain before turning back to Harry.

"Everyone knows you've been telling the truth now, don't they? The whole Wizarding world has had to admit that you were right about Voldemort being back and that you really have fought him twice in the last two years and escaped both times. And now they're calling you 'the Chosen One' — well, come on, can't you see why people are fascinated by you?"Harry was finding the Great Hall very hot all of a sudden, even though the ceiling still looked cold and rainy.

"And you've been through all that persecution from the Ministry when they were trying to make out you were unstable and a liar. You can still see the marks on the back of your hand where that evil woman made you write with your own blood, but you stuck to your story anyway. ...""You can still see where those brains got hold of me in the Min-istry, look," said Ron, shaking back his sleeves.

"And it doesn't hurt that you've grown about a foot over the summer either," Hermione finished, ignoring Ron.

"I'm tall," said Ron inconsequentially.

The post owls arrived, swooping down through rain-flecked windows, scattering everyone with droplets of water. Most people were receiving more post than usual; anxious parents were keen to hear from their children and to reassure them, in turn, that all was well at home. Harry had received no mail since the start of term; his only regular correspondent was now dead and although he had hoped that Lupin might write occasionally, he had so far been disappointed. He was very surprised, therefore, to see the snowy white Hedwig circling amongst all the brown and gray owls. She landed in front of him carrying a large, square package. A moment later, an identical package landed in front of Ron, crushing beneath it his minuscule and exhausted owl, Pigwidgeon.

"Ha!" said Harry, unwrapping the parcel to reveal a new copy of Advanced Potion-Making, fresh from Flourish and Blotts.

"Oh good," said Hermione, delighted. "Now you can give that graffitied copy back.""Are you mad?" said Harry. "I'm keeping it! Look, I've thought it out —"He pulled the old copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag and tapped the cover with his wand, muttering, "Dijjindo!" The cover fell off. He did the same thing with the brand-new book (Hermione looked scandalized). He then swapped the covers, tapped each, and said, "Reparo!"There sat the Prince's copy, disguised as a new book, and there sat the fresh copy from Flourish and Blotts, looking thoroughly secondhand.

"I'll give Slughorn back the new one, he can't complain, it cost nine Galleons."Hermione pressed her lips together, looking angry and disap-proving, but was distracted by a third owl landing in front of her carrying that day's copy of the Daily Prophet. She unfolded it hastily and scanned the front page.

"Anyone we know dead?" asked Ron in a determinedly casual voice; he posed the same question every time Hermione opened her paper.

"No, but there have been more dementor attacks," said Hermi-one. "And an arrest.""Excellent, who?" said Harry, thinking of Bellatrix Lestrange. "Stan Shunpike," said Hermione.

"What?" said Harry, startled.

"'Stanley Shunpike, conductor on the popular Wizarding con-veyance the Knight Bus, has been arrested on suspicion of Death Eater activity. Mr. Shunpike, 21, was taken into custody late last night after a raid on his Clapham home. . .""Stan Shunpike, a Death Eater?" said Harry, remembering the spotty youth he had first met three years before. "No way!""He might have been put under the Imperius Curse," said Ron reasonably. "You never can tell.""It doesn't look like it," said Hermione, who was still reading. "It says here he was arrested after he was overheard talking about the Death Eaters' secret plans in a pub." She looked up with a troubled expression on her face. "If he was under the Imperius Curse, he'd hardly stand around gossiping about their plans, would he?""It sounds like he was trying to make out he knew more than he did," said Ron. "Isn't he the one who claimed he was going to be-come Minister of Magic when he was trying to chat up those veela?""Yeah, that's him," said Harry. "I dunno what they're playing at, taking Stan seriously.""They probably want to look as though they're doing some-thing," said Hermione, frowning. "People are terrified — you know the Patil twins' parents want them to go home? And Eloise Midgen has already been withdrawn. Her father picked her up last night.""What!" said Ron, goggling at Hermione. "But Hogwarts is safer than their homes, bound to be! We've got Aurors, and all those extra protective spells, and we've got Dumbledore!""I don't think we've got him all the time," said Hermione very quietly, glancing toward the staff table over the top of the Prophet. "Haven't you noticed? His seat's been empty as often as Hagrid's this past week."Harry and Ron looked up at the staff table. The headmaster's chair was indeed empty. Now Harry came to

think of it, he had not seen Dumbledore since their private lesson a week ago.

"I think he's left the school to do something with the Order," said Hermione in a low voice. "I mean . . . it's all looking serious, isn't it?"Harry and Ron did not answer, but Harry knew that they were all thinking the same thing. There had been a horrible incident the day before, when Hannah Abbott had been taken out of Herbology to be told her mother had been found dead. They had not seen Hannah since.

When they left the Gryffindor table five minutes later to head down to the Quidditch pitch, they passed Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil. Remembering what Hermione had said about the Patil twins' parents wanting them to leave Hogwarts, Harry was unsurprised to see that the two best friends were whispering to-gether, looking distressed. What did surprise him was that when Ron drew level with them, Parvati suddenly nudged Lavender, who looked around and gave Ron a wide smile. Ron blinked at her, then returned the smile uncertainly. His walk instantly became something more like a strut. Harry resisted the temptation to laugh, re-membering that Ron had refrained from doing so after Malfoy had broken Harry's nose; Hermione, however, looked cold and distant all the way down to the stadium through the cool, misty drizzle, and departed to find a place in the stands without wishing Ron good luck.

As Harry had expected, the trials took most of the morning. Half of Gryffindor House seemed to have turned up, from first years who were nervously clutching a selection of the dreadful old school brooms, to seventh years who towered over the rest, looking coolly intimidating. The latter included a large, wiry-haired boy Harry recognized immediately from the Hogwarts Express.

"We met on the train, in old Sluggy's compartment," he said confidently, stepping out of the crowd to shake Harry's hand. "Cormac McLaggen, Keeper.""You didn't try out last year, did you?"

asked Harry, taking note of the breadth of McLaggen and thinking that he would probably block all three goal hoops without even moving.

"I was in the hospital wing when they held the trials," said McLaggen, with something of a swagger. "Ate a pound of doxy eggs for a bet.""Right," said Harry. "Well. . . if you wait over there ..." He pointed over to the edge of the pitch, close to where Hermi-one was sitting. He thought he saw a flicker of annoyance pass over McLaggen's face and wondered whether McLaggen expected pref-erential treatment because they were both "old Sluggy's" favorites. Harry decided to start with a basic test, asking all applicants for the team to divide into groups of ten and fly once around the pitch. This was a good decision: the first ten was made up of first years, and it could not have been plainer that they had hardly ever flown before. Only one boy managed to remain airborne for more than a few seconds, and he was so surprised he promptly crashed into one of the goal posts.

The second group was comprised of ten of the silliest girls Harry had ever encountered, who, when he blew his whistle, merely fell about giggling and clutching one another. Romilda Vane was amongst them. When he told them to leave the pitch, they did so quite cheerfully and went to sit in the stands to heckle everyone else.

The third group had a pileup halfway around the pitch. Most of the fourth group had come without broomsticks. The fifth group were Hufflepuffs.

"If there's anyone else here who's not from Gryffindor," roared Harry, who was starting to get seriously annoyed, "leave now, please!

There was a pause, then a couple of little Ravenclaws went sprinting off the pitch, snorting with laughter.

After two hours, many complaints, and several tantrums, one in-volving a crashed Comet Two Sixty and several broken teeth, Harry had found himself three Chasers: Katie Bell, returned to the team

after an excellent trial; a new find called Demelza Robins, who was particularly good at dodging Bludgers; and Ginny Weasley, who had outflown all the competition and scored seventeen goals to boot. Pleased though he was with his choices, Harry had also shouted himself hoarse at the many complainers and was now enduring a similar battle with the rejected Beaters.

"That's my final decision and if you don't get out of the way of the Keepers I'll hex you," he bellowed.

Neither of his chosen Beaters had the old brilliance of Fred and George, but he was still reasonably pleased with them: Jimmy Peakes, a short but broad-chested third-year boy who had managed to raise a lump the size of an egg on the back of Harry's head with a ferociously hit Bludger, and Ritchie Coote, who looked weedy but aimed well. They now joined Katie, Demelza, and Ginny in the stands to watch the selection of their last team member.

Harry had deliberately left the trial of the Keepers until last, hoping for an emptier stadium and less pressure on all concerned. Unfortunately, however, all the rejected players and a number of people who had come down to watch after a lengthy breakfast had joined the crowd by now, so that it was larger than ever. As each Keeper flew up to the goal hoops, the crowd roared and jeered in equal measure. Harry glanced over at Ron, who had always had a problem with nerves; Harry had hoped that winning their final match last term might have cured it, but apparently not: Ron was a delicate shade of green.

None of the first five applicants saved more than two goals apiece. To Harry's great disappointment, Cormac McLaggen saved four penalties out of five. On the last one, however, he shot off in completely the wrong direction; the crowd laughed and booed and McLaggen returned to the ground grinding his teeth.

Ron looked ready to pass out as he mounted his Cleansweep Eleven. "Good luck!" cried a voice from the stands. Harry looked around, expecting to see Hermione, but it was Lavender Brown. He would have quite liked to have hidden his face in his hands, as she did a moment later, but thought that as the Captain he ought to show slightly more grit, and so turned to watch Ron do his trial.

Yet he need not have worried: Ron saved one, two, three, four, five penalties in a row. Delighted, and resisting joining in the cheers of the crowd with difficulty, Harry turned to McLaggen to tell him that, most unfortunately, Ron had beaten him, only to find McLaggen's red face inches from his own. He stepped back hastily.

"His sister didn't really try," said McLaggen menacingly. There was a vein pulsing in his temple like the one Harry had often ad-mired in Uncle Vernon's. "She gave him an easy save.""Rubbish," said Harry coldly. "That was the one he nearly missed."McLaggen took a step nearer Harry, who stood his ground this time.

"Give me another go."

"No," said Harry. "You've had your go. You saved four. Ron saved five. Ron's Keeper, he won it fair and square. Get out of my way."He thought for a moment that McLaggen might punch him, but he contented himself with an ugly grimace and stormed away, growling what sounded like threats to thin air.

Harry turned around to find his new team beaming at him.

"Well done," he croaked. "You flew really well —""You did brilliantly, Ron!"

This time it really was Hermione running toward them from the stands; Harry saw Lavender walking off the pitch, arm in arm with Parvati, a rather grumpy expression on her face. Ron looked extremely pleased with himself and even taller than usual as he grinned at the team and at Hermione.

After fixing the time of their first full practice for the following Thursday, Harry, Ron, and Hermione bade good-bye to the rest of the team and headed off toward Hagrid's. A watery sun was trying to break through the clouds now and it had stopped drizzling at last. Harry felt extremely hungry; he hoped there would be some-thing to eat at Hagrid's.

"I thought I was going to miss that fourth penalty," Ron was say-ing happily. "Tricky shot from Demelza, did you see, had a bit of spin on it —""Yes, yes, you were magnificent," said Hermione, looking amused.

"I was better than that McLaggen anyway," said Ron in a highly satisfied voice. "Did you see him lumbering off in the wrong direc-tion on his fifth? Looked like he'd been Confunded. ..."To Harry's surprise, Hermione turned a very deep shade of pink at these words. Ron noticed nothing; he was too busy describing each of his other penalties in loving detail.

The great gray hippogriff, Buckbeak, was tethered in front of Hagrid's cabin. He clicked his razor-sharp beak at their approach and turned his huge head toward them.

"Oh dear," said Hermione nervously. "He's still a bit scary, isn't he?""Come off it, you've ridden him, haven't you?" said Ron. Harry stepped forward and bowed low to the hippogriff without breaking eye contact or blinking. After a few seconds, Buckbeak sank into a bow too.

"How are you?" Harry asked him in a low voice, moving for-ward to stroke the feathery head. "Missing him? But you're okay here with Hagrid, aren't you?""Oi!" said a loud voice.

Hagrid had come striding around the corner of his cabin wearing a large flowery apron and carrying a sack of potatoes. His enormous boarhound, Fang, was at his heels; Fang gave a booming bark and bounded forward.

"Git away from him! He'll have yer fingers — oh. It's yeh lot."Fang was jumping up at Hermione and Ron, attempting to lick their ears. Hagrid stood and looked at them all for a split second, then turned and strode into his cabin, slamming the door behind him.

"Oh dear!" said Hermione, looking stricken.

"Don't worry about it," said Harry grimly. He walked over to the door and knocked loudly. "Hagrid! Open up, we want to talk to you!"There was no sound from within.

"If you don't open the door, we'll blast it open!" Harry said, pulling out his wand.

"Harry!" said Hermione, sounding shocked. "You can't pos-sibly —""Yeah, I can!" said Harry. "Stand back —"But before he could say anything else, the door flew open again as Harry had known it would, and there stood Hagrid, glowering down at him and looking, despite the flowery apron, positively alarming.

"I'm a teacher!" he roared at Harry. "A teacher, Potter! How dare yeh threaten ter break down my door!""I'm sorry, sir" said Harry, emphasizing the last word as he stowed his wand inside his robes.

Hagrid looked stunned. "Since when have yeh called me 'sir'?""Since when have you called me 'Potter'?""Oh, very clever," growled Hagrid. "Very amusin'. That's me outsmarted, innit? All righ', come in then, yeh ungrateful little . . ."Mumbling darkly, he stood back to let them pass. Hermione scurried in after Harry, looking rather frightened.

"Well?" said Hagrid grumpily, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down around his enormous wooden table, Fang laying his head im-mediately upon Harry's knee and drooling all over his robes. "What's this? Feelin' sorry for me? Reckon I'm lonely or summat?""No," said Harry at once. "We wanted to see you.""We've missed you!" said Hermione tremulously.

"Missed me, have yeh?" snorted Hagrid. "Yeah. Righ'."He stomped around, brewing up tea in his enormous copper kettle, muttering all the while. Finally he slammed down three bucket-sized mugs of mahogany-brown tea in front of them and a plate of his rock cakes. Harry was hungry enough even for Hagrid's cooking, and took one at once.

"Hagrid," said Hermione timidly, when he joined them at the table and started peeling his potatoes with a brutality that sug-gested that each tuber had done him a great personal wrong, "we really wanted to carry on with Care of Magical Creatures, you know." Hagrid gave another great snort. Harry rather thought some bo-geys landed on the potatoes, and was inwardly thankful that they were not staying for dinner.

"We did!" said Hermione. "But none of us could fit it into our schedules!""Yeah. Righ'," said Hagrid again.

There was a funny squelching sound and they all looked around: Hermione let out a tiny shriek, and Ron leapt out of his seat and hurried around the table away from the large barrel standing in the corner that they had only just noticed. It was full of what looked like foot-long maggots, slimy, white, and writhing.

"What are they, Hagrid?" asked Harry, trying to sound interested rather than revolted, but putting down his rock cake all the same.

"Jus' giant grubs," said Hagrid.

"And they grow into ... ?" said Ron, looking apprehensive.

"They won' grow inter nuthin'," said Hagrid. "I got 'em ter feed ter Aragog."And without warning, he burst into tears.

"Hagrid!" cried Hermione, leaping up, hurrying around the table the long way to avoid the barrel of maggots, and putting an arm around his shaking shoulders. "What is it?""It's. . . him . .." gulped Hagrid, his

beetle-black eyes stream-ing as he mopped his face with his apron. "It's . . . Aragog. ... I think he's dyin'. . , . He got ill over the summer an' he's not gettin' better.... I don' know what I'll do if he ... if he ... We've bin tergether so long. ..."Hermione patted Hagrid's shoulder, looking at a complete loss for anything to say. Harry knew how she felt. He had known Ha-grid to present a vicious baby dragon with a teddy bear, seen him croon over giant scorpions with suckers and stingers, attempt to reason with his brutal giant of a half-brother, but this was perhaps the most incomprehensible of all his monster fancies: the gigantic talking spider, Aragog, who dwelled deep in the Forbidden Forest and which he and Ron had only narrowly escaped four years previously.

"Is there — is there anything we can do?" Hermione asked, ig-noring Ron's frantic grimaces and head-shakings.

"I don' think there is, Hermione," choked Hagrid, attempting to stem the flood of his tears. "See, the rest o' the tribe ... Aragog's family . . . they're gettin' a bit funny now he's ill... bit restive ...""Yeah, I think we saw a bit of that side of them," said Ron in an undertone.

"... I don' reckon it'd be safe fer anyone but me ter go near the colony at the mo'," Hagrid finished, blowing his nose hard on his apron and looking up. "But thanks fer offerin', Hermione. ... It means a lot. . .."After that, the atmosphere lightened considerably, for although neither Harry nor Ron had shown any inclination to go and feed giant grubs to a murderous, gargantuan spider, Hagrid seemed to take it for granted that they would have liked to have done and be-came his usual self once more.

"Ar, I always knew yeh'd find it hard ter squeeze me inter yer timetables," he said gruffly, pouring them more tea. "Even if yeh applied fer Time-Turners —""We couldn't have done," said Hermione. "We smashed the en-tire stock of Ministry Time-Turners when we were there last sum-mer. It was in the Daily Prophet.""Ar, well then," said Hagrid. "There's no way yeh could've done it. ... I'm sorry I've bin

— yeh know — I've jus' bin worried about Aragog ... an I did wonder whether, if Professor Grubbly-Plank had bin teachin' yeh —"At which all three of them stated categorically and untruthfully that Professor Grubbly-Plank, who had substituted for Hagrid a few times, was a dreadful teacher, with the result that by the time Hagrid waved them off the premises at dusk, he looked quite cheerful.

"I'm starving," said Harry, once the door had closed behind them and they were hurrying through the dark and deserted grounds; he had abandoned the rock cake after an ominous crack-ing noise from one of his back teeth. "And I've got that detention with Snape tonight, I haven't got much time for dinner. ..."As they came into the castle they spotted Cormac McLaggen en-tering the Great Hall. It took him two attempts to get through the doors; he ricocheted off the frame on the first attempt. Ron merely guffawed gloatingly and strode off into the Hall after him, but Harry caught Hermione's arm and held her back.

"What?" said Hermione defensively.

"If you ask me," said Harry quietly, "McLaggen looks like he was Confunded this morning. And he was standing right in front of where you were sitting."Hermione blushed.

"Oh, all right then, I did it," she whispered. "But you should have heard the way he was talking about Ron and Ginny! Any-way, he's got a nasty temper, you saw how he reacted when he didn't get in — you wouldn't have wanted someone like that on the team.""No," said Harry. "No, I suppose that's true. But wasn't that dis-honest, Hermione? I mean, you're a prefect, aren't you?""Oh, be quiet," she snapped, as he smirked.

"What are you two doing?" demanded Ron, reappearing in the doorway to the Great Hall and looking suspicious.

"Nothing," said Harry and Hermione together, and they hurried after Ron. The smell of roast beef made Harry's stomach ache with hunger, but they had barely taken three steps toward the Gryffindor

table when Professor Slughorn appeared in front of them, blocking their path.

"Harry, Harry, just the man I was hoping to see!" he boomed ge-nially, twiddling the ends of his walrus mustache and puffing out his enormous belly, "I was hoping to catch you before dinner! What do you say to a spot of supper tonight in my rooms instead? We're having a little party, just a few rising stars, I've got McLaggen com-ing and Zabini, the charming Melinda Bobbin — I don't know whether you know her? Her family owns a large chain of apothe-caries — and, of course, I hope very much that Miss Granger will favor me by coming too."Slughorn made Hermione a little bow as he finished speaking. It was as though Ron was not present; Slughorn did not so much as look at him.

"I can't come, Professor," said Harry at once. "I've got a deten-tion with Professor Snape.""Oh dear!" said Slughorn, his face falling comically. "Dear, dear, I was counting on you, Harry! Well, now, I'll just have to have a word with Severus and explain the situation. I'm sure I'll be able to per-suade him to postpone your detention. Yes, I'll see you both later!" He bustled away out of the Hall.

"He's got no chance of persuading Snape," said Harry, the mo-ment Slughorn was out of earshot. "This detentions already been postponed once; Snape did it for Dumbledore, but he won't do it for anyone else.""Oh, I wish you could come, I don't want to go on my own!" said Hermione anxiously; Harry knew that she was thinking about McLaggen.

"I doubt you'll be alone, Ginny'll probably be invited," snapped Ron, who did not seem to have taken kindly to being ignored by Slughorn.

After dinner they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower. The common room was very crowded, as most people had finished dinner by now, but they managed to find a free table and sat down; Ron, who had been in a bad mood ever since the encounter with Slughorn,

folded his arms and frowned at the ceiling. Hermione reached out for a copy of the Evening Prophet, which somebody had left abandoned on a chair.

"Anything new?" said Harry.

"Not really. . ." Hermione had opened the newspaper and was scanning the inside pages. "Oh, look, your dad's in here, Ron — he's all right!" she added quickly, for Ron had looked around in alarm. "It just says he's been to visit the Malfoys' house. 'This sec-ond search of the Death Eaters residence does not seem to have yielded any results. Arthur Weasley of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects said that his team had been acting upon a confidential tip-off.'""Yeah, mine!" said Harry. "I told him at Kings Cross about Malfoy and that thing he was trying to get Borgin to fix! Well, if it's not at their house, he must have brought whatever it is to Hogwarts with him —""But how can he have done, Harry?" said Hermione, putting down the newspaper with a surprised look. "We were all searched when we arrived, weren't we?""Were you?" said Harry, taken aback. "I wasn't!""Oh no, of course you weren't, I forgot you were late. . .. Well, Filch ran over all of us with Secrecy Sensors when we got into the entrance hall. Any Dark object would have been found, I know for a fact Crabbe had a shrunken head confiscated. So you see, Malfoy can't have brought in anything dangerous!"Momentarily stymied, Harry watched Ginny Weasley playing with Arnold the Pygmy Puff for a while before seeing a way around this objection.

"Someone's sent it to him by owl, then," he said. "His mother or someone.""All the owls are being checked too," said Hermione. "Filch told us so when he was jabbing those Secrecy Sensors everywhere he could reach."Really stumped this time, Harry found nothing else to say. There did not seem to be any way Malfoy could have brought a dangerous or Dark object into the school. He looked hopefully at Ron, who was sitting with his arms folded, staring over at Lavender Brown.

"Can you think of any way Malfoy — ?""Oh, drop it, Harry," said Ron.

"Listen, it's not my fault Slughorn invited Hermione and me to his stupid party, neither of us wanted to go, you know!" said Harry, firing up.

"Well, as I'm not invited to any parties," said Ron, getting to his feet again, "I think I'll go to bed."He stomped off toward the door to the boys' dormitories, leav-ing Harry and Hermione staring after him.

"Harry?" said the new Chaser, Demelza Robins, appearing suddenly at his shoulder. "I've got a message for you.""From Professor Slughorn?" asked Harry, sitting up hopefully.

"No .. . from Professor Snape," said Demelza. Harry's heart sank. "He says you're to come to his office at half past eight tonight to do your detention — er — no matter how many party invita-tions you've received. And he wanted you to know you'll be sorting out rotten flobberworms from good ones, to use in Potions and — and he says there's no need to bring protective gloves.""Right," said Harry grimly. "Thanks a lot, Demelza."

Chapter 12 Silver and opals

Where was Dumbledore, and what was he doing?

Harry caught sight of the headmaster only twice over the next lew weeks. He rarely appeared at meals anymore, and Harry was sure Hermione was right in thinking that he was leaving the school for days at a time. Had Dumbledore forgotten the lessons he was supposed to be giving Harry? Dumbledore had said that the lessons were leading to something to do with the prophecy; Harry had felt bolstered, comforted, and now he felt slightly abandoned.

Halfway through October came their first trip of the term to Hogsmeade. Harry had wondered whether these trips would still be allowed, given the increasingly tight security measures around the school, but was pleased to know that they were going ahead; it was always good to get out of the castle grounds for a few hours.

Harry woke early on the morning of the trip, which was proving stormy, and whiled away the time until breakfast by reading his copy of Advanced Potion-Making. He did not usually lie in bedreading his textbooks; that sort of behavior, as Ron rightly said, was indecent in anybody except Hermione, who was simply weird that way. Harry felt, however, that the Half-Blood Princes copy of Advanced Potion-Making hardly qualified as a textbook. The more Harry pored over the book, the more he realized how much was in there, not only the handy hints and shortcuts on potions that was earning him such a glowing reputation with Slughorn, but also the imaginative little jinxes and hexes scribbled in the margins, which Harry was sure, judging by the crossings-out and revisions, that the Prince had invented himself.

Harry had already attempted a few of the Prince's self-invented spells. There had been a hex that caused toenails to grow alarmingly fast (he had tried this on Crabbe in the corridor, with very entertaining results); a jinx that glued the tongue to the roof of the mouth (which

he had twice used, to general applause, on an unsuspecting Argus Filch); and, perhaps most useful of all, Muffliato, a spell that filled the ears of anyone nearby with an unidentifiable buzzing, so that lengthy conversations could be held in class with out being overheard. The only person who did not find these charms amusing was Hermione, who maintained a rigidly disapproving expression throughout and refused to talk at all if Harry had used the Muffliato spell on anyone in the vicinity.

Sitting up in bed, Harry turned the book sideways so as to examine more closely the scribbled instructions for a spell that seemed to have caused the Prince some trouble. There were many crossings-out and alterations, but finally, crammed into a corner of the page, the scribble:

Levicorpus (nvbl)

While the wind and sleet pounded relentlessly on the windows, and Neville snored loudly, Harry stared at the letters in brackets. Nvbl . . that had to mean "nonverbal." Harry rather doubted he would be able to bring off this particular spell; he was still having difficulty with nonverbal spells, something Snape had been quick to comment on in every D.A.D.A. class. On the other hand, the Prince had proved a much more effective teacher than Snape so far.

Pointing his wand at nothing in particular, he gave it an upward flick and said Levicorpus! inside his head. "Aaaaaaaargh!"There was a flash of light and the room was full of voices: Everyone had woken up as Ron had let out a yell. Harry sent Advanced Potion-Making flying in panic; Ron was dangling upside down in midair as though an invisible hook had hoisted him up by the ankle.

"Sorry!" yelled Harry, as Dean and Seamus roared with laughter, and Neville picked himself up from the floor, having fallen out of Bed. "Hang on — I'll let you down —"He groped for the potion book and riffled through it in a panic, trying to find the right page; at last he

located it and decipheredthe cramped word underneath the spell: Praying that this was the counter-jinx, Harry thought Liberacorpus! with all his might. There was another flash of light, and Ron fell in a heap onto his mattress.

"Sorry," repeated Harry weakly, while Dean and Seamus continued to roar with laughter.

"Tomorrow," said Ron in a muffled voice, "I'd rather you set the alarm clock."By the time they had got dressed, padding themselves out with several of Mrs. Weasleys hand-knitted sweaters and carrying, cloaks, scarves, and gloves, Ron's shock had subsided and he had decided that Harry's new spell was highly amusing; so amusing, in fact, that he lost no time in regaling Hermione with the story as they sat down for breakfast.

"... and then there was another flash, of light and I landed on the bed again!" Ron grinned, helping himself to sausages.

Hermione had not cracked a smile during this anecdote, and now turned an expression of wintry disapproval upon Harry.

"Was this spell, by any chance, another one from that potion book of yours?" she asked.

Harry frowned at her.

"Always jump to the worst conclusion, don't you?""Was it?"

"Well. . . yeah, it was, but so what?""So you just decided to try out an unknown, handwritten in-cantation and see what would happen?""Why does it matter if it's handwritten?" said Harry, preferring not to answer the rest of the question.

"Because its probably not Ministry of Magic approved," said Hermione. "And also," she added, as Harry and Ron rolled their eyes,

"because I'm starting to think this Prince character was a bit dodgy."Both Harry and Ron shouted her down at once.

"It was a laugh!" said Ron, upending a ketchup bottle over his sausages. "Just a laugh, Hermione, that's all!""Dangling people upside down by the ankle?" said Hermi-one. "Who puts their time and energy into making up spells like that?""Fred and George," said Ron, shrugging, "it's their kind of thing. And, er—""My dad," said Harry. He had only just remembered.

"What?" said Ron and Hermione together.

"My dad used this spell," said Harry. "I — Lupin told me."'This last part was not true; in fact, Harry had seen his father use the spell on Snape, but he had never told Ron and Hermione about that particular excursion into the Pensieve. Now, however, a won-derful possibility occurred to him. Could the Half-Blood Prince possibly be — ?

"Maybe your dad did use it, Harry," said Hermione, "but he's not the only one. We've seen a whole bunch of people use it, in case you've forgotten. Dangling people in the air. Making them float along, asleep, helpless."Harry stared at her. With a sinking feeling, he too remembered the behavior of the Death Eaters at the Quidditch World Cup. Ron came to his aid.

"That was different," he said robustly. "They were abusing it. Harry and his dad were just having a laugh. You don't like the Prince, Hermione," he added, pointing a sausage at her sternly, "because he's better than you at Potions —""It's got nothing to do with that!" said Hermione, her cheeks reddening. "I just think it's very irresponsible to start performing spells when you don't even know what they're for, and stop talking about 'the Prince' as if it's his title, I bet it's just a stupid nickname, and it doesn't seem as though he was a very nice person to me!""I don't see where you get that from," said Harry heatedly. "If he'd been a budding Death Eater he wouldn't have been boasting about being 'half-blood,' would he?"Even as he said it,

Harry remembered that his father had been pure-blood, but he pushed the thought out of his mind; he would worry about that later. . . .

"The Death Eaters can't all be pure-blood, there aren't enough pure-blood wizards left," said Hermione stubbornly. "I expect most of them are half-bloods pretending to be pure. It's only Muggle-borns they hate, they'd be quite happy to let you and Ron join up.""There is no way they'd let me be a Death Eater!" said Ron in-dignantly, a bit of sausage flying off the fork he was now brandish-ing at Hermione and hitting Ernie Macmillan on the head. "My whole family are blood traitors! That's as bad as Muggle-borns to Death Eaters!""And they'd love to have me," said Harry sarcastically. "We'd be best pals if they didn't keep trying to do me in."This made Ron laugh; even Hermione gave a grudging smile, and a distraction arrived in the shape of Ginny.

"Hey, Harry, I'm supposed to give you this."It was a scroll of parchment with Harry's name written upon it in familiar thin, slanting writing.

"Thanks, Ginny. . . It's Dumbledore's next lesson!" Harry told Ron and Hermione, pulling open the parchment and quickly read-ing its contents. "Monday evening!" He felt suddenly light and happy. "Want to join us in Hogsmeade, Ginny?" he asked.

"I'm going with Dean — might see you there," she replied, wav-ing at them as she left.

Filch was standing at the oak front doors as usual, checking off the names of people who had permission to go into Hogsmeade. The process took even longer than normal as Filch was triple-checking everybody with his Secrecy Sensor.

"What does it matter if we're smuggling Dark stuff OUT?" de-manded Ron, eyeing the long thin Secrecy Sensor with apprehen-sion. "Surely you ought to be checking what we bring back IN?"His cheek

earned him a few extra jabs with the Sensor, and he was still wincing as they stepped out into the wind and sleet.

The walk into Hogsmeade was not enjoyable. Harry wrapped his scarf over his lower face; the exposed part soon felt both raw and numb. The road to the village was full of students bent double against the bitter wind. More than once Harry wondered whether they might not have had a better time in the warm common room, and when they finally reached Hogsmeade and saw that Zonko's Joke Shop had been boarded up, Harry took it as confirmation that this trip was not destined to be fun. Ron pointed, with a thickly gloved hand, toward Honeydukes, which was mercifully open, and Harry and Hermione staggered in his wake into the crowded shop.

"Thank God," shivered Ron as they were enveloped by warm, toffee-scented air. "Let's stay here all afternoon.""Harry, m'boy!" said a booming voice from behind them.

"Oh no," muttered Harry. The three of them turned to see Pro-fessor Slughorn, who was wearing an enormous furry hat and an overcoat with matching fur collar, clutching a large bag of crystalized pineapple, and occupying at least a quarter of the shop.

"Harry, that's three of my little suppers you've missed now!" said Slughorn, poking him genially in the chest. "It won't do, m'boy, I'm determined to have you! Miss Granger loves them, don't you?""Yes," said Hermione helplessly, "they're really —""So why don't you come along, Harry?" demanded Slughorn.

"Well, I've had Quidditch practice, Professor," said Harry, who had indeed been scheduling practices every time Slughorn had sent him a little, violet ribbon-adorned invitation. This strategy meant that Ron was not left out, and they usually had a laugh with Ginny, imagining Hermione shut up with McLaggen and Zabini.

"Well, I certainly expect you to win your first match after all the, hard work!" said Slughorn. "But a little recreation never hurt any body.

Now, how about Monday night, you can't possibly want to practice in this weather....""I can't, Professor, I've got — er — an appointment with Profes-sor Dumbledore that evening.""Unlucky again!" cried Slughorn dramatically. "Ah, well . . . you can't evade me forever, Harry!"And with a regal wave, he waddled out of the shop, taking as lit-tle notice of Ron as though he had been a display of Cockroach Clusters.

"I can't believe you've wriggled out of another one," said Hermione, shaking her head. "They're not that bad, you know. . . They're even quite fun sometimes. . . ." But then she caught sight of Ron's expression. "Oh, look — they've got deluxe sugar quills — those would last hours!"Glad that Hermione had changed the subject, Harry showed much more interest in the new extra-large sugar quills than he would normally have done, but Ron continued to look moody and merely shrugged when Hermione asked him where he wanted to go next.

"Let's go to the Three Broomsticks," said Harry. "It'll be warm."They bundled their scarves back over their faces and left the sweetshop. The bitter wind was like knives on their faces after the sugary warmth of Honeydukes. The street was not very busy; no-

body was lingering to chat, just hurrying toward their destinations. The exceptions were two men a little ahead of them, standing just outside the Three Broomsticks. One was very tall and thin; squinting through his rain-washed glasses Harry recognized the barman who worked in the other Hogsmeade pub, the Hog's Head. As Harry, Ron, and Hermione drew closer, the barman drew his cloak more tightly around his neck and walked away, leaving the shorter man to fumble with something in his arms. They were barely feet from him when Harry realized who the man was.

"Mundungus!"

The squat, bandy-legged man with long, straggly, ginger hair jumped and dropped an ancient suitcase, which burst open, releas-ing what looked like the entire contents of a junk shop window.

"Oh, 'ello, 'Arry," said Mundungus Fletcher, with a most un-convincing stab at airiness. "Well, don't let me keep ya."And he began scrabbling on the ground to retrieve the contents of his suitcase with every appearance of a man eager to be gone.

"Are you selling this stuff?" asked Harry, watching Mundungus grab an assortment of grubby-looking objects from the ground.

"Oh, well, gotta scrape a living," said Mundungus. "Gimme that!"Ron had stooped down and picked up something silver.

"Hang on," Ron said slowly. "This looks familiar —""Thank you!" said Mundungus, snatching the goblet out of Ron's hand and stuffing it back into the case. "Well, I'll see you all _ OUCH!"Harry had pinned Mundungus against the wall of the pub by the throat. Holding him fast with one hand, he pulled out his wand.

"Harry!" squealed Hermione.

"You rook that from Sinus's house," said Harry, who was almost nose to nose with Mundungus and was breathing in an unpleasant smell of old tobacco and spirits. "That had the Black family crest on it.""I — no — what — ?" spluttered Mundungus, who was slowly turning purple.

"What did you do, go back the night he died and strip the place?" snarled Harry.

"I — no — "

"Give it to me!"

"Harry, you mustn't!" shrieked Hermione, as Mundungus started to turn blue.

There was a bang, and Harry felt his hands fly off Mundungus's throat. Gasping and spluttering, Mundungus seized his fallen case, then — CRACK— he Disapparated.

Harry swore at the top of his voice, spinning on the spot to see where Mundungus had gone.

"COME BACK, YOU THIEVING — !""There's no point, Harry." Tonks had appeared out of nowhere, her mousy hair wet with sleet.

"Mundungus will probably be in London by now. There's no point yelling.""He's nicked Sirius's stuff! Nicked it!""Yes, but still," said Tonks, who seemed perfectly untroubled by this piece of information. "You should get out of the cold."She watched them go through the door of the Three Broom-sticks. The moment he was inside, Harry burst out, "He was nicking Sirius's stuff!""I know, Harry, but please don't shout, people are staring," whis-pered Hermione. "Go and sit down, I'll get you a drink."Harry was still fuming when Hermione returned to their table a few minutes later holding three bottles of butterbeer.

"Can't the Order control Mundungus?" Harry demanded of the other two in a furious whisper. "Can't they at least stop him steal-ing everything that's not fixed down when he's at headquarters?""Shh!" said Hermione desperately, looking around to make sure nobody was listening; there were a couple of warlocks sitting close by who were staring at Harry with great interest, and Zabini was lolling against a pillar not far away. "Harry, I'd be annoyed too, I know it's your things he's stealing —"Harry gagged on his butterbeer; he had momentarily forgotten that he owned number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"Yeah, it's my stuff!" he said. "No wonder he wasn't pleased to see me! Well, I'm going to tell Dumbledore what's going on, he's the only one who scares Mundungus.""Good idea," whispered Hermione, clearly pleased that Harry was calming down. "Ron, what are you staring at?""Nothing," said Ron, hastily looking away from the bar, but

Harry knew he was trying to catch the eye of the curvy and attractive bar-maid, Madam Rosmerta, for whom he had long nursed a soft spot.

"I expect 'nothing's' in the back getting more firewhisky," said Hermione waspishly.

Ron ignored this jibe, sipping his drink in what he evidently considered to be a dignified silence. Harry was thinking about Sirius, and how he had hated those silver goblets anyway. Hermione drummed her fingers on the table, her eyes flickering between Ron and the bar. The moment Harry drained the last drops in his bot-tle she said, "Shall we call it a day and go back to school, then?"The other two nodded; it had not been a fun trip and the weather was getting worse the longer they stayed. Once again they drew their cloaks tightly around them, rearranged their scarves, pulled on their gloves, then followed Katie Bell and a friend out of the pub and back up the High Street. Harry's thoughts strayed to Ginny as they trudged up the road to Hogwarts through the frozen slush. They had not met up with her, undoubtedly, thought Harry, because she and Dean were cozily closeted in Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop, that haunt of happy couples. Scowling, he bowed his head against the swirling sleet and trudged on.

It was a little while before Harry became aware that the voices of Katie Bell and her friend, which were being carried back to him on the wind, had become shriller and louder. Harry squinted at their indistinct figures. The two girls were having an argument about something Katie was holding in her hand. "It's nothing to do with you, Leanne!" Harry heard Katie say.

They rounded a corner in the lane, sleet coming thick and fast, blurring Harry's glasses. Just as he raised a gloved hand to wipe them, Leanne made to grab hold of the package Katie was holding; Katie tugged it back and the package fell to the ground.

At once, Katie rose into the air, not as Ron had done, suspended comically by the ankle, but gracefully, her arms outstretched, as though she was about to fly. Yet there was something wrong, something eerie. . . . Her hair was whipped around her by the fierce wind, but her eyes were closed and her face was quite empty ofexpression. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Leanne had all halted in their tracks, watching.

Then, six feet above the ground, Katie let out a terrible scream. Her eyes flew open but whatever she could see, or whatever she was feeling, was clearly causing her terrible anguish. She screamed and screamed; Leanne started to scream too and seized Katie's ankles, trying to tug her back to the ground. Harry, Ron, and Hermione rushed forward to help, but even as they grabbed Katie's legs, she fell on top of them; Harry and Ron managed to catch her but she was writhing so much they could hardly hold her. Instead they low-ered her to the ground where she thrashed and screamed, appar-ently unable to recognize any of them.

Harry looked around; the landscape seemed deserted.

"Stay there!" he shouted at the others over the howling wind. "I'm going for help!"He began to sprint toward the school; he had never seen anyone behave as Katie had just behaved and could not think what had caused it; he hurtled around a bend in the lane and collided with what seemed to be an enormous bear on its hind legs.

"Hagrid!" he panted, disentangling himself from the hedgerow into which he had fallen.

"Harry!" said Hagrid, who had sleet trapped in his eyebrows and beard, and was wearing his great, shaggy beaverskin coat. "Jus' bin visitin' Grawp, he's comin' on so well yeh wouldn' —""Hagrid, someone's hurt back there, or cursed, or something —""Wha ?" said Hagrid, bending lower to hear what Harry was say-ing over the raging wind.

"Someone's been cursed!" bellowed Harry. :, ."'Cursed? Who's bin cursed — not Ron? Hermione?" :"No, it's not them, it's Katie Bell — this way . . ."Together they ran back along the lane. It took them no time to find the little group of people around Katie, who was still writhing and screaming on the ground; Ron, Hermione, and Leanne were all trying to quiet her.

"Get back!" shouted Hagrid. "Lemme see her!""Something's happened to her!" sobbed Leanne. "I don't know what —"Hagrid stared at Katie for a second, then without a word, bent down, scooped her into his arms, and ran off toward the castle with her. Within seconds, Katie's piercing screams had died away and the only sound was the roar of the wind.

Hermione hurried over to Katie's wailing friend and put an arm around her.

"It's Leanne, isn't it?"

The girl nodded.

"Did it just happen all of a sudden, or — ?""It was when that package tore," sobbed Leanne, pointing at the now sodden brown-paper package on the ground, which had split open to reveal a greenish glitter. Ron bent down, his hand out-stretched, but Harry seized his arm and pulled him back.

"Don't touch it!"

He crouched down. An ornate opal necklace was visible, poking out of the paper.

"I've seen that before," said Harry, staring at the thing. "It was on display in Borgin and Burkes ages ago. The label said it was cursed. Katie must have touched it." He looked up at Leanne, who had started to shake uncontrollably. "How did Katie get hold of this?""Well, that's why we were arguing. She came back from the bathroom in the

Three Broomsticks holding it, said it was a sur-prise for somebody at Hogwarts and she had to deliver it. She looked all funny when she said it. ... Oh no, oh no, I bet she'd been Imperiused and I didn't realize!"Leanne shook with renewed sobs. Hermione patted her shoulder gently.

"She didn't say who'd given it to her, Leanne?""No . . . she wouldn't tell me . . . and I said she was being stupid and not to take it up to school, but she just wouldn't listen and . . . and then I tried to grab it from her . . . and — and —"Leanne let out a wail of despair.

"We'd better get up to school," said Hermione, her arm still around Leanne. "We'll be able to find out how she is. Come on. . . ."Harry hesitated for a moment, then pulled his scarf from around his face and, ignoring Ron's gasp, carefully covered the necklace in it and picked it up.

"We'll need to show this to Madam Pomfrey," he said.

As they followed Hermione and Leanne up the road, Harry was thinking furiously. They had just entered the grounds when he spoke, unable to keep his thoughts to himself any longer.

"Malfoy knows about this necklace. It was in a case at Borgin and Burkes four years ago, I saw him having a good look at it while I was hiding from him and his dad. This is what he was buying that day when we followed him! He remembered it and he went back for it!" ,"I — I dunno, Harry," said Ron hesitantly. "Loads of people goto Borgin and Burkes . . . and didn't that girl say Katie got it in the girls' bathroom?""She said she came back from the bathroom with it, she didn't necessarily get it in the bathroom itself—""McGonagall!" said Ron warningly.

Harry looked up. Sure enough, Professor McGonagall was hur-rying down the stone steps through swirling sleet to meet them.

"Hagrid says you four saw what happened to Katie Bell — upstairs to my office at once, please! What's that you're holding, Potter?""It's the thing she touched," said Harry.

"Good lord," said Professor McGonagall, looking alarmed as she took the necklace from Harry. "No, no, Filch, they're with me!" she added hastily, as Filch came shuffling eagerly across the entrance hall holding his Secrecy Sensor aloft. "Take this necklace to Profes-sor Snape at once, but be sure not to touch it, keep it wrapped in the scarf!"Harry and the others followed Professor McGonagall upstairs and into her office. The sleet-spattered windows were rattling in their frames, and the room was chilly despite the fire crackling in the grate. Professor McGonagall closed the door and swept around her desk to face Harry, Ron, Hermione, and the still sobbing Leanne.

"Well?" she said sharply. "What happened?"Haltingly, and with many pauses while she attempted to control her crying, Leanne told Professor McGonagall how Katie had gone to the bathroom in the Three Broomsticks and returned holding the unmarked package, how Katie had seemed a little odd, andhow they had argued about the advisability of agreeing to deliver unknown objects, the argument culminating in the tussle over the parcel, which tore open. At this point, Leanne was so overcome, there was no getting another word out of her.

"All right," said Professor McGonagall, not unkindly, "go up to the hospital wing, please, Leanne, and get Madam Pomfrey to give you something for shock."When she had left the room, Professor McGonagall turned back to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"What happened when Katie touched the necklace?""She rose up in the air," said Harry, before either Ron or Hermi-one could speak, "and then began to scream, and collapsed. Profes-sor, can I see Professor Dumbledore, please?""The headmaster is away until Monday, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, looking surprised.

"Away?" Harry repeated angrily.

"Yes, Potter, away!" said Professor McGonagall tartly. "But any-thing you have to say about this horrible business can be said to me, I'm sure!"For a split second, Harry hesitated. Professor McGonagall did not invite confidences; Dumbledore, though in many ways more intimidating, still seemed less likely to scorn a theory, however wild. This was a life-and-death matter, though, and no moment to worry about being laughed at.

"I think Draco Malfoy gave Katie that necklace, Professor." ;On one side of him, Ron rubbed his nose in apparent embar-rassment; on the other, Hermione shuffled her feet as though quite keen to put a bit of distance between herself and Harry.

"That is a very serious accusation, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, after a shocked pause. "Do you have any proof?""No," said Harry, "but.. ." and he told her about following Malfoy to Borgin and Burkes and the conversation they had over-heard between him and Mr. Borgin.

When he had finished speaking, Professor McGonagall looked slightly confused.

"Malfoy took something to Borgin and Burkes for repair?""No, Professor, he just wanted Borgin to tell him how to mend something, he didn't have it with him. But that's not the point, the thing is that he bought something at the same time, and I think it was that necklace —""You saw Malfoy leaving the shop with a similar package?""No, Professor, he told Borgin to keep it in the shop for him —""But Harry," Hermione interrupted, "Borgin asked him if he wanted to take it with him, and Malfoy said no —""Because he didn't want to touch it, obviously!" said Harry angrily.

"What he actually said was, 'How would I look carrying that down the street?'" said Hermione.

"Well, he would look a bit of a prat carrying a necklace," inter-jected Ron.

"Oh, Ron," said Hermione despairingly, "it would be all wrapped up, so he wouldn't have to touch it, and quite easy to hide inside a cloak, so nobody would see it! I think whatever he reserved at Borgin and Burkes was noisy or bulky, something he knew would draw attention to him if he carried it down the street — and in any case," she pressed on loudly, before Harry could interrupt, "I asked Borgin about the necklace, don't you remember? When I went in to try and find out what Malfoy had asked him to keep, I saw it there. And Borgin just told me the price, he didn't say it was already sold or anything —""Well, you were being really obvious, he realized what you were up to within about five seconds, of course he wasn't going to tell you — anyway, Malfoy could've sent off for it since —""That's enough!" said Professor McGonagall, as Hermione opened her mouth to retort, looking furious. "Potter, I appreciate you telling me this, but we cannot point the finger of blame at Mr. Malfoy purely because he visited the shop where this necklace might have been purchased. The same is probably true of hundreds of people —""— that's what I said —" muttered Ron.

"— and in any case, we have put stringent security measures in place this year. I do not believe that necklace can possibly have en-tered this school without our knowledge —""But —"

"— and what is more," said Professor McGonagall, with an air of awful finality, "Mr. Malfoy was not in Hogsmeade today."Harry gaped at her, deflating.

"How do you know, Professor?""Because he was doing detention with me. He has now failed to complete his Transfiguration homework twice in a row. So, thank you for telling me your suspicions, Potter," she said as she marched past them, "but I need to go up to the hospital wing now to check on Katie Bell. Good day to you all."She

held open her office door. They had no choice but to file past her without another word.

Harry was angry with the other two for siding with McGonagall;nevertheless, he felt compelled to join in once they started dis-cussing what had happened.

"So who do you reckon Katie was supposed to give the necklace to?" asked Ron, as they climbed the stairs to the common room.

"Goodness only knows," said Hermione. "But whoever it was has had a narrow escape. No one could have opened that package without touching the necklace.""It could've been meant for loads of people," said Harry. "Dumbledore — the Death Eaters would love to get rid of him, he must be one of their top targets. Or Slughorn — Dumbledore reckons Voldemort really wanted him and they can't be pleased that he's sided with Dumbledore. Or —""Or you," said Hermione, looking troubled.

"Couldn't have been," said Harry, "or Katie would've just turned around in the lane and given it to me, wouldn't she? I was behind her all the way out of the Three Broomsticks. It would have made much more sense to deliver the parcel outside Hogwarts, what with Filch searching everyone who goes in and out. I wonder why Malfoy told her to take it into the castle?""Harry, Malfoy wasn't in Hogsmeade!" said Hermione, actually stamping her foot in frustration.

"He must have used an accomplice, then," said Harry. "Crabbe or Goyle — or, come to think of it, another Death Eater, he'll have loads better cronies than Crabbe and Goyle now he's joined up —"Ron and Hermione exchanged looks that plainly said There's no point arguing with him.

"Dilligrout," said Hermione firmly as they reached the Fat Lady.

The portrait swung open to admit them to the common room. It was quite full and smelled of damp clothing; many people seemed to have

returned from Hogsmeade early because of the bad weather. There was no buzz of fear or speculation, however: Clearly, the news of Katie's fate had not yet spread.

"It wasn't a very slick attack, really, when you stop and think about it," said Ron, casually turfing a first year out of one of the good armchairs by the fire so that he could sit down. "The curse didn't even make it into the castle. Not what you'd call foolproof.""You're right," said Hermione, prodding Ron out of the chair with her foot and offering it to the first year again. "It wasn't very well thought-out at all.""But since when has Malfoy been one of the world's great thinkers?" asked Harry.

Neither Ron nor Hermione answered him.

Chapter 13 The secret riddle

Katie was removed to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries the following day, by which time the news that she had been cursed had spread all over the school, though the details were confused and nobody other than Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Leanne seemed to know that Katie herself had not been the intended target.

"Oh, and Malfoy knows, of course," said Harry to Ron and Hermione, who continued their new policy of feigning deafness whenever Harry mentioned his Malfoy-Is-a-Death-Eater theory.

Harry had wondered whether Dumbledore would return from wherever he had been in time for Monday night's lesson, but having had no word to the contrary, he presented himself outside Dumbledore's office at eight o'clock, knocked, and was told to enter. There sat Dumbledore looking unusually tired; his hand was as black and burned as ever, but he smiled when he gestured to Harry to sit down. The Pensieve was sitting on the desk again, casting silvery specks of light over the ceiling.

"You have had a busy time while I have been away," Dumbledore said. "I believe you witnessed Katie's accident.""Yes, sir. How is she?"

"Still very unwell, although she was relatively lucky. She appears to have brushed the necklace with the smallest possible amount of skin; there was a tiny hole in her glove. Had she put it on, had she even held it in her ungloved hand, she would have died, perhaps instantly. Luckily Professor Snape was able to do enough to prevent a rapid spread of the curse ?quot;"Why him?" asked Harry quickly. "Why not Madam Pomfrey?""Impertinent," said a soft voice from one of the portraits on the wall, and Phineas Nigellus Black, Sirius's great-great-grandfather, raised his head from his arms where he had appeared to be sleeping. "I would not have permitted a student to question the way Hogwarts operated in my day.""Yes, thank you, Phineas," said

Dumbledore quellingly. "Professor Snape knows much more about the Dark Arts than Madam Pomfrey, Harry. Anyway, the St. Mungo's staff are sending me hourly reports, and I am hopeful that Katie will make a full recovery in time.""Where were you this weekend, sir?" Harry asked, disregarding a strong feeling that he might be pushing his luck, a feeling apparently shared by Phineas Nigellus, who hissed softly.

"I would rather not say just now," said Dumbledore. "However, I shall tell you in due course.""You will?" said Harry, startled.

"Yes, I expect so," said Dumbledore, withdrawing a fresh bottle of silver memories from inside his robes and uncorking it with a prod of his wand.

"Sir," said Harry tentatively, "I met Mundungus in Hogsmeade.""Ah yes, I am already aware that Mundungus has been treating your inheritance with light-fingered contempt," said Dumbledore, frowning a little. "He has gone to ground since you accosted him outside the Three Broomsticks; I rather think he dreads facing me. However, rest assured that he will not be making away with any more of Sirius's old possessions.""That mangy old half-blood has been stealing Black heirlooms?" said Phineas Nigellus, incensed; and he stalked out of his frame, undoubtedly to visit his portrait in number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"Professor," said Harry, after a short pause, "did Professor McGonagall tell you what I told her after Katie got hurt? About Draco Malfoy?""She told me of your suspicions, yes," said Dumbledore.

"And do you ??"

"I shall take all appropriate measures to investigate anyone who might have had a hand in Katie's accident," said Dumbledore. "But what concerns me now, Harry, is our lesson."Harry felt slightly resentful at this: If their lessons were so very important, why had there been such a long gap between the first and second? However,

he said no more about Draco Malfoy, but watched as Dumbledore poured the fresh memories into the Pensieve and began swirling the stone basin once more between his long-fingered hands.

"You will remember, I am sure, that we left the tale of Lord Voldemort's beginnings at the point where the handsome Muggle, Tom Riddle, had abandoned his witch wife, Merope, and returned to his family home in Little Hangleton. Merope was left alone in London, expecting the baby who would one day become Lord Voldemort.""How do you know she was in London, sir?""Because of the evidence of one Caractacus Burke," said Dumbledore, "who, by an odd coincidence, helped found the very shop whence came the necklace we have just been discussing."He swilled the contents of the Pensieve as Harry had seen him swill them before, much as a gold prospector sifts for gold. Up out of the swirling, silvery mass rose a little old man revolving slowly in the Pensieve, silver as a ghost but much more solid, with a thatch of hair that completely covered his eyes.

"Yes, we acquired it in curious circumstances. It was brought in by a young witch just before Christmas, oh, many years ago now. She said she needed the gold badly, well, that much was obvious. Covered in rags and pretty far along . . . Going to have a baby, see. She said the locket had been Slytherin's. Well, we hear that sort of story all the time, 'Oh, this was Merlin's, this was, his favorite teapot,' but when I looked at it, it had his mark all right, and a few simple spells were enough to tell me the truth. Of course, that made it near enough priceless. She didn't seem to have any idea how much it was worth. Happy to get ten Galleons for it. Best bargain we ever made!"Dumbledore gave the Pensieve an extra-vigorous shake and Caractacus Burke descended back into the swirling mass of memory from whence he had come.

"He only gave her ten Galleons?" said Harry indignantly.

"Caractacus Burke was not famed for his generosity," said Dumbledore. "So we know that, near the end of her pregnancy, Merope was alone in London and in desperate need of gold, desperate enough to sell her one and only valuable possession, the locket that was one of Marvolo's treasured family heirlooms.""But she could do magic!" said Harry impatiently. "She could have got food and everything for herself by magic, couldn't she?""Ah," said Dumbledore, "perhaps she could. But it is my belief—I am guessing again, but I am sure I am right ?that when her husband abandoned her, Merope stopped using magic. I do not think that she wanted to be a witch any longer. Of course, it is also possible that her unrequited love and the attendant despair sapped her of her powers; that can happen. In any case, as you are about to see, Merope refused to raise her wand even to save her own life.""She wouldn't even stay alive for her son?"Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Could you possibly be feeling sorry for Lord Voldemort?""No," said Harry quickly, "but she had a choice, didn't she, not like my mother ? quot;"Your mother had a choice too," said Dumbledore gently. "Yes, Merope Riddle chose death in spite of a son who needed her, but do not judge her too harshly, Harry. She was greatly weakened by long suffering and she never had your mother's courage. And now, if you will stand ...""Where are we going?" Harry asked, as Dumbledore joined him at the front of the desk.

"This time," said Dumbledore, "we are going to enter my memory. I think you will find it both rich in detail and satisfyingly accurate. After you, Harry ..."Harry bent over the Pensieve; his face broke the cool surface of the memory and then he was falling through darkness again. . . . Seconds later, his feet hit firm ground; he opened his eyes and found that he and Dumbledore were standing in a bustling, old-fashioned London street.

"There I am," said Dumbledore brightly, pointing ahead of them to a tall figure crossing the road in front of a horse-drawn milk cart.

This younger Albus Dumbledore's long hair and beard were auburn. Having reached their side of the street, he strode off along the pavement, drawing many curious glances due to the flamboyantly cut suit of plum velvet that he was wearing.

"Nice suit, sir," said Harry, before he could stop himself, but Dumbledore merely chuckled as they followed his younger self a short distance, finally passing through a set of iron gates into a bare courtyard that fronted a rather grim, square building surrounded by high railings. He mounted the few steps leading to the front door and knocked once. After a moment or two, the door was opened by a scruffy girl wearing an apron.

"Good afternoon. I have an appointment with a Mrs. Cole, who, I believe, is the matron here?""Oh," said the bewildered-looking girl, taking in Dumbledore's eccentric appearance. "Um. . . just a mo' . . . MRS. COLE!" she bellowed over her shoulder.

Harry heard a distant voice shouting something in response. The girl turned back to Dumbledore. "Come in, she's on 'er way."Dumbledore stepped into a hallway tiled in black and white; the whole place was shabby but spotlessly clean. Harry and the older Dumbledore followed. Before the front door had closed behind them, a skinny, harassed-looking woman came scurrying toward them. She had a sharp-featured face that appeared more anxious than unkind, and she was talking over her shoulder to another aproned helper as she walked toward Dumbledore.

". . . and take the iodine upstairs to Martha, Billy Stubbs has been picking his scabs and Eric Whalley's oozing all over his sheets ? chicken pox on top of everything else," she said to nobody in particular, and then her eyes fell upon Dumbledore and she stopped dead in her tracks, looking as astonished as if a giraffe had just crossed her threshold.

"Good afternoon," said Dumbledore, holding out his hand. Mrs. Cole simply gaped.

"My name is Albus Dumbledore. I sent you a letter requesting an appointment and you very kindly invited me here today."Mrs. Cole blinked. Apparently deciding that Dumbledore was not a hallucination, she said feebly, "Oh yes. Well ?well then ?you'd better come into my room. Yes."She led Dumbledore into a small room that seemed part sitting room, part office. It was as shabby as the hallway and the furniture was old and mismatched. She invited Dumbledore to sit on a rickety chair and seated herself behind a cluttered desk, eyeing him nervously.

"I am here, as I told you in my letter, to discuss Tom Riddle and arrangements for his future," said Dumbledore.

"Are you family?" asked Mrs. Cole.

"No, I am a teacher," said Dumbledore. "I have come to offer Tom a place at my school.""What school's this, then?"

"It is called Hogwarts," said Dumbledore.

"And how come you're interested in Tom?""We believe he has qualities we are looking for.""You mean he's won a scholarship? How can he have done? He's never been entered for one.""Well, his name has been down for our school since birth ?quot;"Who registered him? His parents?"There was no doubt that Mrs. Cole was an inconveniently sharp woman. Apparently Dumbledore thought so too, for Harry now saw him slip his wand out of the pocket of his velvet suit, at the same time picking up a piece of perfectly blank paper from Mrs. Cole's desktop.

"Here," said Dumbledore, waving his wand once as he passed her the piece of paper, "I think this will make everything clear."Mrs. Cole's eyes slid out of focus and back again as she gazed intently at the blank paper for a moment.

"That seems perfectly in order," she said placidly, handing it back. Then her eyes fell upon a bottle of gin and two glasses that had certainly not been present a few seconds before.

"Er ?may I offer you a glass of gin?" she said in an extra-refined voice.

"Thank you very much," said Dumbledore, beaming.

It soon became clear that Mrs. Cole was no novice when it came to gin drinking. Pouring both of them a generous measure, she drained her own glass in one gulp. Smacking her lips frankly, she smiled at Dumbledore for the first time, and he didn't hesitate to press his advantage.

"I was wondering whether you could tell me anything of Tom Riddle's history? I think he was born here in the orphanage?""That's right," said Mrs. Cole, helping herself to more gin. "I remember it clear as anything, because I'd just started here myself. New Year's Eve and bitter cold, snowing, you know. Nasty night. And this girl, not much older than I was myself at the time, came staggering up the front steps. Well, she wasn't the first. We took her in, and she had the baby within the hour. And she was dead in another hour."Mrs. Cole nodded impressively and took another generous gulp of gin.

"Did she say anything before she died?" asked Dumbledore. "Anything about the boy's father, for instance?""Now, as it happens, she did," said Mrs. Cole, who seemed to be rather enjoying herself now, with the gin in her hand and an eager audience for her story. "I remember she said to me, 'I hope he looks like his papa,' and I won't lie, she was right to hope it, because she was no beauty ?and then she told me he was to be named Tom, for his father, and Marvolo, for her father ?yes, I know, funny name, isn't it? We wondered whether she came from a circus ?and she said the boy's surname was to be Riddle. And she died soon after that without another word.

"Well, we named him just as she'd said, it seemed so important to the poor girl, but no Tom nor Marvolo nor any kind of Riddle ever came

looking for him, nor any family at all, so he stayed in the orphanage and he's been here ever since."Mrs. Cole helped herself, almost absentmindedly, to another healthy measure of gin. Two pink spots had appeared high on her cheekbones. Then she said, "He's a funny boy.""Yes," said Dumbledore. "I thought he might be.""He was a funny baby too. He hardly ever cried, you know. And then, when he got a little older, he was. . . odd.""Odd in what way?" asked Dumbledore gently.

"Well, he ?quot;

But Mrs. Cole pulled up short, and there was nothing blurry or vague about the inquisitorial glance she shot Dumbledore over her gin glass.

"He's definitely got a place at your school, you say?""Definitely," said Dumbledore.

"And nothing I say can change that?""Nothing," said Dumbledore.

"You'll be taking him away, whatever?""Whatever," repeated Dumbledore gravely.

She squinted at him as though deciding whether or not to trust him. Apparently she decided she could, because she said in a sudden rush, "He scares the other children.""You mean he is a bully?" asked Dumbledore.

"I think he must be," said Mrs. Cole, frowning slightly, "but it's very hard to catch him at it. There have been incidents. . . . Nasty things ..."Dumbledore did not press her, though Harry could tell that he was interested. She took yet another gulp of gin and her rosy cheeks grew rosier still.

"Billy Stubbs's rabbit. . . well, Tom said he didn't do it and I don't see how he could have done, but even so, it didn't hang itself from the rafters, did it?""I shouldn't think so, no," said Dumbledore quietly.

"But I'm jiggered if I know how he got up there to do it. All I know is he and Billy had argued the day before. And then" ?Mrs. Cole took another swig of gin, slopping a little over her chin this time ?"on the summer outing ?we take them out, you know, once a year, to the countryside or to the seaside ?well, Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop were never quite right afterwards, and all we ever got out of them was that they'd gone into a cave with Tom Riddle. He swore they'd just gone exploring, but something happened in there, I'm sure of it. And, well, there have been a lot of things, funny things. . . ."She looked around at Dumbledore again, and though her cheeks were flushed, her gaze was steady. "I don't think many people will be sorry to see the back of him.""You understand, I'm sure, that we will not be keeping him permanently?" said Dumbledore. "He will have to return here, at the very least, every summer.""Oh, well, that's better than a whack on the nose with a rusty poker," said Mrs. Cole with a slight hiccup. She got to her feet, and Harry was impressed to see that she was quite steady, even though two-thirds of the gin was now gone. "I suppose you'd like to see him?""Very much," said Dumbledore, rising too.

She led him out of her office and up the stone stairs, calling out instructions and admonitions to helpers and children as she passed. The orphans, Harry saw, were all wearing the same kind of grayish tunic. They looked reasonably well-cared for, but there was no denying that this was a grim place in which to grow up.

"Here we are," said Mrs. Cole, as they turned off the second landing and stopped outside the first door in a long corridor. She knocked twice and entered.

"Tom? You've got a visitor. This is Mr. Dumberton ?sorry, Dunderbore. He's come to tell you ?well, I'll let him do it."Harry and the two Dumbledores entered the room, and Mrs. Cole closed the door on them. It was a small bare room with nothing in it except an old wardrobe and an iron bedstead. A boy was sitting on top of the gray blankets, his legs stretched out in front of him, holding a book.

There was no trace of the Gaunts in Tom Riddle's face. Merope had got her dying wish: He was his handsome father in miniature, tall for eleven years old, dark-haired, and pale. His eyes narrowed slightly as he took in Dumbledore's eccentric appearance. There was a moment's silence.

"How do you do, Tom?" said Dumbledore, walking forward and holding out his hand.

The boy hesitated, then took it, and they shook hands. Dumbledore drew up the hard wooden chair beside Riddle, so that the pair of them looked rather like a hospital patient and visitor.

"I am Professor Dumbledore."

"'Professor'?" repeated Riddle. He looked wary. "Is that like 'doctor'? What are you here for? Did she get you in to have a look at me?"He was pointing at the door through which Mrs. Cole had just left.

"No, no," said Dumbledore, smiling.

"I don't believe you," said Riddle. "She wants me looked at, doesn't she? Tell the truth!"He spoke the last three words with a ringing force that was almost shocking. It was a command, and it sounded as though he had given it many times before. His eyes had widened and he was glaring at Dumbledore, who made no response except to continue smiling pleasantly. After a few seconds Riddle stopped glaring, though he looked, if anything, warier still.

"Who are you?"

"I have told you. My name is Professor Dumbledore and I work at a school called Hogwarts. I have come to offer you a place at my school ?your new school, if you would like to come."Riddle's reaction to this was most surprising. He leapt from the bed and backed away from Dumbledore, looking furious.

"You can't kid me! The asylum, that's where you're from, isn't it? 'Professor,' yes, of course ?well, I'm not going, see? That old cat's the one who should be in the asylum. I never did anything to little Amy Benson or Dennis Bishop, and you can ask them, they'll tell you!

"I am not from the asylum," said Dumbledore patiently. "I am a teacher and, if you will sit down calmly, I shall tell you about Hogwarts. Of course, if you would rather not come to the school, nobody will force you ?quot;"I'd like to see them try," sneered Riddle.

"Hogwarts," Dumbledore went on, as though he had not heard Riddle's last words, "is a school for people with special abilities ?quot;"I'm not mad!"

"I know that you are not mad. Hogwarts is not a school for mad people. It is a school of magic."There was silence. Riddle had frozen, his face expressionless, but his eyes were flickering back and forth between each of Dumbledore's, as though trying to catch one of them lying.

"Magic?" he repeated in a whisper.

"That's right," said Dumbledore.

"It's. . . it's magic, what I can do?""What is it that you can do?""All sorts," breathed Riddle. A flush of excitement was rising up his neck into his hollow cheeks; he looked fevered. "I can make filings move without touching them. I can make animals do what I want them to do, without training them. I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to."His legs were trembling. He stumbled forward and sat down on the bed again, staring at his hands, his head bowed as though in prayer.

"I knew I was different," he whispered to his own quivering fingers. "I knew I was special. Always, I knew there was something.""Well, you were quite right," said Dumbledore, who was no longer smiling, but watching Riddle intently. "You are a wizard."Riddle lifted his head. His

face was transfigured: There was a wild happiness upon it, yet for some reason it did not make him better looking; on the contrary, his finely carved features seemed somehow rougher, his expression almost bestial.

"Are you a wizard too?"

"Yes, I am."

"Prove it," said Riddle at once, in the same commanding tone he had used when he had said, "Tell the truth."Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "If, as I take it, you are accepting your place at Hogwarts? quot;"Of course I am!"

"Then you will address me as 'Professor' or 'sir.'"Riddle's expression hardened for the most fleeting moment before he said, in an unrecognizably polite voice, "I'm sorry, sir. I meant ?please, Professor, could you show me ??"Harry was sure that Dumbledore was going to refuse, that he would tell Riddle there would be plenty of time for practical demonstrations at Hogwarts, that they were currently in a building full of Muggles and must therefore be cautious. To his great surprise, however, Dumbledore drew his wand from an inside pocket of his suit jacket, pointed it at the shabby wardrobe in the corner, and gave the wand a casual flick.

The wardrobe burst into flames.

Riddle jumped to his feet; Harry could hardly blame him for howling in shock and rage; all his worldly possessions must be in there. But even as Riddle rounded on Dumbledore, the flames vanished, leaving the wardrobe completely undamaged.

Riddle stared from the wardrobe to Dumbledore; then, his expression greedy, he pointed at the wand. "Where can I get one of them?""All in good time," said Dumbledore. "I think there is something trying to get out of your wardrobe."And sure enough, a faint rattling could be heard from inside it. For the first time, Riddle looked frightened.

"Open the door," said Dumbledore.

Riddle hesitated, then crossed the room and threw open the wardrobe door. On the topmost shelf, above a rail of threadbare clothes, a small cardboard box was shaking and rattling as though there were several frantic mice trapped inside it.

"Take it out," said Dumbledore.

Riddle took down the quaking box. He looked unnerved.

"Is there anything in that box that you ought not to have?" asked Dumbledore.

Riddle threw Dumbledore a long, clear, calculating look. "Yes, I suppose so, sir," he said finally, in an expressionless voice.

"Open it," said Dumbledore.

Riddle took off the lid and tipped the contents onto his bed without looking at them. Harry, who had expected something much more exciting, saw a mess of small, everyday objects: a yo-yo, a silver thimble, and a tarnished mouth organ among them. Once free of the box, they stopped quivering and lay quite still upon the thin blankets.

"You will return them to their owners with your apologies," said Dumbledore calmly, putting his wand back into his jacket. "I shall know whether it has been done. And be warned: Thieving is not tolerated at Hogwarts."Riddle did not look remotely abashed; he was still staring coldly and appraisingly at Dumbledore. At last he said in a colorless voice, "Yes, sir.""At Hogwarts," Dumbledore went on, "we teach you not only to use magic, but to control it. You have ?inadvertently, I am sure ?been using your powers in a way that is neither taught nor tolerated at our school. You are not the first, nor will you be the last, to allow your magic to run away with you. But you should know that Hogwarts can expel students, and the Ministry of Magic ?yes, there is a Ministry ?will punish lawbreakers still more

severely. All new wizards must accept that, in entering our world, they abide by our laws.""Yes, sir," said Riddle again.

It was impossible to tell what he was thinking; his face remained quite blank as he put the little cache of stolen objects back into the cardboard box. When he had finished, he turned to Dumbledore and said baldly, "I haven't got any money.""That is easily remedied," said Dumbledore, drawing a leather money-pouch from his pocket. "There is a fund at Hogwarts for those who require assistance to buy books and robes. You might have to buy some of your spellbooks and so on secondhand, but ?quot;"Where do you buy spellbooks?" interrupted Riddle, who had taken the heavy money bag without thanking Dumbledore, and was now examining a fat gold Galleon,"In Diagon Alley," said Dumbledore. "I have your list of books and school equipment with me. I can help you find everything ?quot;"You're coming with me?" asked Riddle, looking up.

"Certainly, if you ?quot;

"I don't need you," said Riddle. "I'm used to doing things for myself, I go round London on my own all the time. How do you get to this Diagon Alley ?sir?" he added, catching Dumbledore's eye.

Harry thought that Dumbledore would insist upon accompanying Riddle, but once again he was surprised. Dumbledore handed Riddle the envelope containing his list of equipment, and after telling Riddle exactly how to get to the Leaky Cauldron from the orphanage, he said, "You will be able to see it, although Muggles around you ?non-magical people, that is ?will not. Ask for Tom the barman ?easy enough to remember, as he shares your name ?quot;Riddle gave an irritable twitch, as though trying to displace an irksome fly.

"You dislike the name 'Tom'?""There are a lot of Toms," muttered Riddle. Then, as though he could not suppress the question, as though it burst from him in spite of himself, he asked, "Was my father

a wizard? He was called Tom Riddle too, they've told me.""I'm afraid I don't know," said Dumbledore, his voice gentle.

"My mother can't have been magic, or she wouldn't have died," said Riddle, more to himself than Dumbledore. "It must've been him. So ? when I've got all my stuff?when do I come to this Hogwarts?""All the details are on the second piece of parchment in your envelope," said Dumbledore. "You will leave from King's Cross Station on the first of September. There is a train ticket in there too."Riddle nodded. Dumbledore got to his feet and held out his hand again. Taking it, Riddle said, "I can speak to snakes. I found out when we've been to the country on trips ?they find me, they whisper to me. Is that normal for a wizard?"Harry could tell that he had withheld mention of this strangest power until that moment, determined to impress.

"It is unusual," said Dumbledore, after a moment's hesitation, "but not unheard of."His tone was casual but his eyes moved curiously over Riddle's face. They stood for a moment, man and boy, staring at each other. Then the handshake was broken; Dumbledore was at the door.

"Good-bye, Tom. I shall see you at Hogwarts.""I think that will do," said the white-haired Dumbledore at Harry's side, and seconds later, they were soaring weightlessly through darkness once more, before landing squarely in the present-day office.

"Sit down," said Dumbledore, landing beside Harry.

Harry obeyed, his mind still full of what he had just seen.

"He believed it much quicker than I did ?I mean, when you told him he was a wizard," said Harry. "I didn't believe Hagrid at first, when he told me.""Yes, Riddle was perfectly ready to believe that he was ?to use his word ?'special,'" said Dumbledore.

"Did you know ?then?" asked Harry.

"Did I know that I had just met the most dangerous Dark wizard of all time?" said Dumbledore. "No, I had no idea that he was to grow up to be what he is. However, I was certainly intrigued by him. I returned to Hogwarts intending to keep an eye upon him, something I should have done in any case, given that he was alone and friendless, but which, already, I felt I ought to do for others' sake as much as his.

"His powers, as you heard, were surprisingly well-developed for such a young wizard and ?most interestingly and ominously of all ?he had already discovered that he had some measure of control over them, and begun to use them consciously. And as you saw, they were not the random experiments typical of young wizards: He was already using magic against other people, to frighten, to punish, to control. The little stories of the strangled rabbit and the young boy and girl he lured into a cave were most suggestive. . . . 'I can make them hurt if I want to. . . .'""And he was a Parselmouth," interjected Harry.

"Yes, indeed; a rare ability, and one supposedly connected with the Dark Arts, although as we know, there are Parselmouths among the great and the good too. In fact, his ability to speak to serpents did not make me nearly as uneasy as his obvious instincts for cruelty, secrecy, and domination.

"Time is making fools of us again," said Dumbledore, indicating the dark sky beyond the windows. "But before we part, I want to draw your attention to certain features of the scene we have just witnessed, for they have a great bearing on the matters we shall be discussing in future meetings.

"Firstly, I hope you noticed Riddle's reaction when I mentioned that another shared his first name, 'Tom'?"Harry nodded.

"There he showed his contempt for anything that tied him to other people, anything that made him ordinary. Even then, he wished to be different, separate, notorious. He shed his name, as you know, within

a few short years of that conversation and created the mask of Lord Voldemort' behind which he has been hidden for so long.

"I trust that you also noticed that Tom Riddle was already highly self-sufficient, secretive, and, apparently, friendless? He did not want help or companionship on his trip to Diagon Alley. He preferred to operate alone. The adult Voldemort is the same. You will hear many of his Death Eaters claiming that they are in his confidence, that they alone are close to him, even understand him. They are deluded. Lord Voldemort has never had a friend, nor do I believe that he has ever wanted one.

"And lastly ?I hope you are not too sleepy to pay attention to this, Harry ?the young Tom Riddle liked to collect trophies. You saw the box of stolen articles he had hidden in his room. These were taken from victims of his bullying behavior, souvenirs, if you will, of particularly unpleasant bits of magic. Bear in mind this magpie-like tendency, for this, particularly, will be important later.

"And now, it really is time for bed."Harry got to his feet. As he walked across the room, his eyes fell I upon the little table on which Marvolo Gaunt's ring had rested last I time, but the ring was no longer there.

"Yes, Harry?" said Dumbledore, for Harry had come to a halt. I"The ring's gone," said Harry, looking around. "But I thought I you might have the mouth organ or something."Dumbledore beamed at him, peering over the top of his hall' moon spectacles.

"Very astute, Harry, but the mouth organ was only ever a mouth organ."And on that enigmatic note he waved to Harry, who understood himself to be dismissed.

Chapter 14 Felix felicis

Harry had Herbology first thing the following morning. He had been unable to tell Ron and Hermione about his lesson with Dumbledore over breakfast for fear of being over-heard, but he filled them in as they walked across the vegetable patch toward the greenhouses. The weekend’s brutal wind had died out at last; the weird mist had returned and it took them a little longer than usual to find the correct greenhouse.

"Wow, scary thought, the boy You-Know-Who," said Ron qui-etly, as they took their places around one of the gnarled Snargaluff stumps that formed this terms project, and began pulling on their protective gloves. "But I still don't get why Dumbledore's showing you all this. I mean, it's really interesting and everything, but what's the point?""Dunno," said Harry, inserting a gum shield. "But he says its all important and it'll help me survive.""I think it's fascinating," said Hermione earnestly. "It makes absolute sense to know as much about Voldemort as possible. How else will you find out his weaknesses?""So how was Slughorn's latest party?" Harry asked her thickly through the gum shield.

"Oh, it was quite fun, really," said Hermione, now putting on protective goggles. "I mean, he drones on about famous exploits a bit, and he absolutely fawns on McLaggen because he's so well connected, but he gave us some really nice food and he introduced us to Gwenog Jones.""Gwenog Jones?" said Ron, his eyes widening under his own goggles. "The Gwenog Jones? Captain of the Holyhead Harpies?""That's right," said Hermione. "Personally, I thought she was a bit full of herself, but —""Quite enough chat over here!" said Professor Sprout briskly, bustling over and looking stern. "You're lagging behind, everybody else has started, and Neville's already got his first pod!"They looked around; sure enough, there sat Neville with a bloody lip and several nasty scratches along the side of his face,

but clutching an unpleasantly pulsating green object about the size of a grapefruit.

"Okay, Professor, we're starting now!" said Ron, adding quietly, when she had turned away again, "should ve used Muffliato, Harry.""No, we shouldn't!" said Hermione at once, looking, as she always did, intensely cross at the thought of the Half-Blood Prince and his spells. "Well, come on ... we'd better get going. ..."She gave the other two an apprehensive look; they all took deep breaths and then dived at the gnarled stump between them.

It sprang to life at once; long, prickly, bramblelike vines flew out of the top and whipped through the air. One tangled itself in Hermione's hair, and Ron beat it back with a pair of secateurs; Harry succeeded in trapping a couple of vines and knotting them together; a hole opened in the middle of all the tentaclelike branches; Hermione plunged her arm bravely into this hole, which closed like a trap around her elbow; Harry and Ron tugged and wrenched at the vines, forcing the hole to open again, and Hermi-one snatched her arm free, clutching in her fingers a pod just like Neville's. At once, the prickly vines shot back inside, and the gnarled stump sat there looking like an innocently dead lump of wood.

"You know, I don't think I'll be having any of these in my garden when I've got my own place," said Ron, pushing his goggles up onto his forehead and wiping sweat from his face.

"Pass me a bowl," said Hermione, holding the pulsating pod at arm's length; Harry handed one over and she dropped the pod into it with a look of disgust on her face.

"Don't be squeamish, squeeze it out, they're best when they're fresh!" called Professor Sprout.

"Anyway," said Hermione, continuing their interrupted conver-sation as though a lump of wood had not just attacked them, "Slughorn's going to have a Christmas party, Harry, and there's no way you'll be

able to wriggle out of this one because he actually asked me to check your free evenings, so he could be sure to have it on a night you can come."Harry groaned. Meanwhile, Ron, who was attempting to burst the pod in the bowl by putting both hands on it, standing up, and squashing it as hard as he could, said angrily, "And this is another party just for Slughorn's favorites, is it?""Just for the Slug Club, yes," said Hermione.

The pod flew out from under Ron's fingers and hit the green house glass, rebounding onto the back of Professor Sprout's head and knocking off her old, patched hat. Harry went to retrieve the pod; when he got back, Hermione was saying, "Look, I didn't make up the name 'Slug Club' —""'Slug Club,'"repeated Ron with a sneer worthy of Malfoy. "It's pathetic. Well, I hope you enjoy your party. Why don't you try hooking up with McLaggen, then Slughorn can make you King and Queen Slug —""We're allowed to bring guests," said Hermione, who for some reason had turned a bright, boiling scarlet, "and I was going to ask you to come, but if you think it's that stupid then I won't bother!"Harry suddenly wished the pod had flown a little farther, so that he need not have been sitting here with the pair of them. Unnoticed by either, he seized the bowl that contained the pod and be-gan to try and open it by the noisiest and most energetic means he could think of; unfortunately, he could still hear every word of their conversation.

"You were going to ask me?" asked Ron, in a completely differ-ent voice.

"Yes," said Hermione angrily. "But obviously if you'd rather 1 hooked up with McLaggen ..."There was a pause while Harry continued to pound the resilient pod with a trowel.

"No, I wouldn't," said Ron, in a very quiet voice.

Harry missed the pod, hit the bowl, and shattered it.

‘"Reparo,"' he said hastily, poking the pieces with his wand, and the bowl sprang back together again. The crash, however, appeared to have awoken Ron and Hermione to Harry's presence. Hermione looked flustered and immediately started fussing about for her copy of “Flesh-Eating Trees of the World” to find out the correct way to juice Snargaluff pods; Ron, on the other hand, looked sheepish but also rather pleased with himself.

"Hand that over, Harry," said Hermione hurriedly. "It says we're supposed to puncture them with something sharp. . . ."Harry passed her the pod in the bowl; he and Ron both snapped their goggles back over their eyes and dived, once more, for the stump. It was not as though he was really surprised, thought Harry, as he wrestled with a thorny vine intent upon throttling him; he had had an inkling that this might happen sooner or later. But he was not sure how he felt about it. ... He and Cho were now too em-barrassed to look at each other, let alone talk to each other; what if Ron and Hermione started going out together, then split up? Could their friendship survive it? Harry remembered the few weeks when they had not been talking to each other in the third year; he had not enjoyed trying to bridge the distance between them. And then, what if they didn't split up? What if they became like Bill and Fleur, and it became excruciatingly embarrassing to be in their presence, so that he was shut out for good?

"Gotcha!" yelled Ron, pulling a second pod from the stump just as Hermione managed to burst the first one open, so that the bowl was full of tubers wriggling like pale green worms.

The rest of the lesson passed without further mention of Slughorn's party. Although Harry watched his two friends more closely over the next few days, Ron and Hermione did not seem any different except that they were a little politer to each other than usual. Harry supposed he would just have to wait to see whathappened under the influence of butterbeer in Slughorn's dimly lit room on the night of the party. In the meantime, however, he had more pressing worries.

Katie Bell was still in St. Mungo's Hospital with no prospect of leaving, which meant that the promising Gryffindor team Harry had been training so carefully since September was one Chaser short. He kept putting off replacing Katie in the hope that she would return, but their opening match against Slytherin was loom-ing, and he finally had to accept that she would not be back in time to play.

Harry did not think he could stand another full-House tryout. With a sinking feeling that had little to do with Quidditch, he cor-nered Dean Thomas after Transfiguration one day. Most of the class had already left, although several twittering yellow birds were still zooming around the room, all of Hermione's creation; nobody else had succeeded in conjuring so much as a feather from thin air.

"Are you still interested in playing Chaser?""Wha — ? Yeah, of course!" said Dean excitedly. Over Dean's shoulder, Harry saw Seamus Finnegan slamming his books into his bag, looking sour. One of the reasons why Harry would have pre-ferred not to have to ask Dean to play was that he knew Seamus would not like it. On the other hand, he had to do what was best for the team, and Dean had outflown Seamus at the tryouts.

"Well then, you're in," said Harry. "There's a practice tonight, seven o'clock.""Right," said Dean. "Cheers, Harry! Blimey, I can't wait to tell Ginny!"He sprinted out of the room, leaving Harry and Seamus alone together, an uncomfortable moment made no easier when a bird dropping landed on Seamus's head as one of Hermione's canaries whizzed over them.

Seamus was not the only person disgruntled by the choice of Katie's substitute. There was much muttering in the common room about the fact that Harry had now chosen two of his class-mates for the team. As Harry had endured much worse mutterings than this in his school career, he was not particularly bothered, but all the same, the pressure was increasing to provide a win in the upcoming match against Slytherin. If Gryffindor won, Harry knew that the whole House

would forget that they had criticized him and swear that they had always known it was a great team. If they lost. . . well, Harry thought wryly, he had still endured worse mutterings. . . .

Harry had no reason to regret his choice once he saw Dean fly that evening; he worked well with Ginny and Demelza. The Beaters, Peakes and Coote, were getting better all the time. The only problem was Ron.

Harry had known all along that Ron was an inconsistent player who suffered from nerves and a lack of confidence, and unfortu-nately, the looming prospect of the opening game of the season seemed to have brought out all his old insecurities. After letting in half a dozen goals, most of them scored by Ginny, his technique became wilder and wilder, until he finally punched an oncoming Demelza Robins in the mouth.

"It was an accident, I'm sorry, Demelza, really sorry!" Ron shouted after her as she zigzagged back to the ground, dripping blood everywhere. "I just —""Panicked," Ginny said angrily, landing next to Demelza and examining her fat lip. "You prat, Ron, look at the state of her!""I can fix that," said Harry, landing beside the two girls, pointing his wand at Demelzas mouth, and saying "Episkey." "And Ginny, don't call Ron a prat, you're not the Captain of this team —""Well, you seemed too busy to call him a prat and I thought someone should —"Harry forced himself not to laugh.

"In the air, everyone, let's go. . . ."Overall it was one of the worst practices they had had all term, though Harry did not feel that honesty was the best policy when they were this close to the match.

"Good work, everyone, I think we'll flatten Slytherin," he said bracingly, and the Chasers and Beaters left the changing room looking reasonably happy with themselves.

"I played like a sack of dragon dung," said Ron in a hollow voice when the door had swung shut behind Ginny.

"No, you didn't," said Harry firmly. "You're the best Keeper I tried out, Ron. Your only problem is nerves."He kept up a relentless flow of encouragement all the way back to the castle, and by the time they reached the second floor, Ron was looking marginally more cheerful. When Harry pushed open the tapestry to take their usual shortcut up to Gryffindor Tower, however, they found themselves looking at Dean and Ginny, who were locked in a close embrace and kissing fiercely as though glued together.

It was as though something large and scaly erupted into life in Harry's stomach, clawing at his insides: Hot blood seemed to flood his brain, so that all thought was extinguished, replaced by a savage urge to jinx Dean into a jelly. Wrestling with this sudden madness, he heard Ron's voice as though from a great distance away.

“Oi!”

Dean and Ginny broke apart and looked around. "What?" said Ginny.

"I don't want to find my own sister snogging people in public!" "This was a deserted corridor till you came butting in!" said Ginny.

Dean was looking embarrassed. He gave Harry a shifty grin that Harry did not return, as the newborn monster inside him was roar-ing for Dean's instant dismissal from the team.

"Er . . . c'mon, Ginny," said Dean, "let's go back to the common room. ...""You go!" said Ginny. "I want a word with my dear brother!" Dean left, looking as though he was not sorry to depart the scene.

"Right," said Ginny, tossing her long red hair out of her face and glaring at Ron, "let's get this straight once and for all. It is none of your business who I go out with or what I do with them, Ron —" "Yeah, it is!" said Ron, just as angrily. "D' you think I want peo-ple saying my sister's a —""A what?" shouted Ginny, drawing her wand. "A what, exactly?" "He doesn't mean anything, Ginny —" said Harry automati-cally, though the monster was roaring its approval of Ron's words.

"Oh yes he does!" she said, flaring up at Harry. "Just because he's never snogged anyone in his life, just because the best kiss he's ever had is from our Auntie Muriel —""Shut your mouth!" bellowed Ron, bypassing red and turning maroon.

"No, I will not!" yelled Ginny, beside herself. "I've seen you with Phlegm, hoping she'll kiss you on the cheek every time you see her, it's pathetic! If you went out and got a bit of snogging done your self, you wouldn't mind so much that everyone else does it!"Ron had pulled out his wand too; Harry stepped swiftly between them.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Ron roared, trying to get a clear shot at Ginny around Harry, who was now standing in front of her with his arms outstretched. "Just because I don't do it in public — !"Ginny screamed with derisive laughter, trying to push Harry out of the way.

"Been kissing Pigwidgeon, have you? Or have you got a picture of Auntie Muriel stashed under your pillow?" You —A streak of orange light flew under Harrys left arm and missed Ginny by inches; Harry pushed Ron up against the wall.

"Don't be stupid —"

"Harry's snogged Cho Chang!" shouted Ginny, who sounded close to tears now. "And Hermione snogged Viktor Krum, it's only you who acts like it's something disgusting, Ron, and that's because you've got about as much experience as a twelve-year-old!"And with that, she stormed away. Harry quickly let go of Ron; the look on his face was murderous. They both stood there, breath-ing heavily, until Mrs. Norris, Rich's cat, appeared around the cor-ner, which broke the tension.

"C'mon," said Harry, as the sound of Filch's shuffling feet reached their ears.

They hurried up the stairs and along a seventh-floor corridor. "Oi, out of the way!" Ron barked at a small girl who jumped in fright and dropped a bottle of toadspawn.

Harry hardly noticed the sound of shattering glass; he felt dis-oriented, dizzy; being struck by a lightning bolt must be something like this. It's just because she's Ron’s sister, he told himself. You just didn't like seeing her kissing Dean because she's Ron's sister. . . .

But unbidden into his mind came an image of that same de-serted corridor with himself kissing Ginny instead. . . . The mon-ster in his chest purred . . . but then he saw Ron ripping open the tapestry curtain and drawing his wand on Harry, shouting things like "betrayal of trust" . . . "supposed to be my friend" . . .

"D'you think Hermione did snog Krum?" Ron asked abruptly, as they approached the Fat Lady. Harry gave a guilty start and wrenched his imagination away from a corridor in which no Ron intruded, in which he and Ginny were quite alone — "What?" he said confusedly. "Oh ... er ..." The honest answer was "yes," but he did not want to give it. However, Ron seemed to gather the worst from the look on Harry's face.

"Dilligrout," he said darkly to the Fat Lady, and they climbed through the portrait hole into the common room.

Neither of them mentioned Ginny or Hermione again; indeed, they barely spoke to each other that evening and got into bed in si-lence, each absorbed in his own thoughts,Harry lay awake for a long time, looking up at the canopy of his four-poster and trying to convince himself that his feelings for Ginny were entirely elder-brotherly. They had lived, had they not, like brother and sister all summer, playing Quidditch, teasing Ron, and having a laugh about Bill and Phlegm? He had known Ginny for years now. ... It was natural that he should feel protective . . . natural that he should want to look out for her . . .

want to rip Dean limb from limb for kissing her... No ... he would have to control that particular brotherly feeling. . . .

Ron gave a great grunting snore.

She's Ron's sister, Harry told himself firmly. Ron's sister. She's out-of-bounds. He would not risk his friendship with Ron for anything. He punched his pillow into a more comfortable shape and waited for sleep to come, trying his utmost not to allow his thoughts to stray anywhere near Ginny.

Harry awoke next morning feeling slightly dazed and confused by a series of dreams in which Ron had chased him with a Beater’s bat, but by midday he would have happily exchanged the dream Ron for the real one, who was not only cold-shouldering Ginny and Dean, but also treating a hurt and bewildered Hermione with an icy, sneering indifference. What was more, Ron seemed to have become, overnight, as touchy and ready to lash out as the average Blast-Ended Skrewt. Harry spent the day attempting to keep the peace between Ron and Hermione with no success; finally, Hermione departed for bed in high dudgeon, and Ron stalked off to the boys' dormitory after swearing angrily at several frightened first years for looking at him.

To Harry’s dismay, Ron's new aggression did not wear off over the next few days. Worse still, it coincided with an even deeper dip in his Keeping skills, which made him still more aggressive, so that during the final Quidditch practice before Saturdays match, he failed to save every single goal the Chasers aimed at him, but bellowed at everybody so much that he reduced Demelza Robins to tears.

"You shut up and leave her alone!" shouted Peakes, who was about two-thirds Ron's height, though admittedly carrying a heavy bat.

"ENOUGH!" bellowed Harry, who had seen Ginny glowering in Ron’s direction and, remembering her reputation as an accom-plished caster of the Bat-Bogey Hex, soared over to intervene be-fore things

got out of hand. "Peakes, go and pack up the Bludgers. Demelza, pull yourself together, you played really well today, Ron . . ." he waited until the rest of the team were out of earshot before saying it, "you're my best mate, but carry on treating the rest of them like this and I'm going to kick you off the team."He really thought for a moment that Ron might hit him, but then something much worse happened: Ron seemed to sag on his broom. all the fight went out of him and he said, "I resign. I'm pathetic.""You're not pathetic and you're not resigning!" said Harry fiercely, seizing Ron by the front of his robes. "You can save any-thing when you're on form, it's a mental problem you've got!" "You calling me mental?" "Yeah, maybe I am!"They glared at each other for a moment, then Ron shook his head wearily. "I know you haven't got any time to find another Keeper, so I'll play tomorrow, but if we lose, and we will, I'm tak-ing myself off the team."Nothing Harry said made any difference. He tried boosting Ron's confidence all through dinner, but Ron was too busy being grumpy and surly with Hermione to notice. Harry persisted in the common room that evening, but his assertion that the whole team would be devastated if Ron left was somewhat undermined by the fact that the rest of the team was sitting in a huddle in a distant corner, clearly muttering about Ron and casting him nasty looks. Finally Harry tried getting angry again in the hope of provoking Ron into a defiant, and hopefully goal-saving, attitude, but this strategy did not appear to work any better than encouragement; Ron went to bed as dejected and hopeless as ever.

Harry lay awake for a very long time in the darkness. He did not want to lose the upcoming match; not only was it his first as Cap-tain, but he was determined to beat Draco Malfoy at Quidditch even if he could not yet prove his suspicions about him. Yet if Ron played as he had done in the last few practices, their chances of winning were very slim. . . .

If only there was something he could do to make Ron pull him-self together . . . make him play at the top of his form . . . some-thing that would ensure that Ron had a really good day. . . .

And the answer came to Harry in one, sudden, glorious stroke of inspiration.

Breakfast was the usual excitable affair next morning; the Slytherins hissed and booed loudly as every member of the Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall. Harry glanced at the ceiling and saw a clear, pale blue sky: a good omen.

The Gryffindor table, a solid mass of red and gold, cheered as Harry and Ron approached. Harry grinned and waved; Ron gri-maced weakly and shook his head.

"Cheer up, Ron!" called Lavender. "I know you'll be brilliant!" : Ron ignored her.

"Tea?" Harry asked him. "Coffee? Pumpkin juice?" "Anything," said Ron glumly, taking a moody bite of toast.

A few minutes later Hermione, who had become so tired of Ron's recent unpleasant behavior that she had not come down to breakfast with them, paused on her way up the table.

"How are you both feeling?" she asked tentatively, her eyes on the back of Ron's head.

"Fine," said Harry, who was concentrating on handing Ron a glass of pumpkin juice. "There you go, Ron. Drink up."Ron had just raised the glass to his lips when Hermione spokesharply.

"Don't drink that, Ron!"

Both Harry and Ron looked up at her.

"Why not?" said Ron.

Hermione was now staring at Harry as though she could not be-lieve her eyes.

"You just put something in that drink.""Excuse me?" said Harry.

"You heard me. I saw you. You just tipped something into Ron's drink. You've got the bottle in your hand right now!""I dont know what you're talking about," said Harry, stowing the little bottle hastily in his pocket.

"Ron, I warn you, don't drink it!" Hermione said again, alarmed, but Ron picked up the glass, drained it in one gulp, and said, "Stop bossing me around, Hermione."She looked scandalized. Bending low so that only Harry could hear her, she hissed, "You should be expelled for that. I'd never have believed it of you, Harry!""Look who's talking," he whispered back. "Confunded anyone lately?"She stormed up the table away from them. Harry watched her go without regret. Hermione had never really understood what a serious business Quidditch was. He then looked around at Ron, who was smacking his lips.

"Nearly time/' said Harry blithely.

The frosty grass crunched underfoot as they strode down to the stadium.

"Pretty lucky the weathers this good, eh?" Harry asked Ron.

"Yeah," said Ron, who was pale and sick-looking.

Ginny and Demelza were already wearing their Quidditch robes and waiting in the changing room.

"Conditions look ideal," said Ginny, ignoring Ron. "And guess what? That Slytherin Chaser Vaisey — he took a Bludger in the head yesterday during their practice, and he's too sore to play! And even better than that — Malfoy's gone off sick too!""What?" said Harry, wheeling around to stare at her. "He's ill? What's wrong with him?""No idea, but it's great for us," said Ginny brightly. "They're playing Harper instead; he's in my year and he's an idiot."Harry smiled back vaguely, but as he pulled on his scarlet robes his mind was far from Quidditch.

Malfoy had once before claimed he could not play due to injury, but on that occasion he had made sure the whole match was rescheduled for a time that suited the Slytherins better. Why was he now happy to let a substitute go on? Was he really ill, or was he faking?

"Fishy, isn't it?" he said in an undertone to Ron. "Malfoy not playing?""Lucky, I call it," said Ron, looking slightly more animated. "And Vaisey off too, he's their best goal scorer, I didn't fancy — hey!" he said suddenly, freezing halfway through pulling on his Keepers gloves and staring at Harry.

"What?"

"I... you . . ." Ron had dropped his voice, he looked both scared and excited. "My drink ... my pumpkin juice ... you didn't...?"Harry raised his eyebrows, but said nothing except, "We'll be starting in about five minutes, you'd better get your boots on."They walked out onto the pitch to tumultuous roars and boos. One end of the stadium was solid red and gold; the other, a sea of green and silver. Many Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had taken sides too: Amidst all the yelling and clapping Harry could distinctly hear the roar of Luna Lovegood's famous lion-topped hat.

Harry stepped up to Madam Hooch, the referee, who was stand-ing ready to release the balls from the crate.

"Captains shake hands," she said, and Harry had his hand crushed by the new Slytherin Captain, Urquhart. "Mount your brooms. On the whistle . . . three . . . two . . . one . . ."The whistle sounded, Harry and the others kicked off hard from the frozen ground, and they were away.

Harry soared around the perimeter of the grounds, looking around for the Snitch and keeping one eye on Harper, who was zigzagging far below him. Then a voice that was jarringly different to the usual commentator's started up.

"Well, there they go, and I think we're all surprised to see the team that Potter's put together this year. Many thought, given Ronald Weasley's patchy performance as Keeper last year, that he might be off the team, but of course, a close personal friendship with the Captain does help. . . ."These words were greeted with jeers and applause from the Slytherin end of the pitch. Harry craned around on his broom to look toward the commentator's podium. A call, skinny blond buy with an upturned nose was standing there, talking into the magical megaphone that had once been Lee Jordan's; Harry recognized Zacharias Smith, a Hufflepuff player whom he heartily disliked.

"Oh, and here comes Slytherin's first attempt on goal, it's Urquhart streaking down the pitch and —"Harrys stomach turned over.

"— Weasley saves it, well, he's bound to get lucky sometimes, I suppose. . . .""That's right, Smith, he is," muttered Harry, grinning to him-self, as he dived amongst the Chasers with his eyes searching all around for some hint of the elusive Snitch.

With half an hour of the game gone, Gryffindor were leading sixty points to zero, Ron having made some truly spectacular saves, some by the very tips of his gloves, and Ginny having scored four of Gryffindor's six goals. This effectively stopped Zacharias won-dering loudly whether the two Weasleys were only there because Harry liked them, and he started on Peakes and Coote instead.

"Of course, Coote isn't really the usual build for a Beater," said Zacharias loftily, "they've generally got a bit more muscle —""Hit a Bludger at him!" Harry called to Coote as he zoomed past, but Coote, grinning broadly, chose to aim the next Bludger at Harper instead, who was just passing Harry in the opposite direc-tion. Harry was pleased to hear the dull thunk that meant the Bludger had found its mark.

It seemed as though Gryffindor could do no wrong. Again and again they scored, and again and again, at the other end of the pitch, Ron saved goals with apparent ease. He was actually smiling now, and when the crowd greeted a particularly good save with arousing chorus of the old favorite "Weasley Is Our King," he pre-tended to conduct them from on high.

"Thinks he's something special today, doesn't he?" said a snide voice, and Harry was nearly knocked off his broom as Harper collided with him hard and deliberately. "Your blood-traitor pal..." Madam Hooch's back was turned, and though Gryffindors be-low shouted in anger, by the time she looked around, Harper had already sped off. His shoulder aching, Harry raced after him, de-termined to ram him back. ...

"And I think Harper of Slytherin's seen the Snitch!" said Zacharias Smith through his megaphone. "Yes, he's certainly seen something Potter hasn't!"Smith really was an idiot, thought Harry, hadn't he noticed them collide? But next moment, his stomach seemed to drop out of the , sky — Smith was right and Harry was wrong: Harper had not sped upward at random; he had spotted what Harry had not: The Snitch was speeding along high above them, glinting brightly against the clear blue sky.

Harry accelerated; the wind was whistling in his ears so that it drowned all sound of Smith's commentary or the crowd, but Harper was still ahead of him, and Gryffindor was only a hundred points up; if Harper got there first Gryffindor had lost. . . and now Harper was feet from it, his hand outstretched. ...

"Oi, Harper!" yelled Harry in desperation. "How much did Malfoy pay you to come on instead of him?"He did not know what made him say it, but Harper did a dou-ble-take; he fumbled the Snitch, let it slip through his fingers, and shot right past it. Harry made a great swipe for the tiny, fluttering ball and caught it.

"YES!" Hairy yelled. Wheeling around, he hurtled back toward the ground, the Snitch held high in his hand. As the crowd realized what had happened, a great shout went up that almost drowned the sound of the whistle that signaled the end of the game.

"Ginny, where're you going?" yelled Harry, who had found hint self trapped in the midst of a mass midair hug with the rest of tin1 team, but Ginny sped right on past them until, with an almighty crash, she collided with the commentators podium. As the crowd shrieked and laughed, the Gryffindor team landed beside the wreckage of wood under which Zacharias was feebly stirring,: Harry heard Ginny saying blithely to an irate Professor McGonagall, "Forgot to brake, Professor, sorry."Laughing, Harry broke free of the rest of the team and hugged Ginny, but let go very quickly. Avoiding her gaze, he clapped cheering Ron on the back instead as, all enmity forgotten, the Gryffindor team left the pitch arm in arm, punching the air ami waving to their supporters.

The atmosphere in the changing room was jubilant. "Party up in the common room, Seamus said!" yelled Dean exuberantly. "C'mon, Ginny, Demelza!"Ron and Harry were the last two in the changing room. They were just about to leave when Hermione entered. She was twisting her Gryffindor scarf in her hands and looked upset but determined. "I want a word with you, Harry." She took a deep breath. "Yon shouldn't have done it. You heard Slughorn, its illegal." "What are you going to do, turn us in?" demanded Ron. "What are you two talking about?" asked Harry, turning away to hang up his robes so that neither of them would see him grinning, "You know perfectly well what we're talking about!" said Hermione shrilly. "You spiked Rons juice with lucky potion at breakfast! I'elix Felicis!""No, I didn't," said Harry, turning back to face them both.

"Yes you did, Harry, and that's why everything went right, there were Slytherin players missing and Ron saved everything!""I didn't put it in!" said Harry, grinning broadly. He slipped his hand inside his jacket pocket and drew out the tiny bottle that Hermione had seen in his

hand that morning. It was full of golden potion and the cork was still tightly sealed with wax. "I wanted Ron to think I'd done it, so I faked it when I knew you were look-ing." He looked at Ron. "You saved everything because you felt lucky. You did it all yourself."He pocketed the potion again.

"There really wasn't anything in my pumpkin juice?" Ron said, astounded. "But the weather's good. . . and Vaisey couldn't play. ... I honestly haven't been given lucky potion?"]Harry shook his head. Ron gaped at him for a moment, then rounded on Hermione, imitating her voice. "You added Felix Felicis to Ron’s juice this morning, that's why he saved everything! See! I can save goals without help, Hermione!""I never said you couldn't — Ron, you thought you'd been given it too!"But Ron had already strode past her out of the door with his broomstick over his shoulder.

"Er," said Harry into the sudden silence; he had not expected his plan to backfire like this, "shall. . . shall we go up to the party, then?""You go!" said Hermione, blinking back tears. "I'm sick of Ron at the moment, I don't know what I'm supposed to have done. . . ."And she stormed out of the changing room too.

Harry walked slowly back up the grounds toward the castle through the crowd, many of whom shouted congratulations at him, but he felt a great sense of letdown; he had been sure that if Ron won the match, he and Hermione would be friends again immediately. He did not see how he could possibly explain to Hermi-one that what she had done to offend Ron was kiss Viktor Krum, not when the offense had occurred so long ago.

Harry could not see Hermione at the Gryffindor celebration party, which was in full swing when he arrived. Renewed cheers and clapping greeted his appearance, and he was soon surrounded by a mob of people congratulating him. What with trying to shake off the Creevey brothers, who wanted a blow-by-blow match analysis, and the large group of girls that encircled him, laughing at his least

amusing comments and batting their eyelids, it was some time before he could try and find Ron. At last, he extricated him-self from Romilda Vane, who was hinting heavily that she would like to go to Slughorn's Christmas party with him. As he was duck-ing toward the drinks table, he walked straight into Ginny, Arnold the Pygmy Puff riding on her shoulder and Crookshanks mewing hopefully at her heels.

"Looking for Ron?" she asked, smirking. "He's over there, the filthy hypocrite."Harry looked into the corner she was indicating. There, in full view of the whole room, stood Ron wrapped so closely around Lavender Brown it was hard to tell whose hands were whose.

"It looks like he's eating her face, doesn't it?" said Ginny dispassionately. "But I suppose he's got to refine his technique somehow. Good game, Harry."She patted him on the arm; Harry felt a swooping sensation in his stomach, but then she walked off to help herself to more butterbeer. Crookshanks trotted after her, his yellow eyes fixed upon Arnold.

Harry turned away from Ron, who did not look like he would be surfacing soon, just as the portrait hole was closing. With a sinking feeling, he thought he saw a mane of bushy brown hair whip-ping out of sight.

He darted forward, sidestepped Romilda Vane again, and pushed open the portrait of the Fat Lady. The corridor outside , seemed to be deserted.

"Hermione?"

He found her in the first unlocked classroom he tried. She was sitting on the teacher's desk, alone except for a small ring of twit-tering yellow birds circling her head, which she had clearly just conjured out of midair. Harry could not help admiring her spell-work at a time like this.

"Oh, hello, Harry," she said in a brittle voice. "I was just practicing.""Yeah . . . they're — er — really good. ..." said Harry.

He had no idea what to say to her. He was just wondering whether there was any chance that she had not noticed Ron, that she had merely left the room because the party was a little too rowdy, when she said, in an unnaturally high-pitched voice, "Ron seems to be enjoying the celebrations.""Er . . . does he?" said Harry.

"Don't pretend you didn't see him," said Hermione. "He wasn't exactly hiding it, was — ?"The door behind them burst open. To Harry's horror, Ron came in, laughing, pulling Lavender by the hand. ; "'Oh," he said, drawing up short at the sight of Harry and Hermione.

"Oops!" said Lavender, and she backed out of the room, gig-gling. The door swung shut behind her.

There was a horrible, swelling, billowing silence. Hermione was staring at Ron, who refused to look at her, but said with an odd mixture of bravado and awkwardness, "Hi, Harry! Wondered where you'd got to!"Hermione slid off the desk. The little flock of golden birds con-tinued to twitter in circles around her head so that she looked like a strange, feathery model of the solar system.

"You shouldn't leave Lavender waiting outside," she said quietly. "She'll wonder where you've gone."She walked very slowly and erectly toward the door. Harry glanced at Ron, who was looking relieved that nothing worse had happened.

"Oppugno!" came a shriek from the doorway.

Harry spun around to see Hermione pointing her wand at Ron, her expression wild: The little flock of birds was speeding like a hail of fat golden bullets toward Ron, who yelped and covered his face with his hands, but the birds attacked, pecking and clawing at every bit of flesh they could reach.

"Gerremoffme!" he yelled, but with one last look of vindictive fury, Hermione wrenched open the door and disappeared through it. Harry thought he heard a sob before it slammed.

Chapter 15 The Unbreakable Vow

Snow was swirling against the icy windows once more; Christmas was approaching fast. Hagrid had already singlehandedly delivered the usual twelve C hristmas trees to the Great Hall; garlands of holly and tinsel had been twisted around the banisters of the stairs; everlasting candles glowed from inside the helmets of suits of armor and great bunches of mistletoe had been hung at intervals along the corridors. Large groups of girls tended to converge underneath the mistletoe bunches every time Harry went past, which caused blockages in the corridors; fortunat e ly, however, Harry's frequent nighttime wanderings had given him an unusually good knowledge of the castle's secret passageways, so that he was often, without too much difficulty, to naviga t e mistletoe-free routes between classes.

Ron, who might once have found the necessity of these detours excuse for jealousy rather than hilarity, simply roared with laughter about it all. Although Harry much preferred this new laughing, joking Ron to the moody, aggressive model he had been enduring for the last few weeks, the improved Ron came at a heavy price. Firstly, Harry had to put up with the frequent presence of Lavender Brown, who seemed to regard any moment that she was not kissing Ron as a moment wasted; and secondly, Harry found himself once more the best friend of two people who seemed unlikely ever to speak to each other again.

Ron, whose hands and forearms still bore scratches and cuts from Hermione's bird attack, was taking a defensive and resentful tone.

"She can't complain," he told Harry. "She snogged Krum. So she's found out someone wants to snog me too. Well, it's a free country. I haven't done anything wrong."

Harry did not answer, but pretended to be absorbed in the book they were supposed to have read before Charms next morning

(Quintessence: A Q uest). Determined as he was to remain friends with both Ron and Hermione, he was spending a lot of time with his mouth shut tight.

"I never promised Hermione anything , " Ron mumbled. "I mean, all right, I was going to go to Slughorn's Christmas party with her, but she never said... just as friends... I'm a free agent..."

Harry turned a page of Quintessence, aware that Ron was watching him. Ron's voice trailed away in mutters, barely audible over the loud crackling of the fire, though Harry thought he caught the words "Krum" and "Can't complain" again.

Hermione's schedule was so full that Harry could only talk to her properly in the evenings, when Ron was, in any case, so tightly wrapped around Lavender that he did not notice what Harry was doing. Hermione refused to sit in the common room while Ron was there, So Harry generally joined her in the library, which meant that their conversations were held in whispers.

"He's at perfect liberty to kiss whomever he likes," said Hermione, while the librarian , Madam Pince, prowled the shelves behind them. "I really couldn't care less."

She raised her quill and dotted an 'i' so ferociously that she punctured a hole in her parchment. Harry said nothing. He thought his voice might soon vanish from the lack of use. He bent a little lower over Advanced Potion-Making and continued to make notes on Everlasting Elixirs, occasionally pausing to decipher the p rince's useful additions to Libatius B orage's text.

"And incidentally," said Hermione, after a few moments, "you need to be careful."

"For the last time," said Harry, speaking in a slightly hoarse tone after three-quarters of an ho u r of silence, "I am not giving back this book .

I've learned more from the Half-blood p rince than Snape or Slughorn have taught me in--"

"I'm not talking about your stupid so-called prince," said Hermione , giving his book a nasty look as though it had been rude to her. "I'm talki ng about earlier. I went into the girl's bathroom just before I came in here and there were about a dozen girls in there, including that Romilda Vane , trying to decide how to slip you a love potion. They're all hoping they're going to get you to take them to Slughorn's party, and thay all seem to have bought Fred and George's love potions, which I'm afraid to say probably work --"

"Why didn't you confiscate them then?" demanded Harry, it seemed extraordinary that Hermione's m ania for upholding the rules could have abandoned her at this crucial juncture.

"They didn't have the potions with them in the bathroom," said Hermione scornfully, "They were just discussing tactics. As I doubt the Half-blood prince" she gave the book another scornful look "could dream up an antidote for a dozen different love potions at once, I'd just invite someone to go with you, that'll stop all the others thinking they've still got a chance. It's tomor r ow night, they're getting desperate."

"There isn't anyone I want to invite," mumbled Harry, who was still not trying to think about Ginny any more than he could help, despite the fact the fact that she kept cropping up in his dreams in ways that made him devoutly thankful that Ron could not perform Legilimency.

"Well, just be careful what you drink, because Romilda Va ne looked like she meant business." said Hermione grimly.

She hitched up the long roll of parchment on which she was writing her Arithma n cy essay and continued to scratch away with her quill. Harry wa t che d her with his mind a long way away.

"Hang on a moment," he said slowly. "I thought Filch had banned anything bought at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes?"

"And when has anyone ever paid attention to what Filch has banned?" asked Hermione, still concentrating on her essay.

"But I thought all the owls were being searched. So how come these grils are able to bring love potions into the school?"

"Fred and George send them disguised as perfumes and cough potions," said Hermione. "It's part of their Owl order service."

"You know a lot about it."

Hermione gave him the kind of nasty look she had just given his copy of Advanced Potion-Making.

"It was all on the back of the bottles they showed Ginny and me in the summer," she said coldly, "I don't go around putting potions in people's drinks... or pretending too eit h er, which is just as bad..."

"Yeah, well, never mind that," said Harry quickly. "The point is, Filch is being fooled isn't he? These girls are getting stuff into the school disguised as something else! So why couldn't Malfoy have brought the necklace into the school --?"

"Oh, Harry... not that again..."

"Come on, why not?" demanded Harry.

"Look , " sighed Hermione, "Secrecy Sensors detect jinxes, curses, and concealment charms, don't they? They're used to find d ark magic and d ark obje c ts. They'd have picked up a powerful curse , like the one in the necklace, withi n seconds. But something that's just been put in the wrong bottle wouldn ' t register -- anyway Love potions aren't d ark or dangerous ---"

"Easy for you to say," muttered Harry, thinking of Romilda Vane.

"-- so it would be down to Filch to realise it wasn't a cough potion, and he's not a very good wizard, I doubt he can tell one potion from --"

Hermione stopped dead; Harry had heard it too. Somebody had moved close behind them among the dark bookshelves. They waited, and a moment later the vulturelike countenance of Madam Pince appeared around the corner, her sunken cheeks, her skin like parchment, and her long hooked nose illuminated unflatteringly by the lamp she was carrying.

"The library is now closed," she said, "Mind you return anything you have borrowed to the correct -- what have you been doing to that book, you depraved boy?"

"It isn't the library's, it's mine!" said Harry hastily, snatching his copy of Advanced Potion-Making off the table as she lunged at it with a clawlike hand.

" Spoiled!" she hissed . "Desecrated, befouled !"

"It's just a book that's been written on!" said Harry, tugging it out of her grip.

She looked as though she might have a seizure; Hermione, who had hastily packed her things, grabbed Harry by the arm and frogmarched him away.

"She'll ban you from the library if you're not careful. Why did you have to bring that stupid book?"

"It's not my fault she's barking mad, Hermione. Or d'you think she overheard you being rude about Filch? I've always thought there might be something between them..."

"Oh, ha ha.."

Enjoying the fact that they could speak normally again, they made their way along the deserted lamp-lit corridors back to the common room, arguing w hether or not Filch and Madam Pince were secretly in love with each other.

"Baubles" said Harry to the Fat Lady, this being the new, festive password.

"Same to you," said the fat lady with a roguish grin, and she swung forward to admit them.

"Hi, Harry!" said Romilda Vane, the moment he had climbed through the portrait hole. "Fancy a gillywater?"

Hermione gave him a "what-did-I-tell-you?" look over her shoulder.

"No thanks," said Harry quickly. "I don't like it much."

"Well, take these anyway," said Romilda, thrusting a box into his hands. "Chocolate Cauldrons, they've got firewhiskey in them. My gran sent them to me, but I don't like them."

"Oh-- right -- thanks a lot." said Harry, who could not think what else to say. " Er-- I ' m just going over here with ..."

He hurried off behind Hermione, his voice tailing away feebly.

"Told you," said Hermione succinctly, " Sooner you ask someone, sooner they'll all leave you alone and you can --"

But her face suddnly turned blank; she had just spotted Ron and Lavender, who were i ntertwined in the same armchair.

"Well, good night, Harry" said Hermione, though it was only seven o'clock in the evening, and she left for the girl s' dormitory without another word.

Harry went to bed comforting himself that there was only one more day of lessons to struggle through, plus Slughorn's party, after which he and Ron would depart together for the B urrow. It now seemed impossible that Ron and Hermione would make up with each other before the holidays began, but perhaps, somehow, the break would give them time to calm down, think better of their behavior...

But his hopes were not high, and they sank still lower after enduring a Transfiguration lesson with them both next day. They had just embarked upon the immensely difficult topic of human transfiguration; working in front of mirrors , they were suposed to be changing the color of their own eyebrows. Hermione laughed unkindly at Ron's disastrous first attempt, during which he somehow managed to give himself a spectacular handlebar mustache; Ron retaliated by doing a cruel but accurate impression of Hermione jumping up and down in her seat every time Profe s sor McGonagall asked a question, which Lavender and Parvati found deeply amusing and which reduced Hermione to the verge of tears again. She raced out of the classroom on the bell, leaving half her things behind; Harry, deciding that her need was greater than Ron's just now, scooped up her remaining po ssessions and followed her.

He finally tracked her down as she emerged from a girl's bathroom on the floor below. She was accompanied by Luna Lovegood, who was patting her vaguely on the back.

"Oh, hello, Harry , " said Luna . " D id you know one of your eyebrows is bright yellow?"

"Hi, Luna. Hermione , you left your stuff..."

He held out her books.

"Oh, yes," said Hermione in a choked voice, taking her things and turning away quickly to hide the fact she was wiping her eyes with her pencil case. "Thank you , Harry. Well, I'd better get going..."

And she hurried off, without ever giving Harry any time to offer words of comfort, though admittedly he could not think of any.

"She's a bit upset , " said Luna. "I thought at first it was Moaning Myrtle in there, but it turned out to be Hermione. She said something about Ron Weasley..."

"Yeah, they've had a row," said Harry.

"He says funny things sometimes, doesn't he?" said Luna as they set off down the corridor together. "But he can be a bit unkind. I noticed that last year."

" I s'pose , " said Harry. Luna was demonstrating her usual knack of speaking uncomfortable truths; he had never met anyone quite like her. "So have you had a good term?"

"Oh, it's been al l right," said Luna. " A bit lonely without the D.A. Ginny's been nice, though. She stopped two boys in our Transfiguration class calling me 'Loony' the other day --"

"How would you like to come to S lughorn's party with me tonight?"

The words were out of Harry's mouth before he could stop them; he heard himself say them as though it were a stranger speaking.

Luna turned her protuberant eyes to him in surprise.

"Slughorn's party? With you?"

"Yeah," said Harry, "We're supposed to bring guests, so I thought you might like.. I mean..." He was keen to make his intentions perfectly clear. " I mean, just as friends, you know. But if you don't want to..."

He was already half hoping that she didn't want to.

"O h no, I'd love to go with you as friends!" said Luna, beaming as he had never seen her beam before. "Nobody's ever asked me to a party

before, as a friend! Is that why you dyed your eyebrow, for the party? Should I dye mine too?"

"No" said Harry firmly, "That was a mistake. I'll get Hermione to put it right for me. So I'll meet you in the entrance hall at eight o'clock then . "

"AHA!" screamed a voice from overhead and both of them jumped; unnoticed by either of them, they had just passed underneath Peeves, who was hanging upside down from a chandelier and grinning maliciously at them.

"Potty asked Loony to go to the part y ! Potty lurves Loony! Potty luuuuuurves Looooony!"And he zoomed away cackling and shrieking, "Potty loves Loony!""Nice to keep these things private," said Harry. And sure enough, in no time at all the whole school seemed to know that Harry Potter was taking Luna Lovegood to Slughorn's party.

"You could've taken anyone!" said Ron in disbelief over dinner. "Anyone! And you chose Loony Lovegood?"

"Don't call her that, Ron!" snapped Ginny, pausing behind Harry on her way to join friends. "I'm really glad you're taking her Harry, she's so excited."

And she moved on down the table to sit with Dean. Harry tried to feel pleased that Ginny was glad he was taking Luna to the party but could not quite manage it. A long way along the table Hermione was sitting alone, playing with her stew. Harry noticed Ron looking at her furtively.

"You could say sorry , " suggested Harry bluntly.

"What , and get attacked by another flock of canaries?" muttered Ron.

"What did you have to imitate her for?""She laughed at my mustache!""So did I, it was the stupidest thing I've ever seen."

But Ron did not seem to have he a rd; Lavender had just arrived with Parvati. Squeezing herself in between Harry and Ron, Lavender flung her arms around Ron's neck.

"Hi, Harry," said Parvati who, like Harry, looked faintly embarrassed and bored by the behavior of their two friends.

"Hi," said Harry, "How're you? You're staying at Hogwarts, then? I heard your parents wanted you to leave."

"I managed to talk them out o f it for the time being," said Parvati. "That Katie thing really freaked them out, but as there hasn't been anything since... Oh, hi, Hermione!"

Parvati positively beamed. Harry could tell that she was feeling guilty for having laughed at Hermione in Transfiguration. He looked around and saw that Hermione was beaming back, if possible even more brightly. Girls were very strange sometimes.

"Hi, Parvati!" said Hermione, ignoring Ron and Lavender completely. "Are you going to Slughorn's party tonight?"

"No invite," said Parvati gloomily. "I'd love to go, though, it sounds like it's going to be really good... You're going, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm meeting Cormac at eight, and we're -"

There was a noise like a plunger being withdrawn from a blocked sink , and Ron surfaced. Hermione acted as though she had not seen or heard anything.

"- we're going up to the party together."

"Cormac?" said Parvati. "Cormac McLaggen, you mean?"

"That's right," said Hermione sweetly. "The one who *almost*" - she put a great deal of emphasis on the word - "bec a me Gryffindor Keeper."

"Are you going out with him, then?" asked Parvati, wide-eyed.

"Oh - yes - didn't you know?" said Harmione, with a most un-Hermione-ish giggle.

"No!" said Parvati, looking positively agog at thi s piece of gossip. "Wow , you like your Quidditch players, don't you? First Krum, then McLaggen. . ."

"I like *really good* Quidditch players," Hermione corrected her, still smiling. "Well, see you... Got to go and get ready for the party..."

She left. At once Lavender and Parvati put their heads together to discuss this new development, with everything they had ever heard about McLaggen, and all they had ever guessed about Hermione. Ron looked strangely blank and said nothing. Harry was left to ponder in silence the depths to which girls would sink to get revenge.

When he arrived in the entrance hall at eight o'clock that night, he found an unusually large number of girls lurking there, all of whom seemed to be staring at him resentfully as he approached Luna. She was wearing a set of spangled silver robes that were attracting a certain amount of giggles from the onlookers, but otherwise she looked quite nice. Harry was glad, in any case, that she had left off her radish earrings, her butterbeer cork necklace, and her Spectrespecs.

"Hi," he said. "Shall we get going then?"

"Oh yes," she said happily. "Where is the party?"

"Slughorn's office," said Harry, leading her up the marble staircase away from all the staring and muttering. "Did you hear, there's

supposed to be a vampire coming?"

"Rufus Scrimgeour?" asked Luna.

"I - what?" said Harry, disconcerted. "You mean the Minister of Magic?"

"Yes, he's a vampire," said Luna matter-of-factly. "Father wrote a very long article about it when Scrimgeour first took over from Cornelius Fudge, but he was forced not to publish by somebody from the Ministry. Obviously, they didn't want the truth to get out!"

Harry, who thought it most unlikely that Rufus Scrimgeour was a vampire, but who was used to Luna repeating her father's bizarre views as though they were fact, did not reply; they were already approaching Slughorn's office and the sounds of laughter, music, and loud conversation were growing louder with every step they took.

Whether it had been built that way, or because he had used magical trickery to make it so, Slughorn's office was much larger than the usual teacher's study. The ceiling and walls had been draped with emerald, crimson , and gold hangings, so that it looked as though they were all inside a vast tent. The room was crowded and stuffy and bathed in the red light cast by an ornate golden lamp dangling from the center of the ceiling in which real fairies were fluttering, each a brilliant speck of light. Loud singing accompanied by what sounded like mandolins issued from a distant corner; a haze of pipe smoke hung over several elderly warlocks deep in conversation, and a number of house-elves were negotiating their way squeakily through the forest of knees, obscured by the heavy silver platters of food they were bearing, so that they looked like little roving tables.

"Harry, m'boy!" boomed Slughorn, almost as soon as Harry and Luna had squeezed in through the door. "Come in, come in, so many people I'd like you to meet!"

Slughorn was wearing a tasseled velvet hat to match his smoking jacket. Gripping Harry's arm so tightly he might have been hoping to Disapparate with him, Slughorn led him purposefully into the party; Harry seized Luna's hand and dragged her along with him.

"Harry, I'd like you to meet Eldred Worple, an old student of mine, author of ' Blood Brothers: My L ife Amongst the Vampires' - and, of course, his friend Sanguini."

Worple, who was a small, stout, bespectacled man, grabbed Harry's hand and shook it enthusiastically; the vampire Sanguini, who was tall and emaciated with dark shadows under his eyes, merely nodded. He looked rather bored. A gaggle of girls was standing close to him, looking curious and excited.

"Harry Potter, I am simply delighted!" said Worple, peering shortsightedly up into Harry's face. "I was saying to Professor Slughorn only the other day, 'Where is the biography of Harry Potter for which we have all been waiting?'"

"Er," said Harry, "were you?"

"Just as modest as Horace described!" said Worple. "But seri-ously" — his manner changed; it became suddenly businesslike — "I would be delighted to write it myself— people are craving to know more about you, dear boy, craving! If you were prepared to grant me a few interviews, say in four- or five-hour sessions, why, we could have the book finished within months. And all with very little effort on your part, I assure you — ask Sanguini here if it isn't quite — Sanguini, stay here!" added Worple, suddenly stern, for the vampire had been edging toward the nearby group of girls, a rather hungry look in his eye. "Here, have a pasty," said Worple, seizing one from a passing elf and stuffing it into Sanguini's hand before turning his attention back to Harry. "My dear boy, the gold you could make, you have no idea —"

"I'm definitely not interested," said Harry firmly, "and I've just seen a friend of mine, sorry." He pulled Luna after him into the crowd; he had

indeed just seen a long mane of brown hair disappear between what looked like two members of the Weird Sisters.

"Hermione! Hermione !"

"Harry! There you are, thank goodness! Hi, Luna !"

"What's happened to you?" asked Harry, for Hermione looked distinctly disheveled, rather as though she had just fought her way out of a thicket of Devil's Snare.

"Oh, I've just escaped — I mean, I've just left Cormac," she said. "Under the mistletoe," she added in explanation, as Harry continued to look questioningly at her.

"Serves you right for coming with him," he told her severely. "I thought he'd annoy Ron most," said Hermione dispassion-ately. "I debated for a while about Zacharias Smith, but I thought, on the whole —"

"You considered Smith?" said Harry, revoked.

"Yes, I did, and I'm starting to wish I'd chosen him, McLaggen makes Grawp look a gentleman. Let's go this way, we'll be able to see him coming, he's so tall. . . ." The three of them made their way over to the other side of the room, scooping up goblets of mead on the way, realizing too late that Professor Trelawney was standing there alone.

"Hello," said Luna politely to Professor Trelawney.

"Good evening, my dear," said Professor Trelawney, focusing upon Luna with some difficulty. Harry could smell cooking sherry again. "I haven't seen you in my classes lately. .."

"No, I've got Firenze this year," said Luna.

"Oh, of course," said Professor Trelawney with an angry, drunken titter. "Or Dobbin, as I prefer to think of him. You would have thought,

would you not, that now I am returned to the school Professor Dumbledore might have got rid of the horse? But no ... we share classes. . . . It's an insult, frankly, an insult. Do you know. . ." Professor Trelawney seemed too tipsy to have recognized Harry.

Under cover of her furious criticisms of Firenze, Harry drew closer to Hermione and said, "Let ' s get something straight. Are you planning to tell Ron that you interfered at Keeper tryouts?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Do you really think I'd stoop that low?"

-=-Harry looked at her shrewdly. "Hermione, if you can ask 0111 McLaggen —"

"There's a difference," said Hermione with dignity. "I've got no plans to tell Ron anything about what might, or might not, have happened at Keeper tryouts."

"Good," said Harry fervently. "Because he'll just fall apart again, and we'll lose the next match —"

"Quidditch!" said Hermione angrily. "Is that all boys care about? Cormac hasn't asked me one single question about myself, no, I've just been treated to 'A Hundred Great Saves Made by Cormac McLaggen' nonstop ever since — oh no, here he comes!" She moved so fast it was as though she had Disapparated; one moment she was there, the next, she had squeezed between two guffawing witches and vanished.

"Seen Hermione?" asked McLaggen, forcing his way through the throng a minute later.

"No, sorry," said Harry, and he turned quickly to join in Luna's conversation, forgetting for a split second to whom she was talking.

"Harry Potter!" said Professor Trelawney in deep, vibrant tones, noticing him for the first time.

"Oh, hello," said Harry unenthusiastically.

"My dear boy!" she said in a very carrying whisper. "The rumors! The stories! 'The Chosen One'! Of course, I have known for a very long time. . . . The omens were never good, Harry. . . But why have you not returned to Divination? For you, of all people, the subject is of the utmost importance!"

"Ah, Sybi l l, we all think our subject's most important!" said a loud voice, and Slughorn appeared at Professor Trelawney s other side, his face very red, his velvet hat a little askew, a glass of mead in one hand and an enormous mince pie in the other. "But I don't t hink I've ever known such a natural at Potions!" said Slughorn, re-garding Harry with a fond, if bloodshot, eye. "Instinctive, you know — like his mother! I've only ever taught a few with this kind of ability, I can tell you that, Sybi l l — why even Severus —" And to Harry's horror, Slughorn threw out an arm and seemed to scoop Snape out of thin air toward them. "Stop skulking and come and join us, Severus!" hiccuped Slughorn happily. "I was just talking about Harry's exceptional po-tion-making! Some credit must go to you, of course, you taught him for five years!"

Trapped, with Slughorns arm around his shoulders, Snape looked down his hooked nose at Harry, his black eyes narrowed. "Funny, I never had the impression that I managed to teach Potter anything at all."

"Well, then, it's natural ability!" shouted Slughorn. "You should have seen what he gave me, first lesson, Draught of Living Death — never had a student produce finer on a first attempt, I don't think even you, Severus —"

"Really?" said Snape quietly, his eyes still boring into Harry, who felt a certain disquiet. The last thing he wanted was for Snape to start

investigating the source of his newfound brilliance at Potions.

"Remind me what other subjects you're taking, Harry?" asked Slughorn .

"Defense Against the D ark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration , Herbology..."

"All the subjects required, in short, for an Auror ," said Snap e with the faintest sneer.

"Yeah, well, that's what I'd like to do," said Harry defiantly.

"And a great one you'll make too!" boomed Slughorn.

"I don't think you should be an Auror, Harry," said Luna unex pectedly. Everybody looked at her. "The Aurors are part of the Rotfang Conspiracy, I thought everyone knew that. They're planning to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using a c om bination of Dark Magic and gum disease."

Harry inhaled half his mead up his nose as he started to lau gh. Really, it had been worth bringing Luna just for this. Emerging, from his goblet, coughing, sopping wet but still grinning, he saw something calculated to raise his spirits even higher: Draco Malf o y being dragged by the ear toward them by Argus Filch.

"Professor Slughorn," wheezed Filch, his jowls aquiver and the maniacal light of mischief-detection in his bulging eyes, "I discovered this boy lurking in an upstairs corridor. He claims to have been invited to your party and to have been delayed in setting out. Did you issue him with an invitation?"

Malfoy pulled himself free of Filchs grip, looking furious. "All right, I wasn't invited!" he said angrily. "I was trying to gate crash, happy?"

"No, I'm not!" said Filch, a statement at complete odds with the glee on his face. "You're in trouble, you are! Didn't the headma ster say that nighttime prowling ' s out, unless you've got permission, didn't he, eh?"

-=-"That's all right, Argus, that's all right," said Slughorn, waving it 1.1 nd. "It's Christmas, and it's not a crime to want to come to a party . Just this once, we'll forget any punishment; you may stay , Draco.

Fil ich's expression of outraged disappointment was perfectly pre di c t able; but why, Harry wondered, watching him, did Malfoy look almost equally unhappy? And why was Snape looking at Mal-foy as though both angry and . . . was it p ossible? ... a lit tl afraid? But almost before Harry had registered what he had seen, Filch had turned and shuffled away, muttering under his breath; Malfoy h ad composed his face into a smile and was thanking Slughorn for his generosity, and Snape's face was smoothly inscrutable again.

"It's nothing, nothing," said Slughorn, waving away Malfoy's t hanks. "I did know your grandfather, after all...."

"He always spoke very highly of you, sir," said Malfoy quickly. "Said you were the best potion-maker he'd ever known. ..."

Harry stared at Malfoy. It was not the sucking-up that intrigued him; he had watched Malfoy do that to Snape for a long time. It was the fact that Malfoy did, after all, look a little ill. This was the first time he had seen Malfoy close up for ages; he now saw that Malfoy had dark shadows under his eyes and a distinctly grayish tinge to his skin.

"I'd like a word with you, Draco," said Snape suddenly.

"Now , Severus," said Slughorn, hiccuping again, "it's Christ mas, do n't be too hard —"

"I am his Head of House, and I shall decide how hard, or other-wise, to be," said Snape curtly. "Follow me, Draco."

They left, Snape leading the way, Malfoy looking resentful. Harry stood there for a moment, irresolute, then said, "I'll be back in a bit, Luna — er — bathroom."

"All right," she said cheerfully, and he thought he heard her, as he hurried off into the crowd, resume the subject of the Rotfang Conspiracy with Professor Trelawney, who seemed sincerely in terested. It was easy, once out of the party, to pull his Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket and throw it over himself, for the corridor was quite deserted. What was more difficult was finding Snape and Malfoy. Harry ran down the corridor, the noise of his feet masked by the music and loud talk still issuing from Slughorn's office behind him. Perhaps Snape had taken Malfoy to his office in the dungeons ... or perhaps he was escorting him back to the Slyt herin common room. . . . Harry pressed his ear against door after door as he dashed down the corridor until, with a great jolt of excitement, he crouched down to the keyhole of the last classroom in the corridor and heard voices.

" . . . cannot afford mistakes, Draco, because if you are expelled —"

"I didn't have anything to do with it, all right?"

"I hope you are telling the truth, because it was both clumsy a nd foolish. Already you are suspected of having a hand in it."

"Who suspects me?" said Malfoy angrily. "For the last time, I didn't do it, okay? That Bell girl must ' ve had an enemy no on e knows about — don't look at me like that! I know what you're do-ing, I'm not stupid, but it won't work — I can stop you!"

There was a pause and then Snape said quietly, "Ah . . . Aunt Bellatrix has been teaching you Occlumency, I see. What thoughts are you trying to conceal from your master, Draco?"

"I'm not trying to conceal anything from him, I just don't want you butting in !" Harry pressed his ear still more closely against the keyhole. . . . What had happened to make Malfoy speak to Snape like

this — Snape, toward whom he had always shown respect, even liking?

"So that is why you have been avoiding me this term? You have feared my interference? You realize that, had anybody else failed to come to my office when I had told them repeatedly to be there, Draco —"

"So put me in detention! Report me to Dumbledore!" jeered Malfoy.

There was another pause. Then Snape said, "You know perfectly well that I do not wish to do either of those things ."

"You'd better stop telling me to come to your office then!"

"Listen to me," said Snape, his voice so low now that Harry had to push his ear very hard against the keyhole to hear. "I am trying to help you. I swore to your mother I would protect you. I made the Unbreakable Vow, Draco —"

"Looks like you'll have to break it, then, because I don't need your protection! It's my job, he gave it to me and I'm doing it, I've got a plan and it's going to work, it's just taking a bit longer than I thought it would!"

"What is your plan ?"

"It's none of your business !"

" If you tell me what you are trying to do, I can assist you ..."

"I have all the assistance I need, thanks, I'm not alone!"

"You were certainly alone tonight, which was foolish in the ex-treme, wandering the corridors without lookouts or backup, these are elementary mistakes —"

"I would've had Crabbe and Goyle with me if you hadn't put them in detention!"

"Keep your voice down!" spat Snape, for Malfoy ' s voice had risen excitedly. "If your friends Crabbe and Goyle intend to pass their Defense Against the Dark Arts OWL this time around, they will need to work a little harder than they are doing at pres —"

"What does it matter?" said Malfoy. "Defense Against the Dark Arts — its all just a joke, isn't it, an act? Like any of us need pro-tecting against the Dark Arts —"

"It is an act that is crucial to success, Draco!" said Snape. "Where do you think I would have been all these years, if I had not known how to act? Now listen to me! You are being incautious, wandering around at night, getting yourself caught, and if you are placing your reliance in assistants like Crabbe and Goyle —"

"They're not the only ones, I've got other people on my side, better people!"

"Then why not confide in me, and I can —"

"I know what you're up to! You want to steal my glory!"

There was another pause, then Snape said coldly, "You are speaking like a child. I quite understand that your fathers capture and imprisonment has upset you, but —"

Harry had barely a second ' s warning; he heard Malfoy's footsteps on the other side of the door and flung himself out of the way just as it burst open . Malfoy was striding away down the corridor, past the open door of Slughorns office, around the distant corner, and out of sight. Hardly daring to breathe, Harry remained crouched down as Snape emerged slowly from the classroom. His expression unfath-omable, he returned to the party. Harry remained on the floor, hid-den beneath the cloak, his mind racing.

Chapter 16 A very frosty Christmas

“So Snape was offering to help him? He was definitely offering to help him?""If you ask. that once more," said Harry, "I'm going to stick this sprout —""I'm only checking!" said Ron. They were standing alone at the Burrow's kitchen sink, peeling a mountain of sprouts for Mrs. Weasley. Snow was drifting past the window in front of them.

"Yes, Snape was offering to help him!" said Harry. "He said he'd promised Malfoy's mother to protect him, that he'd made an Unbreakable Oath or something —""An Unbreakable Vow?" said Ron, looking stunned. "Nah, he can't have. . . . Are you sure?""Yes, I'm sure," said Harry. "Why, what does it mean?"“Well, you can't break an Unbreakable Vow. . . .""I'd worked that much out for myself, funnily enough. What happens if you break it, then?""You die," said Ron simply. "Fred and George tried to get me to make one when I was about five. I nearly did too, I was holding hands with Fred and everything when Dad found us. He went mental," said Ron, with a reminiscent gleam in his eyes. "Only time I've ever seen Dad as angry as Mum, Fred reckons his left but-tock has never been the same since.""Yeah, well, passing over Fred's left buttock —""I beg your pardon?" said Fred's voice as the twins entered the kitchen.

"Aaah, George, look at this. They're using knives and everything. Bless them.""I'll be seventeen in two and a bit months' time," said Ron grumpily, "and then I'll be able to do it by magic!""But meanwhile," said George, sitting down at the kitchen table and putting his feet up on it, "we can enjoy watching you demon-strate the correct use of a — whoops-a-daisy!""You made me do that!" said Ron angrily, sucking his cut thumb. "You wait, when I'm seventeen —""I'm sure you'll dazzle us all with hitherto unsuspected magical skills," yawned Fred.

"And speaking of hitherto unsuspected skills, Ronald," said George, "what is this we hear from Ginny about you and a young lady called

— unless our information is faulty — Lavender Brown?"Ron turned a little pink, but did not look displeased as he turned back to the sprouts. "Mind your own business.""What a snappy retort," said Fred. "I really don't know how you think of them. No, what we wanted to know was... how did it happen?""What d'you mean?"

"Did she have an accident or something?""What?" ..|;

"Well, how did she sustain such extensive brain damage? Care-ful, now!"Mrs. Weasley entered the room just in time to see Ron throw the sprout knife at Fred, who had turned it into a paper airplane with one lazy flick of his wand,"Ron!" she said furiously. "Don't you ever let me see you throw-ing knives again!""I wont," said Ron, "let you see," he added under his breath, as he turned back to the sprout mountain.

"Fred, George, I'm sorry, dears, but Remus is arriving tonight, so Bill will have to squeeze in with you two." ;"No problem," said George.

- "Then, as Charlie isn't coming home, that just leaves Harry and ;|/ Ron in the attic, and if Fleur shares with Ginny —" "— that'll make Ginny's Christmas —" muttered Fred. "— everyone should be comfortable. Well, they'll have a bed, anyway," said Mrs. Weasley, sounding slightly harassed.

"Percy definitely not showing his ugly face, then?" asked Fred. Mrs. Weasley turned away before she answered. "No, he's busy, I expect, at the Ministry.""Or he's the world's biggest prat," said Fred, as Mrs. Weasley left the kitchen. "One of the two. "Well, let's get going, then, George.""What are you two up to?" asked Ron. "Cant you help us with these sprouts? You could just use your wand and then we'll be freetoo!"

"No, I don't think we can do that," said Fred seriously. "It's very character-building stuff, learning to peel sprouts without magic, makes you appreciate how difficult it is for Muggles and Squibs —" "— and if you want people to help you, Ron," added George, throwing the paper airplane at him, "I wouldn't chuck knives at them. Just a

little hint. We're off to the village, there's a very pretty girl working in the paper shop who thinks my card tricks are some-thing marvelous . . , almost like real magic. ...""Gits," said Ron darkly, watching Fred and George setting off across the snowy yard. "Would've only taken them ten seconds and then we could've gone too.""I couldn't," said Harry. "I promised Dumbledore I wouldn't wander off while I'm staying here.""Oh yeah," said Ron. He peeled a few more sprouts and then said, "Are you going to tell Dumbledore what you heard Snape and Malfoy saying to each other?""Yep," said Harry. "I'm going to tell anyone who can put a stop to it, and Dumbledore’s top of the list. I might have another word with your dad too.""Pity you didn't hear what Malfoy’s actually doing, though." "I couldn't have done, could I? That was the whole point, he was refusing to tell Snape."There was silence for a moment or two, then Ron said, " 'Course, you know what they'll all say? Dad and Dumbledore and all of them? They'll say Snape isn't really trying to help Malfoy, he was just trying to find out what Malfoy's up to.""They didn't hear him," said Harry flatly. "No one's that good an actor, not even Snape.""Yeah . . . I'm just saying, though/' said Ron.

Harry turned to face him, frowning. "You think I'm right, though?" ,"Yeah, I do!" said Ron hastily. "Seriously, I do! But they're all convinced Snape's in the Order, aren't they?"Harry said nothing. It had already occurred to him that this would be the most likely objection to his new evidence; he could hear Hermione now: Obviously, Harry, he was pretending to offer help so he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he's doing. . . .

This was pure imagination, however, as he had had no opportu-nity to tell Hermione what he had overheard. She had disappeared from Slughorn's party before he returned to it, or so he had been informed by an irate McLaggen, and she had already gone to bed by the time he returned to the common room. As he and Ron had left for the Burrow early the next day, he had barely had time to wish her a happy Christmas and to tell her that he had some very important news when they got back from the holidays. He was not entirely sure

that she had heard him, though; Ron and Lavender had been saying a thoroughly nonverbal good-bye just behind him at the time.

Still, even Hermione would not be able to deny one thing: Mal-foy was definitely up to something, and Snape knew it, so Harry felt fully justified in saying "I told you so," which he had done sev-eral times to Ron already.

Harry did not get the chance to speak to Mr. Weasley, who was working very long hours at the Ministry, until Christmas Eve night. The Weasleys and their guests were sitting in the living room, which Ginny had decorated so lavishly that it was rather like sitting in a paper-chain explosion. Fred, George, Harry, and Ron were the only ones who knew that the angel on top of the tree was actually a garden gnome that had bitten Fred on the ankle as hr pulled up carrots for Christmas dinner. Stupefied, painted gold, stuffed into a miniature tutu and with small wings glued to il.s back, it glowered down at them all, the ugliest angel Harry had ever seen, with a large bald head like a potato and rather hairy feet.

They were all supposed to be listening to a Christmas broadcast by Mrs. Weasleys favorite singer, Celestina Warbeck, whose voice was warbling out of the large wooden wireless set. Fleur, who seemed to find Celestina very dull, was talking so loudly in the corner that a scowling Mrs. Weasley kept pointing her wand at the volume con-trol, so that Celestina grew louder and louder. Under cover of a par-ticularly jazzy number called "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love," Fred and George started a game of Exploding Snap with Ginny. Ron kept shooting Bill and Fleur covert looks, as though hoping to pick up tips. Meanwhile, Remus Lupin, who was thinner and more ragged-looking than ever, was sitting beside the fire, staring into its depths as though he could not hear Celestinas voice.

Oh, come and stir my cauldron,And if you do it right,

I'll boil you up some hot strong loveTo keep you warm tonight.

"We danced to this when we were eighteen!" said Mrs. Weasley, wiping her eyes on her knitting. "Do you remember, Arthur?""Mphf?" said Mr. Weasley, whose head had been nodding over the satsuma he was peeling. "Oh yes ... marvelous tune . . ."With an effort, he sat up a little straighter and looked around at Harry, who was sitting next to him.

"Sorry about this," he said, jerking his head toward the wireless as Celestina broke into the chorus. "Be over soon.""No problem," said Harry, grinning. "Has it been busy at the Ministry?""Very," said Mr. Weasley. "I wouldn't mind if we were getting anywhere, but of the three arrests we've made in the last couple of months, I doubt that one of them is a genuine Death Eater — only don't repeat that, Harry," he added quickly, looking much more awake all of a sudden.

"They're not still holding Stan Shunpike, are they?" asked Harry.

"I'm afraid so," said Mr. Weasley. "I know Dumbledore's tried appealing directly to Scrimgeour about Stan. ... I mean, anybody who has actually interviewed him agrees that he's about as much a Death Eater as this satsuma . . . but the top levels want to look as though they're making some progress, and 'three arrests' sounds better than 'three mistaken arrests and releases'. . . but again, this isall top secret. . . ."

"I won't say anything," said Harry. He hesitated for a moment, wondering how best to embark on what he wanted to say; as he marshaled his thoughts, Celestina Warbeck began a ballad called "You Charmed the Heart Right Out of Me.""Mr. Weasley, you know what I told you at the station when we were setting off for school?""I checked, Harry," said Mr. Weasley at once. "I went and searched the Malfoys' house. There was nothing, either broken or whole, that shouldn't have been there.""Yeah, I know, I saw in the Prophet that you'd looked . . . but this is something different. . . . Well, something more ..."And he told Mr. Weasley everything he had overheard betweenMalfoy and Snape, As Harry spoke, he saw Lupin's head

turn a lit-tle toward him, taking in every word. When he had finished, there was silence, except for Celestina's crooning.

Oh, my poor heart, where has it gone? It's left me for a spell...

"Has it occurred to you, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, "that Snape was simply pretending — ?""Pretending to offer help, so that he could find out what Malfoy's up to?" said Harry quickly. "Yeah, I thought you'd say that. But how do we know?""It isn't our business to know," said Lupin unexpectedly. He had turned his back on the fire now and faced Harry across Mr. Weasley. "It's Dumbledore's business. Dumbledore trusts Severus, and that ought to be good enough for all of us.""But," said Harry, "just say — just say Dumbledores wrong about Snape —""People have said it, many times. It comes down to whether or not you trust Dumbledore's judgment. I do; therefore, I trust Severus.""But Dumbledore can make mistakes," argued Harry. "He says it himself. And you" — he looked Lupin straight in the eye — "do you honestly like Snape?""I neither like nor dislike Severus," said Lupin. "No, Harry, I am speaking the truth," he added, as Harry pulled a skeptical expres-sion. "We shall never be bosom friends, perhaps; after all that hap-pened between James and Sirius and Severus, there is too much bitterness there. But I do not forget that during the year I taught at Hogwarts, Severus made the Wolfsbane Potion for me every month, made it perfectly, so that I did not have to suffer as I usu-ally do at the full moon.""But he 'accidentally' let it slip that you're a werewolf, so you had to leave!" said Harry angrily.

Lupin shrugged. "The news would have leaked out anyway. We both know he wanted my job, but he could have wreaked much worse damage on me by tampering with the potion. He kept me healthy. I must be grateful.""Maybe he didn't dare mess with the potion with Dumbledore watching him!" said Harry.

"You are determined to hate him, Harry," said Lupin with a faint smile. "And I understand; with James as your father, with Sir-ius as your godfather, you have inherited an old prejudice. By all means tell

Dumbledore what you have told Arthur and me, but do not expect him to share your view of the matter; do not even expect him to be surprised by what you tell him. It might have been on Dumbledore's orders that Severus questioned Draco." ;. . . and now you've torn it quite apart I'll thank you to give back my heart!

Celestina ended her song on a very long, high-pitched note and loud applause issued out of the wireless, which Mrs. Weasley joined in with enthusiastically.

"Eez eet over?" said Fleur loudly. "Thank goodness, what an 'orrible —""Shall we have a nightcap, then?" asked Mr. Weasley loudly, leaping to his feet. "Who wants eggnog?""What have you been up to lately?" Harry asked Lupin, as Mr, Weasley bustled off to fetch the eggnog, and everybody else stretched and broke into conversation.

"Oh, I've been underground," said Lupin. "Almost literally. That's why I haven't been able to write, Harry; sending letters to you would have been something of a giveaway." -:"What do you mean?" '

"I've been living among my fellows, my equals," said Lupin. "Werewolves," he added, at Harrys look of incomprehension. "Nearly all of them are on Voldemort's side. Dumbledore wanted a spy and here I was . . . ready-made."He sounded a little bitter, and perhaps realized it, for he smiled more warmly as he went on, "I am not complaining; it is necessary work and who can do it better than I? However, it has been difficult gaining their trust. I bear the unmistakable signs of having tried to live among wizards, you see, whereas they have shunned normal society and live on the margins, stealing — and sometimes killing — to eat.""How come they like Voldemort?""They think that, under his rule, they will have a better life," said Lupin. "And it is hard to argue with Greyback out there. . . .""Who's Greyback?"

"You haven't heard of him?" Lupin's hands closed convulsively in his lap. "Fenrir Greyback is, perhaps, the most savage werewolf alive

today. He regards it as his mission in life to bite and to conta-minate as many people as possible; he wants to create enough were-wolves to overcome the wizards. Voldemort has promised him prey in return for his services. Greyback specializes in children. . . . Bite them young, he says, and raise them away from their parents, raise them to hate normal wizards. Voldemort has threatened to unleash him upon people's sons and daughters; it is a threat that usually produces good results."Lupin paused and then said, "It was Greyback who bit me." "What?" said Harry, astonished. "When — when you were a kid, you mean?""Yes. My father had offended him. I did not know, for a very long time, the identity of the werewolf who had attacked me; I even felt pity for him, thinking that he had had no control, know-ing by then how it felt to transform. But Greyback is not like that. At the full moon, he positions himself close to victims, ensuring that he is near enough to strike. He plans it all. And this is the man Voldemort is using to marshal the werewolves. I cannot pretend that my particular brand of reasoned argument is making much headway against Greyback's insistence that we werewolves deserve blood, that we ought to revenge ourselves on normal people." "But you are normal!" said Harry fiercely. "You've just got a — aproblem —"

Lupin burst out laughing. "Sometimes you remind me a lot of James. He called it my 'furry little problem in company. Many people were under the impression that I owned a badly behavedrabbit."

He accepted a glass of eggnog from Mr. Weasley with a word of thanks, looking slightly more cheerful, Harry, meanwhile, felt a rush of excitement: This last mention of his father had reminded him that there was something he had been looking forward to ask-ing Lupin.

"Have you ever heard of someone called the Half-Blood Prince?""The Half-Blood what?"

"Prince," said Harry, watching him closely for signs of recogni-tion.

"There are no Wizarding princes," said Lupin, now smiling. "Is this a title you re thinking of adopting? I should have thought be-ing 'the Chosen One' would be enough.""It's nothing to do with me!" said Harry indignantly. "The Half-Blood Prince is someone who used to go to Hogwarts, I've got his old Potions book. He wrote spells all over it, spells he invented. One of them was Levicorpus —""Oh, that one had a great vogue during my time at Hogwarts," said Lupin reminiscently. "There were a few months in my fifth year when you couldn't move for being hoisted into the air by your ankle.""My dad used it," said Harry. "I saw him in the Pensieve, he used it on Snape."He tried to sound casual, as though this was a throwaway com-ment of no real importance, but he was not sure he had achieved the right effect; Lupins smile was a little too understanding.

"Yes," he said, "but he wasn't the only one. As I say, it was very popular. . . . You know how these spells come and go. , . .""But it sounds like it was invented while you were at school," Harry persisted.

"Not necessarily," said Lupin. "Jinxes go in and out of fashion like everything else."He looked into Harry's face and then said quietly, "James was a pureblood, Harry, and I promise you, he never asked us to call him 'Prince.'"Abandoning pretense, Harry said, "And it wasn't Sirius? Or you?""Definitely not."

"Oh." Harry stared into the fire. "I just thought — well, he's helped me out a lot in Potions classes, the Prince has.""How old is this book, Harry?""I dunno, I've never checked.""Well, perhaps that will give you some clue as to when the Prince was at Hogwarts," said Lupin.

Shortly after this, Fleur decided to imitate Celestina singing "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love," which was taken by everyone, once they had glimpsed Mrs. Weasley's expression, to be the cue to go to bed. Harry and Ron climbed all the way up to Ron's attic bedroom, where a camp bed had been added for Harry.

Ron fell asleep almost immediately, but Harry delved into his trunk and pulled out his copy of Advanced Potion-Making before getting into bed. There he turned its pages, searching, until he finally found, at the front of the book, the date that it had been pub-lished. It was nearly fifty years old. Neither his father, nor his father's friends, had been at Hogwarts fifty years ago. Feeling disappointed, Harry threw the book back into his trunk, turned off the lamp, and rolled over, thinking of werewolves and Snape, Stan Shunpike and the Half-Blood Prince, and finally falling into an uneasy sleep full of creeping shadows and the cries of bitten children. . . .

"She's got to be joking. . . ."Harry woke with a start to find a bulging stocking lying over the end of his bed. He put on his glasses and looked around; the tiny window was almost completely obscured with snow and, in front of it, Ron was sitting bolt upright in bed and examining what ap-peared to be a thick gold chain.

"What's chat?" asked Harry. "'Its from Lavender," said Ron, sounding revolted^ "She earnhonestly think I'd wear ..."

Harry looked more closely and let out a shout of laughter, Dangling from the chain in large gold letters were the words:

“My sweetheart”

"Nice," he said. "Classy. You should definitely wear it in front ol Fred and George.""If you tell them," said Ron, shoving the necklace out of sight under his pillow, "I — I — I’ll —""Stutter at me?" said Harry, grinning. "Come on, would I?""How could she think I'd like something like that, though?" Ron demanded of thin air, looking rather shocked.

"Well, think back," said Harry. "Have you ever let it slip that you'd like to go out in public with the words 'My Sweetheart' round your neck?""Well... we don't really talk much," said Ron. "It's mainly . . .""Snogging," said Harry.

"Well, yeah," said Ron. He hesitated a moment, then said, "Is Hermione really going out with McLaggen?""I dunno," said Harry. "They were at Slughorn's party together, but I don't think it went that well."Ron looked slightly more cheerful as he delved deeper into his stocking.

Harrys presents included a sweater with a large Golden Snitch worked onto the front, hand-knitted by Mrs. Weasley, a large box of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes products from the twins, and a slightly damp, moldy-smelling package that came with a label read-ing To Master, From Kreacher,Harry stared at it. "D'you reckon this is safe to open?" he asked. "Can't be anything dangerous, all our mail's still being searched at the Ministry," replied Ron, though he was eyeing the parcel suspiciously.

"I didn't think of giving Kreacher anything. Do people usually give their house-elves Christmas presents?" asked Harry, prodding the parcel cautiously.

"Hermione would," said Ron. "But let's wait and see what it is before you start feeling guilty."A moment later, Harry had given a loud yell and leapt out of his camp bed; the package contained a large number of maggots. "Nice," said Ron, roaring with laughter. "Very thoughtful." "I'd rather have them than that necklace," said Harry, which sobered Ron up at once.

Everybody was wearing new sweaters when they all sat down for Christmas lunch, everyone except Fleur (on whom, it appeared, Mrs. Weasley had not wanted to waste one) and Mrs. Weasley herself, who was sporting a brand-new midnight blue witch's hat glittering with what looked like tiny starlike diamonds, and a spec-tacular golden necklace.

"Fred and George gave them to me! Aren't they beautiful?" .: "Well, we find we appreciate you more and more, Mum, now we're washing our own socks," said George, waving an airy hand. "Parsnips,

Remus?""Harry, you've got a maggot in your hair," said Ginny cheerfully, leaning across the table to pick it out; Harry felt goose bumps erupt up his neck that had nothing to do with the maggot.

"'Ow 'orrible," said Fleur, with an affected little shudder.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Ron. "Gravy, Fleur?". In his eagerness to help her, he knocked the gravy boat flying; Bill waved his wand and the gravy soared up in the air and returned meekly to the boat.

"You are as bad as zat Tonks," said Fleur to Ron, when she had finished kissing Bill in thanks. "She is always knocking —""I invited dear Tonks to come along today," said Mrs. Weasley, setting down the carrots with unnecessary force and glaring at Fleur. "But she wouldn't come. Have you spoken to her lately, Remus?""No, I haven't been in contact with anybody very much," said Lupin. "But Tonks has got her own family to go to, hasn't she?""Hmmm," said Mrs. Weasley. "Maybe. I got the impression she was planning to spend Christmas alone, actually."She gave Lupin an annoyed look, as though it was all his fault she was getting Fleur for a daughter-in-law instead of Tonks, but Harry, glancing across at Fleur, who was now feeding Bill bits of turkey off her own fork, thought that Mrs. Weasley was fighting a long-lost battle. He was, however, reminded of a question he had with regard to Tonks, and who better to ask than Lupin, the man who knew all about Patronuses?

"Tonks's Patronus has changed its form," he told him. "Snape said so anyway. I didn't know that could happen. Why would your Patronus change?"Lupin took his time chewing his turkey and swallowing before saying slowly, "Sometimes ... a great shock ... an emotional up-heaval ...""It looked big, and it had four legs," said Harry, struck by a sud-den thought and lowering his voice. "Hey ... it couldn't be —?""Arthur!" said Mrs. Weasley suddenly. She had risen from her chair; her hand was pressed over her heart and she was staring out of the kitchen window. "Arthur — it's Percy!""What?"

Mr. Weasley looked around. Everybody looked quickly at the window; Ginny stood up for a better look. There, sure enough, was Percy Weasley, striding across the snowy yard, his horn-rimmed glasses glinting in the sunlight. He was not, however, alone.

"Arthur, he's — he's with the Minister!"And sure enough, the man Harry had seen in the Daily Prophet was following along in Percy's wake, limping slightly, his mane of graying hair and his black cloak flecked with snow. Before any of , them could say anything, before Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could do : more than exchange stunned looks, the back door opened and there stood Percy.

There was a moment's painful silence. Then Percy said rather stiffly, "Merry Christmas, Mother.""Oh, Percy!" said Mrs. Weasley, and she threw herself into his arms.

Rufus Scrimgeour paused in the doorway, leaning on his walk-ing stick and smiling as he observed this affecting scene.

"You must forgive this intrusion," he said, when Mrs. Weasley looked around at him, beaming and wiping her eyes. "Percy and I were in the vicinity — working, you know — and he couldn't re-sist dropping in and seeing you all."But Percy showed no sign of wanting to greet any of the rest of the family. He stood, poker-straight and awkward-looking, and stared over everybody else's heads. Mr. Weasley, Fred, and George were all observing him, stony-faced.

"Please, come in, sit down, Minister!" fluttered Mrs. Weasley, straightening her hat. Have a little purkey, or some tooding. ... 1 '. mean —""No, no, my dear Molly," said Scrimgeour. Harry guessed that he had checked her name with Percy before they entered the house. "I don't want to intrude, wouldn't be here at all if Percy hadn't wanted to see you all so badly. . . .""Oh, Perce!" said Mrs. Weasley tearfully, reaching up to kiss him.

". , . We've only looked in for five minutes, so I'll have a stroll around the yard while you catch up with Percy. No, no, I assure you I don't

want to butt in! Well, if anybody cared to show me your charming garden . . . Ah, that young man's finished, why doesn't he take a stroll with me?"The atmosphere around the table changed perceptibly. Every-body looked from Scrimgeour to Harry. Nobody seemed to find Scrimgeour's pretense that he did not know Harry's name convincing, or find it natural that he should be chosen to accompany the Minister around the garden when Ginny, Fleur, and George also had clean plates.

"Yeah, all right," said Harry into the silence.

He was not fooled; for all Scrimgeour's talk that they had just been in the area, that Percy wanted to look up his family, this must be the real reason that they had come, so that Scrimgeour could speak to Harry alone.

"It's fine," he said quietly, as he passed Lupin, who had half risen from his chair. "Fine," he added, as Mr. Weasley opened his mouth to speak.

"Wonderful!" said Scrimgeour, standing back to let Harry passthrough the door ahead of him. "We'll just take a turn around the garden, and Percy and I'll be off. Carry on, everyone!"Harry walked across the yard toward the Weasleys' overgrown, snow-covered garden, Scrimgeour limping slightly at his side. He had, Harry knew, been Head of the Auror office; he looked tough and battle-scarred, very different from portly Fudge in his bowler hat.

"Charming," said Scrimgeour, stopping at the garden fence and looking out over the snowy lawn and the indistinguishable plants. "Charming."Harry said nothing. He could tell that Scrimgeour was watching him.

"I've wanted to meet you for a very long time," said Scrimgeour, after a few moments. "Did you know that?""No," said Harry truthfully. |!.

"Oh yes, for a very long time. But Dumbledore has been very protective of you," said Scrimgeour. "Natural, of course, natural, after what you've been through. . . . Especially what happened at : the Ministry ...":He waited for Harry to say something, but Harry did not oblige, : so he went on, "I have been hoping for an occasion to talk to you ever since I gained office, but Dumbledore has — most under-standably, as I say — prevented this."Still, Harry said nothing, waiting.

"The rumors that have flown around!" said Scrimgeour. "Well, of course, we both know how these stories get distorted ... all these whispers of a prophecy . . . of you being 'the Chosen One'. . ."They were getting near it now, Harry thought, the reason Scrim-geour was here.

“I assume that Dumbledore has discussed these matters with you?",Harry deliberated, wondering whether he ought to lie or not. He looked at the little gnome prints all around the flowerbeds, ami the scuffed-up patch that marked the spot where Fred had caught the gnome now wearing the tutu at the top of the Christmas tree. Finally, he decided on the truth ... or a bit of it.

"Yeah, we've discussed it."

"Have you, have you . . ." said Scrimgeour. Harry could see, out of the corner of his eye, Scrimgeour squinting at him, so he pre-tended to be very interested in a gnome that had just poked its head out from underneath a frozen rhododendron. "And what has Dumbledore told you, Harry?""Sorry, but that's between us," said Harry. He kept his voice as pleasant as he could, and Scrimgeour's tone, too, was light and friendly as he said, "Oh, of course, if it's a question of confidences, I wouldn't want you to divulge . . . no, no ... and in any case, does it really matter whether you are 'the Chosen One' or not?"Harry had to mull that one over for a few seconds before re-sponding. "I don't really know what you mean, Minister.""Well, of course, to you it will matter enormously," said Scrim-geour with a

laugh. "But to the Wizarding community at large . . . it's all perception, isn't it? It's what people believe that's important."Harry said nothing. He thought he saw, dimly, where they were heading, but he was not going to help Scrimgeour get there. The gnome under the rhododendron was now digging for worms at its roots, and Harry kept his eyes fixed upon it.

"People believe you are 'the Chosen One,' you see," said Scrim-geour. "They think you quite the hero — which, of course, you arc, Harry, chosen or not! How many times have you faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named now? Well, anyway," he pressed on, without waiting for a reply, "the point is, you are a symbol of hope lor many, Harry. The idea that there is somebody out there who might be able, who might even be destined, to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named — well, naturally, it gives people a lift. And I can't help but feel that, once you realize this, you might consider it, well, almost a duty, to stand alongside the Ministry, and give everyone a boost."The gnome had just managed to get hold of a worm. It was now tugging very hard on it, trying to get it out of the frozen ground. Harry was silent so long that Scrimgeour said, looking from Harry to the gnome, "Funny little chaps, aren't they? But what say you, Harry?""I don't exactly understand what you want," said Harry slowly. "'Stand alongside the Ministry' . . . What does that mean?""Oh, well, nothing at all onerous, I assure you," said Scrim-geour. "If you were to be seen popping in and out of the Ministry from time to time, for instance, that would give the right impres-sion. And of course, while you were there, you would have ample : opportunity to speak to Gawain Robards, my successor as Head of the Auror office. Dolores Umbridge has told me that you cherish an ambition to become an Auror. Well, that could be arranged very easily. ..."Harry felt anger bubbling in the pit of his stomach: So Dolores Umbridge was still at the Ministry, was she?

"So basically," he said, as though he just wanted to clarify a few points, "you'd like to give the impression that I'm working for the Ministry?""It would give everyone a lift to think you were more

involved, Harry," said Scrimgeour, sounding relieved that Harry had cot-toned on so quickly. "'The Chosen One,' you know. . . It's all about giving people hope, the feeling that exciting things are hap-pening. ...""But if I keep running in and out of the Ministry," said Harry, still endeavoring to keep his voice friendly, "won't that seem as though I approve of what the Ministry's up to?""Well," said Scrimgeour, frowning slightly, "well, yes, that's partly why we'd like —""No, I don't think that'll work," said Harry pleasantly. "You see, I don't like some of the things the Ministry's doing. Locking up Stan Shunpike, for instance."Scrimgeour did not speak for a moment but his expression hard-ened instantly. "I would not expect you to understand," he said, and he was not as successful at keeping anger out of his voice as Harry had been. "These are dangerous times, and certain measures need to be taken. You are sixteen years old —""Dumbledore's a lot older than sixteen, and he doesn't think Stan should be in Azkaban either," said Harry. "You're making Stan a scapegoat, just like you want to make me a mascot."They looked at each other, long and hard. Finally Scrimgeour said, with no pretense at warmth, "I see. You prefer — like your hero, Dumbledore — to disassociate yourself from the Ministry?" "I don't want to be used," said Harry.

"Some would say it's your duty to be used by the Ministry!" "Yeah, and others might say its your duty to check that people really are Death Eaters before you chuck them in prison," said Harry, his temper rising now. "You're doing what Barty Crouchdid. You never get it right, you people, do you? Either we've got Fudge, pretending everything's lovely while people get murdered right under his nose, or we've got you, chucking the wrong people into jail and trying to pretend you've got 'the Chosen One' work-ing for you!" ' i"So you're not 'the Chosen One'?" said Scrimgeour. "'I thought you said it didn't matter either way?" said Harry, with a bitter laugh. "Not to you anyway.""I shouldn't have said that," said Scrimgeour quickly. "It was tactless —""No, it was honest," said Harry. "One of the only honest things you've said to me. You don't care whether I live or die, but you do care that I help you convince everyone you're winning the war against Voldemort. I haven't forgotten, Minister...."He raised his right

fist. There, shining white on the back of his cold hand, were the scars which Dolores Umbridge had forced him to carve into his own flesh: I must not tell lies.

"I don't remember you rushing to my defense when I was trying to tell everyone Voldemort was back. The Ministry wasn't so keen to be pals last year."They stood in silence as icy as the ground beneath their feet. The gnome had finally managed to extricate his worm and was now sucking on it happily, leaning against the bottommost branches of the rhododendron bush.

"What is Dumbledore up to?" said Scrimgeour brusquely. "Where does he go when he is absent from Hogwarts?""No idea," said Harry.

"And you wouldn't tell me if you knew," said Scrimgeour, "would you?""No, 1 wouldn't," said Harry.

"Well, then, I shall have to see whether I can't find out by other means.""You can try," said Harry indifferently. "But you seem cleverer than Fudge, so I'd have thought you'd have learned from his mis-takes. He tried interfering at Hogwarts. You might have noticed he's not Minister anymore, but Dumbledore’s still headmaster. I'd leave Dumbledore alone, if I were you."There was a long pause.

"Well, it is clear to me that he has done a very good job on you," said Scrimgeour, his eyes cold and hard behind his wire-rimmed glasses, "Dumbledore’s man through and through, aren't you, Potter?""Yeah, I am," said Harry. "Glad we straightened that out."And turning his back on the Minister of Magic, he strode back toward the house.

Chapter 17 A sluggish memory

Late in the afternoon, a few days after New Year, Harry, Ron, and Ginny lined up beside the kitchen fire to return to Hogwarts. The Ministry had arranged this one-off connection to the Floo Network to return students quickly and safely to the school. Only Mrs. Weasley was there to say good-bye, as Mr. Weasley, Fred, George, Bill, and Fleur were all at work. Mrs. Weasley dissolved into tears at the moment of parting. Admittedly, it took very little to set her off lately; she had been crying on and off ever since Percy had stormed from the house on Christmas Day with his glasses splattered with mashed parsnip (for which Fred, George, and Ginny all claimed credit).

"Don't cry, Mum," said Ginny, patting her on the back as Mrs. Weasley sobbed into her shoulder. "It's okay. ...""Yeah, don't worry about us," said Ron, permitting his mother to plant a very wet kiss on his cheek, "or about Percy. He's such a prat, it's not really a loss, is it?"Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever as she enfolded Harry in her arms.

"Promise me you'll look after yourself.. .. Stay out of trouble. ...""I always do, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry. "I like a quiet life, you know me."She gave a watery chuckle and stood back. "Be good, then, all of you. ..."Harry stepped into the emerald fire and shouted "Hogwarts!" He had one last fleeting view of the Weasleys' kitchen and Mrs. Weasley's tearful face before the flames engulfed him; spinning very fast, he caught blurred glimpses of other Wizarding rooms, which were whipped out of sight before he could get a proper look; then he was slowing down, finally stopping squarely in the fireplace in Professor McGonagall's office. She barely glanced up from her work as he clambered out over the grate.

"Evening, Potter. Try not to get too much ash on the carpet.""No, Professor."

Harry straightened his glasses and flattened his hair as Ron came spinning into view. When Ginny had arrived, all three of them trooped out of McGonagall's office and off toward Gryffindor Tower. Harry glanced out of the corridor windows as they passed; the sun was already sinking over grounds carpeted in deeper snow than had lain over the Burrow garden. In the distance, he could see Hagrid feeding Buckbeak in front of his cabin.

"Baubles," said Ron confidently, when they reached the Fat Lady, who was looking rather paler than usual and winced at his loud voice.

"No," she said.

“What d’you mean, ‘no’ ?

"There is a new password," she said. "And please don't shout.""But we've been away, how're we supposed to — ?""Harry! Ginny!"

Hermione was hurrying toward them, very pink-faced and wearing a cloak, hat, and gloves.

"I got back a couple of hours ago, I've just been down to visit Hagrid and Buck — I mean Witherwings," she said breathlessly. "Did you have a good Christmas?""Yeah," said Ron at once, "pretty eventful, Rufus Scrim —"] "I've got something for you, Harry," said Hermione, neither looking at Ron nor giving any sign that she had heard him. "Oh, hang on — password. Abstinence.""Precisely," said the Fat Lady in a feeble voice, and swung forward to reveal the portrait hole.

"What's up with her?" asked Harry.

"Overindulged over Christmas, apparently," said Hermione, rolling her eyes as she led the way into the packed common room. "She and her friend Violet drank their way through all the wine in that picture of drunk monks down by the Charms corridor. Anyway..."She rummaged in her pocket for a moment, then pulled out a scroll of parchment with Dumbledore's writing on it.

"Great," said Harry, unrolling it at once to discover that his next lesson with Dumbledore was scheduled for the following night. "I've got loads to tell him — and you. Let's sit down —"But at that moment there was a loud squeal of "Won-Won!" and Lavender Brown came hurtling out of nowhere and flung herself into Ron's arms. Several onlookers sniggered; Hermione gave a tinkling laugh and said, "There's a cable over here... Coming. Ginny?""No, thanks, I said I'd meet Dean," said Ginny, though Harry could not help noticing that she did not sound very enthusiastic. Leaving Ron and Lavender locked in a kind of vertical wrestling, match, Harry led Hermione over to the spare table.

"So how was your Christmas?"

"Oh, fine," she shrugged. "Nothing special. How was it at Won-Won's?""I'll tell you in a minute," said Harry. "Look, Hermione, can't you —""No, I can't," she said flatly. "So don't even ask.""I thought maybe, you know, over Christmas —""It was the Fat Lady who drank a vat of five-hundred-year-old wine, Harry, not me. So what was this important news you wanted to tell me?"She looked too fierce to argue with at that moment, so Harry dropped the subject of Ron and recounted all that he had overheard between Malfoy and Snape. When he had finished, Hermione sat in thought for a moment and then said, "Don't you think — ?""— he was pretending to offer help so that he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he's doing?""Well, yes," said Hermione.

"Ron's dad and Lupin think so," Harry said grudgingly. "But this definitely proves Malfoy's planning something, you can't deny that.""No, I can't," she answered slowly.

"And he's acting on Voldemort's orders, just like I said!""Hmm .. . did either of them actually mention Voldemort's name?"Harry frowned, trying to remember. "I'm not sure ... Snape definitely said 'your master,' and who else would that be?""I don't know," said Hermione, biting her lip. "Maybe his father?"She stared across the room,

apparently lost in thought, not even noticing Lavender tickling Ron. "How's Lupin?""Not great," said Harry, and he told her all about Lupin’s mission among the werewolves and the difficulties he was facing. "Have you heard of this Fenrir Greyback?""Yes, I have!" said Hermione, sounding startled. "And so have you, Harry!""When, History of Magic? You know full well I never listened ...""No, no, not History of Magic — Malfoy threatened Borgin with Kim!" said Hermione. "Back in Knockturn Alley, don't you remember? He told Borgin that Greyback was an old family friend and that he'd be checking up on Borgin's progress!"Harry gaped at her. "I forgot! But this proves Malfoy s a Death Eater, how else could he be in contact with Greyback and telling him what to do?""It is pretty suspicious," breathed Hermione. "Unless . . ." "Oh, come on," said Harry in exasperation, "you can't get round this one!""Well . . . there is the possibility it was an empty threat." "You're unbelievable, you are," said Harry, shaking his head.

"We'll see who's right. . . . You'll be eating your words, Hermione, just like the Ministry. Oh yeah, 1 had a row with Rufus Scrimgeour as well. . . ."And the rest of the evening passed amicably with both of them abusing the Minister of Magic, for Hermione, like Ron, thought that after all the Ministry had put Harry through the previous year, they had a great deal of nerve asking him for help now.

The new term started next morning with a pleasant surprise for the sixth years: a large sign had been pinned to the common room notice boards overnight.

APPARITION LESSONS

If you are seventeen years of age, or will turn seventeen on or before the 31st August next, you are eligible for a twelve-week course of Apparition Lessons from a Ministry of Magic Apparition instructor. Please sign below if you would like to participate. Cost: 12 Galleons.

Harry and Ron joined the crowd that was jostling around the notice and taking it in turns to write their names at the bottom. Ron was just taking out his quill to sign after Hermione when Lavender crept up behind him, slipped her hands over his eyes, and trilled, "Guess who, Won-Won?" Harry turned to see Hermione stalking off; he caught up with her, having no wish to stay behind with Ron and Lavender, but to his surprise, Ron caught up with them only a little way beyond the portrait hole, his ears bright red and his expression disgruntled. Without a word, Hermione sped up to walk with Neville.

"So — Apparition," said Ron, his tone making it perfectly plain that Harry was not to mention what had just happened. "Should be a laugh, eh?""I dunno," said Harry. "Maybe it's better when you do it yourself, I didn't enjoy it much when Dumbledore took me along for the ride.""I forgot you'd already done it. ... I'd better pass my test firsttime," said Ron, looking anxious. "Fred and George did," "Charlie failed, though, didn't he?" "Yeah, but Charlie's bigger than me" — Ron held his arms out from his body as though he was a gorilla — "so Fred and Georgedidn't go on about it much . . . not to his face anyway . . ." "When can we take the actual test?" "Soon as we're seventeen. That's only March for me!" "Yeah, but you wouldn't be able to Apparate in here, not in the castle . . .""Not the point, is it? Everyone would know I could Apparate if I wanted."Ron was not the only one to be excited at the prospect of Apparition. All that day there was much talk about the forthcoming , lessons; a great deal of store was set by being able to vanish and reappear at will.

"How cool will it be when we can just —" Seamus clicked his ringers to indicate disappearance. "Me cousin Fergus does it just to annoy me, you wait till I can do it back. . . He'll never have another peaceful moment. . . ."Lost in visions of this happy prospect, he flicked his wand a little too enthusiastically, so that instead of producing the fountain of pure water that was the object of today's Charms lesson, he let out a hoselike jet that ricocheted off the ceiling and knocked Professor Flitwick flat on his face.

"Harry’s already Apparated," Ron told a slightly abashed Seamus, after Professor Flitwick had dried himself off with a wave of his wand and set Seamus lines: "I am a wizard, not a baboon brandishing a stick." "Dum — er — someone took him. Side-Along-Apparition, you know.""Whoa!" whispered Seamus, and he, Dean, and Neville put their heads a little closer to hear what Apparition felt like. For the rest of the day, Harry was besieged with requests from the other sixth years to describe the sensation of Apparition. All of them seemed awed, rather than put off, when he told them how uncomfortable it was, and he was still answering detailed questions at ten to eight that evening, when he was forced to lie and say that he needed to return a book to the library, so as to escape in time for his lesson with Dumbledore.

The lamps in Dumbledore’s office were lit, the portraits of previous headmasters were snoring gently in their frames, and the Pen-sieve was ready upon the desk once more. Dumbledore’s hands lay on either side of it, the right one as blackened and burnt-looking as ever. It did not seem to have healed at all and Harry wondered, for perhaps the hundredth time, what had caused such a distinctive injury, but did not ask; Dumbledore had said that he would know eventually and there was, in any case, another subject he wanted to discuss. But before Harry could say anything about Snape and Malfoy, Dumbledore spoke.

"I hear that you met the Minister of Magic over Christmas?" "Yes," said Harry. "He's not very happy with me.""No," sighed Dumbledore. "He is not very happy with me either. We must try not to sink beneath our anguish, Harry, but battle on."Harry grinned.

"He wanted me to tell the Wizarding community that the Ministry's doing a wonderful job.'Dumbledore smiled.

"It was Fudge's idea originally, you know. During his last days in office, when he was trying desperately to cling to his post, he sought a meeting with you, hoping that you would give him yoursupport —"

"After everything Fudge did last year?" said Harry angrily. "After Umbridge ?”

"I told Cornelius there was no chance of it, but the idea did not die when he left: office. Within hours of Scrimgeour's appointment we met and he demanded that I arrange a meeting with you —""So that's why you argued!" Harry blurted out. "It was in the Daily Prophet""The Prophet is bound to report the truth occasionally," said Dumbledore, "if only accidentally. Yes, that was why we argued. Well, it appears that Rufus found a way to corner you at last.""He accused me of being 'Dumbledore's man through and through.'""How very rude of him."

"I told him I was."

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. Behind Harry, Fawkes the phoenix let out a low, soft, musical cry. To Harry’s intense embarrassment, he suddenly realizedthat Dumbledore's bright blue eyes looked rather watery, ami stared hastily at his own knees. When Dumbledore spoke, however, his voice was quite steady.

"I am very touched, Harry."

"Scrimgeour wanted to know where you go when you're not at Hogwarts," said Harry, still looking fixedly at his knees.

"Yes, he is very nosy about that," said Dumbledore, now sounding cheerful, and Harry thought it safe to look up again. "He has even attempted to have me followed. Amusing, really. He set Dawlish to tail me. It wasn't kind. I have already been forced to jinx Dawlish once; I did it again with the greatest regret.""So they still don't know where you go?" asked Harry, hoping for more information on this intriguing subject, but Dumbledore merely smiled over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

"No, they don't, and the time is not quite right for you to know either. Now, I suggest we press on, unless there's anything else — ?" "There is, actually, sir," said Harry. "It's about Malfoy and Snape.""Professor Snape, Harry."

"Yes, sir. I overheard them during Professor Slughorns party . . . well, I followed them, actually. ..."Dumbledore listened to Harry's story with an impassive face. When Harry had finished he did not speak for a few moments, then said, "Thank you for telling me this, Harry, but I suggest that you put it out of your mind. I do not think that it is of great importance.""Not of great importance?" repeated Harry incredulously. "Professor, did you understand — ?""Yes, Harry, blessed as I am with extraordinary brainpower, I understood everything you told me," said Dumbledore, a little sharply. "I think you might even consider the possibility that I understood more than you did. Again, I am glad that you have con-lided in me, but let me reassure you that you have not told me anything that causes me disquiet."Harry sat in seething silence, glaring at Dumbledore. What was going on? Did this mean that Dumbledore had indeed ordered Snape to find out what Malfoy was doing, in which case he had already heard everything Harry had just told him from Snape? Or was he really worried by what he had heard, but pretending not to be?

"So, sir," said Harry, in what he hoped was a polite, calm voice, "you definitely still trust — ?""I have been tolerant enough to answer that question already," said Dumbledore, but he did not sound very tolerant anymore. "My answer has not changed.""I should think not," said a snide voice; Phineas Nigellus was evidently only pretending to be asleep. Dumbledore ignored him.

"And now, Harry, I must insist that we press on. I have more important things to discuss with you this evening."Harry sat there feeling mutinous. How would it be if he refused to permit the change of subject, if he insisted upon arguing the case against Malfoy? As though he had read Harry's mind, Dumbledore shook his head.

"Ah, Harry, how often this happens, even between the best of friends! Each of us believes that what he has to say is much more important than anything the other might have to contribute!""I don't think what you've got to say is unimportant, sir," said Harry stiffly.

"Well, you are quite right, because it is not," said Dumbledore briskly. "I have two more memories to show you this evening, both obtained with enormous difficulty, and the second of them is, 1 think, the most important I have collected."Harry did not say anything to this; he still felt angry at the reception his confidences had received, but could not see what was to be gained by arguing further.

"So," said Dumbledore, in a ringing voice, "we meet this evening to continue the tale of Tom Riddle, whom we left last lesson poised on the threshold of his years at Hogwarts. You will remember how excited he was to hear that he was a wizard, that he refused my company on a trip to Diagon Alley, and that I, in turn, warned him against continued thievery when he arrived at school.

"Well, the start of the school year arrived and with it came Tom Riddle, a quiet boy in his secondhand robes, who lined up with the other first years to be sorted. He was placed in Slytherin House almost the moment that the Sorting Hat touched his head," continued Dumbledore, waving his blackened hand toward the shelf over his head where the Sorting Hat sat, ancient and unmoving. "How soon Riddle learned that the famous founder of the House could talk to snakes, I do not know — perhaps that very evening. The knowledge can only have excited him and increased his sense of self-importance.

"However, if he was frightening or impressing fellow Slytherins with displays of Parseltongue in their common room, no hint of it reached the staff. He showed no sign of outward arrogance or aggression at all. As an unusually talented and very good-looking orphan, he naturally drew attention and sympathy from the staff almost from the moment of his arrival. He seemed police, quiet, and thirsty for

knowledge. Nearly all were most favorably impressed by him.""Didn't you tell them, sir, what he'd been like when you met him at the orphanage?" asked Harry.

"No, I did not. Though he had shown no hint of remorse, it was possible that he felt sorry for how he had behaved before and was resolved to turn over a fresh leaf. I chose to give him that chance."Dumbledore paused and looked inquiringly at Harry, who had opened his mouth to speak. Here, again, was Dumbledore's tendency to trust people in spite of overwhelming evidence that they did not deserve it! But then Harry remembered something. . . .

"But you didn't really trust him, sir, did you? He told me . . . the Riddle who came out of that diary said, 'Dumbledore never seemed to like me as much as the other teachers did.'""Let us say that I did not take it for granted that he was trustworthy," said Dumbledore. "I had, as I have already indicated, resolved to keep a close eye upon him, and so I did. I cannot pretend that I gleaned a great deal from my observations at first. He was very guarded with me; he felt, I am sure, that in the thrill of discovering his true identity he had told me a little too much. He was careful never to reveal as much again, but he could not take back what he had let slip in his excitement, nor what Mrs. Cole had confided in me. However, he had the sense never to try and charm me as he charmed so many of my colleagues.

"As he moved up the school, he gathered about him a group of dedicated friends; I call them that, for want of a better term, although as I have already indicated, Riddle undoubtedly felt no affection for any of them. This group had a kind of dark glamour within the castle. They were a motley collection; a mixture of the weak seeking protection, the ambitious seeking some shared glory, and the thuggish gravitating toward a leader who could show them more refined forms of cruelty. In other words, they were the forerunners of the Death Eaters, and indeed some of them became the first Death Eaters after leaving Hogwarts.

"Rigidly controlled by Riddle, they were never detected in open wrongdoing, although their seven years at Hogwarts were marked by a number of nasty incidents to which they were never satisfactorily linked, the most serious of which was, of course, the opening of the Chamber of Secrets, which resulted in the death of a girl. As you know, Hagrid was wrongly accused of that crime.

"I have not been able to find many memories of Riddle at Hogwarts," said Dumbledore, placing his withered hand on the Pensieve. "Few who knew him then are prepared to talk about him; they are too terrified. What I know, I found out after he had left Hogwarts, after much painstaking effort, after tracing those few who could be tricked into speaking, after searching old records and questioning Muggle and wizard witnesses alike.

"Those whom I could persuade to talk told me that Riddle was obsessed with his parentage. This is understandable, of course; he had grown up in an orphanage and naturally wished to know how he came to be there. It seems that he searched in vain for some trace of Tom Riddle senior on the shields in the trophy room, on the lists of prefects in the old school records, even in the books of Wizarding history. Finally he was forced to accept that his father had never set foot in Hogwarts. I believe that it was then that he dropped the name forever, assumed the identity of Lord Volde-mort, and began his investigations into his previously despised mother's family — the woman whom, you will remember, he had thought could not be a witch if she had succumbed to the shameful human weakness of death.

"All he had to go upon was the single name 'Marvolo,' which he knew from those who ran the orphanage had been his mother's father's name. Finally, after painstaking research, through old books of Wizarding families, he discovered the existence of Slytherin's surviving line. In the summer of his sixteenth year, he left the orphanage to which he returned annually and set off to find his Gaunt relatives. And now, Harry, if you will stand ..." :Dumbledore rose, and

Harry saw that he was again holding a. small crystal bottle filled with swirling, pearly memory.

"I was very lucky to collect this," he said, as he poured the gleaming mass into the Pensieve. "As you will understand when we have experienced it. Shall we?"Harry stepped up to the stone basin and bowed obediently until his face sank through the surface of the memory; he felt the familiar sensation of falling through nothingness and then landed upon a dirty stone floor in almost total darkness.

It took him several seconds to recognize the place, by which time Dumbledore had landed beside him. The Gaunts' house was now more indescribably filthy than anywhere Harry had ever seen. The ceiling was thick with cobwebs, the floor coated in grime; moldy and rotting food lay upon the table amidst a mass of crusted pots. The only light came from a single guttering candle placed at the feet of a man with hair and beard so overgrown Harry could see neither eyes nor mouth. He was slumped in an armchair by the fire, and Harry wondered for a moment whether he was dead. Butthen there came a loud knock on the door and the man jerked awake, raising a wand in his right hand and a short knife in his left.

The door creaked open. There on the threshold, holding an old-fashioned lamp, stood a boy Harry recognized at once: tall, pale, dark-haired, and handsome — the teenage Voldemort.

Voldemort's eyes moved slowly around the hovel and then found the man in the armchair. For a few seconds they looked at each other, then the man staggered upright, the many empty bottles at his feet clattering and tinkling across the floor.

"YOU!" he bellowed. "YOU!"

And he hurtled drunkenly at Riddle, wand and knife held aloft.

"Stop."

Riddle spoke in Parseltongue. The man skidded into the table, sending moldy pots crashing to the floor. He stared at Riddle. There was a long silence while they contemplated each other. The man broke it.

"You speak it?"

"Yes, I speak it," said Riddle. He moved forward into the room, allowing the door to swing shut behind him. Harry could not help but feel a resentful admiration for Voldemort's complete lack of fear. His race merely expressed disgust and, perhaps, disappointment.

"Where is Marvolo?" he asked.

"Dead," said the other. "Died years ago, didn't he?"Riddle frowned.

"Who are you, then?"

"I’m Morfin, ain't I?"

"Marvolo's son?"

"'Course I am, then..." ? ,, .

Morfin pushed the hair out of his dirty face, the better to see Riddle, and Harry saw that he wore Marvolo's black-stoned ring on his right hand.

"I thought you was that Muggle," whispered Morfin. "You look mighty like that Muggle.""What Muggle?" said Riddle sharply.

"That Muggle what my sister took a fancy to, that Muggle what lives in the big house over the way," said Morfin, and he spat unexpectedly upon the floor between them. "You look right like him. Riddle. But he's older now, in 'e? He's older'n you, now I think on it. ..."Morfin looked slightly dazed and swayed a little, still clutching the edge of the table for support. "He come back, see," he added stupidly.

Voldemort was gazing at Morfin as though appraising his possibilities. Now he moved a little closer and said, "Riddle came back?""Ar, he left her, and serve her right, marrying filth!" said Morfin, spitting on the floor again. "Robbed us, mind, before she ran off. , Where's the locket, eh, where's Slytherin's locket?"Voldemort did not answer. Morfin was working himself into a rage again; he brandished his knife and shouted, "Dishonored us, , she did, that little slut! And whore you, coming here and asking questions about all that? It's over, innit. . . . It's over. ..."He looked away, staggering slightly, and Voldemort moved forward. As he did so, an unnatural darkness fell, extinguishing Voldemort's lamp and Morfin's candle, extinguishing everything. . . . Dumbledore's fingers closed tightly around Harry's arm and they were soaring back into the present again. The soft golden light in Dumbledore's office seemed to dazzle Harry's eyes after that impenetrable darkness. |"Is that all?" said Harry at once. "Why did it go dark, what happened?""Because Morfin could not remember anything from that point onward," said Dumbledore, gesturing Harry back into his seat. "When he awoke next morning, he was lying on the floor, quite alone. Marvolo's ring had gone.

"Meanwhile, in the village of Little Hangleton, a maid was running along the High Street, screaming that there were three bodies lying in the drawing room of the big house: Tom Riddle Senior and his mother and father.

"The Muggle authorities were perplexed. As far as I am aware, they do not know to this day how the Riddles died, for the Avadu Kedavra curse does not usually leave any sign of damage. . . . The exception sits before me," Dumbledore added, with a nod to Harry's scar. "The Ministry, on the other hand, knew at once that this was a wizard's murder. They also knew that a convicted Muggle-hater lived across the valley from the Riddle house, a Muggle-hater who had already been imprisoned once for attacking one of the murdered people.

"So the Ministry called upon Morfin. They did not need to question him, to use Veritaserum or Legilimency. He admitted to the murder on

the spot, giving details only the murderer could know. He was proud, he said, to have killed the Muggles, had been awaiting his chance all these years. He handed over his wand, which was proved at once to have been used to kill the Riddles. And he permitted himself to be led off to Azkaban without a fight.

All that disturbed him was the fact that his fathers ring had disappeared. 'He'll kill me for losing it,' he told his captors over and over again. 'He'll kill me for losing his ring.' And that, apparently, was all he ever said again. He lived out the remainder of his life in Azkaban, lamenting the loss of Marvolo's last heirloom, and is buried beside the prison, alongside the other poor souls who have expired within its walls.""So Voldemort stole Morfin's wand and used it?" said Harry, sitting up straight.

"That's right," said Dumbledore. "We have no memories to show us this, but I think we can be fairly sure what happened. Voldemort Stupefied his uncle, took his wand, and proceeded across the valley to 'the big house over the way.' There he murdered the Muggle man who had abandoned his witch mother, and, for good measure, his Muggle grandparents, thus obliterating the last of the unworthy Riddle line and revenging himself upon the father who never wanted him. Then he returned to the Gaunt hovel, performed the complex bit of magic that would implant a false memory in his uncle's mind, laid Morfin's wand beside its unconscious owner, pocketed the ancient ring he wore, and departed.""And Morfin never realized he hadn't done it?""Never," said Dumbledore. "He gave, as I say, a full and boastful confession.""But he had this real memory in him all the time!" "Yes, but it took a great deal of skilled Legilimency to coax it out of him," said Dumbledore, "and why should anybody delve further into Morfin's mind when he had already confessed to the crime? However, I was able to secure a visit to Morfin in the last weeks of his life, by which time I was attempting to discover as much as I could about Voldemort's past. I extracted this memory with difficulty. When I saw what it contained, I attempted to use it to secure Morfin's release from Azkaban. Before the Ministry reached their decision, however, Morfin

had died.""But how come the Ministry didn't realize that Voldemort had done all that to Morfin?" Harry asked angrily "He was underage at the time, wasn't he? I thought they could detect underage magic!" "You are quite right — they can detect magic, but not the perpetrator: You will remember that you were blamed by the Ministry for the Hover Charm that was, in fact, cast by —""Dobby," growled Harry; this injustice still rankled. "So if you're underage and you do magic inside an adult witch or wizard's house, the Ministry won't know?""They will certainly be unable to tell who performed the magic," said Dumbledore, smiling slightly at the look of great indignation on Harrys face. "They rely on witch and wizard parents to enforce their offspring's obedience while within their walls.""Well, that's rubbish," snapped Harry. "Look what happened here, look what happened to Morfin!""I agree," said Dumbledore. "Whatever Morfin was, he did not deserve to die as he did, blamed for murders he had not committed. But it is getting late, and I want you to see this other memory before we part. ..."Dumbledore took from an inside pocket another crystal phial and Harry fell silent at once, remembering that Dumbledore had said it was the most important one he had collected. Harry noticed that the contents proved difficult to empty into the Pensieve, as though they had congealed slightly; did memories go bad?

"This will not take long," said Dumbledore, when he had finally emptied the phial. "We shall be back before you know it. Once more into the Pensieve, then . . ."And Harry fell again through the silver surface, landing this time right in front of a man he recognized at once.

It was a much younger Horace Slughorn. Harry was so used to him bald that he found the sight of Slughorn with thick, shiny, straw-colored hair quite disconcerting; it looked as though he had had his head thatched, though there was already a shiny Galleon-sized bald patch on his crown. His mustache, less massive than it was these days, was gingery-blond. He was not quite as rotund as the Slughorn Harry knew, though the golden buttons on his richly embroidered waistcoat were taking a fair amount of strain. His little feet resting

upon a velvet pouffe, he was sitting well back in a comfortable winged armchair, one hand grasping a small glass of wine, the other searching through a box of crystalized pineapple.

Harry looked around as Dumbledore appeared beside him and saw that they were standing in Slughorn's office. Haifa dozen boys were sitting around Slughorn, all on harder or lower seats than his, and all in their mid-teens. Harry recognized Voldemort at once. His was the most handsome face and he looked the most relaxed of all the boys. His right hand lay negligently upon the arm of his chair; with a jolt, Harry saw that he was wearing Marvolo's gold-and-black ring; he had already killed his father.

"Sir, is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?" he asked.

"Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you," said Slughorn, wagging a reproving, sugar-covered finger at Riddle, though ruining the effect slightly by winking. "I must say, I'd like to know where you get your information, boy, more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are."

Riddle smiled; the other boys laughed and cast him admiring looks.

"What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter — thank you fm the pineapple, by the way, you're quite right, it is my favorite — "As several of the boys tittered, something very odd happened. The whole room was suddenly filled with a thick white fog, so that Harry could see nothing but the face of Dumbledore, who was standing beside him. Then Slughorn's voice rang out through the mist, unnaturally loudly, "You'll go wrong, boy, mark my words. "The fog cleared as suddenly as it had appeared and yet nobody made any allusion to it, nor did anybody look as though anything unusual had just happened. Bewildered, Harry looked around as a small golden clock standing upon Slughorn's desk chimed eleven o'clock.

"Good gracious, is it that time already?" said Slughorn. "You'd better get going, boys, or we'll all be in trouble. Lestrange, I want your essay

by tomorrow or it's detention. Same goes for you, Avery."Slughorn pulled himself out of his armchair and carried his empty glass over to his desk as the boys filed out. Voldemort, however, stayed behind. Harry could tell he had dawdled deliberately, wanting to be last in the room with Slughorn.

"Look sharp, Tom," said Slughorn, turning around and finding him still present. "You don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a prefect...""Sir, I wanted to ask you something.""Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away....""Sir, I wondered what you know about. . . about Horcruxes?"And it happened all over again: The dense fog filled the room so that Harry could not see Slughorn or Voldemort at all; only Dumbledore, smiling serenely beside him. Then Slughorn's voice boomed out again, just as it had done before.

"I don't know anything about Horcruxes and I wouldn't tell you if I did! Now get out of here at once and don't let me catch you mentioning them again!""Well, that's that," said Dumbledore placidly beside Harry.

"Time to go."

And Harry's feet left the floor to fall, seconds later, back onto therug in front of Dumbledore's desk.

"That's all there is?" said Harry blankly.

Dumbledore had said that this was the most important memory of all, but he could not see what was so significant about it. Admittedly the fog, and the fact that nobody seemed to have noticed it, was odd, but other than that nothing seemed to have happened except that Voldemort had asked a question and failed to get an answer.

"As you might have noticed," said Dumbledore, reseating himself behind his desk, "that memory has been tampered with.""Tampered with?" repeated Harry, sitting back down too.

"Certainly," said Dumbledore. "Professor Slughorn has meddled with his own recollections.""But why would he do that?"

"Because, I think, he is ashamed of what he remembers," said Dumbledore. "He has tried to rework the memory to show himself in a better light, obliterating those parts which he does not wish me to see. It is, as you will have noticed, very crudely done, and that is all to the good, for it shows that the true memory is still there beneath the alterations.

"And so, for the first time, I am giving you homework, Harry. It will be your job to persuade Professor Slughorn to divulge the real memory, which will undoubtedly be our most crucial piece of information of all."Harry stared at him.

"But surely, sir," he said, keeping his voice as respectful as possible, "you don't need me — you could use Legilimency ... or Veritaserum. ...""Professor Slughorn is an extremely able wizard who will be expecting both," said Dumbledore. "He is much more accomplished at Occlumency than poor Morfin Gaunt, and I would be astonished if he has not carried an antidote to Veritaserum with him ever since I coerced him into giving me this travesty of a recollection.

"No, I think it would be foolish to attempt to wrest the truth from Professor Slughorn by force, and might do much more harm than good; I do not wish him to leave Hogwarts. However, he has his weaknesses like the rest of us, and I believe that you are the one person who might be able to penetrate his defenses. It is most important that we secure the true memory, Harry. . . . How important, we will only know when we have seen the real thing. So, good luck . . . and good night."A little taken aback by the abrupt dismissal, Harry got to his feet quickly. "Good night, sir."As he closed the study door behind him, he distinctly heard Phineas Nigellus say, "I can't see why the boy should be able to do it better than you, Dumbledore.""I wouldn't expect you to, Phineas," replied Dumbledore, and Fawkes gave another low, musical cry.

Chapter 18 Birthday Surprises

The next day Harry confided in both Ron and Hermione the task that Dumbledore had set him, though separately, for Hermione still refused to remain in Ron's presence longer than it took to give him a contemptuous look.

Ron thought that Harry was unlikely to have any trouble with Slughorn at all.

'He loves you,' he said over breakfast, waving an airy forkful of fried egg. 'Won't refuse you anything, will he? Not his little Potions Prince. Just hang back after class this afternoon and ask him.'Hermione, however, took a gloomier view.

'He must be determined to hide what really happened if Dumbledore couldn't get it out of him,' she said in a low voice, as they stood in the deserted, snowy courtyard at break. 'Horcruxes ... Horcruxes ... I've never even heard of them ...''You haven't?'

Harry was disappointed; he had hoped that Hermione might have been able to give him a clue as to what Horcruxes were.

'They must be really advanced Dark magic, or why would Voldemort have wanted to know about them? I think it's going to be difficult to get the information, Harry, you'll have to be very careful about how you approach Slughorn, think out a strategy ...''Ron reckons 1 should just hang back after Potions this afternoon ...''Oh, well, if Won-Won thinks that, you'd better do it,' she said, flaring up at once. 'After all, when has Won-Won's judgement ever been faulty?''Hermione, can't you —'

'No!' she said angrily, and stormed away, leaving Harry alone and ankle-deep in snow.

Potions lessons were uncomfortable enough these days, seeing as Harry, Ron and Hermione had to share a desk. Today, Hermione moved her cauldron around the table so that she was close to Ernie, and ignored both Harry and Ron.

'What've you done?' Ron muttered to Harry, looking at Hermione's haughty profile.

But before Harry could answer, Slughorn was calling for silence from the front of the room.

'Settle down, settle down, please! Quickly, now, lots of work to get through this afternoon! Golpalott's Third Law ... who can tell me -? But Miss Granger can, of course!'Hermione recited at top speed: 'Golpalott's-Third-Law- states-that-the-antidote-for-a-blended-poison-will-be-equal-to- more-than-the-sum-of-the-antidotes-for-each-of-the-separale- components.''Precisely!' beamed Slughorn. Ten points for Gryffindor! Now, if we accept Golpalott's Third Law as true ...''Harry was going to have to take Slughorn's word for it that Golpalott's Third Law was true, because he had not under-stood any of it. Nobody apart from Hermione seemed to be following what Slughorn said next, either.

'... which means, of course, that assuming we have achieved correct identification of the potion's ingredients by Scarpin's Revelaspell, our primary aim is not the relatively simple one of selecting antidotes to those ingredients in a

of themselves, but to find that added component which will, by an almost alchemical process, transform these disparate elements -'Ron was sitting beside Harry with his mouth half-open, doodling absently on his new copy of Advanced Potion-Making. Ron kept forgetting that he could no longer rely on Hermione to help him out of trouble when he failed to grasp what was going on.

'... and so,' finished Slughorn, 'I want each of you to come and take one of these phials from my desk. You are to create an antidote for

the poison within it before the end of the lesson. Good luck, and don't forget your protective gloves!'Hermione had left her stool and was halfway towards Siughorn's desk before the rest of the class had realised it was time to move, and by the time Harry, Ron and Ernie returned to the table, she had already tipped the contents of her phial into her cauldron and was kindling a fire underneath it.

'it's a shame that the Prince won't be able to help you much with this, Harry,' she said brightly as she straightened up. 'You have to understand the principles involved this time. No short cuts or cheats!'Annoyed, Harry uncorked the poison he had taken from Siughorn's desk, which was a garish shade of pink, tipped it into his cauldron and lit a fire underneath it. He did not have the faintest idea what he was supposed to do next. He glanced at Ron, who was now standing there looking rather gormless, having copied everything Harry had done.

'You sure the Prince hasn't got any tips?' Ron muttered to Harry.

Harry pulled out his trusty copy of Advanced Potion-Making and turned to the chapter on Antidotes. There was Golpalott's Third Law, stated word for word as Hermione had recited it, but not a single illuminating note in the Prince's hand to explain what it meant. Apparently the Prince, like Hermione, had had no difficulty understanding it.

'Nothing,' said Harry gloomily.

Hermione was now waving her wand enthusiastically over her cauldron. Unfortunately, they could not copy the spell she was doing because she was now so good at non-verbal incan-tations that she did not need to say the words aloud. Ernie Macmillan, however, was muttering, 'Specialis revelio!' over his cauldron, which sounded impressive, so Harry and Ron hastened to imitate him.

It took Harry only five minutes to realise that his reputa-tion as the best potion-maker in the class was crashing around his ears.

Slughorn had peered hopefully into his cauldron on his first circuit of the dungeon, preparing to exclaim in delight as he usually did, and instead had with-drawn his head hastily, coughing, as the smell of bad eggs overwhelmed him. Hermione's expression could not have been any smugger; she had loathed being out-performed in every Potions class. She was now decanting the mysteriously separated ingredients of her poison into ten different crystal phials. More to avoid watching this irritating sight than any-thing else, Harry bent over the Half-Blood Prince's book and turned a few pages with unnecessary force.

And there it was, scrawled right across a long list of antidotes.

Just shove a bezoar down their throats.

Harry stared at these words for a moment. Hadn't he once, long ago, heard of bezoars? Hadn't Snape mentioned them in their first ever Potions lesson? 'A stone taken from the stomach of a goat, which will protect from most poisons.'It was not an answer to the Golpalott problem, and had Snape still been their teacher, Harry would not have dared do it, but this was a moment for desperate measures. He hastened towards the store cupboard and rummaged within it, pushing aside unicorn horns and tangles of dried herbs until he found, at the very back, a small card box on which had been scribbled the word 'Bezoars'.

He opened the box just as Slughorn called, Two minutes left, everyone!' Inside were half a dozen shrivelled brown objects, looking more like dried-up kidneys than real stones. Harry seized one, put the box back in the cupboard and hurried back to his cauldron.

'Time's ... UP!' called Slughorn genially. 'Well, let's see how you've done! Blaise ... what have you got for me?'Slowly, Slughorn moved around the room, examining the various antidotes. Nobody had finished the task, although Hermione was trying to cram a few more ingredients into her bottle before Slughorn reached her. Ron had

given up com-pletely, and was merely trying to avoid breathing in the putrid fumes issuing from his cauldron. Harry stood there waiting, the bezoar clutched in a slightly sweaty hand.

Slughorn reached their table last. He sniffed Ernie's potion and passed on to Ron's with a grimace. He did not linger over Ron's cauldron, but backed away swiftly, retching slightly.

'And you, Harry,' he said. 'What have you got to show me?'Harry held out his hand, the bezoar sitting on his palm.

Slughorn looked down at it for a full ten seconds. Harry wondered, for a moment, whether he was going to shout at him. Then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

'You've got a nerve, boy!' he boomed, taking the bezoar and holding it up so that the class could see it. 'Oh, you're like your mother ... well, 1 can't fault you ... a bezoar would certainly act as an antidote to all these potions!'Hermione, who was sweaty-faced and had soot on her nose, looked livid. Her half-finished antidote, comprising fifty-two ingredients including a chunk of her own hair,bubbled sluggishly behind Slughorn, who had eyes for nobody but Harry.

'And you thought of a bezoar all by yourself, did you, Harry?' she asked through gritted teeth.

That's the individual spirit a real potion-maker needs!' said Slughorn happily, before Harry could reply. 'Just like his mother, she had the same intuitive grasp of potion-making, it's undoubtedly from Lily he gets it ... yes, Harry, yes, if you've got a bezoar to hand, of course that would do the trick ... although as they don't work on everything, and are pretty rare, it's still worth knowing how to mix antidotes ...'The only person in the room looking angrier than Hermione was Malfoy, who, Harry was pleased to see, had spilled some-thing that looked like cat sick over himself. Before either of them could express their fury that Harry had come top of the class by not doing any work, however, the bell rang.

Time to pack up!' said Slughorn. 'And an extra ten points to Gryffindor for sheer cheek!'Still chuckling, he waddled back to his desk at the front of the dungeon.

Harry dawdled behind, taking an inordinate amount of time to do up his bag. Neither Ron nor Hermione wished him luck as they left; both looked rather annoyed. At last Harry and Slughorn were the only two left in the room.

'Come on, now, Harry, you'll be late for your next lesson,' said Slughorn affably, snapping the gold clasps shut on his dragonskin briefcase.

'Sir,' said Harry, reminding himself irresistibly of Voldemort, '1 wanted to ask you something.''Ask away, then, my dear boy, ask away ...''Sir, 1 wondered what you know about ... about Horcruxes?'Slughorn froze. His round face seemed to sink in upon itself. He licked his lips and said hoarsely, 'What did you say?' 'I asked whether you know anything about Horcruxes, sir. You see -''Dumbledore put you up to this,' whispered Slughorn.

His voice had changed completely. It was not genial any more, but shocked, terrified. He fumbled in his breast pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, mopping his sweating brow.

'Dumbledore's shown you that - that memory,' said Slughorn. 'Well? Hasn't he?''Yes,' said Harry, deciding on the spot that it was best not to lie.

'Yes, of course,' said Slughorn quietly, still dabbing at his white face. 'Of course ... well, if you've seen that memory, Harry, you'll know that I don't know anything - anything -he repeated the word forcefully '- about Horcruxes.'He seized his dragonskin briefcase, stuffed his handkerchief back into his pocket and marched to the dungeon door.

'Sir,' said Harry desperately, 'I just thought there might be a bit more to the memory -''Did you?' said Slughorn. Then you were wrong,

weren't you? WRONG!'He bellowed the last word and, before Harry could say another word, slammed the dungeon door behind him.

Neither Ron nor Hermione was at all sympathetic when Harry told them of this disastrous interview Hermione was still seething at the way Harry had triumphed without doing the work properly. Ron was resentful that Harry hadn't slipped him a bezoar, too.

'It would've just looked stupid if we'd both done it!' said Harry irritably. 'Look, I had to try and soften him up so I could ask him about Voldemort, didn't I? Oh, will you gel a grip!' he added in exasperation, as Ron winced at the sound of the name.

Infuriated by his failure and by Ron and Hermione's atti-

tudes, Harry brooded for the next few days over what to do next about Slughorn. He decided that, for the time being, he would let Slughorn think that he had forgotten all about Horcruxes; it was surely best to lull him into a false sense of security before returning to the attack.

When Harry did noi question Slughorn again, the Potions master reverted to his usual affectionate treatment of him, and appeared to have put the matter from his mind. Harry awaited an invitation to one of his little evening parties, determined to accept this time, even if he had to reschedule Quidditch prac- tice. Unfortunately, however, no such invitation arrived. Harry checked with Hermione and Ginny: neither of them had received an invitation and nor, as far as they knew, had anybody else. Harry could not help wondering whether this meant that Slughorn was not quite as forgetful as he appeared, simply determined to give Harry no additional opportunities to question him.

Meanwhile, the Hogwarts library had failed Hermione for the first lime in living memory. She was so shocked, she even forgot that she was annoyed at Harry for his trick with the bezoar,'I haven't found one single explanation of what Horcruxes do!" she told him. 'Not a single

one! I've been right through the restricted section and even in the most horrible books, where they tell you how to brew the most gruesome potions -nothing! All I could find was this, in the introduciion to Magick Mostc Evilc — listen — "of the Horcrux, wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction" ... 1 mean, why mention it, then?' she said impatiently, slamming the old book shut; it let out a ghostly wail. 'Oh, shut up,' she snapped, stuffing it back into her bag. 'I asked whether you know anything about Horcruxes, sir. You see -

'Dumbledore put you up to this,' whispered Slughorn,His voice had changed completely. It was not genial any more, but shocked, terrified. He fumbled in his breast pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, mopping his sweating brow.

'Dumbledore's shown you that — that memory,' said Slughorn. 'Well? Hasn't he?''Yes,' said Harry, deciding on the spot that it was best not to lie.

'Yes, of course,' said Slughorn quietly, still dabbing at his white face. 'Of course ... well, if you've seen that memory, Harry, you'll know that I don't know anything - anything -he repeated the word forcefully '-about Horcruxes.'He seized his dragonskin briefcase, stuffed his handkerchief back into his pocket and marched to the dungeon door.

'Sir,' said Harry desperately, '1 just thought there might be a'Did you?' said Slughorn. Then you were wrong, weren't you? WRONG!'He bellowed the last word and, before Harry could say another word, slammed the dungeon door behind him.

Neither Ron nor Hermione was at all sympathetic when Harry told them of this disastrous interview. Hermione was still seething at the way Harry had triumphed without doing the work properly. Ron was resentful that Harry hadn't slipped him a bezoar, too.

'It would've just looked stupid if we'd both done it!' said Harry irritably. 'Look, 1 had to try and soften him up so 1 could ask him about

Voldemort, didn't I? Oh, will you get a grip!' he added in exasperation, as Ron winced at the sound ofInfuriated by his failure and by Ron and Hermione's atti-

tudes, Harry brooded for the next few days over what to do next about Slughorn. He decided that, for the time being, he would let Slughorn think that he had forgotten all about Horcruxes; it was surely best to lull him into a false sense of security before returning to the attack.

When Harry did not question Slughorn again, the Potions master reverted to his usual affectionate treatment of him, and appeared to have put the matter from his mind. Harry awaited an invitation to one of his little evening parties, determined to accept this time, even if he had to reschedule Quidditch prac-tice. Unfortunately, however, no such invitation arrived. Harry checked with Hermione and Ginny: neither of them had received an invitation and nor, as far as they knew, had anybody else. Harry could not help wondering whether this meant that Slughorn was not quite as forgetful as he appeared, simply determined to give Harry no additional opportunities to question him.

Meanwhile, the Hogwarts library had failed Hermione for the first time in living memory. She was so shocked, she even forgot that she was annoyed at Harry for his trick with the bezoar.

'I haven't found one single explanation of what Horcruxes do!' she told him. 'Not a single one! I've been right through the restricted section and even in the most horrible books, where they tell you how to brew the most gruesome potions -nothing! All I could find was this, in the introduction to Magick Moste Evile - listen - "of the Horcrux, wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction" ... I mean, why mention it, then?' she said impatiently, slamming the old book shut; it let out a ghostly wail. 'Oh, shut up,' she snapped, stuffing it back into her bag.

The snow melted around the school as February arrived, to be replaced by cold, dreary wetness. Purplish-grey clouds hung low over the castle and a constant fall of chilly rain made the lawns slippery and muddy. The upshot of this was that the sixth-years' first Apparition lesson, which was sched-uled for a Saturday morning so that no normal lessons would be missed, took place in the Great Hall instead of in the grounds.

When Harry and Hermione arrived in the Hall (Ron had come down with Lavender) they found that the tables had disappeared. Rain lashed against the high windows and the enchanted ceiling swirled darkly above them as they assembled in front of Professors McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick and Sprout - the Heads of House - and a small wizard whom Harry took to be the Apparition Instructor from the Ministry. He was oddly colourless, with transparent eyelashes, wispy hair and an insubstantial air, as though a single gust of wind might blow him away. Harry wondered whether constant dis-appearances and reappearances had somehow diminished his substance, or whether this frail build was ideal for anyone wishing to vanish.

'Good morning,' said the Ministry wizard, when all the stu-dents had arrived and the Heads of House had called for quiet. 'My name is Wilkie Twycross and I shall be your Ministry-Apparition Instructor for the next twelve weeks. 1 hope to be able to prepare you for your Apparition test in this time -''Malfoy, be quiet and pay attention!' barked Professor McGonagall.

Everybody looked round. Malfoy had flushed a dull pink; he looked furious as he stepped away from Crabbe, with whom he appeared to have been having a whispered argu-ment. Harry glanced quickly at Snape, who also looked annoyed, though Harry strongly suspected that this was less because of Malfoy's rudeness than the fact that McGonagall had reprimanded one of his house.

'- by which time, many of you may be ready to take your test,' Twycross continued, as though there had been no interruption.

'As you may know, it is usually impossible to Apparate or Disapparate within Hogwarts. The Headmaster has lifted this enchantment, purely within the Great Hall, for one hour, so as to enable you to practise. May I emphasise that you will not be able to Apparate outside the walls of this Hall, and that you would be unwise to try.

'I would like each of you to place yourselves now so that you have a clear five feet of space in front of you.'There was a great scrambiing and jostling as people separ-ated, banged into each other, and ordered others out of their space. The Heads of House moved among the students, marshalling them into position and breaking up arguments.

'Harry, where are you going? 1 demanded Hermione.

But Harry did not answer; he was moving quickly through the crowd, past the place where Professor Flitwick was making squeaky attempts to position a few Ravenclaws, all of whom wanted to be near the front, past Professor Sprout, who was chivvying the Hufflepuffs into line, until, by dodging around Ernie Macmillan, he managed to position himself right at the back of the crowd, directly behind Malfoy, who was taking advantage of the general upheaval to continue his argument with Crabbe, standing five feet away and looking mutinous.

'I don't know how much longer, all right?' Malfoy shot at him, oblivious to Harry standing right behind him. 'It's taking longer than I thought it would.'Crabbe opened his mouth, but Malfoy appeared to second-guess what he was going to say.

'Look, it's none of your business what I'm doing, Crabbe, you and Goyle just do as you're told and keep a lookout!"! tell my friends what I'm up to, if I want them to keep a lookout for me," Harry said, just loud enough for Malfoy to hear him.

Malfoy spun round on the spot, his hand flying to his wand, but at thai precise moment the four Heads of House shouted, 'Quiet!' and

silence fell again. Malfoy turned slowly to face the front.

Thank you,' said Twycross. :Now then ...'He waved his wand. Old-fashioned wooden hoops instantly appeared on the floor in from of every student.

The important things to remember when Apparating are the three Ds!' said Twycross. 'Destination, Determination, Deliberation!

'Step one: fix your mind firmly upon the desired destin-ation,' said Twycross. 'In this case, the interior of your hoop. Kindly concentrate upon that destination now.'Everybody looked around furtively, to check that everyone else was staring into their hoop, then hastily did as they were told. Harry gazed at the circular patch of dusty floor enclosed by his hoop and tried hard to think of nothing else. This proved impossible, as he couldn't stop puzzling over what Malfoy was doing that needed lookouts.

"Step two,' said Twycross, 'focus your determination to occupy the visualised space! Let your yearning to enter it flood from your mind to every particle of your body!'Harry glanced around surreptitiously. A little way to his left, Ernie Macmillan was contemplating his hoop so hard that his face had turned pink; it looked as though he was straining to lay a Quaffle-sized egg. Harry bit back a laugh and hastily returned his gaze to his own hoop.

'Step three,' called Twycross, 'and only when 1 give the com-mand ... lum on the spot, feeiing your way into nothingness, moving with deliberation 1. On my command, now ... one- 1Harry glanced around again; lots of people were looking positively alarmed at being asked to Apparate so quickly.

Harry tried to fix his thoughts on his hoop again; he had already forgotten what the three Ds stood for.

: - THREE!'

Harry spun on the spot, lost his balance and nearly fell over. He was not the only one. The whole Hall was suddenly full of staggering people; Neville was flat on his back; Ernie Macmillan, on the other hand, had done a kind of pirouet-ting leap into his hoop and looked momentarily thrilled, until he caught sight of Dean Thomas roaring with laughter at him.

'Never mind, never mind,' said Twycross dryly, who did not seem to have expected anything better. 'Adjust your hoops, please, and back to your original positions ...'The second atlem.pt was no better than the first. The third was just as bad. Not until the fourth did anything exciting happen. There was a horrible screech of pain and everybody looked around, terrified, to see Susan Bones of Hufflepuff wobbling in her hoop with her left leg still standing five feet away where she had started.

The Heads of House converged on her; there was a great bang and a puff of purple smoke, which cleared to reveal Susan sobbing, reunited with her leg but looking horrified.

'Sph'nching, or the separation of random body parts,' said Wilkie Twycross dispassionately, 'occurs when the mind is insufficiently determined. You must concentrate continually upon your destination, and move, without hasie, but with deliberation ... thus.'Twycross stepped forwards, turned gracefully on the spot with his arms outstretched and vanished in a swirl of robes, reappearing at the back of the Hall. 'Remember the three Ds,' he said, 'and try again ... one - two - three -'But an hour later, Susan's Splinching was still ihe most interesting thing that had happened. Twycross did not seem discouraged. Fastening his cloak at his neck, he merely said, 'Until next Saturday, everybody, and do not forget: Destin-ation. Determination. Deliberation.'With that, he waved his wand, Vanishing the hoops, and walked out of the Hall accompanied by Professor McGonagall. Talk broke out at once as people began moving towards the Entrance Hall.

'How did you do?' asked Ron, hurrying towards Harry. '1 think 1 felt something the last time I tried - a kind of tingling in my feet.''1 expect your trainers are too small, Won-Won,' said a voice behind them, and Hermione stalked past, smirking.

'1 didn't feel anything,' said Harry, ignoring this inter-ruption. ''But 1 don't care about that now-''What d'you mean, you don't care ... don't you want to leam to Apparate?' said Ron incredulously.

'I'm not fussed, really. I prefer flying,' said Harry, glancing over his shoulder to see where Malfoy was, and speeding up as they came into the Entrance Hall. 'Look, hurry up, will you, there's something I want to do ...'Perplexed, Ron followed Harry back to Gryffindor Tower at a run. They were temporarily detained by Peeves, who had jammed a door on the fourth floor shut and was refusing to let anyone pass until they set fire to their own pants, but Harry and Ron simply turned back and took one of their trusted short cuts. Within five minutes, they were climbing through the portrait hole.

'Are you going to tell me what we're doing, then?' asked Ron, panting slightly.

'Up here,' said Harry, and he crossed the common room and led the way through the door to the boys' staircase.

Their dormitory was, as Ham' had hoped, empty. He flung open his trunk and began to rummage in it, while Ron watched impatiently.

'Harry ...'

'Malfoy's using Crabbe and Goyle as lookouts. He was argu-ing with Crabbe just now. 1 want to know ... aha.'He had found it, a folded square of apparently blank parchment, which he now smoothed out and tapped with [he tip of his wand.

'I solemn!)' swear that I am up to no good ... or Malfoy is,At once, the Marauder's Map appeared on the parchment's surface. Here was a

detailed plan of every one of the castle's floors and, moving around it, the tiny, labelled black dots that signified each of the castle's occupants.

'Help me find Malfoy,' said Harry urgently.

He laid the map upon his bed and he and Ron leaned over it, searching.

'There!' said Ron, after a minute or so. 'He's in the Slytherin common room, look ... with Parkinson and Zabini and Crabbe and Goyle ..."Harry looked down at the map, disappointed, but rallied almost at once.

'Well, I'm keeping an eye on him from now on,' he said firmly. 'And the moment 1 see him lurking somewhere with Crabbe and Goyle keeping watch outside, it'll be on with the old Invisibility Cloak and off to find out what he's-'He broke off as Neville entered the dormitory, bringing with him a strong smell of singed material, and began rummaging in his trunk for a fresh pair of pants.

Despite his determination 10 catch Malfoy out, Harry had no luck at all over the next couple of weeks. Although he consulted the map as often as he could, sometimes making unnecessary visits to the bathroom between lessons to search it, he did not once see Malfoy anywhere suspicious. Admit-tedly, he spotted Crabbe and Goyle moving around the castle on their own more often than usual, sometimes remaining stationary in deserted corridors, but at these times Malfoy was not only nowhere near them, but impossible to locate on the map at all. This was most mysterious. Harry toyed with the possibility that Malfoy was actually leaving the school grounds, but could not see how he could be doing it, given the very high leve! of security now operating within the castle. He could only suppose ihat he was missing Malfoy amongst the hundreds of tiny black dots upon the map. As for the fact that Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle appeared to be going their dif-ferent ways when they were usually

inseparable, these things happened as people got older - Ron and Hermione, Harry reflected sadly, were living proof.

February moved towards March with no change in the weather except that it became windy as well as wet. To general indignation, a sign went up on all common-room noticeboards that the next trip into Hogsmeade had been cancelled. Ron was furious.

'It was on my birthday!' he said, 'i was looking forward to that!''Not a big surprise, though, is it?' said Harry. 'Not after what happened to Katie.'She had still not returned from Si Mungo's. What was more, further disappearances had been reported in the Daily Prophet, including several relatives of students at Hogwarts.

'But now all I've got to look forward to is stupid Appar-ition!' said Ron grumpily. 'Big birthday treat ...'Three lessons on, Apparition was proving as difficult asever, though a few more people had managed to Splinch themselves. Frustration was running high and there was a certain amount of ill-feeling towards Wilkie Twycross and his three Ds, which had inspired a number of nicknames for him, the politest of which were Dog-breath and Dung-head.

'Happy birthday, Ron,' said Harry, when they were woken on the first of March by Seamus and Dean leaving noisily for breakfast. 'Have a present.'He threw the package across on to Ron's bed, where it joined a small pile of them that must, Harry assumed, have been delivered by house-elves in the night.

'Cheers,' said Ron drowsily, and as he ripped off the paper Harry got out of bed, opened his own crunk and began rum-maging in it for the Marauder's Map, which he hid after every use. He turfed out half the contents of his trunk before he found it hiding beneath the rolled-up socks in which he was still keeping his bottle of lucky potion, Felix Felicis.

'Right,' he murmured, taking it back to bed with him, tap-ping it quietly and murmuring, 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,' so that

Neville, who was passing the foot of his bed at the time, would not hear.

'Nice one, Harry!' said Ron enthusiastically, waving the new pair of Quidditch Keeper's gloves Harry had given him.

'No problem,' said Harry absent-mindedly, as he searched the Slytherin dormitory closely for Malfoy. 'Hey ... I don't think he's in his bed ...'Ron did not answer; he was too busy unwrapping presents, every now and then letting out an exclamation of pleasure.

'Seriously good haul this year!' he announced, holding up a heavy gold watch with odd symbols around the edge and tiny moving stars instead of hands. 'See what Mum and Dad got me? Blimey, I think I'll come of age next year too ...

'Cool,' muttered Harry, sparing the watch a glance before peering more closely at the map. Where was Malfoy? He did not seem to be at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, eating breakfast ... he was nowhere near Snape, who was sitting in his study ... he wasn't in any of the bathrooms or in the hospital wing ...

'Want one? 1 said Ron thickly, holding out a box of Chocolate Cauldrons.

'No thanks,' said Harry, looking up. 'Malfoy's gone again!''Can't have done,' said Ron, stuffing a second Cauldron into his mouth as he slid out of bed to get dressed. 'Come on. if you don't hurry up you'll have to Apparate on an empty-stomach ... might make it easier, 1 suppose ...''Ron looked thoughtfully ai the box of Chocolate Cauldrons, then shrugged and helped himself to a third.

Harry tapped the map with his wand, muttered, 'Mischief managed,' though it hadn't been, and got dressed, thinking hard. There had to be an explanation for Malfoy's periodic disappearances, but he simply could not think what it could be. The best way of finding out would be to tail him, bur even with the Invisibility Cloak this was an impractical

idea; he had lessons, Quidditch practice, homework and Apparition; he could not follow Malfoy around school all day wilhout his absence being remarked upon,'Ready?' he said to Ron.

He was halfway to the dormitory door when he realised that Ron had not moved, but was leaning on his bedpost, staring out of the rain-washed window with a strangely un-focused look on his face.

'Ron? Breakfast.'

'I'm not hungry,'

Harry stared ai him.

'I thought you just said -?'

-Well, all right, I'll come down with you,' sighed Ron, 'but I don't want to eat.'Harry scrutinised him suspiciously.

'You've just eaten half a box of Chocolate Cauldrons, haven't you?''It's not that,' Ron sighed again. 'You ... you wouldn't understand.''Fair enough,' said Harry, albeit puzzled, as he turned to open the door.

'Harry!' said Ron suddenly.

'What?'

'Harry, I can't stand it!'

'You can't stand what?' asked Harry, now starling to feel definitely alarmed. Ron was rather pale and looked as though he was about to be sick.

'I can't stop thinking about her!' said Ron hoarsely.

Harry gaped at him. He had not expected this and was not sure he wanted to hear it. Friends they might be, but if Ron started calling Lavender 'Lav-Lav', he would have to pui his foot down.

'Why does that stop you having breakfast?' Harry asked, trying to inject a note of common sense into the proceedings.

'I don't think she knows I exist,' said Ron with a desperate gesture.

'She definitely knows you exist,' said Harry, bewildered. 'She keeps snogging you, doesn't she?'Ron blinked.

'Who are you talking about?'

Who are you talking about?' said Harry, with an increasing sense that all reason had dropped out of the conversation.

'Romilda Vane,' said Ron softly, and his whole face seemed to illuminate as he said it, as though hit by a ray of purest sunlight. They stared at each other for almost a whole minute, before Harry said, 'This is a joke, right? You're joking.'T think ... Harry, 1 ihink I love her,' said Ron in a strangled voice.

'OK,' said Harry, walking up to Ron 10 get a better look at the glazed eyes and the pallid complexion, 'OK ... say that again with a straight face.''I love her,' repeated Ron breathlessly. 'Have you seen her hair, it's all black and shiny and silky ... and her eyes? Her big dark eyes? And her -''This is really funny and everything,' said Harry impatiently, 'but joke's over, all right? Drop it.'He turned to leave; he had got two steps towards the door when a crashing blow hit him on the right ear. Staggering, he looked round. Ron's fist was drawn right back, his face was contorted with rage; he was about to strike again.

Harry reacted instinctively; his wand was out of his pocket and the incantation sprang to mind without conscious thought: Le\icorpus!

Ron yelled as his heel was wrenched upwards once more; he dangled helplessly, upside-down, his robes hanging off him.

'What was that for?' Harry bellowed.

'You insulted her, Harry! You said it was a joke!' shouted Ron, who was slowly turning purple in the face as all the blood rushed to his head.

'This is insane!' said Harry. 'What's got into -?'And then he saw the box lying open on Ron's bed and the truth hit him with the force of a stampeding troll.

'Where did you get those Chocolate Cauldrons?''They were a birthday present!' shouted Ron, revolving slowly in midair as he struggled to get free. '1 offered you one, didn't 1?''You just picked them up off the floor, didn't you?''They'd fallen off my bed, all right? Let me go!''They didn't fall off your bed, you prat, don't you understand? They were mine, 1 chucked them out of my trunk when 1 was looking for the map. They're the Chocolate Cauldrons Romilda gave me before Christmas and they're all spiked with love potion!'But only one word of this seemed to have registered with Ron.

'Romilda?' he repeated. 'Did you say Romilda? Harry - do you know her? Can you introduce me?'Harry stared at the dangling Ron, whose face now looked tremendously hopeful, and fought a strong desire to laugh. A part of him - the part closest to his throbbing right ear - was quite keen on the idea of letting Ron down and watching him run amok until the effects of the potion wore off ... but on the other hand, they were supposed to be friends, Ron had not been himself when he had attacked, and Harry- thought that he would deserve another punching if he permitted Ron to declare undying love for Romilda Vane.

'Yeah, I'll introduce you,' said Harry, thinking fast. 'I'm going to let you down now, OK?'He sent Ron crashing back to the floor (his ear did hurt quite a lot), but Ron simply bounded to his feet again, grinning.

'She'll be in Slughorn's office, 1 said Harry confidently, leading the way to the door.

'Why will she be in there?' asked Ron anxiously, hurrying to keep up.

'Oh, she has extra Potions lessons with him,' said Harry, inventing wildly.

'Maybe 1 could ask if 1 can have them with her?' said Ron eagerly.

'Great idea,' said Harry. Lavender was waiting beside the portrait hole, a complication Harry had not foreseen.

'You're lace, Won-Won!' she pouted. 'I've got you a birth-day-''Leave me alone,' said Ron impatiently, 'Harry's going to introduce me to Romilda Vane.'And without another word to her, he pushed his way oui of the portrait hole. Harry tried to make an apologetic face to Lavender, but it might have turned out simply amused, because she looked more offended than ever as the Fat Lady swung shut behind them.

Harry had been slightly worried that Slughorn might be at breakfast, but he answered his office door at the first knock, wearing a green velvet dressing-gown and matching nightcap and looking rather bleary-eyed.

'Harry,' he mumbled. 'This is very early for a call ... I generally sleep late on a Saturday ...''Professor, I'm really sorry to disturb you,' said Harry as quietly as possible, while Ron stood on tiptoe, attempting to see past Slughorn into his room, 'but my friend Ron's swallowed a love potion by mistake. You couldn't make him an antidote, could you? I'd take him to Madam Pomfrey, but we're not supposed to have anything from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and, you know ... awkward questions ...'Td have thought you could have whipped him up a remedy, Harry, an expert potioneer like you?' asked Slughorn. 'Er,' said Harry, somewhat distracted by the fact that Ron was now elbowing him in the ribs in an attempt to force his way into the room, 'well, I've never mixed an antidote for a love potion, sir, and by the time I get it right Ron might've done something serious -'Helpfully, Ron chose this moment to moan, 'I can't see her. Harry - is he hiding her?''Was this potion within date?' asked Slughorn, now eyeing Ron

with professional interest. 'They can strengthen, you know, the longer they're kept.'That would explain a lot,' panted Harry, now positively wrestling with Ron to keep him from knocking Slughorn over. 'It's his birthday, Professor,' he added imploringly.

'Oh, all right, come in, then, come in,' said Slughorn, relenting. 'I've got the necessary here in my bag, it's not a difficult antidote ...'Ron burst through the door into Slughorn's overheated, crowded study, tripped over a tasselled footstool, regained his balance by seizing Harry around the neck and muttered, 'She didn't see that, did she?''She's not here yet,' said Harry, watching Slughorn opening his potion kit and adding a few pinches of this and that to a small crystal bottle.

That's good,' said Ron fervently. 'How do I look?''Very handsome,' said Slughorn smoothly, handing Ron a glass of clear liquid. 'Now drink that up, it's a tonic for the nerves, keep you calm when she arrives, you know,''Brilliant,' said Ron eagerly, and he gulped the antidote down noisily.

Harry and Slughorn watched him. For a moment, Ron beamed at them. Then, very slowly, his grin sagged and van-ished, to be replaced by an expression of utmost horror.

'Back to normal, then?' said Harry, grinning. Slughorn chuckled. Thanks a lot, Professor.''Don't mention it, m'boy, don't mention it,' said Slughorn, as Ron collapsed into a nearby armchair, looking devastated. 'Pick-me-up, that's what he needs,' Slughorn continued, now-bustling over to a table loaded with drinks. 'I've got Butter-beer, I've got wine, I've got one last bottle of this oak-matured mead ... hmm ... meant to give that to Dumbledore forChristmas ... ah well ...' he shrugged '... he can't miss what he's never had! Why don't we open it now and celebrate Mr Weasley's birthday? Nothing like a fine spirit to chase away the pangs of disappointed love ...'He chortled again and Harry joined in. This was the firsi time he had found himself almost alone with Slughorn since his disastrous first attempt to extract the

true memory from him. Perhaps, if he could just keep Slughorn in a good mood ... perhaps if they got through enough of the oak-matured mead ...

There you are, then,' said Slughorn, handing Harry and Ron a glass of mead each, before raising his own. 'Well, a very happy birthday, Ralph -''- Ron -' whispered Harry.

But Ron, who did not appear to be listening to the toast, had already thrown the mead into his mouth and swallowed it.

There was one second, hardly more than a heartbeat, in which Harry knew there was something terribly wrong and Slughorn, it seemed, did not.

'- and may you have many more -

'Ron!'

Ron had dropped his glass; he half-rose from his chair and then crumpled, his extremities jerking uncontrollably. Foam was dribbling from his mouth and his eyes were bulging from their sockets.

'Professor!' Harry bellowed. 'Do something]'But Slughorn seemed paralysed by shock. Ron twitched and choked: his skin was turning blue.

'What - but -' spluttered Slughorn.

Harry leapt over a low table and sprinted towards Slughorn's open potion kit, pulling out jars and pouches, while the terrible sound of Ron's gargling breath filled the room. Thenhe found it - the shrivelled kidney-like stone Slughorn had taken from him in Potions.

He hurtled back to Ron's side, wrenched open his jaw and thrust the bezoar into his mouth. Ron gave a great shudder, a rattling gasp and his body became limp and still.

Chapter 19 Elf Tails

So, all in all, not one of Ron's better birthdays?" said Fred.

It was evening; the hospital wing was quiet, the windows curtained, the lamps lit. Ron's was the only occupied bed. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny were sitting around him; they had spent all day waiting outside the double doors, trying to see inside whenever somebody went in or out. Madam Pomfrey had only let them enter at eight o'clock. Fred and George had arrived at ten past.

"This isn't how we imagined handing over our present," said George grimly, putting down a large wrapped gift on Ron's bedside cabinet and sitting beside Ginny.

"Yeah, when we pictured the scene, he was conscious," said Fred.

"There we were in Hogsmeade, waiting to surprise him —" said George.

"You were in Hogsmeade?" asked Ginny, looking up.

"We were thinking of buying Zonko's," said Fred gloomily. "A Hogsmeade branch, you know, but a fat lot of good it'll do us if you lot aren't allowed out at weekends to buy our stuff anymon ... But never mind that now."He drew up a chair beside Harry and looked at Ron's pale face.

"How exactly did it happen, Harry?"Harry retold the story he had already recounted, it felt like a hundred times to Dumbledore, to McGonagall, to Madam Pomfrey, to Hermione, and to Ginny.

". . . and then I got the bezoar down his throat and his breathing eased up a bit, Slughorn ran for help, McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey turned up, and they brought Ron up here. They reckon he'll be all right. Madam Pomfrey says he'll have to stay here a week or so

... keep taking essence of rue . . .""Blimey, it was lucky you thought of a bezoar," said George in a low voice.

"Lucky there was one in the room," said Harry, who kept turning cold at the thought of what would have happened if he had not been able to lay hands on the little stone.

Hermione gave an almost inaudible sniff. She had been exceptionally quiet all day. Having hurtled, white-faced, up to Harry outside the hospital wing and demanded to know what had happened., she had taken almost no part in Harry and Ginny's obsessive discussion about how Ron had been poisoned, but merely stood beside them, clench-jawed and frightened-looking, until ai last they had been allowed in to see him.

"Do Mum and Dad know?" Fred asked Ginny. "They've already seen him, they arrived an hour ago — they're in Dumbledore's office now, but they'll be back soon. . . ."There was a pause while they all watched Ron mumble a little in his sleep.

"So the poison was in the drink?" said Fred quietly.

"Yes," said Harry at once; he could think of nothing else and was glad for the opportunity to start discussing it again. "Slughorn poured it out —""Would he have been able to slip something into Ron's glass without you seeing?""Probably," said Harry, "but why would Slughorn want to poison Ron?""No idea," said Fred, frowning. "You don't think he could have mixed up the glasses by mistake? Meaning to get you?""Why would Slughorn want to poison Harry?" asked Ginny. "I dunno," said Fred, "but there must be loads of people who'd like to poison Harry, mustn't there? 'The Chosen One' and all that?" "So you think Slughorn's a Death Eater?" said Ginny. :,"Anything's possible," said Fred darkly. "He could be under the Imperius Curse," said George. "Or he could be innocent," said Ginny. "The poison could have been in the bottle, in which case it was probably meant for Slughorn himself.""Who'd want to kill Slughorn?""Dumbledore

reckons Voldemort wanted Slughorn on his side," said Harry. "Slughorn was in hiding for a year before he came to Hogwarts. And . . ." He thought of the memory Dumbledore had not yet been able to extract from Slughorn. "And maybe Voldemort wants him out of the way, maybe he thinks he could be valuable to Dumbledore.""But you said Slughorn had been planning to give th.u Untie to Dumbledore for Christmas," Ginny reminded him. "So the poisoner could just as easily have been after Dumbledore.""Then the poisoner didn't know Slughorn very well," said Hermione, speaking for the first time in hours and sounding as though she had a bad head cold. "Anyone who knew Slughorn would have I known there was a good chance he'd keep something that tasty for himself." I"Er-my-nee," croaked Ron unexpectedly from between themThey all fell silent, watching him anxiously, but after muttering incomprehensibly for a moment he merely started snoring.

The dormitory doors flew open, making them all jump: Hagrid came striding toward them, his hair rain-flecked, his bearskin coat flapping behind him, a crossbow in his hand, leaving a trail of muddy dolphin-sized footprints all over the floor.

"Bin in the forest all day!" he panted. "Aragog's worse, I bin readin' to him — didn' get up ter dinner till jus' now an' then Professor Sprout told me abou' Ron! How is he?""Not bad," said Harry. "They say he'll be okay.""No more than six visitors at a time!" said Madam Pomfrey, hurrying out of her office.

"Hagrid makes six," George pointed out.

"Oh . . . yes. .." said Madam Pomfrey, who seemed to have been counting Hagrid as several people due to his vastness. To cover her confusion, she hurried off to clear up his muddy foot prints with her wand.

"I don' believe this," said Hagrid hoarsely, shaking his great shaggy head as he stared down at Ron. "Jus' don' believe it... Look at him

lyin' there. . . . Who'd want ter hurt him, eh?""That's just what we were discussing," said Harry. "We don't know.""Someone couldn’ have a grudge against the Gryfinndor Quidditch team, could they?" said Hagrid anxiously. "Firs' Katie, now Ron . . .""I cant see anyone trying to bump off a Quidditch team," saidI m urge.

Wood might've done the Slytherins if he could've got away with it," said Fred fairly.

Well, I don't think it's Quidditch, but I think there's a connection between the attacks," said Hermione quietly"How d'you work that out?" asked Fred.

"Well, for one thing, they both ought to have been fatal and weren't, although that was pure luck. And for another, neither the poison nor the necklace seems to have reached the person who was (supposed to be killed. Of course," she added broodingly, "that makes the person behind this even more dangerous in a way, because they don't seem to care how many people they finish off In lore they actually reach their victim."Before anybody could respond to this ominous pronouncement, tin- dormitory doors opened again and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley hurried up the ward. They had done no more than satisfy themselves that Ron would make a full recovery on their last visit to the ward; now Mrs. Weasley seized hold of Harry and hugged him very tighty. "Dumbledore's told us how you saved him with the bezoar," she sobbed. "Oh, Harry, what can we say? You saved Ginny . . . you saved Arthur , . . now you've saved Ron"Don't be ... I didn't. . ." muttered Harry awkwardly. "Half our family does seem to owe you their lives, now I stop and think about it," Mr. Weasley said in a constricted voice. "Well, all I can say is that it was a lucky clay for the Weasleys when Ron decided to sit in your compartment on the Hogwarts Expirv., Harry."Harry could not think of any reply to this and was almost gl.i?l when Madam Pomfrey reminded them that there were only supposed to be six visitors around Ron's bed; he and Hermione rose .h once to leave and Hagrid decided to go with them, leaving Ron with his family.

"It's terrible," growled Hagrid into his beard, as the three ol them walked back along the corridor to the marble staircase. "Ml this new security, an kids are still gettin' hurt. . . . Dumbledoiv's worried sick. . . . He don say much, but I can tell. . . .""Hasn't he got any ideas, Hagrid?" asked Hermione desperately.

"I spect he's got hundreds of ideas, brain like his," said Hagrid. "But he doesn' know who sent that necklace nor put poison in that wine, or they'dve bin caught, wouldn they? Wha' worries me," said Hagrid, lowering his voice and glancing over his shoulder (Harry, for good measure, checked the ceiling for Peeves), "is how long Hogwarts can stay open if kids are bein' attacked. Chamber o' Secrets all over again, isn' it? There'll be panic, more parents takin their kids outta school, an nex' thing yeh know the board o' governors ..."Hagrid stopped talking as the ghost of a long-haired woman drifted serenely past, then resumed in a hoarse whisper, ". . . the board o' governors'll be talkin about shuttin' us up fer good.""Surely not?" said Hermione, looking worried.

"Gotta see it from their point o' view," said Hagrid heavily. "I mean, it's always bin a bit of a risk sendin a kid ter Hogwarts, hasn’ it? Yer expect accidents, don' yeh, with hundreds of underage wizards all locked up tergether, but attempted murder, tha's tliff'rent. 'S'no wonder Dumbledore's angry with Sn —"Hagrid stopped in his tracks, a familiar, guilty expression on what was visible of his face above his tangled black beard.

"What?" said Harry quickly. "Dumbledore's angry with Snape?""I never said tha’," said Hagrid, though his look of panic could not have been a bigger giveaway. "Look at the time, it's gettin' on fer midnight, I need ter —""Hagrid, why is Dumbledore angry with Snape?" Harry asked loudly.

"Shhhh!" said Hagrid, looking both nervous and angry. "Don’ shout stuff like that, Harry, d'yeh wan’ me ter lose me job? Mind, I don' suppose yeh'd care, would yeh, not now yeh've given up Care of Mag

—""Don't try and make me feel guilty, it wont work!" said Harry forcefully. "What's Snape done?""I dunno, Harry, I shouldn'ta heard it at all! I — well, I was comin’ outta the forest the other evenin’ an' I overheard 'em talking— well, arguin’. Didn't like ter draw attention to meself, so I sorta skulked an tried not ter listen, but it was a — well, a heated discussion an' it wasn’ easy ter block it out.""Well?" Harry urged him, as Hagrid shuffled his enormous feet uneasily.

"Well — I jus' heard Snape sayin’ Dumbledore took too much fer granted an maybe he — Snape — didn’ wan’ ter do it any more —“"Do what?"

"I dunno, Harry, it sounded like Snape was feelin’ a bit overworked, tha's all — anyway, Dumbledore told him flat out he'd agreed ter do it an' that was all there was to it. Pretty firm with him. An' then he said summat abou’ Snape makin' investigations in his House, in Slytherin. Well, there's nothin' strange abou' that!" Hagrid added hastily, as Harry and Hermione exchanged looks full of meaning. "All the Heads o' Houses were asked ter look inter that necklace business —""Yeah, but Dumbledore's not having rows with the rest of them, is he?" said Harry.

"Look," Hagrid twisted his crossbow uncomfortably in his hands; there was a loud splintering sound and it snapped in two. "I know what yeh're like abou' Snape, Harry, an' I don' want yeh ter go readin' more inter this than there is.""Look out," said Hermione tersely.

They turned just in time to see the shadow of Argus Filch looming over the wall behind them before the man himself turned the corner, hunchbacked, his jowls aquiver.

"Oho!" he wheezed. "Out of bed so late, this'll mean detention!""No it won', Filch," said Hagrid shortly. "They're with me, aren’ they?""And what difference does that make?" asked Filch obnoxiously.

"I'm a ruddy teacher, aren' I, yeh sneakin' Squib!" said Hagrid, firing up at once.

There was a nasty hissing noise as Filch swelled with fury; Mrs. Norris had arrived, unseen, and was twisting herself sinuously around Filch's skinny ankles.

"Get goin," said Hagrid out of the corner of his mouth.

Harry did not need telling twice; he and Hermione both hurried off; Hagrid's and Filch's raised voices echoed behind them as they ran. They passed Peeves near the turning into Gryffindor Tower, but he was streaking happily toward the source of the yelling, cackling and calling,

When there's strife and when there's troubleCall on Peevsie, he'll make double!

The Fat Lady was snoozing and not pleased to be woken, but swung forward grumpily to allow them to clamber into the mercifully peaceful and empty common room. It did not seem that people knew about Ron yet; Harry was very relieved: He had been interrogated enough that day. Hermione bade him good night and set off for the girls' dormitory. Harry, however, remained behind, taking a seat beside the fire and looking down into the dying embers.

So Dumbledore had argued with Snape. In spite of all he had told Harry, in spite of his insistence that he trusted Snape completely, he had lost his temper with him. . . . He did not think that Snape had tried hard enough to investigate the Slytherins ... or, perhaps, to investigate a single Slytherin: Malfoy?

Was it because Dumbledore did not want Harry to do anything foolish, to take matters into his own hands, that he had pretended there was nothing in Harry's suspicions? That seemed likely. It , might even be that Dumbledore did not want anything to distract Harry from their lessons, or from procuring that memory from Slughorn. Perhaps Dumbledore did not think it right to confide suspicions about his staff to sixteen-year-olds. ...

"There you are, Potter!"

Harry jumped to his feet in shock, his wand at the ready. He had been quite convinced that the common room was empty; he had not been at all prepared for a hulking figure to rise suddenly out of a distant chair. A closer look showed him that it was Cormac McLaggen.

"I've been waiting for you to come back," said McLaggen, disregarding Harry's drawn wand. "Must've fallen asleep. Look, I saw them taking Weasley up to the hospital wing earlier. Didn't look like he'll be fit for next week's match."It took Harry a few moments to realize what McLaggen was talking about.

"Oh . . . right. . . Quidditch," he said, putting his wand back into the belt of his jeans and running a hand wearily through his hair. "Yeah ... he might not make it.""Well, then, I'll be playing Keeper, won't I?" said McLaggen.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah, I suppose so. ..."He could not think of an argument against it; after all, McLaggen had certainly performed second-best in the trials.

"Excellent," said McLaggen in a satisfied voice. "So when's practice?""What? Oh . . . there's one tomorrow evening.""Good. Listen, Potter, we should have a talk beforehand. I've got some ideas on strategy you might find useful.""Right," said Harry unenthusiastically. "Well, I'll hear them tomorrow, then. I'm pretty tired now ... see you . . ."The news that Ron had been poisoned spread quickly next day, but it did not cause the sensation that Katie's attack had done. People seemed to think that it might have been an accident, given that he had been in the Potions master's room at the time, and that as he had been given an antidote immediately there was no real harm done. In fact, the Gryffindors were generally much more interested in the upcoming Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, for many of them wanted to see Zacharias Smith, who played Chaser

on the Hufflepuff team, punished soundly for his commentary during the opening match against Slytherin.

Harry, however, had never been less interested in Quidditch; he was rapidly becoming obsessed with Draco Malfoy. Still checking the Marauder's Map whenever he got a chance, he sometimes made detours to wherever Malfoy happened to be, but had not yet detected him doing anything out of the ordinary. And still there were those inexplicable times when Malfoy simply vanished from the map. . . .

But Harry did not get a lot of time to consider the problem, what with Quidditch practice, homework, and the fact that he was now being dogged wherever he went by Cormac McLaggen and Lavender Brown.

He could not decide which of them was more annoying. McLaggen kept up a constant stream of hints that he would make a better permanent Keeper for the team than Ron, and that now that Harry was seeing him play regularly he would surely come around to this way of thinking too; he was also keen to criticize the other players and provide Harry with detailed training schemes, so that more than once Harry was forced to remind him who was Captain.

Meanwhile, Lavender kept sidling up to Harry to discuss Ron, which Harry found almost more wearing than McLaggen's Quidditch lectures. At first, Lavender had been very annoyed that nobody had thought to tell her that Ron was in the hospital wing — "I mean, I am his girlfriend!" — but unfortunately slit-had now decided to forgive Harry this lapse of memory and was keen to have lots of in-depth chats with him about Ron's feelings, a most uncomfortable experience that Harry would have happily forgone.

"Look, why don't you talk to Ron about all this?" Harry asked, after a particularly long interrogation from Lavender that took in everything from precisely what Ron had said about her new drew robes to whether or not Harry thought that Ron considered his relationship

with Lavender to be "serious.""Well, I would, but he's always asleep when I go and see him!" said Lavender fretfully.

"Is he?" said Harry, surprised, for he had found Ron perfectly alert every time he had been up to the hospital wing, both highly interested in the news of Dumbledore and Snape's row and keen m abuse McLaggen as much as possible.

"Is Hermione Granger still visiting him?" Lavender demanded suddenly.

"Yeah, I think so. Well, they're friends, aren't they?" said Harry uncomfortably.

"Friends, don't make me laugh," said Lavender scornfully. "She didn't talk to him for weeks after he started going out with me! But I suppose she wants to make up with him now he's all interesting. ...""Would you call getting poisoned being interesting?" asked Harry. "Anyway — sorry, got to go — there's McLaggen coming for a talk about Quidditch," said Harry hurriedly, and he dashed sideways through a door pretending to be solid wall and sprinted down the shortcut that would take him off to Potions where, thankfully, neither Lavender nor McLaggen could follow him.

On the morning of the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, Harry dropped in on the hospital wing before heading down to the pitch. Ron was very agitated; Madam Pomfrey would not let him go down to watch the match, feeling it would overexcite him.

"So how's McLaggen shaping up?" he asked Harry nervously, apparently forgetting that he had already asked the same question twice.

"I've told you," said Harry patiently, "he could be world-class and I wouldn't want to keep him. He keeps trying to tell everyone what to do, he thinks he could play every position better than the rest of us. I can't wait to be shot of him. And speaking of getting shot of people,"

Harry added, getting to his feet and picking up his Firebolt, "will you stop pretending to be asleep when Lavender comes to see you? She's driving me mad as well.""Oh," said Ron, looking sheepish. "Yeah. All right.""If you don't want to go out with her anymore, just tell her," said Harry.

"Yeah . . . well. . . it's not that easy, is it?" said Ron. He paused. "Hermione going to look in before the match?" he added casually.

"No, she's already gone down to the pitch with Ginny.""Oh," said Ron, looking rather glum. "Right. Well, good luck. Hope you hammer McLag — I mean, Smith.""I'll try," said Harry, shouldering his broom. "See you after the match."He hurried down through the deserted corridors; the whole school was outside, either already seated in the stadium or heading down toward it. He was looking out of the windows he passed, trying to gauge how much wind they were facing, when a noise ahead made him glance up and he saw Malfoy walking toward him, accompanied by two girls, both of whom looked sulky and resentful.

Malfoy stopped short at the sight of Harry, then gave a short, humorless laugh and continued walking.

"Where're you going?" Harry demanded.

"Yeah, I'm really going to tell you, because it's your business, Potter," sneered Malfoy. "You'd better hurry up, they'll be waiting for 'the Chosen Captain' — 'the Boy Who Scored' — whatever they call you these days."One of the girls gave an unwilling giggle. Harry stared at her. She blushed. Malfoy pushed past Harry and she and her friend followed at a trot, turning the corner and vanishing from view.

Harry stood rooted on the spot and watched them disappear. This was infuriating; he was already cutting it fine to get to the match on time and yet there was Malfoy, skulking off while the rest of the school was absent: Harry's best chance yet of discovering what Malfoy was up to. The silent seconds trickled past, and Harry

remained where he was, frozen, gazing at the place where Malfoy had vanished. . . .

"Where have you been?" demanded Ginny, as Harry sprinted into the changing rooms. The whole team was changed and ready; Coote and Peakes, the Beaters, were both hitting their clubs nervously against their legs.

"I met Malfoy," Harry told her quietly, as he pulled his scarlet robes over his head.

"So I wanted to know how come he's up at the castle with a couple of girlfriends while everyone else is down here. ...""Does it matter right now?"

"Well, I'm not likely to find out, am I?" said Harry, seizing his Firebolt and pushing his glasses straight. "Come on then!"And without another word, he marched out onto the pitch to deafening cheers and boos.

There was little wind; the clouds were patchy; every now and then there were dazzling flashes of bright sunlight.

"Tricky conditions!" McLaggen said bracingly to the team. "Coote, Peakes, you'll want to fly out of the sun, so they don't see you coming —""I'm the Captain, McLaggen, shut up giving them instructions," said Harry angrily. "Just get up by the goal posts!"Once McLaggen had marched off, Harry turned to Coote and Peakes.

"Make sure you do fly out of the sun," he told them grudgingly.

He shook hands with the Hufflepuff Captain, and then, on Madam Hooch's whistle, kicked off and rose into the air, higher than the rest of his team, streaking around the pitch in search of the Snitch. If he could catch it good and early, there might be a chance he could get back up to the castle, seize the Marauder's Map, and find out what Malfoy was doing. . . .

"And that's Smith of Hufflepuff with the Quaffle," said a dreamy voice, echoing over the grounds. "He did the commentary last time, of course, and Ginny Weasley flew into him, I think probably on purpose, it looked like it. Smith was being quite rude about Gryffindor, I expect he regrets that now he's playing them — oh, look, he's lost the Quaffle, Ginny took it from him, I do like her, she's very nice. ..."Harry stared down at the commentator's podium. Surely nobody in their right mind would have let Luna Lovegood commentate? But even from above there was no mistaking that long, dirty-blonde hair, nor the necklace of butterbeer corks. . . . Beside Luna, Professor McGonagall was looking slightly uncomfortable, as though she was indeed having second thoughts about this appointment.

". . . but now that big Hufflepuff player's got the Quaffle from , her, I can't remember his name, it's something like Bibble — no, Buggins —""It's Cadwallader!" said Professor McGonagall loudly from beside Luna. The crowd laughed.

Harry stared around for the Snitch; there was no sign of it. Moments later, Cadwallader scored. McLaggen had been shouting criticism at Ginny for allowing the Quaffle out of her possession, with the result that he had not noticed the large red ball soaring past his right ear.

"McLaggen, will you pay attention to what you're supposed to be doing and leave everyone else alone!" bellowed Harry, wheeling around to face his Keeper.

"You're not setting a great example!" McLaggen shouted back, red-faced and furious.

"And Harry Potter's now having an argument with his Keeper," said Luna serenely, while both Hufflepuffs and Slytherins below in the crowd cheered and jeered. "I don't think that'll help him find the Snitch, but maybe it's a clever ruse. ..."Swearing angrily, Harry spun round and set off around the pitch again, scanning the skies for some sign of the tiny, winged golden ball.

Ginny and Demelza scored a goal apiece, giving the red-and-gold-clad supporters below something to cheer about. Then Cadwallader scored again, making things level, but Luna did not seem to have noticed; she appeared singularly uninterested in such mundane things as the score, and kept attempting to draw the crowd's attention to such things as interestingly shaped clouds and the possibility that Zacharias Smith, who had so far failed to maintain possession of the Quaffle for longer than a minute, was suffering from something called "Loser's Lurgy.""Seventy-forty to Hufflepuff!" barked Professor McGonagall into Luna's megaphone.

"Is it, already?" said Luna vaguely. "Oh, look! The Gryffindor Keeper's got hold of one of the Beater's bats."Harry spun around in midair. Sure enough, McLaggen, for reasons best known to himself, had pulled Peakes's bat from him and appeared to be demonstrating how to hit a Bludger toward an oncoming Cadwallader.

"Will you give him back his bat and get back to the goal posts!" roared Harry, pelting toward McLaggen just as McLaggen took a ferocious swipe at the Bludger and mishit it.

A blinding, sickening pain ... a flash of light. . . distant screams . . . and the sensation of falling down a long tunnel. . .

And the next thing Harry knew, he was lying in a remarkably warm and comfortable bed and looking up at a lamp that was throwing a circle of golden light onto a shadowy ceiling. He raised his head awkwardly. There on his left was a familiar-looking, freckly, red-haired person.

"Nice of you to drop in," said Ron, grinning.

Harry blinked and looked around. Of course: He was in the hospital wing. The sky outside was indigo streaked with crimson. The match must have finished hours ago ... as had any hope of cornering Malfoy. Harry's head felt strangely heavy; he raised a hand and felt a stiff turban of bandages.

"What happened?"

"Cracked skull," said Madam Pomfrey, bustling up and pushing him back against his pillows. "Nothing to worry about, I mended it at once, but I'm keeping you in overnight. You shouldn't over exert yourself for a few hours.""I don't want to stay here overnight," said Harry angrily, sitting up and throwing back his covers. "I want to find McLaggen and kill him.""I'm afraid that would come under the heading of 'overexertion,'" said Madam Pomfrey, pushing him firmly back onto the bed and raising her wand in a threatening manner. "You will stay here until I discharge you, Potter, or I shall call the headmaster."She bustled back into her office, and Harry sank back into his pillows, fuming.

"D'you know how much we lost by?" he asked Ron through clenched teeth.

"Well, yeah I do," said Ron apologetically. "Final score was three hundred and twenty to sixty.""Brilliant," said Harry savagely. "Really brilliant! When I get hold of McLaggen —""You don't want to get hold of him, he's the size of a troll," saidRon reasonably. "Personally, I think there's a lot to be said for hexing him with that toenail thing of the Prince's. Anyway, the rest of the team might've dealt with him before you get out of here, they're not happy. ..."There was a note of badly suppressed glee in Rons voice; Harry could tell he was nothing short of thrilled that McLaggen had messed up so badly. Harry lay there, staring up at the patch of light on the ceiling, his recently mended skull not hurting, precisely, but feeling slightly tender underneath all the bandaging.

"I could hear the match commentary from here," said Ron, his voice now shaking with laughter. "I hope Luna always commentates from now on. . . . Loser's Lurgy ..."But Harry was still too angry to see much humor in the situation, and after a while Ron's snorts subsided.

"Ginny came in to visit while you were unconscious," he said, after a long pause, and Harry's imagination zoomed into overdrive, rapidly constructing a scene in which Ginny, weeping over his lifeless form, confessed her feelings of deep attraction to him while Ron gave them his blessing. . . ."She reckons you only just arrived on time for the match. How come? You left here early enough.""Oh . . ." said Harry, as the scene in his mind's eye imploded. "Yeah . . . well, I saw Malfoy sneaking off with a couple of girls who didn't look like they wanted to be with him, and that's the second time he's made sure he isn't down on the Quidditch pitch with the rest of the school; he skipped the last match too, remember?" Harry sighed. "Wish I'd followed him now, the match was such a fiasco. . . .""Don't be stupid," said Ron sharply. "You couldn't have missed a Quidditch match just to follow Malfoy, you're the Captain!""I want to know what he's up to," said Harry. "And don't tell nn its all in my head, not after what I overheard between him and Snape —""I never said it was all in your head," said Ron, hoisting himself up on an elbow in turn and frowning at Harry, "but there's no rule saying only one person at a time can be plotting anything in this place! You're getting a bit obsessed with Malfoy, Harry. I mean, thinking about missing a match just to follow him ...""I want to catch him at it!" said Harry in frustration. "I mean, where's he going when he disappears off the map?""I dunno . . . Hogsmeade?" suggested Ron, yawning.

"I've never seen him going along any of the secret passageway on the map. I thought they were being watched now anyway?""Well then, I dunno," said Ron.

Silence fell between them. Harry stared up at the circle of lamp light above him, thinking. . . .

If only he had Rufus Scrimgeour's power, he would have been able to set a tail upon Malfoy, but unfortunately Harry did not have an office full of Aurors at his command. . . . He thought fleetingly of trying to set something up with the D.A., but there again was the problem that

people would be missed from lessons; most of them, after all, still had full schedules. . . .

There was a low, rumbling snore from Ron's bed. After a while Madam Pomfrey came out of her office, this time wearing a thick dressing gown. It was easiest to feign sleep; Harry rolled over onto his side and listened to all the curtains closing themselves as she waved her wand. The lamps dimmed, and she returned to her office; he heard the door click behind her and knew that she was off to bed.

This was, Harry reflected in the darkness, the third time that he had been brought to the hospital wing because of a Quidditch injury. Last time he had fallen off his broom due to the presence of dementors around the pitch, and the time before that, all the bones had been removed from his arm by the incurably inept Professor Lockhart. . . . That had been his most painful injury by far ... he remembered the agony of regrowing an armful of bones in one night, a discomfort not eased by the arrival of an unexpected visitor in the middle of the — Harry sat bolt upright, his heart pounding, his bandage turban askew. He had the solution at last: There was a way to have Malfoy followed — how could he have forgotten, why hadn't he thoughtof it before?

But the question was, how to call him? What did you do? Quietly, tentatively, Harry spoke into the darkness.

"Kreacher?"

There was a very loud crack, and the sounds of scuffling and squeaks filled the silent room. Ron awoke with a yelp.

"What's going — ?"

Harry pointed his wand hastily at the door of Madam Pomfrey's office and muttered, "Muffliato!" so that she would not come running. Then he scrambled to the end of his bed for a better look atwhat was going on.

Two house-elves were rolling around on the floor in the middle of the dormitory, one wearing a shrunken maroon jumper and several woolly hats, the other, a filthy old rag strung over his hips like a loincloth. Then there was another loud bang, and Peeves the Poltergeist appeared in midair above the wrestling elves.

"I was watching that, Potty!" he told Harry indignantly, pointing at the fight below, before letting out a loud cackle. "Look at the ickle creatures squabbling, bitey bitey, punchy punchy —""Kreacher will not insult Harry Potter in front of Dobby, no he won't, or Dobby will shut Kreacher's mouth for him!" cried Dobby in a high-pitched voice.

"— kicky, scratchy!" cried Peeves happily, now pelting bits of' chalk at the elves to enrage them further. "Tweaky, pokey!""Kreacher will say what he likes about his master, oh yes, and what a master he is, filthy friend of Mudbloods, oh, what would poor Kreacher's mistress say — ?"Exactly what Kreacher's mistress would have said they did not find out, for at that moment Dobby sank his knobbly little fist into Kreacher's mouth and knocked out half of his teeth. Harry and Ron both leapt out of their beds and wrenched the two elves apart, though they continued to try and kick and punch each other, egged on by Peeves, who swooped around the lamp squealing, "Stick your fingers up his nosey, draw his cork and pull his earsies —"Harry aimed his wand at Peeves and said, "Langlock!" Peeves clutched at his throat, gulped, then swooped from the room making obscene gestures but unable to speak, owing to the fact that his tongue had just glued itself to the roof of his mouth.

"Nice one," said Ron appreciatively, lifting Dobby into the air so that his flailing limbs no longer made contact with Kreacher. "That was another Prince hex, wasn't it?""Yeah," said Harry, twisting Kreacher's wizened arm into a half nelson. "Right — I'm forbidding you to fight each other! Well, Kreacher, you're forbidden to fight Dobby. Dobby, I know I'm not allowed to give you orders —""Dobby is a free house-elf and he can obey anyone he likes and Dobby will do whatever Harry

Potter wants him to do!" said Dobby, tears now streaming down his shriveled little face onto his jumper.

"Okay then," said Harry, and he and Ron both released the elves, who fell to the floor but did not continue fighting.

"Master called me?" croaked Kreacher, sinking into a bow even as he gave Harry a look that plainly wished him a painful death.

"Yeah, I did," said Harry, glancing toward Madam Pomfrey's office door to check that the Muffliato spell was still working; there was no sign that she had heard any of the commotion. "I've got a job for you.""Kreacher will do whatever Master wants," said Kreacher, sinking so low that his lips almost touched his gnarled toes, "because Kreacher has no choice, but Kreacher is ashamed to have such a master, yes —""Dobby will do it, Harry Potter!" squeaked Dobby, his tennis-ball-sized eyes still swimming in tears. "Dobby would be honored to help Harry Potter!""Come to think of it, it would be good to have both of you," said Harry. "Okay then ... I want you to tail Draco Malfoy."Ignoring the look of mingled surprise and exasperation on Ron's face, Harry went on, "I want to know where he's going, who he's meeting, and what he's doing. I want you to follow him around theclock."

"Yes, Harry Potter!" said Dobby at once, his great eyes shining with excitement. "And if Dobby does it wrong, Dobby will throw himself off the topmost tower, Harry Potter!""There won't be any need for that," said Harry hastily.

"Master wants me to follow the youngest of the Malfoys?" croaked Kreacher. "Master wants me to spy upon the pure-blood great-nephew of my old mistress?""That's the one," said Harry, foreseeing a great danger and determining to prevent it immediately. "And you're forbidden to tip him off, Kreacher, or to show him what you're up to, or to talk to him at all, or to write him messages or ... or to contact him in any way. Got it?"He thought he could see Kreacher struggling to see

a loophole in the instructions he had just been given and waited. After a moment or two, and to Harrys great satisfaction, Kreacher bowed deeply again and said, with bitter resentment, "Master thinks of everything, and Kreacher must obey him even though Kreacher would much rather be the servant of the Malfoy boy, oh yes. . . .""That's settled, then," said Harry. "I'll want regular reports, but make sure I'm not surrounded by people when you turn up. Ron and Hermione are okay. And don't tell anyone what you're doing. Just stick to Malfoy like a couple of wart plasters."

Chapter 20 Lord Voldemort's Request

Harry and Ron left the hospital wing first thing on Monday morning, restored to full health by the ministrations of Madam Pomfrey and now able to enjoy the benefits of having been knocked out and poisoned, the best of which was that Hermione was friends with Ron again. Hermione even escorted them down to breakfast, bringing with her the news that Ginny had argued with Dean. The drowsing creature in Harry's chest suddenly raised its head, sniffing the air hopefully.

"What did they row about?" he asked, trying to sound casual as they turned onto a seventh-floor corridor that was deserted but for a very small girl who had been examining a tapestry of trolls in tutus. She looked terrified at the sight of the approaching sixth years and dropped the heavy brass scales she was carrying.

"It's all right!" said Hermione kindly, hurrying forward to help her. "Here ..."

She tapped the broken scales with her wand and said, "Reparo." The girl did not say thank you, but remained rooted to the spot as they passed and watched them out of sight; Ron glanced back at her.

"I swear they're getting smaller," he said.

"Never mind her," said Harry, a little impatiently. "What did Ginny and Dean row about, Hermione?""Oh, Dean was laughing about McLaggen hitting that Bludgu at you," said Hermione.

"It must've looked funny," said Ron reasonably. "It didn't look funny at all!" said Hermione hotly. "It looked terrible and if Coote and Peakes hadn't caught Harry he could have been very badly hurt!"

"Yeah, well, there was no need for Ginny and Dean to split up over it," said Harry, still trying to sound casual. "Or are they still together?"

"Yes, they are — but why are you so interested?" asked Hermione, giving Harry a sharp look.

"I just don't want my Quidditch team messed up again!" he said hastily, but Hermione continued to look suspicious, and he was most relieved when a voice behind them called, "Harry!" giving him an excuse to turn his back on her. "Oh, hi, Luna."

- "I went to the hospital wing to find you," said Luna, rummaging in her bag. "But they said you'd left..."She thrust what appeared to be a green onion, a large spotted toadstool, and a considerable amount of what looked like cat litter into Ron's hands, finally pulling out a rather grubby scroll of parchment that she handed to Harry.

". . . I've been told to give you this."

It was a small roll of parchment, which Harry recognized at once as another invitation to a lesson with Dumbledore.

"Tonight," he told Ron and Hermione, once he had unrolled it.

"Nice commentary last match!" said Ron to Luna as she took back the green onion, the toadstool, and the cat litter. Luna smiled vaguely.

"You're making fun of me, aren't you?" she said. "Everyone says I was dreadful."

"No, I'm serious!" said Ron earnestly. "I can't remember enjoying commentary more! What is this, by the way?" he added, holding the onionlike object up to eye level.

"Oh, it's a Gurdyroot," she said, stuffing the cat litter and the toadstool back into her bag. "You can keep it if you like, I've got a few of them. They're really excellent for warding off Gulping Plimpies." And she walked away, leaving Ron chortling, still clutching the Gurdyroot.

"You know, she's grown on me, Luna," he said, as they set off again for the Great Hall. "I know she's insane, but it's in a good —" He stopped talking very suddenly. Lavender Brown was standing at the foot of the marble staircase looking thunderous. "Hi," said Ron nervously.

"C'mon," Harry muttered to Hermione, and they sped past, though not before they had heard Lavender say, "Why didn't you tell me you were getting out today? And why was she with you?"

Ron looked both sulky and annoyed when he appeared at breakfast half an hour later, and though he sat with Lavender, Harry did not see them exchange a word all the time they were together. Hermione was acting as though she was quite oblivious to all of this, but once or twice Harry saw an inexplicable smirk cross her face. All that day she seemed to be in a particularly good mood, and that evening in the common room she even consented to look over (in other words, finish writing) Harry's Herbology essay, something she had been resolutely refusing to do up to this point, because she had known that Harry would then let Ron copy his work.

"Thanks a lot, Hermione," said Harry, giving her a hasty pat on the back as he checked his watch and saw that it was nearly eight o'clock. "Listen, I've got to hurry or I'll be late for Dumbledore. ..."

She did not answer, but merely crossed out a few of his feebler sentences in a weary sort of way. Grinning, Harry hurried out through the portrait hole and off to the headmasters office. The gargoyle leapt aside at the mention of toffee eclairs, and Harry took the spiral staircase two steps at a time, knocking on the door just as a clock within chimed eight.

"Enter," called Dumbledore, but as Harry put out a hand to push the door, it was wrenched open from inside. There stood Professor Trelawney.

"Aha!" she cried, pointing dramatically at Harry as she blinked at him through her magnifying spectacles.

"So this is the reason I am to be thrown unceremoniously from your office, Dumbledore!"

"My dear Sybill," said Dumbledore in a slightly exasperated voice, "there is no question of throwing you unceremoniously from anywhere, but Harry does have an appointment, and I really don't think there is any more to be said —"

"Very well," said Professor Trelawney, in a deeply wounded voice. "If you will not banish the usurping nag, so be it. ...

Perhaps I shall find a school where my talents are better appreciated. ..."

She pushed past Harry and disappeared down the spiral staircase; they heard her stumble halfway down, and Harry guessed that she had tripped over one of her trailing shawls.

"Please close the door and sit down, Harry," said Dumbledore, sounding rather tired.

Harry obeyed, noticing as he took his usual seat in front of Dumbledore's desk that the Pensieve lay between them once more, as did two more tiny crystal bottles full of swirling memory.

"Professor Trelawney still isn't happy Firenze is teaching, then?" Harry asked.

"No," said Dumbledore, "Divination is turning out to be much more trouble than I could have foreseen, never having studied the subject myself. I cannot ask Firenze to return to the forest, where he is now an outcast, nor can I ask Sybill Trelawney to leave. Between ourselves, she has no idea of the danger she would be in outside the castle. She does not know — and I think it would be unwise to

enlighten her — that she made the prophecy about you and Voldemort, you see."

Dumbledore heaved a deep sigh, then said, "But never mind my staffing problems. We have much more important matters to discuss. Firstly — have you managed the task I set you at the end of our previous lesson?"

"Ah," said Harry, brought up short. What with Apparition lessons and Quidditch and Ron being poisoned and getting his skull cracked and his determination to find out what Draco Malfoy was up to, Harry had almost forgotten about the memory Dumbledore had asked him to extract from Professor Slughorn. "Well, I asked Professor Slughorn about it at the end of Potions, sir, but, er, he wouldn't give it to me." There was a little silence.

"I see," said Dumbledore eventually, peering at Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles and giving Harry the usual sensation that he was being X-rayed. "And you feel that you have exerted your very best efforts in this matter, do you? That you have exercised all of your considerable ingenuity? That you have left no depth of cunning unplumbed in your quest to retrieve the memory?"

"Well," Harry stalled, at a loss for what to say next. His single attempt to get hold of the memory suddenly seemed embarrassingly feeble. "Well . . . the day Ron swallowed love potion by mistake I took him to Professor Slughorn. I thought maybe if I got Professor Slughorn in a good enough mood —" "And did that work?" asked Dumbledore. "Well, no, sir, because Ron got poisoned —" "— which, naturally, made you forget all about trying to retrieve the memory; I would have expected nothing else, while your best friend was in danger. Once it became clear that Mr. Weasley was going to make a full recovery, however, I would have hoped that you returned to the task I set you. I thought I made it clear to you how very important that memory is. Indeed, I did my best to impress upon you that it is the most crucial memory of all and that we will be wasting our time without it."

A hot, prickly feeling of shame spread from the top of Harry's head all the way down his body. Dumbledore had not raised his voice, he did not even sound angry, but Harry would have preferred him to yell; this cold disappointment was worse than anything.

"Sir," he said, a little desperately, "it isn't that I wasn't bothered or anything, I've just had other — other things . . ."

"Other things on your mind," Dumbledore finished the sentence for him. "I see."

Silence fell between them again, the most uncomfortable silence Harry had ever experienced with Dumbledore; it seemed to go on and on, punctuated only by the little grunting snores of the portrait of Armando Dippet over Dumbledore's head. Harry felt strangely diminished, as though he had shrunk a little since he had entered the room. When he could stand it no longer he said, "Professor Dumbledore, I'm really sorry. I should have done more. ... I should have realized you wouldn't have asked me to do it if it wasn't really important."

"Thank you for saying that, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "May I hope, then, that you will give this matter higher priority from now on? There will be little point in our meeting after tonight unless we have that memory."

"I'll do it, sir, I'll get it from him," he said earnestly.

"Then we shall say no more about it just now," said Dumbledore more kindly, "but continue with our story where we left off. You remember where that was?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry quickly. "Voldemort killed his father and his grandparents and made it look as though his Uncle Morfin did it. Then he went back to Hogwarts and he asked ... he asked Professor Slughorn about Horcruxes," he mumbled shamefacedly.

"Very good," said Dumbledore. "Now, you will remember, I hope, that I told you at the very outset of these meetings of ours that we would be entering the realms of guesswork and speculation?"

“Yes, sir”.

"Thus far, as I hope you agree, I have shown you reasonably firm sources of fact for my deductions as to what Voldemort did until the age of seventeen?"

Harry nodded.

"But now, Harry," said Dumbledore, "now things become murkier and stranger. If it was difficult to find evidence about the boy Riddle, it has been almost impossible to find anyone prepared to reminisce about the man Voldemort. In fact, I doubt whether there is a soul alive, apart from himself, who could give us a full account of his life since he left Hogwarts. However, I have two last memories that I would like to share with you." Dumbledore indicated the two little crystal bottles gleaming beside the Pensieve. "I shall then be glad of your opinion as to whether the conclusions I have drawn from them seem likely."

The idea that Dumbledore valued his opinion this highly made Harry feel even more deeply ashamed that he had failed in the task of retrieving the Horcrux memory, and he shifted guiltily in his seat as Dumbledore raised the first of the two bottles to the light and examined it.

"I hope you are not tired of diving into other people's memories, for they are curious recollections, these two," he said. "This first one came from a very old house-elf by the name of Hokey. Before we see what Hokey witnessed, I must quickly recount how Lord Voldemort left Hogwarts.

"He reached the seventh year of his schooling with, as you might have expected, top grades in every examination he had taken. All around him, his classmates were deciding which jobs they were to

pursue once they had left Hogwarts. Nearly everybody expected spectacular things from Tom Riddle, prefect, Head Boy, winner of the Award for Special Services to the School. I know that several teachers, Professor Slughorn amongst them, suggested that he join the Ministry of Magic, offered to set up appointments, put him in touch with useful contacts. He refused all offers. The next thing the staff knew, Voldemort was working at Borgin and Burkes."

"At Borgin and Burkes?" Harry repeated, stunned.

"At Borgin and Burkes," repeated Dumbledore calmly. "I think you will see what attractions the place held for him when we have entered Hokey's memory. But this was not Voldemort's first choice of job. Hardly anyone knew of it at the time — I was one of the few in whom the then headmaster confided — but Voldemort first approached Professor Dippet and asked whether he could remain at Hogwarts as a teacher."

"He wanted to stay here? Why?" asked Harry, more amazed still.

"I believe he had several reasons, though he confided none of them to Professor Dippet," said Dumbledore. "Firstly, and very importantly, Voldemort was, I believe, more attached to this school than he has ever been to a person. Hogwarts was where he had been happiest; the first and only place he had felt at home."

Harry felt slightly uncomfortable at these words, for this was exactly how he felt about Hogwarts too.

"Secondly, the castle is a stronghold of ancient magic. Undoubtedly Voldemort had penetrated many more of its secrets than most of the students who pass through the place, but he may have felt that there were still mysteries to unravel, stores of magic to tap.

"And thirdly, as a teacher, he would have had great power and influence over young witches and wizards. Perhaps he had gained the idea from Professor Slughorn, the teacher with whom he was on

best terms, who had demonstrated how influential a role a teacher can play. I do not imagine for an instant that Voldemort envisaged spending the rest of his life at Hogwarts, but I do think that he saw it as a useful recruiting ground, and a place where he might begin to build himself an army."

"But he didn't get the job, sir?"

"No, he did not. Professor Dippet told him that he was too young at eighteen, but invited him to reapply in a few years, if he still wished to teach."

"How did you feel about that, sir?" asked Harry hesitantly. "Deeply uneasy," said Dumbledore. "I had advised Armando against the appointment — I did not give the reasons I have given you, for Professor Dippet was very fond of Voldemort and convinced of his honesty. But I did not want Lord Voldemort back at this school, and especially not in a position of power."

"Which job did he want, sir? What subject did he want to teach?"

Somehow, Harry knew the answer even before Dumbledore gave it.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts. It was being taught at the time by an old Professor by the name of Galatea Merrythought, who had been at Hogwarts for nearly fifty years.

"So Voldemort went off to Borgin and Burkes, and all the staff who had admired him said what a waste it was, a brilliant young wizard like that, working in a shop. However, Voldemort was no mere assistant. Polite and handsome and clever, he was soon given particular jobs of the type that only exist in a place like Borgin and Burkes, which specializes, as you know, Harry, in objects with unusual and powerful properties. Voldemort was sent to persuade people to part with their treasures for sale by the partners, and he was, by all accounts, unusually gifted at doing this."

"I'll bet he was," said Harry, unable to contain himself.

"Well, quite," said Dumbledore, with a faint smile. "And now it is time to hear from Hokey the house-elf, who worked for a very old, very rich witch by the name of Hepzibah Smith."

Dumbledore tapped a bottle with his wand, the cork flew out, and he tipped the swirling memory into the Pensieve, saying as he did so, "After you, Harry."

Harry got to his feet and bent once more over the rippling silver contents of the stone basin until his face touched them. He tumbled through dark nothingness and landed in a sitting room in front of an immensely fat old lady wearing an elaborate ginger wig and a brilliant pink set of robes that flowed all around her, giving her the look of a melting iced cake. She was looking into a small jeweled mirror and dabbing rouge onto her already scarlet cheeks with a large powder puff, while the tiniest and oldest house-elf Harry had ever seen laced her fleshy feet into tight satin slippers.

"Hurry up, Hokey!" said Hepzibah imperiously. "He said he'd come at four, it's only a couple of minutes to and he's never been late yet!"

She tucked away her powder puff as the house-elf straightened up. The top of the elf's head barely reached the seat of Hepzibah's chair, and her papery skin hung off her frame just like the crisp linen sheet she wore draped like a toga.

"How do I look?" said Hepzibah, turning her head to admire the various angles of her face in the mirror.

"Lovely, madam," squeaked Hokey.

Harry could only assume that it was down in Hokey’s contract that she must lie through her teeth when asked this question, because Hepzibah Smith looked a long way from lovely in his opinion.

A tinkling doorbell rang and both mistress and elf jumped.

"Quick, quick, he's here, Hokey!" cried Hepzibah and the elf scurried out of the room, which was so crammed with objects that it was difficult to see how anybody could navigate their way across it without knocking over at least a dozen things: There were cabinets full of little lacquered boxes, cases full of gold-embossed books, shelves of orbs and celestial globes, and many flourishing potted plants in brass containers. In fact, the room looked like a cross between a magical antique shop and a conservatory.

The house-elf returned within minutes, followed by a tall young man Harry had no difficulty whatsoever in recognizing as Voldemort. He was plainly dressed in a black suit; his hair was a little longer than it had been at school and his cheeks were hollowed, but all of this suited him; he looked more handsome than ever. He picked his way through the cramped room with an air that showed he had visited many times before and bowed low over Hepzibah's fat little hand, brushing it with his lips.

"I brought you flowers," he said quietly, producing a bunch of roses from nowhere.

"You naughty boy, you shouldn't have!" squealed old Hepzibah, though Harry noticed that she had an empty vase standing ready on the nearest little table. "You do spoil this old lady, Tom. ... Sit down, sit down. . . . Where's Hokey? Ah ..."

The house-elf had come dashing back into the room carrying a tray of little cakes, which she set at her mistress's elbow.

"Help yourself, Tom," said Hepzibah, "I know how you love my cakes. Now, how are you? You look pale. They overwork you at that shop, I've said it a hundred times. ..."

Voldemort smiled mechanically and Hepzibah simpered. .|,!

"Well, what's your excuse for visiting this time?" she asked, bat-ring her lashes.

"Mr. Burke would like to make an improved offer for the goblin-made armor," said Voldemort. "Five hundred Galleons, he feels it is a more than fair —"

"Now, now, not so fast, or I'll think you're only here for my trinkets!" pouted Hepzibah.

"I am ordered here because of them," said Voldemort quietly. "I am only a poor assistant, madam, who must do as he is told. Mr. Burke wishes me to inquire —"

"Oh, Mr. Burke, phooey!" said Hepzibah, waving a little hand. "I've something to show you that I've never shown Mr. Burke! Can you keep a secret, Tom? Will you promise you won't tell Mr. Burke I've got it? He'd never let me rest if he knew I'd shown it to you, and I'm not selling, not to Burke, not to anyone! But you, Tom, you'll appreciate it for its history, not how many Galleons you can get for it."

"I'd be glad to see anything Miss Hepzibah shows me," said Voldemort quietly, and Hepzibah gave another girlish giggle.

"I had Hokey bring it out for me . . . Hokey, where are you? I want to show Mr. Riddle our finest treasure. ... In fact, bring both, while you're at it. ..."

"Here, madam," squeaked the house-elf, and Harry saw two leather boxes, one on top of the other, moving across the room as if of their own volition, though he knew the tiny elf was holding them over her head as she wended her way between tables, ***pouffes, and footstools.

"Now," said Hepzibah happily, taking the boxes from the elf, laying them in her lap, and preparing to open the topmost one, "I think you'll

like this, Tom. . . . Oh, if my family knew I was showing you. . . . They can't wait to get their hands on this!"

She opened the lid. Harry edged forward a little to get a better view and saw what looked like a small golden cup with two finely wrought handles.

"I wonder whether you know what it is, Tom? Pick it up, have a good look!" whispered Hepzibah, and Voldemort stretched out a long-fingered hand and lifted the cup by one handle out of its snug silken wrappings. Harry thought he saw a red gleam in his dark eyes. His greedy expression was curiously mirrored on Hepzibah’s face, except that her tiny eyes were fixed upon Voldemort's handsome features.

"A badger," murmured Voldemort, examining the engraving upon the cup. "Then this was . . . ?"

"Helga Hufflepuff 's, as you very well know, you clever boy!" said Hepzibah, leaning forward with a loud creaking of corsets and actually pinching his hollow cheek. "Didn't I tell you I was distantly descended? This has been handed down in the family for years and years. Lovely, isn't it? And all sorts of powers it's supposed to possess too, but I haven't tested them thoroughly, I just keep it nice and safe in here. . . ."

She hooked the cup back off Voldemort's long forefinger and restored it gently to its box, too intent upon settling it carefully back into position to notice the shadow that crossed Voldemort's face as the cup was taken away.

"Now then," said Hepzibah happily, "where’s Hokey? Oh yes, there you are — take that away now, Hokey."

The elf obediently took the boxed cup, and Hepzibah turned her attention to the much flatter box in her lap.

"I think you'll like this even more, Tom," she whispered. "Lean in a little, dear boy, so you can see. . . . Of course, Burke knows I've got this one, I bought it from him, and I daresay he'd love to get it back when I'm gone. ..."

She slid back the fine filigree clasp and flipped open the box. There upon the smooth crimson velvet lay a heavy golden locket.

Voldemort reached out his hand, without invitation this time, and held it up to the light, staring at it.

"Slytherin's mark," he said quietly, as the light played upon an ornate, serpentine S.

"That's right!" said Hepzibah, delighted, apparently, at the sight of Voldemort gazing at her locket, transfixed. "I had to pay an arm and a leg for it, but I couldn't let it pass, not a real treasure like that, had to have it for my collection. Burke bought it, apparently, from a ragged-looking woman who seemed to have stolen it, but had no idea of its true value —"

There was no mistaking it this time: Voldemort's eyes flashed scarlet at the words, and Harry saw his knuckles whiten on the locket's chain.

"— I daresay Burke paid her a pittance but there you are. . . . Pretty, isn't it? And again, all kinds of powers attributed to it, though I just keep it nice and safe. . . ."

She reached out to take the locket back. For a moment, Harry thought Voldemort was not going to let go of it, but then it had slid through his fingers and was back in its red velvet cushion.

“So there you are, Tom, clear, and I hope you enjoyed that!”

She looked him full in the face and for the first time, Harry saw her foolish smile falter.

"Are you all right, dear?"

"Oh yes," said Voldemort quietly. "Yes, I'm very well. ..."

“I thought — but a trick of the light, I suppose —" said Hepzibah, looking unnerved, and Harry guessed that she too had seen the momentary red gleam in Voldemort's eyes. "Here, Hokey, take these away and lock them up again. ... The usual enchantments..."

"Time to leave, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly, and as the in tie elf bobbed away bearing the boxes, Dumbledore grasped Harry once again above the elbow and together they rose up through oblivion and back to Dumbledore's office.

"Hepzibah Smith died two days after that little scene," said Dumbledore, resuming his seat and indicating that Harry should do the same. "Hokey the house-elf was convicted by the Ministry of poisoning her mistress's evening cocoa by accident."

"No way!" said Harry angrily.

"I see we are of one mind," said Dumbledore. "Certainly, then are many similarities between this death and that of the Riddles. In both cases, somebody else took the blame, someone who had a clear memory of having caused the death —" "Hokey confessed?"

"She remembered putting something in her mistress's cocoa that turned out not to be sugar, but a lethal and little-known poison, said Dumbledore. "It was concluded that she had not meant to do it, but being old and confused —"

"Voldemort modified her memory, just like he did with Morfin!" "Yes, that is my conclusion too," said Dumbledore. "And, just as with Morfin, the Ministry was predisposed to suspect Hokey —"

"— because she was a house-elf," said Harry. He had rarely felt more in sympathy with the society Hermione had set up, S.P.E.W.

"Precisely," said Dumbledore. "She was old, she admitted to having tampered with the drink, and nobody at the Ministry bothered to inquire further. As in the case of Morfin, by the time I traced her and managed to extract this memory, her life was almost over — but her memory, of course, proves nothing except that Voldemort knew of the existence of the cup and the locket.

"By the time Hokey was convicted, Hepzibah's family had realized that two of her greatest treasures were missing. It took them a while to be sure of this, for she had many hiding places, having always guarded her collection most jealously. But before they were sure beyond doubt that the cup and the locket were both gone, the assistant who had worked at Borgin and Burkes, the young man who had visited Hepzibah so regularly and charmed her so well, had resigned his post and vanished. His superiors had no idea where he had gone; they were as surprised as anyone at his disappearance. And that was the last that was seen or heard of Tom Riddle for a very long time.

"Now," said Dumbledore, "if you don't mind, Harry, I want to pause once more to draw your attention to certain points of our story. Voldemort had committed another murder; whether it was his first since he killed the Riddles, I do not know, but I think it was. This time, as you will have seen, he killed not for revenge, but for gain. He wanted the two fabulous trophies that poor, besotted, old woman showed him. Just as he had once robbed the other children at his orphanage, just as he had stolen his Uncle Morfin's ring, so he ran off now with Hepzibahs cup and locket."

"But," said Harry, frowning, "it seems mad. . . . Risking everything, throwing away his job, just for those . . ."

"Mad to you, perhaps, but not to Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "I hope you will understand in due course exactly what those objects meant to him, Harry, but you must admit that it is not difficult to

imagine that he saw the locket, at least, as rightfully his." "The locket maybe," said Harry, "but why take the cup as well?"

"It had belonged to another of Hogwarts's founders," said Dumbledore. "I think he still felt a great pull toward the school and that he could not resist an object so steeped in Hogwarts history. There were other reasons, I think. ... I hope to be able to demonstrate them to you in due course.

"And now for the very last recollection I have to show you, at least until you manage to retrieve Professor Slughorn's memory for us. Ten years separates Hokey's memory and this one, ten years during which we can only guess at what Lord Voldemort was doing. . . ." Harry got to his feet once more as Dumbledore emptied the last memory into the Pensieve.

"Whose memory is it?" he asked. "Mine," said Dumbledore.

And Harry dived after Dumbledore through the shifting silver mass, landing in the very office he had just left. There was Fawkes slumbering happily on his perch, and there behind the desk was Dumbledore, who looked very similar to the Dumbledore standing beside Harry, though both hands were whole and undamaged and his face was, perhaps, a little less lined. The one difference between the present-day office and this one was that it was snowing in the past; bluish flecks were drifting past the window in the dark and building up on the outside ledge.

The younger Dumbledore seemed to be waiting for something, and sure enough, moments after their arrival, there was a knock on the door and he said, "Enter."

Harry let out a hastily stifled gasp. Voldemort had entered the room. His features were not those Harry had seen emerge from the great stone cauldron almost two years ago: They were not as snake-like, the eyes were not yet scarlet, the face not yet masklike, and yet he was no longer handsome Tom Riddle. It was as though his features

had been burned and blurred; they were waxy and oddly distorted, and the whites of the eyes now had a permanently bloody look, though the pupils were not yet the slits that Harry knew they would become. He was wearing a long black cloak, and his face was as pale as the snow glistening on his shoulders.

The Dumbledore behind the desk showed no sign of surprise. Evidently this visit had been made by appointment.

"Good evening, Tom," said Dumbledore easily. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you," said Voldemort, and he took the seat to which Dumbledore had gestured — the very seat, by the looks of it, that Harry had just vacated in the present. "I heard that you had become headmaster," he said, and his voice was slightly higher and colder than it had been. "A worthy choice."

"I am glad you approve," said Dumbledore, smiling. "May I offer you a drink?"

"That would be welcome," said Voldemort. "I have come a long way."

Dumbledore stood and swept over to the cabinet where he now kept the Pensieve, but which then was full of bottles. Having handed Voldemort a goblet of wine and poured one for himself, he returned to the seat behind his desk. . "So, Tom ... to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Voldemort did not answer at once, but merely sipped his wine.

"They do not call me 'Tom' anymore," he said. "These days, 1 am known as —"

"I know what you are known as," said Dumbledore, smiling, pleasantly. "But to me, I'm afraid, you will always be Tom Riddle. It is one of the irritating things about old teachers. I am afraid that they never quite forget their charges' youthful beginnings."

He raised his glass as though toasting Voldemort, whose face remained expressionless. Nevertheless, Harry felt the atmosphere in the room change subtly: Dumbledore's refusal to use Voldemort’s chosen name was a refusal to allow Voldemort to dictate the terms of the meeting, and Harry could tell that Voldemort took it as such.

"I am surprised you have remained here so long," said Voldemort after a short pause. "I always wondered why a wizard such as yourself never wished to leave school."

"Well," said Dumbledore, still smiling, "to a wizard such as myself, there can be nothing more important than passing on ancient skills, helping hone young minds. If I remember correctly, you once saw the attraction of teaching too."

"I see it still," said Voldemort. "I merely wondered why you — who are so often asked for advice by the Ministry, and who have twice, I think, been offered the post of Minister —"

"Three times at the last count, actually," said Dumbledore. "But the Ministry never attracted me as a career. Again, something we have in common, I think."

Voldemort inclined his head, unsmiling, and took another sip of wine. Dumbledore did not break the silence that stretched between them now, but waited, with a look of pleasant expectancy, for Voldemort to talk first.

"I have returned," he said, after a little while, "later, perhaps, than Professor Dippet expected . . . but I have returned, nevertheless, to request again what he once told me I was too young to have. I have come to you to ask that you permit me to return to this castle, to teach. I think you must know that I have seen and done much since I left this place. I could show and tell your students things they can gain from no other wizard."

Dumbledore considered Voldemort over the top of his own goblet for a while before speaking.

"Yes, I certainly do know that you have seen and done much since leaving us," he said quietly. "Rumors of your doings have reached your old school, Tom. I should be sorry to believe half of them."

Voldemort's expression remained impassive as he said, "Greatness inspires envy, envy engenders spite, spite spawns lies. You must know this, Dumbledore."

"You call it 'greatness,' what you have been doing, do you?" asked Dumbledore delicately.

"Certainly," said Voldemort, and his eyes seemed to burn red. "I have experimented; I have pushed the boundaries of magic further, perhaps, than they have ever been pushed —"

"Of some kinds of magic," Dumbledore corrected him quietly. "Of some. Of others, you remain . . . forgive me . . . woefully ignorant."

For the first time, Voldemort smiled. It was a taut leer, an evil thing, more threatening than a look of rage.

"The old argument," he said softly. "But nothing I have seen in the world has supported your famous pronouncements that love is more powerful than my kind of magic, Dumbledore."

"Perhaps you have been looking in the wrong places," suggested Dumbledore.

"Well, then, what better place to start my fresh researches than here, at Hogwarts?" said Voldemort. "Will you let me return? Will you let me share my knowledge with your students? I place myself and my talents at your disposal. I am yours to command."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "And what will become of those whom you command? What will happen to those who call themselves — or so rumor has it — the Death Eaters?"

Harry could tell that Voldemort had not expected Dumbledore to know this name; he saw Voldemort's eyes flash red again and the slitlike nostrils flare.

"My friends," he said, after a moment's pause, "will carry on without me, I am sure."

"I am glad to hear that you consider them friends," said Dumbledore. "I was under the impression that they are more in the order of servants."

"You are mistaken," said Voldemort.

"Then if I were to go to the Hog's Head tonight, I would not find a group of them — Nott, Rosier, Muldber, Dolohov — awaiting your return? Devoted friends indeed, to travel this far with you on a snowy night, merely to wish you luck as you attempted to secure a teaching post."

There could be no doubt that Dumbledore's detailed knowledge of those with whom he was traveling was even less welcome to Voldemort; however, he rallied almost at once.

"You are omniscient as ever, Dumbledore."

"Oh no, merely friendly with the local barmen," said Dumbledore lightly. "Now, Tom . . ."

Dumbledore set down his empty glass and drew himself up in his seat, the tips of his fingers together in a very characteristic gesture.

"Let us speak openly. Why have you come here tonight, surrounded by henchmen, to request a job we both know you do not

want?"Voldemort looked coldly surprised. "A job I do not want? On the contrary, Dumbledore, I want it very much."

"Oh, you want to come back to Hogwarts, but you do not want to teach any more than you wanted to when you were eighteen. What is it you're after, Tom? Why not try an open request for once?"

Voldemort sneered. "If you do not want to give me a job —"

"Of course I don't," said Dumbledore. "And I don't think for a moment you expected me to. Nevertheless, you came here, you asked, you must have had a purpose."

Voldemort stood up. He looked less like Tom Riddle than ever, his features thick with rage. "This is your final word?"

"It is," said Dumbledore, also standing.

"Then we have nothing more to say to each other."

"No, nothing," said Dumbledore, and a great sadness filled his face. "The time is long gone when I could frighten you with a burning wardrobe and force you to make repayment for your crimes. But I wish I could, Tom. ... I wish I could. . . ."

For a second, Harry was on the verge of shouting a pointless warning: He was sure that Voldemort's hand had twitched toward his pocket and his wand; but then the moment had passed, Voldemort had turned away, the door was closing, and he was gone.

Harry felt Dumbledore's hand close over his arm again and moments later, they were standing together on almost the same spot, but there was no snow building on the window ledge, and Dumbledore's hand was blackened and dead-looking once more.

"Why?" said Harry at once, looking up into Dumbledore's face. "Why did he come back? Did you ever find out?"

"I have ideas," said Dumbledore, "but no more than that."

"What ideas, sir?"

"I shall tell you, Harry, when you have retrieved that memory from Professor Slughorn," said Dumbledore.

"When you have that last piece of the jigsaw, everything will, I hope, be clear ... to both of us."

Harry was still burning with curiosity and even though Dumbledore had walked to the door and was holding it open for him, he did not move at once.

"Was he after the Defense Against the Dark Arts job again, sir? He didn't say. ..."

"Oh, he definitely wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job," said Dumbledore. "The aftermath of our little meeting proved that. You see, we have never been able to keep a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher for longer than a year since I refused the post to Lord Voldemort."

Chapter 21: The Unknowable RoomHarry wracked his brains over the next week as to how he was to persuade Slughorn to hand over the true memory, but nothing in the nature of a brain wave occurred and he was reduced to doing what he did increasingly these days when at a loss: poring over his Potions book, hoping that the Prince would have scribbled something useful in a margin, as he had done so many times before.

"You won't find anything in there," said Hermione firmly, late on Sunday evening.

"Don't start, Hermione," said Harry. "If it hadn't been for the Prince, Ron wouldn't be sitting here now."

"He would if you'd just listened to Snape in our first year," said Hermione dismissively.

Harry ignored her. He had just found an incantation “Sectum-sempra!" scrawled in a margin above the intriguing words "For enemies," and was itching to try it out, but thought it best not to in front of Hermione. Instead, he surreptitiously folded down the corner of the page. They were sitting beside the fire in the common room; the only other people awake were fellow sixth years. There had been a cer-tain amount of excitement earlier when they had come back from dinner to find a new sign on the notice board that announced the date for their Apparition Test. Those who would be seventeen on or before the first test date, the twenty-first of April, had the option of signing up for additional practice sessions, which would take place (heavily supervised) in Hogsmeade.

Ron had panicked on reading this notice; he had still not man-aged to Apparate and feared he would not be ready for the test. Hermione, who had now achieved Apparition twice, was a little more confident, but Harry, who would not be seventeen for an-other four months, could not take the test whether ready or not.

"At least you can Apparate, though!" said Ron tensely. "You'll have no trouble come July!"

"I've only done it once," Harry reminded him; he had finally managed to disappear and rematerialize inside his hoop during their previous lesson.

Having wasted a lot of time worrying aloud about Apparition, Ron was now struggling to finish a viciously difficult essay for Snape that Harry and Hermione had already completed. Harry fully expected to receive low marks on his, because he had disagreed with Snape on the best way to tackle dementors, but he did not care: Slughorns memory was the most important thing to him now.

"I'm telling you, the stupid Prince isn't going to be able to help you with this, Harry!" said Hermione, more loudly. "There's only one way to force someone to do what you want, and that's the Imperius Curse, which is illegal —"

"Yeah, I know that, thanks," said Harry, not looking up from the book. "That's why I'm looking for something different. Dumbledorf says Veritaserum won't do it, but there might be something else, a potion or a spell. . . ."

"You're going about it the wrong way," said Hermione. "Only you can get the memory, Dumbledore says. That must mean you can persuade Slughorn where other people can't. It's not a question of slipping him a potion, anyone could do that —"

"How do you spell 'belligerent'?" said Ron, shaking his quill very hard while staring at his parchment. "It can't be B — U — M —"

"No, it isn't," said Hermione, pulling Ron's essay toward her. "And 'augury' doesn't begin O — R — G either. What kind of quill are you using?"

"It's one of Fred and George's Spell-Check ones, but I think the charm must be wearing off."

"Yes, it must," said Hermione, pointing at the title of his essay, "because we were asked how we'd deal with dementors, not 'Dug-bogs', and I don't remember you changing your name to 'Roonil Wazlib' either."

"Ah no!" said Ron, staring horror-struck at the parchment. "Don't say I'll have to write the whole thing out again!"

"It's okay, we can fix it," said Hermione, pulling the essay toward her and taking out her wand.

"I love you, Hermione," said Ron, sinking back in his chair, rub-bing his eyes wearily. Hermione turned faintly pink, but merely said, "Don't let Lavender hear you saying that."

"1 won't," said Ron into his hands. "Or maybe I will, then she'll ditch me."

"Why don't you ditch her if you want to finish it?" asked Harry.

"You haven't ever chucked anyone, have you?" said Ron. "You and Cho just —"

"Sort of fell apart, yeah," said Harry.

"Wish that would happen with me and Lavender," said Ron gloomily, watching Hermione silently tapping each of his mis-spelled words with the end of her wand, so that they corrected themselves on the page. "But the more I hint I want to finish it, the tighter she holds on. It's like going out with the giant squid."

"There," said Hermione, some twenty minutes later, handing back Ron's essay.

"Thanks a million," said Ron. "Can I borrow your quill for the conclusion?" Harry, who had found nothing useful in the Half-Blood Prince's notes so far, looked around; the three of them were now the only ones left in the common room, Seamus having just gone up to bed cursing Snape and his essay. The only sounds were the crackling of the fire and Ron scratching out one last paragraph on dementors using Hermione's quill. Harry had just closed the Half-Blood Prince's book, yawning, when —

Crack!

Hermione let out a little shriek; Ron spilled ink all over his freshly completed essay, and Harry said, "Kreacher!"

The house-elf bowed low and addressed his own gnarled toes. "Master said he wanted regular reports on what the Malfoy boy is doing, so Kreacher has come to give--"

Crack!

Dobby appeared alongside Kreacher, his tea-cozy hat askew. "Dobby has been helping too, Harry Potter!" he squeaked, cast-ing Kreacher a resentful look. "And Kreacher ought to tell Dobby when he is coming to see Harry Potter so they can make their re-ports together!"

"What is this?" asked Hermione, still looking shocked by these sudden appearances. "What's going on, Harry?" Harry hesitated before answering, because he had not told Her-mione about setting Kreacher and Dobby to tail Malfoy; house-elves were always such a touchy subject with her.

"Well. . . they've been following Malfoy for me," he said.

"Night and day," croaked Kreacher.

"Dobby has not slept for a week, Harry Potter!" said Dobby proudly, swaying where he stood. Hermione looked indignant.

"You haven't slept, Dobby? But surely, Harry, you didn't tell him not to —"

"No, of course I didn't," said Harry quickly. "Dobby, you can sleep, all right? But has either of you found out anything?" he has-tened to ask, before Hermione could intervene again.

"Master Malfoy moves with a nobility that befits his pure blood," croaked Kreacher at once. "His features recall the fine bones of my mistress and his manners are those of—"

"Draco Malfoy is a bad boy!" squeaked Dobby angrily. "A bad boy who — who —" He shuddered from the tassel of his tea cozy to the

toes of his socks and then ran at the fire, as though about to dive into it. Harry, to whom this was not entirely unexpected, caught him around the middle and held him fast. For a few seconds Dobby struggled, then went limp.

"Thank you, Harry Potter," he panted. "Dobby still finds it dif-ficult to speak ill of his old masters." Harry released him; Dobby straightened his tea cozy and said defiantly to Kreacher, "But Kreacher should know that Draco Malfoy is not a good master to a house-elf!"

"Yeah, we don't need to hear about you being in love with Malfoy," Harry told Kreacher. "Let's fast forward to where he's actually been going."

Kreacher bowed again, looking furious, and then said, "Master Malfoy eats in the Great Hall, he sleeps in a dormitory in the dun-geons, he attends his classes in a variety of—"

"Dobby, you tell me," said Harry, cutting across Kreacher. "Has he been going anywhere he shouldn't have?"

"Harry Potter, sir," squeaked Dobby, his great orblike eyes shining in the firelight, "the Malfoy boy is breaking no rules that Dobby can discover, but he is still keen to avoid detection. He has been making regular visits to the seventh floor with a variety of other students, who keep watch for him while he enters —"

"The Room of Requirement!" said Harry, smacking himself hard on the forehead with Advanced Potion-Making. Hermione and Ron stared at him. "That's where he's been sneaking off to! That's where he's doing… whatever he's doing! And I bet that's why he's been disappearing off the map — come to think of it, I've never seen the Room of Requirement on there!"

"Maybe the Marauders never knew the room was there," said Ron.

"I think it'll be part of the magic of the room," said Hermione. "If you need it to be unplottable, it will be."

"Dobby, have you managed to get in to have a look at what Malfoy's doing?" said Harry eagerly.

"No, Harry Potter, that is impossible," said Dobby.

"No, it's not," said Harry at once. "Malfoy got into our head-quarters there last year, so I'll be able to get in and spy on him, no problem."

"But I don't think you will, Harry," said Hermione slowly. "Mal-foy already knew exactly how we were using the room, didn't he, because that stupid Marietta had blabbed. He needed the room to become the headquarters of the D.A., so it did. But you don't know what the room becomes when Malfoy goes in there, so you don't know what to ask it to transform into."

"There'll be a way around that," said Harry dismissively. "You've done brilliantly, Dobby."

"Kreachers done well too," said Hermione kindly; but far from looking grateful, Kreacher averted his huge, bloodshot eyes and croaked at the ceiling, "The Mudblood is speaking to Kreacher, Kreacher will pretend he cannot hear —"

"Get out of it," Harry snapped at him, and Kreacher made one last deep bow and Disapparated. "You'd better go and get some sleep too, Dobby."

"Thank you, Harry Potter, sir!" squeaked Dobby happily, and he too vanished.

"How good is this?" said Harry enthusiastically, turning to Ron and Hermione the moment the room was elf-free again. "We know where Malfoy's going! We've got him cornered now!"

"Yeah, it's great," said Ron glumly, who was attempting to mop up the sodden mass of ink chat had recently been an almost com-pleted essay. Hermione pulled it toward her and began siphoning the ink off with her wand.

"But what's all this about him going up there with a variety of students'?" said Hermione. "How many people are in on it? You wouldn't think he'd trust lots of them to know what he's do-ing---"

"Yeah, that is weird," said Harry, frowning. "I heard him telling Crabbe it wasn't Crabbe's business what he was doing... so what's he telling all these... all these..." Harry's voice tailed away; he was staring at the fire. "God, I've been stupid," he said quietly. "Its obvious, isn't it? There was a great vat of it down in the dungeon. . . . He could've nicked some any time during that lesson. . . ."

"Nicked what?" said Ron.

"Polyjuice Potion. He stole some of the Polyjuice Potion Slug-horn showed us in our first Potions lesson… There aren't a whole variety of students standing guard for Malfoy… it's just Crabbe and Goyle as usual. …Yeah, it all fits!" said Harry, jumping up and starting to pace in front of the fire. "They're stupid enough to do what they're told even if he won't tell them what he's up to, but he doesn't want them to be seen lurking around outside the Room of Requirement, so he's got them taking Polyjuice to make them look like other people… Those two girls I saw him with when he missed Quidditch — ha! Crabbe and Goyle!"

“Do you mean to say," said Hermione in a hushed voice, "that that little girl whose scales I repaired — ?"

"Yeah, of course!" said Harry loudly, staring at her. "Of course! Malfoy must've been inside the room at the time, so she — what am I talking about? — he dropped the scales to tell Malfoy not to corne out, because there was someone there! And there was that girl who

dropped the toadspawn too! We've been walking past him all the time and not realizing it!"

"He's got Crabbe and Goyle transforming into girls?" guffawed Ron. "Blimey… no wonder they don't look too happy these days. I'm surprised they don't tell him to stuff it."

"Well, they wouldn't, would they, if he's shown them his Dark Mark?" said Harry.

"Hmmm... the Dark Mark we don't know exists," said Hermi-one skeptically, rolling up Ron's dried essay before it could come to any more harm and handing it to him.

"We'll see" said Harry confidently.

"Yes, we will," Hermione said, getting to her feet and stretching. "But, Harry, before you get all excited, I still don't think you'll be able to get into the Room of Requirement without knowing what's there first'. And I don't think you should forget" — she heaved her bag onto her shoulder and gave him a very serious look — "that what you're supposed to be concentrating on is getting that memory from Slughorn. Good night."

Harry watched her go, feeling slightly disgruntled. Once the door to the girls' dormitories had closed behind her he rounded on Ron. "What d'you think?"

"Wish I could Disapparate like a house-elf," said Ron, staring at the spot where Dobby had vanished. "I'd have that Apparition Test in the bag."

Harry did not sleep well that night. He lay awake for what felt like hours, wondering how Malfoy was using the Room of Requirement and what he, Harry, would see when he went in there the following day, for whatever Hermione said, Harry was sure that if Malfoy had-=-been able to see the headquarters of the D.A., he would be able to

see Malfoy's, what could it be? A meeting place? A hideout? A ston room? A workshop? Harrys mind worked feverishly and his dreams, when he finally fell asleep, were broken and disturbed by images of Malfoy, who turned into Slughorn, who turned into Snape…

Harry was in a state of great anticipation over breakfast the following morning; he had a free period before Defense Against the Dark Arts and was determined to spend it trying to get into the Room of Requirement. Hermione was rather ostentatiously showing no interest in his whispered plans for forcing entry into the room, which irritated Harry, because he thought she might be a lot of help if she wanted to.

"Look," he said quietly, leaning forward and putting a hand on the Daily Prophet, which she had just removed from a post owl, to stop her from opening it and vanishing behind it. "I haven't for-gotten about Slughorn, but I haven't got a clue how to get that memory off him, and until I get a brain wave why shouldn't I find out what Malfoy's doing?"

"I've already told you, you need to persuade Slughorn," said Her-mione. "It's not a question of tricking him or bewitching him, or Dumbledore could have done it in a second. Instead of messing around outside the Room of Requirement" — she jerked the Prophet out from under Harrys hand and unfolded it to look at the front page — "you should go and find Slughorn and start appeal-ing to his better nature."

"Anyone we know — ?" asked Ron, as Hermione scanned the headlines.

"Yes!" said Hermione, causing both Harry and Ron to gag on their breakfast. "But it's all right, he's not dead — its Mundungus, he's been arrested and sent to Azkaban! Something to do with impersonating an Inferius during an attempted burglary, and someone called Octavius Pepper has vanished. Oh, and how horrible, a nine-year-old

boy has been arrested for trying to kill his grandparents, they think he was under the Imperius Curse."

They finished their breakfast in silence. Hermione set off immediately for Ancient Runes; Ron for the common room, where he still had to finish his conclusion on Snape's dementor essay, and Harry for the corridor on the seventh floor and the stretch of wall opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy teaching trolls to do ballet.

Harry slipped on his Invisibility Cloak once he had found an empty passage, but he need not have bothered. When he reached his destination he found it deserted. Harry was not sure whether his chances of getting inside the room were better with Malfoy in-side it or out, but at least his first attempt was not going to be complicated by the presence of Crabbe or Goyle pretending to be an eleven-year-old girl.

He closed his eyes as he approached the place where the Room of Requirement's door was concealed. He knew what he had to do; he had become most accomplished at it last year. Concentrating with all his might he thought, “I need to see what Malfoy's doing in here... I need to see what Malfoy's doing in here... I need to see what Malfoy's doing in here...”

Three times he walked past the door; then, his heart pounding with excitement, he opened his eyes and faced it — but he was still looking at a stretch of mundanely blank wall. He moved forward and gave it an experimental push. The stone remained solid and unyielding.

"Okay," said Harry aloud. "Okay... I thought the wrong thing..." He pondered for a moment then set off again, eyes closed, concentrating as hard as he could. “I need to see the place where Malfoy keeps coming secretly... I need to see the place where Malfoy keeps coming secretly...” After three walks past, he opened his eyes expectantly.

There was no door.

"Oh, come off it," he told the wall irritably. "That was a clear instruction. Fine." He thought hard for several minutes before striding off once more. “I need you to become the place you become for Draco Malfoy...”

He did not immediately open his eyes when he had finished his patrolling; he was listening hard, as though he might hear the door pop into existence. He heard nothing, however, except the distant twittering of birds outside. He opened his eyes.

There was still no door.

Harry swore. Someone screamed. He looked around to see a gaggle of first years running back around the corner, apparently un-der the impression that they had just encountered a particularly foulmouthed ghost.

Harry tried every variation of "I need to see what Draco Malfoy is doing inside you" that he could think of for a whole hour, at the end of which he was forced to concede that Hermione might have had a point: The room simply did not want to open for him. Frus-trated and annoyed, he set off for Defense Against the Dark Arts, pulling off his Invisibility Cloak and stuffing it into his bag as he went.

"Late again, Potter," said Snape coldly, as Harry hurried into the candlelit classroom. "Ten points from Gryfrindor." Harry scowled at Snape as he flung himself into the seat beside Ron. Half the class were still on their feet, taking out books and orga-nizing their things; he could not be much later than any of them.

"Before we start, I want your dementor essays," said Snape, wav-ing his wand carelessly, so that twenty-five scrolls of parchment soared into the air and landed in a neat pile on his desk. "And I hope for your sakes they are better than the tripe I had to endure on resisting the

Imperius Curse. Now, if you will all open your books to page — what is it, Mr. Finnigan?"

"Sir," said Seamus, "I've been wondering, how do you tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost? Because there was something in the paper about an Inferius —"

"No, there wasn't," said Snape in a bored voice.

"But sir, I heard people talking —"

"If you had actually read the article in question, Mr. Finnigan, you would have known that the so-called Inferius was nothing but a smelly sneak thief by the name of Mundungus Fletcher."

"I thought Snape and Mundungus were on the same side," mut-tered Harry to Ron and Hermione. "Shouldn't he be upset Mun-dungus has been arrest —"

"But Potter seems to have a lot to say on the subject," said Snape, pointing suddenly at the back of the room, his black eyes fixed on Harry. "Let us ask Potter how we would tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost."

The whole class looked around at Harry, who hastily tried to recall what Dumbledore had told him the night that they had gone to visit Slughorn. "Er — well — ghosts are transparent —" he said.

"Oh, very good," interrupted Snape, his lip curling. "Yes, it in easy to see that nearly six years of magical education have not been wasted on you, Potter. 'Ghosts are transparent."'

Pansy Parkinson let out a high-pitched giggle. Several other peo-ple were smirking. Harry took a deep breath and continued calmly, though his insides were boiling, "Yeah, ghosts are transparent, but Inferi are dead bodies, aren't they? So they'd be solid —"

"A five-year-old could have told us as much," sneered Snape. "The Inferius is a corpse that has been reanimated by a Dark wiz-ard's spells. It is not alive, it is merely used like a puppet to do the wizard's bidding. A ghost, as I trust that you are all aware by now, is the imprint of a departed soul left upon the earth, and of course, as Potter so wisely tells us, transparent. "

"Well, what Harry said is the most useful if we're trying to tell them apart!" said Ron. "When we come face-to-face with one down a dark alley, we're going to be having a look to see if its solid, aren't we, we're not going to be asking, 'Excuse me, are you the imprint of a departed soul?'" There was a ripple of laughter, instantly quelled by the look Snape gave the class.

"Another ten points from Gryffindor," said Snape. "I would ex-pect nothing more sophisticated from you, Ronald Weasley, the boy so solid he cannot Apparate half an inch across a room."

"No!" whispered Hermione, grabbing Harrys arm as he opened his mouth furiously. "There's no point, you'll just end up in deten-tion again, leave it!""Now open your books to page two hundred and thirteen," said Snape, smirking a little, "and read the first two paragraphs on the Cruciatus Curse."

Ron was very subdued all through the class. When the bell sounded at the end of the lesson, Lavender caught up with Ron and Harry (Hermione mysteriously melted out of sight as she ap-proached) and abused Snape hotly for his jibe about Ron's Appari-tion, but this seemed to merely irritate Ron, and he shook her off by making a detour into the boys' bathroom with Harry.

"Snape's right, though, isn't he?" said Ron, after staring into a cracked mirror for a minute or two. "I dunno whether it's worth me taking the test. I just can't get the hang of Apparition."

"You might as well do the extra practice sessions in Hogsmeade and see where they get you," said Harry reasonably. "It'll be more

interesting than trying to get into a stupid hoop anyway. Then, if you're still not — you know — as good as you'd like to be, you can postpone the test, do it with me over the summer — Myrtle, this is the boys' bathroom!"

The ghost of a girl had risen out of the toilet in a cubicle behind them and was now floating in midair, staring at them through thick, white, round glasses. "Oh," she said glumly. "It's you two."

"Who were you expecting?" said Ron, looking at her in the mirror.

"Nobody," said Myrtle, picking moodily at a spot on her chin. "He said he'd come back and see me, but then you said you'd pop in and visit me too" — she gave Harry a reproachful look — "and I haven't seen you for months and months. I've learned not to ex-pect too much from boys."

"I thought you lived in that girls' bathroom?" said Harry, who had been careful to give the place a wide berth for some years now.

"I do," she said, with a sulky little shrug, "but that doesn't mean I cant visit other places. I came and saw you in your bath once, remember?"

"Vividly," said Harry.

"But I thought he liked me," she said plaintively. "Maybe if you two left, he'd come back again. We had lots in common. I'm sure he felt it."

And she looked hopefully toward the door. "When you say you had lots in common," said Ron, sounding rather amused now, "d'you mean he lives in an S-bend too?"

"No," said Myrtle defiantly, her voice echoing loudly around the old tiled bathroom. "I mean he's sensitive, people bully him too, and he feels lonely and hasn't got anybody to talk to, and he's not afraid to show his feelings and cry!"

"There's been a boy in here crying?" said Harry curiously. "A young boy?"

"Never you mind!" said Myrtle, her small, leaky eyes fixed on Ron, who was now definitely grinning. "I promised I wouldn't tell anyone, and I'll take his secret to the —"

"— not the grave, surely?" said Ron with a snort. "The sewers, maybe." Myrtle gave a howl of rage and dived back into the toilet, caus-ing water to slop over the sides and onto the floor. Goading Myrtle seemed to have put fresh heart into Ron. "You're right," he said, swinging his schoolbag back over his shoulder, "I'll do the practice sessions in Hogsmeade before I de-cide about taking the test."

And so the following weekend, Ron joined Hermione and the rest of the sixth years who would turn seventeen in time to take the test in a fortnight. Harry felt rather jealous watching them all get ready to go into the village; he missed making trips there, and it was a particularly fine spring day, one of the first clear skies they had seen in a long time. However, he had decided to use the time to attempt another assault on the Room of Requirement.

"You'd do better," said Hermione, when he confided this plan to Ron and her in the entrance hall, "to go straight to Slughorn's of-fice and try and get that memory from him."

"I've been trying!" said Harry crossly, which was perfectly true. He had lagged behind after every Potions lesson that week in an at-tempt to corner Slughorn, but the Potions master always left the dungeon so fast that Harry had not been able to catch him. Twice, Harry had gone to his office and knocked, but received no reply, though on the second occasion he was sure he had heard the quickly stifled sounds of an old gramophone.

"He doesn't want to talk to me, Hermione! He can tell I've been trying to get him on his own again, and he's not going to let it happen!"

"Well, you've just got to keep at it, haven't you?"

The short queue of people waiting to file past Filch, who was do-ing his usual prodding act with the Secrecy Sensor, moved forward a few steps and Harry did not answer in case he was overheard by the caretaker. He wished Ron and Hermione both luck, then turned and climbed the marble staircase again, determined, whatever Her-mione said, to devote an hour or two to the Room of Requirement.

Once out of sight of the entrance hall, Harry pulled the Ma-rauder's Map and his Invisibility Cloak from his bag. Having concealed himself, he tapped the map, murmured, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," and scanned it carefully.

As it was Sunday morning, nearly all the students were inside their various common rooms, the Gryffindors in one tower, the Ravenclaws in another, the Slytherins in the dungeons, and the Hufflepuffs in the basement near the kitchens. Here and there a stray person meandered around the library or up a corridor. There were a few people out in the grounds, and there, alone in the seventh-floor corridor, was Gregory Goyle. There was no sign of the Room of Requirement, but Harry was not worried about that; if Goyle was standing guard outside it, the room was open, whether the map was aware of it or not. He therefore sprinted up the stairs, slowing down only when he reached the corner into the corridor, when he began to creep, very slowly, toward the very same little girl, clutching her heavy brass scales, that Hermione had so kindly helped a fortnight before. He waited until he was right be-hind her before bending very low and whispering, "Hello…you're very pretty, aren't you?"

Goyle gave a high-pitched scream of terror, threw the scales up into the air, and sprinted away, vanishing from sight long before the sound of the scales smashing had stopped echoing around the corri-dor. Laughing, Harry turned to contemplate the blank wall behind which, he was sure, Draco Malfoy was now standing frozen, aware that someone unwelcome was out there, but not daring to make an

appearance. It gave Harry a most agreeable feeling of power as he tried to remember what form of words he had not yet tried.

Yet this hopeful mood did not last long. Half an hour later, hav-ing tried many more variations of his request to see what Malfoy was up to, the wall was just as doorless as ever. Harry felt frustrated beyond belief-=Malfoy might be just feet away from him, and there was still not the tiniest shred of evidence as to what he was doing in there. Losing his patience completely, Harry ran at the wall and kicked it.

"OUCH!"

He thought he might have broken his toe; as he clutched it and hopped on one foot, the Invisibility Cloak slipped off him.

"Harry?"

He spun around, one-legged, and toppled over. There, to his utter astonishment, was Tonks, walking toward him as though she frequently strolled up this corridor.

"What’re you doing here?" he said, scrambling to his feet again; why did she always have to find him lying on the floor?

"I came to see Dumbledore," said Tonks. Harry thought she looked terrible: thinner than usual, her mouse-colored hair lank.

"His office isn't here," said Harry, "it's round the other side of the castle, behind the gargoyle —"

"I know," said Tonks. "He's not there. Apparently he's gone away again."

"Has he?" said Harry, putting his bruised foot gingerly back on the floor. "Hey — you don't know where he goes, I suppose?"

"No," said Tonks.

"What did you want to see him about?"

"Nothing in particular," said Tonks, picking, apparently unconsciously, at the sleeve of her robe. "I just thought he might know what's going on. I've heard rumors… people getting hurt."

"Yeah, I know, it's all been in the papers," said Harry. "That lit-tle kid trying to kill his —"

"The Prophet's often behind the times," said Tonks, who didn't seem to be listening to him. "You haven't had any letters from any-one in the Order recently?"

"No one from the Order writes to me anymore," said Harry, "not since Sirius —“ He saw that her eyes had filled with tears.

"I'm sorry," he muttered awkwardly. "I mean... I miss him, as well."

"What?" said Tonks blankly, as though she had not heard him. "Well. I'll see you around, Harry.”

And she turned abruptly and walked back down the corridor, leaving Harry to stare after her. After a minute or so, he pulled the Invisibility Cloak on again and resumed his efforts to get into the Room of Requirement, but his heart was not in it. Finally, a hollow feeling in his stomach and the knowledge that Ron and Hermione would soon be back for lunch made him abandon the attempt and leave the corridor to Malfoy who, hopefully, would be too afraid to leave for some hours to come.

He found Ron and Hermione in the Great Hall, already halfway through an early lunch.

"I did it — well, kind of!" Ron told Harry enthusiastically when he caught sight of him. "I was supposed to be Apparating to out-side Madam Puddifoots Tea Shop and I overshot it a bit, ended up near Scrivenshafts, but at least I moved!"

"Good one," said Harry. "How'd you do, Hermione?"

"Oh, she was perfect, obviously," said Ron, before Hermione could answer. "Perfect deliberation, divination, and desperation or whatever the hell it is — we all went for a quick drink in the Three Broomsticks after and you should've heard Twycross going on about her — I'll be surprised if he doesn't pop the question soon —"

"And what about you?" asked Hermione, ignoring Ron. "Have you been up at the Room of Requirement all this time?"

"Yep," said Harry. "And guess who I ran into up there? Tonks!"

"Tonks?" repeated Ron and Hermione together, looking surprised.

"Yeah, she said she'd come to visit Dumbledore."

"If you ask me," said Ron once Harry had finished describing his conversation with Tonks, "she's cracking up a bit. Losing her nerve after what happened at the Ministry."

"It’s a bit odd," said Hermione, who for some reason looked very concerned. "She's supposed to be guarding the school, why she suddenly abandoning her post to come and see Dumbledore when he's not even here?"

"I had a thought," said Harry tentatively. He felt strange about voicing it; this was much more Hermione’s territory than his. "You don't think she can have been... you know... in love with Sirius?"

Hermione stared at him. "What on earth makes you say that?"

"I dunno," said Harry, shrugging, "but she was nearly crying when I mentioned his name, and her Patronus is a big four-legged thing now. I wondered whether it hadn't become... you know... him."

"It's a thought," said Hermione slowly. "But I still don't know why she'd be bursting into the castle to see Dumbledore, if that's re-ally why she was here."

"Goes back to what I said, doesn't it?" said Ron, who was now shoveling mashed potato into his mouth. "She's gone a bit funny. Lost her nerve. Women," he said wisely to Harry, "they're easily upset."

"And yet," said Hermione, coming out of her reverie, "I doubt you'd find a woman who sulked for half an hour because Madam Rosmerta didn't laugh at their joke about the hag, the Healer, and the Mimbulus mimbletonia."

Ron scowled.

Chapter 22 After the Burial

Patches of bright blue sky were beginning to appear over the castle turrets, but these signs of approaching summer did not lift Harry's mood. He had been thwarted, both in his attempts to find out what Malfoy was doing, and in his efforts to start a conversation with Slughorn that might lead, somehow, to Slughorn hand-ing over the memory he had apparently suppressed for decades.

"For the last time, just forget about Malfoy," Hermione told Harry firmly.

They were sitting with Ron in a sunny corner of the courtyard after lunch. Hermione and Ron were both clutching a Ministry of Magic leaflet — Common Apparition Mistakes and How to Avoid Them — for they were taking their tests that very afternoon, but by and large the leaflets had not proved soothing to the nerves.

Ron gave a start and tried to hide behind Hermione as a girl came around the corner.

"It isn't Lavender," said Hermione wearily.

"Oh, good," said Ron, relaxing.

"Harry Potter?" said the girl. "I was asked to give you this.""Thanks..."

Harry's heart sank as he took the small scroll of parchment. Once the girl was out of earshot he said, "Dumbledore said we wouldn't be having any more lessons until I got the memory!"

"Maybe he wants to check on how you're doing?" suggested Hermione, as Harry unrolled the parchment; but rather than finding Dumbledore's long, narrow, slanted writing he saw an untidy sprawl, very difficult to read due to the presence of large blotches on the parchment where the ink had run.

Dear Harry, Ron and Hermione!

Aragog died last night. Harry and Ron, you met him and you know how special he was.

Hermione, I know you'd have liked him.

It would mean a lot to me if you'd nip down for the burial later this evening.

I'm planning on doing it round dusk, that was his favorite time of day.

I know you're not supposed to be out that late, but you can use the cloak.

Wouldn't ask, but I can't face it alone.

Hagrid

"Look at this," said Harry, handing the note to Hermione. "Oh, for heaven's sake," she said, scanning it quickly and passing it to Ron, who read it through looking increasingly incredulous. "He's mental" he said furiously. "That thing told its mates to eat Harry and me! Told them to help themselves! And now Hagrid ex-pects us to go down there and cry over its horrible hairy body!"

"Its not just that," said Hermione. "He's asking us to leave the castle at night and he knows security's a million times tighter and how much trouble we'd be in if we were caught."

"We've been down to see him by night before," said Harry.

"Yes, but for something like this?" said Hermione. "We've risked a lot to help Hagrid out, but after all — Aragog's dead. If it were a question of saving him —"

"— I'd want to go even less," said Ron firmly. "You didn't meet him, Hermione. Believe me, being dead will have improved him a lot."

Harry took the note back and stared down at all the inky blotches all over it. Tears had clearly fallen thick and fast upon the parchment. . . .

"Harry, you can't be thinking of going," said Hermione. "It's such a pointless thing to get detention for."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I know," he said. "I s'pose Hagrid'll have to bury Aragog without us."

"Yes, he will," said Hermione, looking relieved. "Look, Potions will be almost empty this afternoon, with us all off doing our tests. . . . Try and soften Slughorn up a bit then!"

"Fifty-seventh time lucky, you think?" said Harry bitterly.

"Lucky," said Ron suddenly. "Harry, that's it — get lucky!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Use your lucky potion!"

"Ron, that's — that's it!" said Hermione, sounding stunned. "Of course! Why didn't I think of it?"

Harry stared at them both. "Felix Felicis?" he said. "I dunno . . . I was sort of saving it. ..."

"What for?" demanded Ron incredulously.

"What on earth is more important than this memory, Harry?" asked Hermione.

Harry did not answer. The thought of that little golden bottle had hovered on the edges of his imagination for some time; vague and unformulated plans that involved Ginny splitting up with Dean, and Ron somehow being happy to see her with a new boyfriend, had been fermenting in the depths of his brain, unacknowledged except during dreams or the twilight time between sleeping and waking. . . .

"Harry? Are you still with us?" asked Hermione.

"Wha — ? Yeah, of course," he said, pulling himself together. "Well. . . okay. If I can't get Slughorn to talk this afternoon, I'll take some Felix and have another go this evening."

"That's decided, then," said Hermione briskly, getting to her feet and performing a graceful pirouette. "Destination . . . determina-tion . . . deliberation . . ." she murmured.

"Oh, stop that," Ron begged her, "I feel sick enough as it is — quick, hide me!"

"It isn't Lavender!" said Hermione impatiently, as another cou-ple of girls appeared in the courtyard and Ron dived behind her.

"Cool," said Ron, peering over Hermiones shoulder to check. "Blimey, they don't look happy, do they?"

"They're the Montgomery sisters and of course they don't look happy, didn't you hear what happened to their little brother?" said Hermione.

"I'm losing track of what's happening to everyone's relatives, to be honest," said Ron.

"Well, their brother was attacked by a werewolf. The rumor is that their mother refused to help the Death Eaters. Anyway, the boy was only five and he died in St. Mungos, they couldn't save him."

"He died?" repeated Harry, shocked. "But surely werewolves don't kill, they just turn you into one of them?"

"They sometimes kill," said Ron, who looked unusually grave now. "I've heard of it happening when the werewolf gets carried away."

"What was the werewolf's name?" said Harry quickly.

"Well, the rumor is that it was that Fenrir Greyback," said Hermione.

"I knew it — the maniac who likes attacking kids, the one Lupin told me about!" said Harry angrily.

Hermione looked at him bleakly.

"Harry, you've got to get that memory," she said. "It's all about stopping Voldemort, isn't it? These dreadful things that are hap-pening are all down to him. . . ."

The bell rang overhead in the castle and both Hermione and Ron jumped to their feet, looking terrified.

"You'll do fine," Harry told them both, as they headed toward the entrance hall to meet the rest of the people taking their Ap-parition Test. "Good luck."

"And you too!" said Hermione with a significant look, as Harry headed off to the dungeons.

There were only three of them in Potions that afternoon: Harry, Ernie, and Draco Malfoy.

"All too young to Apparate just yet?" said Slughorh genially, "Not turned seventeen yet?"

They shook their heads.

"Ah well," said Slughorn cheerily, "as we're so few, we'll do something for fun. I want you all to brew me up something amusing!"

"That sounds good, sir," said Ernie sycophantically, rubbing his hands together. Malfoy, on the other hand, did not crack a smile. "What do you mean, 'something amusing'?" he said irritably. "Oh, surprise me," said Slughorn airily.

Malfoy opened his copy of Advanced Potion-Making with a sulky expression. It could not have been plainer that he thought this les-son

was a waste of time. Undoubtedly, Harry thought, watching him over the top of his own book, Malfoy was begrudging the time he could otherwise be spending in the Room of Requirement.

Was it his imagination, or did Malfoy, like Tonks, look thinner! Certainly he looked paler; his skin still had that grayish tinge, probably because he so rarely saw daylight these days. But there was no air of smugness, excitement, or superiority; none of the swagger that he had had on the Hogwarts Express, when he had boasted openly of the mission he had been given by Voldemort. . . . There could be only one conclusion, in Harry's opinion: The mission, whatever it was, was going badly.

Cheered by this thought, Harry skimmed through his copy of Advanced Potion-Making and found a heavily corrected Half-Blood Prince's version of "An Elixir to Induce Euphoria," which seemed not only to meet Slughorn's instructions, but which might (Harry's heart leapt as the thought struck him) put Slughorn into such a good mood that he would be prepared to hand over that memory if Harry could persuade him to taste some. . . .

"Well, now, this looks absolutely wonderful," said Slughorn an hour and a half later, clapping his hands together as he stared down into the sunshine yellow contents of Harry's cauldron. "Euphoria, I take it? And what's that I smell? Mmmm . . . you've added just a sprig of peppermint, haven't you? Unorthodox, but what a stroke of inspiration, Harry, of course, that would tend to counterbalance the occa-sional side effects of excessive singing and nose-tweaking. ... I really don't know where you get these brain waves, my boy . . . unless —"

Harry pushed the Half-Blood Prince's book deeper into his bag with his foot.

"— it's just your mother's genes coming out in you!"

"Oh . . . yeah, maybe," said Harry, relieved.

Ernie was looking rather grumpy; determined to outshine Harry for once, he had most rashly invented his own potion, which had curdled and formed a kind of purple dumpling at the bottom of his cauldron. Malfoy was already packing up, sour-faced; Slughorn had pronounced his Hiccuping Solution merely "passable."..;.

The bell rang and both Ernie and Malfoy left at once. "Sir," Harry began, but Slughorn immediately glanced over his shoulder; when he saw that the room was empty but for himself and Harry, he hurried away as fast as he could.

"Professor — Professor, don't you want to taste my po — ?" called Harry desperately.

But Slughorn had gone. Disappointed, Harry emptied the caul-dron, packed up his things, left the dungeon, and walked slowly back upstairs to the common room.

Ron and Hermione returned in the late afternoon.

"Harry!" cried Hermione as she climbed through the portrait hole. "Harry, I passed!"-

"Well done!" he said. "And Ron?"

"He — he just failed," whispered Hermione, as Ron came slouching into the room looking most morose. "It was really unlucky, a tiny thing, the examiner just spotted that he'd left half an eyebrow behind. . . How did it go with Slughorn?"

"No joy," said Harry, as Ron joined them. "Bad luck, mate, but you'll pass next time — we can take it together."

"Yeah, I s'pose," said Ron grumpily. "But half an eyebrow – like that matters!"

"I know," said Hermione soothingly, "it does seem really harsh. ..."

They spent most of their dinner roundly abusing the Apparition examiner, and Ron looked fractionally more cheerful by the time they set off back to the common room, now discussing the continuing problem of Slughorn and the memory.

"So, Harry — you going to use the Felix Felicis or what?" Ron demanded.

"Yeah, I s'pose I'd better," said Harry. "I don't reckon I'll need all of it, not twenty-four hours' worth, it can't take all night.... I'll just take a mouthful. Two or three hours should do it."

"It's a great feeling when you take it," said Ron reminiscently. "Like you can't do anything wrong."

"What are you talking about?" said Hermione, laughing. "You've never taken any!"

"Yeah, but I thought I had, didn't I?" said Ron, as though ex-plaining the obvious. "Same difference really ..."

As they had only just seen Slughorn enter the Great Hall and knew that he liked to take time over meals, they lingered for a while in the common room, the plan being that Harry should go to Slughorn s office once the teacher had had time to get back there. When the sun had sunk to the level of the treetops in the Forbid-den Forest, they decided the moment had come, and after check-ing carefully that Neville, Dean, and Seamus were all in the common room, sneaked up to the boys' dormitory.

Harry took out the rolled-up socks at the bottom of his trunk and extracted the tiny, gleaming bottle.

"Well, here goes," said Harry, and he raised the little bottle and look a carefully measured gulp.

"What does it feel like?" whispered Hermione.

Harry did not answer for a moment. Then, slowly but surely, an exhilarating sense of infinite opportunity stole through him; he felt as though he could have done anything, anything at all... and getting the memory from Slughorn seemed suddenly not only pos-sible, but positively easy. . . .

He got to his feet, smiling, brimming with confidence.

"Excellent," he said. "Really excellent. Right. . . I'm going down to Hagrid's."

"What?" said Ron and Hermione together, looking aghast.

"No, Harry — you've got to go and see Slughorn, remember?" said Hermione.

"No," said Harry confidently. "I'm going to Hagrid's, I've got a good feeling about going to Hagrid's."

"You've got a good feeling about burying a giant spider?" asked Ron, looking stunned.

"Yeah," said Harry, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his bag. "I feel like it's the place to be tonight, you know what I mean?"

"No," said Ron and Hermione together, both looking positively alarmed now.

"This is Felix Felicis, I suppose?" said Hermione anxiously, holding up the bottle to the light. "You haven't got another little bottle full of— I don't know —"

"Essence of Insanity?" suggested Ron, as Harry swung his cloak over his shoulders.

Harry laughed, and Ron and Hermione looked even more alarmed.

"Trust me," he said. "I know what I'm doing ... or at least" he strolled confidently to the door— "Felix does."

He pulled the Invisibility Cloak over his head and set off down the stairs, Ron and Hermione hurrying along behind him. At the foot of the stairs, Harry slid through the open door.

"What were you doing up there with her!" shrieked Lavender Brown, staring right through Harry at Ron and Hermione emerging together from the boys' dormitories. Harry heard Ron splutter-ing behind him as he darted across the room away from them.

Getting through the portrait hole was simple; as he approached it, Ginny and Dean came through it, and Harry was able to slip between them. As he did so, he brushed accidentally against Ginny.

"Don't push me, please, Dean," she said, sounding annoyed. ; "You're always doing that, I can get through perfectly well on my own. ..."

The portrait swung closed behind Harry, but not before he had heard Dean make an angry retort.. . . His feeling of elation in-creasing, Harry strode off through the castle. He did not have to creep along, for he met nobody on his way, but this did not surprise him in the slightest. This evening, he was the luckiest person at Hogwarts.

Why he knew that going to Hagrid's was the right thing to do, he had no idea. It was as though the potion was illuminating a few steps of the path at a time. He could not see the final destination, he could not see where Slughorn came in, but he knew that he was going the right way to get that memory. When he reached the en-trance hall he saw that Filch had forgotten to lock the front door. Beaming, Harry threw it open and breathed in the smell of clean air and grass for a moment before walking down the steps into the dusk.

It was when he reached the bottom step that it occurred to him how very pleasant it would be to pass the vegetable patch on his walk to Hagrid's. It was not strictly on the way, but it seemed clear to Harry

that this was a whim on which he should act, so he di-rected his feet immediately toward the vegetable patch, where he was pleased, but not altogether surprised, to find Professor Slughorn in conversation with Professor Sprout. Harry lurked be-hind a low stone wall, feeling at peace with the world and listening to their conversation.

"I do thank you for taking the time, Pomona," Slughorn was saying courteously, "most authorities agree that they are at their most efficacious if picked at twilight."

"Oh, I quite agree," said Professor Sprout warmly. "That enough for you?"

"Plenty, plenty," said Slughorn, who, Harry saw, was carrying an armful of leafy plants. "This should allow for a few leaves for each of my third years, and some to spare if anybody over-stews them. . . . Well, good evening to you, and many thanks again!"

Professor Sprout headed off into the gathering darkness in the direction of her greenhouses, and Slughorn directed his steps to the spot where Harry stood, invisible.

:

Seized with an immediate desire to reveal himself, Harry pullet I off the cloak with a flourish.

"Good evening, Professor."

"Merlin’s beard, Harry, you made me jump," said Slughotn, stopping dead in his tracks and looking wary. "How did you get out of the castle?"

"I think Filch must've forgotten to lock the doors," said Harry cheerfully, and was delighted to see Slughorn scowl.

"I'll be reporting that man, he's more concerned about litter than proper security if you ask me. . . . But why are you out then, Harry?"

"Well, sir, it's Hagrid," said Harry, who knew that the right thing to do just now was to tell the truth. "He's pretty upset. . . But you won't tell anyone, Professor? I don't want trouble for him. ..."

Slughorn's curiosity was evidently aroused. "Well, I can't promise that," he said gruffly. "But I know that Dumbledore trusts Hagrid to the hilt, so I'm sure he can't be up to anything very dreadful. ..

."

"Well, it's this giant spider, he's had it for years. ... It lived in the forest. ... It could talk and everything —"

"I heard rumors there were acromantulas in the forest," said Slughorn softly, looking over at the mass of black trees. "It's true, then?"

"Yes," said Harry. "But this one, Aragog, the first one Hagrid ever got, it died last night. He's devastated. He wants company while he buries it and I said I'd go."

"Touching, touching," said Slughorn absentmindedly, his large droopy eyes fixed upon the distant lights of Hagrid's cabin. "But acromantula venom is very valuable ... If the beast only just died it might not yet have dried out. . . . Of course, I wouldn't want to do anything insensitive if Hagrid is upset. . . but if there was any way to procure some ... I mean, its almost impossible to get venom from an acromantula while its alive. ..."

Slughorn seemed to be talking more to himself than Harry now. ". . . seems an awful waste not to collect it... might get a hun-dred Galleons a pint. ... To be frank, my salary is not large. . . ."

And now Harry saw clearly what was to be done. "Well," he said, with a most convincing hesitancy, "well, if you wanted to come, Professor,

Hagrid would probably be really pleased. . . . Give Aragog a better send-off, you know ..."

"Yes, of course," said Slughorn, his eyes now gleaming with en-thusiasm. "I tell you what, Harry, I'll meet you down there with a bottle or two. . . . We'll drink the poor beast's — well — not health — but we'll send it off in style, anyway, once it's buried. And I'll change my tie, this one is a little exuberant for the occa-sion. . . ."

He bustled back into the castle, and Harry sped off to Hagrid's, delighted with himself.

"Yen came," croaked Hagrid, when he opened the door and saw Harry emerging from the Invisibility Cloak in front of him.

"Yeah — Ron and Hermione couldn't, though," said Harry. "They're really sorry."

"Don — don matter . . . Hed've bin touched yeh're here, though, Harry. . . ."

Hagrid gave a great sob. He had made himself a black armband out of what looked like a rag dipped in boot polish, and his eyes were puffy, red, and swollen. Harry patted him consolingly on the elbow, which was the highest point of Hagrid he could easily reach.

"Where are we burying him?" he asked. "The forest?"

"Blimey, no," said Hagrid, wiping his streaming eyes on the bot-tom of his shirt. "The other spiders won' let me anywhere near their webs now Aragog's gone. Turns out it was only on his orders they didn' eat me! Can yeh believe that, Harry?"

The honest answer was "yes"; Harry recalled with painful ease the scene when he and Ron had come face-to-face with the aero-mantulas. They had been quite clear that Aragog was the only thing that stopped them from eating Hagrid.

"Never bin an area o' the forest I couldn' go before!" said Hagrid, shaking his head. "It wasn' easy, gettin' Aragog's body out o' there, I can tell yeh — they usually eat their dead, see. . . . But I wanted ter give 'im a nice burial... a proper send-off. . ."

He broke into sobs again and Harry resumed the patting of his elbow, saying as he did so (for the potion seemed to indicate that it was the right thing to do), "Professor Slughorn met me coming down here, Hagrid."

"Not in trouble, are yeh?" said Hagrid, looking up, alarmed. "Yeh shouldn' be outta the castle in the evenin', I know it, it's my fault —"

"No, no, when he heard what I was doing he said he'd like to come and pay his last respects to Aragog too," said Harry.

"He's gone to change into something more suitable, I think…and he said he'd bring some bottles so we can drink to Aragog's mem-ory..."

"Did he?" said Hagrid, looking both astonished and touched. "Tha's — tha's righ' nice of him, that is, an' not turnin' yeh in ei-ther. I've never really had a lot ter do with Horace Slughorn before. .. . Comin' ter see old Aragog off, though, eh? Well. . . he'd've liked that, Aragog would. . . .":

Harry thought privately that what Aragog would have liked most about Slughorn was the ample amount of edible flesh he pro-vided, but he merely moved to the rear window of Hagrid's hut, where he saw the rather horrible sight of the enormous dead spider lying on its back outside, its legs curled and tangled.

"Are we going to bury him here, Hagrid, in your garden?"

"Jus' beyond the pumpkin patch, I thought," said Hagrid in a choked voice. "I've already dug the — yeh know — grave. Jus' thought we'd say a few nice things over him — happy memories, yeh know —"

His voice quivered and broke. There was a knock on the door, and he turned to answer it, blowing his nose on his great spotted handkerchief as he did so. Slughorn hurried over the threshold, several bottles in his arms, and wearing a somber black cravat.

"Hagrid," he said, in a deep, grave voice. "So very sorry to hear of your loss."

"Tha's very nice of yeh," said Hagrid. "Thanks a lot. An' thanks fer not givin Harry detention neither. . . ."

"Wouldn't have dreamed of it," said Slughorn. "Sad night, sad night. . . Where is the poor creature?"

"Out here," said Hagrid in a shaking voice. "Shall we — shall we do it, then?"

The three of them stepped out into the back garden. The moon was glistening palely through the trees now, and its rays mingled with the light spilling from Hagrid's window to illuminate Aragogs body lying on the edge of a massive pit beside a ten-foot- high mound of freshly dug earth.

"Magnificent," said Slughorn, approaching the spiders head, where eight milky eyes stared blankly at the sky and two huge, curved pincers shone, motionless, in the moonlight. Harry thougln he heard the tinkle of bottles as Slughorn bent over the pincers, apparently examining the enormous hairy head.

"Its not ev'ryone appreciates how beau'iful they are’ said H grid to Slughorn's back, tears leaking from the corners of his crinkled eyes. "I didn' know yeh were interested in creatures like Aragog, Horace."

"Interested? My dear Hagrid, I revere them," said Slughorn, stepping back from the body. Harry saw the glint of a bottle disap-pear beneath his cloak, though Hagrid, mopping his eyes once more, noticed nothing. "Now . . . shall we proceed to the burial?"

Hagrid nodded and moved forward. He heaved the gigantic spi-der into his arms and, with an enormous grunt, rolled it into the dark pit. It hit the bottom with a rather horrible, crunchy thud. Hagrid started to cry again.

"Of course, it's difficult for you, who knew him best," said Slughorn, who like Harry could reach no higher than Hagrid's el-bow, but patted it all the same. "Why don't I say a few words?"

He must have got a lot of good quality venom from Aragog, Harry thought, for Slughorn wore a satisfied smirk as he stepped up to the rim of the pit and said, in a slow, impressive voice, "Farewell, Aragog, king of arachnids, whose long and faithful friendship those who knew you won't forget! Though your body will decay, your spirit lingers on in the quiet, web-spun places of your forest home. May your many-eyed descendants ever flourish and your human friends find solace for the loss they have sustained."

"Tha was . . . tha was . . . beau'iful!" howled Hagrid, and he collapsed onto the compost heap, crying harder than ever.

"There, there," said Slughorn, waving his wand so that the huge pile of earth rose up and then fell, with a muffled sort of crash, onto the dead spider, forming a smooth mound. "Lets get inside and have a drink. Get on his other side, Harry. . . . That's it. ... Up you come, Hagrid . . . Well done ..."

They deposited Hagrid in a chair at the table. Fang, who had been skulking in his basket during the burial, now came padding softly across to them and put his heavy head into Harry's lap as usual. Slughorn uncorked one of the bottles of wine he had brought.

"I have had it all tested for poison," he assured Harry, pouring most of the first bottle into one of Hagrid's bucket-sized mugs and handing it to Hagrid. "Had a house-elf taste every bottle after what happened to your poor friend Rupert."

Harry saw, in his mind's eye, the expression on Hermione's face if she ever heard about this abuse of houseelves, and decided never to mention it to her.

"One for Harry . . ." said Slughorn, dividing a second bottle be-tween two mugs, ". . . and one for me. Well" — he raised his mug high — "to Aragog."

"Aragog," said Harry and Hagrid together. Both Slughorn and Hagrid drank deeply. Harry, however, with the way ahead illuminated for him by Felix Felicis, knew that he must not drink, so he merely pretended to take a gulp and then set the mug back on the table before him.

"I had him from an egg, yeh know," said Hagrid morosely. "'Tiny little thing he was when he hatched. 'Bout the size of a Pekingese”

"Sweet," said Slughorn.

"Used ter keep him in a cupboard up at the school until . . . well..."

Hagrid's face darkened and Harry knew why: Tom Riddle had contrived to have Hagrid thrown out of school, blamed for opening the Chamber of Secrets. Slughorn, however, did not seem to be listening; he was looking up at the ceiling, from which a number of brass pots hung, and also a long, silky skein of bright white hair.

"That's not unicorn hair, Hagrid?"

"Oh, yeah," said Hagrid indifferently. "Gets pulled out of their tails, they catch it on branches an' stuff in the forest, yeh know ..."

"But my dear chap, do you know how much that's worth?"

"I use it fer bindin' on bandages an stuff if a creature gets in jured," said Hagrid, shrugging. "It's dead useful. . . very strong.”

Slughorn took another deep draught from his mug, his eyes moving carefully around the cabin now, looking, Harry knew, for more treasures that he might be able to convert into a plentiful su ply of oak-matured mead, crystalized pineapple, and velvet smok-ing jackets. He refilled Hagrid's mug and his own, and questioned him about the creatures that lived in the forest these days and how Hagrid was able to look after them all. Hagrid, becoming expan-sive under the influence of the drink and Slughorn's flattering in-terest, stopped mopping his eyes and entered happily into a long explanation of bowtruckle husbandry.

The Felix Felicis gave Harry a little nudge at this point, and he noticed that the supply of drink that Slughorn had brought was running out fast. Harry had not yet managed to bring off the Re-filling Charm without saying the incantation aloud, but the idea that he might not be able to do it tonight was laughable: Indeed, Harry grinned to himself as, unnoticed by either Hagrid or Slug-liorn (now swapping tales of the illegal trade in dragon eggs) he pointed his wand under the table at the emptying bottles and they immediately began to refill.

After an hour or so, Hagrid and Slughorn began making extravagant toasts: to Hogwarts, to Dumbledore, to elf-made wine, and to-

"Harry Potter!" bellowed Hagrid, slopping some of his four-teenth bucket of wine down his chin as he drained it.

"Yes, indeed," cried Slughorn a little thickly, "Parry Otter, the Chosen Boy Who — well — something of that sort," he mumbled, and drained his mug too.

;

Not long after this, Hagrid became tearful again and pressed the whole unicorn tail upon Slughorn, who pocketed it with cries of, "To friendship! To generosity! To ten Galleons a hair!"

And for a while after that, Hagrid and Slughorn were sitting side by side, arms around each other, singing a slow sad song about a dying wizard called Odo.

"Aaargh, the good die young," muttered Hagrid, slumping low onto the table, a little cross-eyed, while Slughorn continued to war-ble the refrain. "Me dad was no age ter go ... nor were yer mum' an' dad, Harry . . ."

Great fat tears oozed out of the corners of Hagrid's crinkled eyes again; he grasped Harry's arm and shook it

"Bes' wiz and witchard o' their age … I never knew.. . terrible thing . . . terrible thing ..."

“And Odo the hero, they bore him back homeTo the place that he'd known as a lad,”

sang Slughorn plaintively.

“They laid him to rest with his hat inside out.

And his wand snapped in two, which was sad.”

". . . terrible," Hagrid grunted, and his great shaggy head rolled sideways onto his arms and he fell asleep, snoring deeply.

"Sorry," said Slughorn with a hiccup. "Can't carry a tune to save my life."

"Hagrid wasn't talking about your singing," said Harry quietly. "He was talking about my mum and dad dying."

"Oh," said Slughorn, repressing a large belch. "Oh dear. Yes, that was — was terrible indeed. Terrible . . . terrible ..."

He looked quite at a loss for what to say, and resorted to refilling their mugs.

"I don't — don't suppose you remember it, Harry?" he asked awkwardly.

"No — well, I was only one when they died," said Harry, his eyes on the flame of the candle flickering in Hagrid's heavy snores. "But I've found out pretty much what happened since. My dad died first. Did you know that?"

"I — I didn't," said Slughorn in a hushed voice.

"Yeah . . . Voldemort murdered him and then stepped over his body toward my mum," said Harry.

Slughorn gave a great shudder, but he did not seem able to tear his horrified gaze away from Harry's face.

"He told her to get out of the way," said Harry remorselessly. "He told me she needn't have died. He only wanted me. She could have run."

"Oh dear," breathed Slughorn. "She could have . . . she needn't . . . That's awful. . . ."

"It is, isn't it?" said Harry, in a voice barely more than a whisper. "But she didn't move. Dad was already dead, but she didn't want me to go too. She tried to plead with Voldemort. . . but he just laughed...."

"That's enough!" said Slughorn suddenly, raising a shaking hand. "Really, my dear boy, enough . . . I'm an old man ... I don't need to hear ... I don't want to hear ..."

"I forgot," lied Harry, Felix Felicis leading him on. "You liked her, didn't you?"

"Liked her?" said Slughorn, his eyes brimming with tears once more. "I don't imagine anyone who met her wouldn't have liked her. . . . Very brave . . . Very funny... It was the most horrible thing. ..."

"But you won't help her son," said Harry. "She gave me her life, but you won't give me a memory."

Hagrid's rumbling snores filled the cabin. Harry looked steadily into Slughorn's tear-filled eyes. The Potions master seemed unable to look away.

"Don't say that," he whispered. "It isn't a question ... If it were to help you, of course . . . but no purpose can be served . . .""It can," said Harry clearly. "Dumbledore needs information. I need information."

He knew he was safe: Felix was telling him that Slughorn would remember nothing of this in the morning. Looking Slughorn straight in the eye, Harry leaned forward a little.

"I am the Chosen One. I have to kill him. I need that memory."

Slughorn turned paler than ever; his shiny forehead gleamed with sweat.

"You are the Chosen One?" . . I.

"Of course I am," said Harry calmly.

"But then . . . my dear boy . . . you're asking a great deal. . . you're asking me, in fact, to aid you in your attempt to destroy-“

"You don't want to get rid of the wizard who killed Lily Evans?'"

"Harry, Harry, of course I do, but —"

"You're scared he'll find out you helped me?"

Slughorn said nothing; he looked terrified.

"Be brave like my mother, Professor. . . ."

Slughorn raised a pudgy hand and pressed his shaking fingers to his mouth; he looked for a moment like an enormously overgrown baby.

"I am not proud . . ." he whispered through his fingers. "I am ashamed of what — of what that memory shows. ... I think I may have done great damage that day. ..."

"You'd cancel out anything you did by giving me the memory," said Harry. "It would be a very brave and noble thing to do."

Hagrid twitched in his sleep and snored on. Slughorn and Harry stared at each other over the guttering candle. There was a long, long silence, but Felix Felicis told Harry not to break it, to wait. Then, very slowly, Slughorn put his hand in his pocket and pulled out his wand. He put his other hand inside his cloak and took out a small, empty bottle. Still looking into Harry's eyes, Slughorn touched the tip of his wand to his temple and withdrew it, so that a long, silver thread of memory came away too, clinging to the wand tip. Longer and longer the memory stretched until it broke and swung, silvery bright, from the wand. Slughorn lowered it into the bottle where it coiled, then spread, swirling like gas. He corked the bottle with a trembling hand and then passed it across the table to Harry.

"Thank you very much, Professor."

"You're a good boy," said Professor Slughorn, tears trickling down his fat cheeks into his walrus mustache. "And you've got her eyes. . . . Just don't think too badly of me once you've seen it. . . ,"

And he too put his head on his arms, gave a deep sigh, and fell asleep.

Chapter 23 Horcruxes

Harry could feel the Felix Felicis wearing off as he creeped back into the castle. The front door had remained un locked for him, but on the third floor he met Peeves and only narrowly avoided detection by diving sideways through one of his shortcuts. By the time he got up to the portrait of the Fat Lady and pulled off his Invisibility Cloak, he was not surprised to find her in a most unhelpful mood.

"What sort of time do you call this?"

"I'm really sorry — I had to go out for something important —"

"Well, the password changed at midnight, so you'll just have to sleep in the corridor, won't you?"

"You're joking!" said Harry. "Why did it have to change at midnight?"

"That's the way it is," said the Fat Lady. "If you're angry, go and take it up with the headmaster, he's the one who's tightened security."

"Fantastic," said Harry bitterly, looking around at the hard floor. "Really brilliant. Yeah, I would go and take it up with Dumbledore if he was here, because he's the one who wanted me to —"

"He is here," said a voice behind Harry. "Professor Dumbledore returned to the school an hour ago."Nearly Headless Nick was gliding toward Harry, his head wob-bling as usual upon his ruff.

"I had it from the Bloody Baron, who saw him arrive," said Nick. "He appeared, according to the Baron, to be in good spirits, though a little tired, of course.""Where is he?" said Harry, his heart leaping,”

"Oh, groaning and clanking up on the Astronomy Tower, it's a, favorite pastime of his —"

"Not the Bloody Baron — Dumbledore!"

"Oh — in his office," said Nick. "I believe, from what the Baron said, that he had business to attend to before turning in —"

"Yeah, he has," said Harry, excitement blazing in his chest at the prospect of telling Dumbledore he had secured the memory. He wheeled about and sprinted off again, ignoring the Fat Lady who was calling after him.

"Come back! All right, I lied! I was annoyed you woke me up! The password's still 'tapeworm'!"

But Harry was already hurtling back along the corridor and within minutes, he was saying "toffee eclairs" to Dumbledore's gar-goyle, which leapt aside, permitting Harry entrance onto the spiral staircase.

"Enter," said Dumbledore when Harry knocked. He sounded exhausted. Harry pushed open the door. There was Dumbledore's office, looking the same as ever, but with black, star-strewn skies beyond the windows.

"Good gracious, Harry," said Dumbledore in surprise. "To what do I owe this very late pleasure?"

"Sir — I've got it. I've got the memory from Slughorn."

Harry pulled out the tiny glass bottle and showed it to Dumbledore. For a moment or two, the headmaster looked stunned. Then his face split in a wide smile.

"Harry, this is spectacular news! Very well done indeed! I knew you could do it!"

All thought of the lateness of the hour apparently forgotten, he hurried around his desk, took the bottle with Slughorn's memory in his

uninjured hand, and strode over to the cabinet where he kepi the Pensieve.

"And now," said Dumbledore, placing the stone basin upon the desk and emptying the contents of the bottle into it. "Now, at last. we shall see. Harry, quickly . . ."

Harry bowed obediently over the Pensieve and felt his feet leave the office floor. . . . Once again he fell through darkness and landed in Horace Slughorn's office many years before. There was the much younger Slughorn, with his thick, shiny, straw-colored hair and his gingery-blond mustache, sitting again in the comfortable winged armchair in his office, his feet resting upon a velvet pouffe, a small glass of wine in one hand, the other rummaging in a box of crystallized pineapple. And there were the half dozen teenage boys sitting around Slughorn with Tom Riddle in the midst of them, Marvolo's gold-and-black ring gleaming on his finger.

Dumbledore landed beside Harry just as Riddle asked, "Sir is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?"

"Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you," said Slughorn, wag-ging his finger reprovingly at Riddle, though winking at the same time. "I must say, I'd like to know where you get your information, boy, more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are."

Riddle smiled; the other boys laughed and cast him admiring looks.

"What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter — thank you for the pineapple, by the way, you're quite right, it is my favorite —" Several of the boys tittered again. "— I confidently expect you to rise to Minister of Magic within twenty years. Fifteen, if you keep sending me pineapple, I have ex-cellent contacts at the Ministry."

Tom Riddle merely smiled as the others laughed again. Harry noticed that he was by no means the eldest of the group of boys, but that they

all seemed to look to him as their leader.

"I don't know that politics would suit me, sir," he said when the laughter had died away. "I don't have the right kind of background, for one thing."

A couple of the boys around him smirked at each other. Harry was sure they were enjoying a private joke, undoubtedly about what they knew, or suspected, regarding their gang leader's famous ancestor.

"Nonsense," said Slughorn briskly, "couldn't be plainer you come from decent Wizarding stock, abilities like yours. No, you'll go far, Tom, I've never been wrong about a student yet."

The small golden clock standing upon Slughorn's desk chimed eleven o'clock behind him and he looked around.

"Good gracious, is it that time already? You'd better get going boys, or we'll all be in trouble. Lestrange, I want your essay by in morrow or it's detention. Same goes for you, Avery."

One by one, the boys filed out of the room. Slughorn heaved himself out of his armchair and carried his empty glass over to his desk. A movement behind him made him look around; Riddle was still standing there.

"Look shar

p, Tom, you don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a prefect.. ."

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something." -' "Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away. . . ."

"Sir, I wondered what you know about. . . about Horcruxes?'

Slughorn stared at him, his thick ringers absentmindedly clawing the stem of his wine glass.

"Project for Defense Against the Dark Arts, is it?"

But Harry could tell that Slughorn knew perfectly well that this was not schoolwork.

"Not exactly, sir," said Riddle. "I came across the term while reading and I didn't fully understand it.""No . . . well. . . you'd be hard-pushed to find a book at Hogwarts that'll give you details on Horcruxes, Tom, that's very Dark stuff, very Dark indeed," said Slughorn.

"But you obviously know all about them, sir? I mean, a wizard like you — sorry, I mean, if you can't tell me, obviously — I just knew if anyone could tell me, you could — so I just thought I'd –“

It was very well done, thought Harry, the hesitancy, the casual tone, the careful flattery, none of it overdone. He, Harry, had had too much experience of trying to wheedle information out of re-luctant people not to recognize a master at work. He could tell that Riddle wanted the information very, very much; perhaps had been working toward this moment for weeks.

"Well," said Slughorn, not looking at Riddle, but fiddling with the ribbon on top of his box of crystallized pineapple, "well, it can't hurt to give you an overview, of course. Just so that you understand t he term. A Horcrux is the word used for an object in which a per-son has concealed part of their soul."

"I don't quite understand how that works, though, sir," said Riddle.

His voice was carefully controlled, but Harry could sense his excitement.

"Well, you split your soul, you see," said Slughorn, "and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then, even if one's body is attacked or

destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged. But of course, existence in such a form ..."

Slughorn's face crumpled and Harry found himself remember-ing words he had heard nearly two years before: "I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost. . . but still, I was alive.""... few would want it, Tom, very few. Death would be preferable."

But Riddle's hunger was now apparent; his expression was greedy, he could no longer hide his longing.

"How do you split your soul?"

"Well," said Slughorn uncomfortably, "you must understand that the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole. Splitting n it I an act of violation, it is against nature.""But how do you do it?"

"By an act of evil — the supreme act of evil. By commiting murder. Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage: He would encase the torn portion —"

"Encase? But how — ?"

"There is a spell, do not ask me, I don't know!" said Slughoin shaking his head like an old elephant bothered by mosquitoes. " Do I look as though I have tried it — do I look like a killer?"

"No, sir, of course not," said Riddle quickly. "I'm sorry ... I didn't mean to offend . . ."

"Not at all, not at all, not offended," said Slughorn gruffly, "It is natural to feel some curiosity about these things. . . . Wizards of a certain caliber have always been drawn to that aspect of magic. . . ."

"Yes, sir," said Riddle. "What I don't understand, though — just out of curiosity — I mean, would one Horcrux be much use? Can you only split your soul once? Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces, I mean, for instance, isn't seven the most powerfully magical number, wouldn't seven — ?"

"Merlin's beard, Tom!" yelped Slughorn. "Seven! Isn't it bad enough to think of killing one person? And in any case . . . bad enough to divide the soul . . . but to rip it into seven pieces . . ."

Slughorn looked deeply troubled now: He was gazing at Riddle as though he had never seen him plainly before, and Harry could tell that he was regretting entering into the conversation at all.

"Of course," he muttered, "this is all hypothetical, what we're discussing, isn't it? All academic . . ."

"Yes, sir, of course," said Riddle quickly.

"But all the same, Tom . . . keep it quiet, what I've told — that's to say, what we've discussed. People wouldn't like to think we've been chatting about Horcruxes. It's a banned subject at Hogwarts, you know. . . . Dumbledore's particularly fierce about it. ..."

"I won't say a word, sir," said Riddle, and he left, but not before Harry had glimpsed his face, which was full of that same wild hap-piness it had worn when he had first found out that he was a wiz-ard, the sort of happiness that did not enhance his handsome features, but made them, somehow, less human. . . .

"Thank you, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "Let us go. . . ."

When Harry landed back on the office floor Dumbledore was ; already sitting down behind his desk. Harry sat too and waited for Dumbledore to speak.

"I have been hoping for this piece of evidence for a very long time," said Dumbledore at last. "It confirms the theory on which I have been working, it tells me that I am right, and also how very far there is still to go. ..."

Harry suddenly noticed that every single one of the old head-masters and headmistresses in the portraits around the walls was awake and listening in on their conversation. A corpulent, red nosed wizard had actually taken out an ear trumpet.

"Well, Harry," said Dumbledore, "I am sure you understood the significance of what we just heard. At the same age as you are now, give or take a few months, Tom Riddle was doing all he could to find out how to make himself immortal."

"You think he succeeded then, sir?" asked Harry. "He made a Horcrux? And that's why he didn't die when he attacked me? He had a Horcrux hidden somewhere? A bit of his soul was safe?"

"A bit... or more," said Dumbledore. "You heard Voldemort, what he particularly wanted from Horace was an opinion on what would happen to the wizard who created more than one Horcrux, what would happen to the wizard so determined to evade death that he would be prepared to murder many times, rip his soul repeatedly, so as to store it in many, separately concealed Horcruxc. No book would have given him that information. As far as I know — as far, I am sure, as Voldemort knew — no wizard had ever done more than tear his soul in two."

Dumbledore paused for a moment, marshaling his thought, and then said, "Four years ago, I received what I considered certain proof that Voldemort had split his soul."

"Where?" asked Harry. "How?"

"You handed it to me, Harry," said Dumbledore. "The diary, Riddles diary, the one giving instructions on how to reopen the Chamber of

Secrets."

"I don't understand, sir," said Harry.

"Well, although I did not see the Riddle who came out of the di-ary, what you described to me was a phenomenon I had never wit-nessed. A mere memory starting to act and think for itself? A mere memory, sapping the life out of the girl into whose hands it had fallen? No, something much more sinister had lived inside that book. ... a fragment of soul, I was almost sure of it. The diary had been a Horcrux. But this raised as many questions as it answered. What intrigued and alarmed me most was that that diary had been intended as a weapon as much as a safeguard."

"1 still don't understand," said Harry.

"Well, it worked as a Horcrux is supposed to work — in other words, the fragment of soul concealed inside it was kept safe and had undoubtedly played its part in preventing the death of its owner. But there could be no doubt that Riddle really wanted that diary read, wanted the piece of his soul to inhabit or possess some-body else, so that Slytherin's monster would be unleashed again."

"Well, he didn't want his hard work to be wasted," said Harry. "He wanted people to know he was Slytherin's heir, because he couldn't take credit at the time."

"Quite correct," said Dumbledore, nodding. "But don't you see, Harry, that if he intended the diary to be passed to, or planted on, some future Hogwarts student, he was being remarkably blase about that precious fragment of his soul concealed within it. The point of a Horcrux is, as Professor Slughorn explained, to keep part of the self hidden and safe, not to fling it into somebody else's path and run the risk that they might destroy it — as indeed happened: That particular fragment of soul is no more; you saw to that.

The careless way in which Voldemort regarded this Horcrux seemed most ominous to me. It suggested that he must have made — or had been planning to make — more Horcruxes, so that the loss of his first would not be so detrimental. I did not wish to be-lieve it, but nothing else seemed to make sense. Then you told me, two years later, that on the night that Volde-mort returned to his body, he made a most illuminating and alarm-ing statement to his Death Eaters. ‘I who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality.’ That was what you told me he said. 'Further than anybody!' And I thought I knew what that meant, though the Death Eaters did not. He was referring to his Horcruxes, Horcruxes in the plural, Harry, which I don’t believe any other wizard has ever had. Yet it fitted: Lord Voldomort has seemed to grow less human with the passing years, and the transformation he had undergone seemed to me to be only explainable if his soul was mutilated beyond the realms of what we might call 'usual evil' . . ."

"So he's made himself impossible to kill by murdering other people?" said Harry. "Why couldn't he make a Sorcerer's Stone, or steal one, if he was so interested in immortality?"

"Well, we know that he tried to do just that, five years ago," s;n?l Dumbledore. "But there are several reasons why, I think, a Sorcerer's Stone would appeal less than Horcruxes to Lord Voldemort,"While the Elixir of Life does indeed extend life, it must lie drunk regularly, for all eternity, if the drinker is to maintain the immortality. Therefore, Voldemort would be entirely dependant on the Elixir, and if it ran out, or was contaminated, or if the Stone was stolen, he would die just like any other man. Voldemort likes to operate alone, remember. I believe that he would have found the thought of being dependent, even on the Elixir, intolerable. Of course he was prepared to drink it if it would take him out of the horrible part-life to which he was condemned after attacking you, but only to regain a body. Thereafter, I am convinced, he intended to continue to rely on his Horcruxes. He would need nothing more, if only he could regain a human form. He was already im-mortal, you see ... or as close to immortal as any man can be. But

now, Harry, armed with this information, the crucial memory you have succeeded in procuring for us, we are closer to the se-cret of finishing Lord Voldemort than anyone has ever been before. You heard him, Harry: 'Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces . . . isn't seven the most powerfully magical number . . .' Isn't seven the most powerfully magical number. Yes, I think the idea of a seven-part soul would greatly appeal to Lord Voldemort."

"He made seven Horcruxes?" said Harry, horror-struck, while several of the portraits on the walls made similar noises of shock mid outrage. "But they could be anywhere in the world — hidden — buried or invisible —"

"I am glad to see you appreciate the magnitude of the problem," said Dumbledore calmly. "But firstly, no, Harry, not seven Hor-cruxes: six. The seventh part of his soul, however maimed, resides inside his regenerated body. That was the part of him that lived a spectral existence for so many years during his exile; without that, he has no self at all. That seventh piece of soul will be the last that anybody wishing to kill Voldemort must attack — the piece that lives in his body.""But the six Horcruxes, then," said Harry, a little desperately, "how are we supposed to find them?""You are forgetting . . . you have already destroyed one of them. And I have destroyed another."

"You have?" said Harry eagerly.

"Yes indeed," said Dumbledore, and he raised his blackened, burned-looking hand. "The ring, Harry. Marvolo's ring. And a ter-rible curse there was upon it too. Had it not been — forgive me the lack of seemly modesty — for my own prodigious skill, and for Professor Snape's timely action when I returned to Hogwarts, des-perately injured, I might not have lived to tell the tale. However, a withered hand does not seem an unreasonable exchange for a sev-enth of Voldemort's soul. The ring is no longer a Horcrux."

"But how did you find it?"

"Well, as you now know, for many years I have made it my business to discover as much as I can about Voldemort's past life. I have traveled widely, visiting those places he once knew. I stumbled across the ring hidden in the ruin of the Gaunt's house. It seem that once Voldemort had succeeded in sealing a piece of his soul in side it, he did not want to wear it anymore. He hid it, protected by many powerful enchantments, in the shack where his ancestors had once lived (Morfin having been carted off to Azkaban, of course), never guessing that I might one day take the trouble to visit the ruin, or that I might be keeping an eye open for traces of magical concealment.

"However, we should not congratulate ourselves too heartily. You destroyed the diary and I the ring, but if we are right in our theory of a seven-part soul, four Horcruxes remain.""And they could be anything?" said Harry. "They could be oh, in tin cans or, I dunno, empty potion bottles. . . ."

"You are thinking of Portkeys, Harry, which must be ordinary objects, easy to overlook. But would Lord Voldemort use tin cans or old potion bottles to guard his own precious soul? You are forgetting what I have showed you. Lord Voldemort liked to collect trophies, and he preferred objects with a powerful magical history His pride, his belief in his own superiority, his determination to carve for himself a startling place in magical history; these things, suggest to me that Voldemort would have chosen his Horcruxr with some care, favoring objects worthy of the honor."

"The diary wasn't that special."

"The diary, as you have said yourself, was proof that he was the Hire of Slytherin. I am sure that Voldemort considered it of stu-pendous importance."

"So, the other Horcruxes?" said Harry. "Do you think you know what they are, sir?"

"I can only guess," said Dumbledore. "For the reasons I have al-ready given, I believe that Lord Voldemort would prefer objects that, in themselves, have a certain grandeur. I have therefore trawled back through Voldemort's past to see if I can find evidence that such artifacts have disappeared around him."

"The locket!" said Harry loudly, "Hufflepuff's cup!"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, smiling, "I would be prepared to bet — perhaps not my other hand — but a couple of fingers, that they be-came Horcruxes three and four. The remaining two, assuming again that he created a total of six, are more of a problem, but I will hazard a guess that, having secured objects from Hufflepuff and Slytherin, he set out to track down objects owned by Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. Four objects from the four founders would, I am sure, have exerted a powerful pull over Voldemort's imagination. I can-not answer for whether he ever managed to find anything of Ravenclaw's. I am confident, however, that the only known relic of Gryffindor remains safe."

Dumbledore pointed his blackened fingers to the wall behind him, where a ruby-encrusted sword reposed within a glass case.

"Do you think that's why he really wanted to come back to Hogwarts, sir?" said Harry. "To try and find something from one of the other founders?"

"My thoughts precisely," said Dumbledore. "But unfortunately, that does not advance us much further, for he was turned away, or so I believe, without the chance to search the school. I am forced to conclude that he never fulfilled his ambition of collecting four founders' objects. He definitely had two — he may have found three — that is the best we can do for now."

"Even if he got something of Ravenclaw's or of Gryffindor's, that leaves a sixth Horcrux," said Harry, counting on his fingers. "Unless he’s got both?"

"I don't think so," said Dumbledore. "I think I know what the sixth Horcrux is. I wonder what you will say when I confess that I have been curious for a while about the behavior of the snake, Nagini?'

"The snake?" said Harry, startled. "You can use animals as Horcruxes?"

"Well, it is inadvisable to do so," said Dumbledore, "because to confide a part of your soul to something that can think and move for itself is obviously a very risky business. However, if my calculations are correct, Voldemort was still at least one Horcrux short of his goal of six when he entered your parents' house with the inten-tion of killing you. He seems to have reserved the process of making Horcruxes for particularly significant deaths. You would certainly have been that. He believed that in killing you, he was destroying the danger the prophecy had outlined. He believed he was making himself invin-cible. I am sure that he was intending to make his final Horcrux with your death. As we know, he failed. After an interval of some years, however, he used Nagini to kill an old Muggle man, and it might then have occurred to him to turn her into his last Horcrux. She underlines the Slytherin connection, which enhances Lord Voldemorts mys-tique; I think he is perhaps as fond of her as he can be of anything; he certainly likes to keep her close, and he seems to have an un-usual amount of control over her, even for a Parselmouth."

"So," said Harry, "the diary's gone, the ring's gone. The cup, the locket, and the snake are still intact, and you think there might be a Horcrux that was once Ravenclaw's or Gryffindor's?"

"An admirably succinct and accurate summary, yes," said Dum-bledore, bowing his head.

"So . . . are you still looking for them, sir? Is that where you've been going when you've been leaving the school?"

"Correct," said Dumbledore. "I have been looking for a very long time. I think. . . perhaps ... I may be close to finding an-other one. There are hopeful signs."

"And if you do," said Harry quickly, "can I come with you and help get rid of it?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry very intently for a moment before saying, "Yes, I think so."

"I can?" said Harry, thoroughly taken aback.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore, smiling slightly. "I think you have earned that right."

Harry felt his heart lift. It was very good not to hear words of caution and protection for once. The headmasters and head-mistresses around the walls seemed less impressed by Dumbledore's decision; Harry saw a few of them shaking their heads and Phineas Nigellus actually snorted.

"Does Voldemort know when a Horcrux is destroyed, sir? Can he feel it?" Harry asked, ignoring the portraits.

"A very interesting question, Harry. I believe not. I believe that Voldemort is now so immersed in evil, and these crucial parts of himself have been detached for so long, he does not feel as we do. Perhaps, at the point of death, he might be aware of his loss . . . but he was not aware, for instance, that the diary had been destroyed until he forced the truth out of Lucius Malfoy. When Voldemort discovered that the diary had been mutilated and robbed of all its powers, I am told that his anger was terrible to behold."

"But I thought he meant Lucius Malfoy to smuggle it into Hogwarts?"

"Yes, he did, years ago, when he was sure he would be able to create more Horcruxes, but still Lucius was supposed to wait for Voldemorts

say-so, and he never received it, for Voldemort van-ished shortly after giving him the diary. No doubt he thought that Lucius would not dare do anything with the Horcrux other than guard it carefully, but he was counting too much upon Lucius's fear of a master who had been gone for years and whom Lucius believed dead. Of course, Lucius did not know what the diary really was. I understand that Voldemort had told him the diary would cause the Chamber of Secrets to reopen because it was cleverly enchanted. Had Lucius known he held a portion of his mas-ters soul in his hands, he would undoubtedly have treated it with more reverence — but instead he went ahead and carried out the old plan for his own ends. By planting the diary upon Arthur Weasleys daughter, he hoped to discredit Arthur and get rid of a highly incrim-inating magical object in one stroke. Ah, poor Lucius . . . what with Voldemorts fury about the fact that he threw away the Horcrux for his own gain, and the fiasco at the Ministry last year, I would not be sur-prised if he is not secretly glad to be safe in Azkaban at the moment."

Harry sat in thought for a moment, then asked, "So if all of his Horcruxes are destroyed, Voldemort couldbe killed?""Yes, I think so," said Dumbledore. "Without his Horcruxes, Voldemort will be a mortal man with a maimed and diminished soul. Never forget, though, that while his soul may be damaged be-yond repair, his brain and his magical powers remain intact. It will take uncommon skill and power to kill a wizard like Voldemort even without his Horcruxes."

"But I haven't got uncommon skill and power," said Harry, be-fore he could stop himself.

"Yes, you have," said Dumbledore firmly. "You have a power that Voldemort has never had. You can —""I know!" said Harry impatiently. "I can love!" It was only with difficulty that he stopped himself adding, "Big deal!"

"Yes, Harry, you can love," said Dumbledore, who looked as though he knew perfectly well what Harry had just refrained from saying.

"Which, given everything that has happened to you, is a great and remarkable thing. You are still too young to understand how unusual you are, Harry."

"So, when the prophecy says that I'll have 'power the Dark Lord knows not,' it just means — love?" asked Harry, feeling a little let down.

"Yes — just love," said Dumbledore. "But Harry, never forget that what the prophecy says is only significant because Voldemort made it so. I told you this at the end of last year. Voldemort singled you out as the person who would be most dangerous to him — and in doing so, he made you the person who would be most dan-gerous to him!"

"But it comes to the same —"

"No, it doesn't!" said Dumbledore, sounding impatient now. Pointing at Harry with his black, withered hand, he said, "You are setting too much store by the prophecy!"

"But," spluttered Harry, "but you said the prophecy means —"

"If Voldemort had never heard of the prophecy, would it have been fulfilled? Would it have meant anything? Of course not! Ho you think every prophecy in the Hall of Prophecy has been fulfilled?"

"But," said Harry, bewildered, "but last year, you said one of us would have to kill the other —"

"Harry, Harry, only because Voldemort made a grave error, and acted on Professor Trelawney's words! If Voldemort had never murdered your father, would he have imparted in you a furious desire for revenge? Of course not! If he had not forced your mother to die for you, would he have given you a magical protection he could not penetrate? Of course not, Harry! Don't you see? Voldemort himself created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much tyrants fear the people they oppress? All of them

realize that, one day, amongst their many victims, there is sure to be one who rises against them and strikes back! Voldemort is no different! Always he was on the lookout for the one who would challenge him. He heard the prophecy and he leapt into ac-tion, with the result that he not only handpicked the man most likely to finish him, he handed him uniquely deadly weapons!"

"But —"

"It is essential that you understand this!" said Dumbledore, standing up and striding about the room, his glittering robes swooshing in his wake; Harry had never seen him so agitated. "By attempting to kill you, Voldemort himself singled out the remark-able person who sits here in front of me, and gave him the tools for the job! It is Voldemort's fault that you were able to see into his thoughts, his ambitions, that you even understand the snakelike language in which he gives orders, and yet, Harry, despite your privileged insight into Voldemort's world (which, incidentally, is a gift any Death Eater would kill to have), you have never been se-duced by the Dark Arts, never, even for a second, shown the slight-est desire to become one of Voldemort's followers!"

"Of course I haven't!" said Harry indignantly. "He killed my mum and dad!"

"You are protected, in short, by your ability to love!" said Dum-bledore loudly. "The only protection that can possibly work against the lure of power like Voldemort's! In spite of all the temptation you have endured, all the suffering, you remain pure of heart, just as pure as you were at the age of eleven, when you stared into a mir-ror that reflected your heart's desire, and it showed you only the way to thwart Lord Voldemort, and not immortality or riches. Harry, have you any idea how few wizards could have seen what you saw in that mirror? Voldemort should have known then what he was dealing with, but he did not! But he knows it now. You have flitted into Lord Voldemort's mind without damage to yourself, but he cannot possess you with-out

enduring mortal agony, as he discovered in the Ministry. I do not think he understands why, Harry, but then, he was in such a hurry to mutilate his own soul, he never paused to understand the incomparable power of a soul that is untarnished and whole."

"But, sir," said Harry, making valiant efforts not to sound argu-mentative, "it all comes to the same thing, doesn't it? I've got to try and kill him, or —"

"Got to?" said Dumbledore. "Of course you've got to! But not because of the prophecy! Because you, yourself, will never rest until you've tried! We both know it! Imagine, please, just for a moment,that you had never heard that prophecy! How would you feel about Voldemort now? Think!"

Harry watched Dumbledore striding up and down in front ol him, and thought. He thought of his mother, his father, and Sinus. He thought of Cedric Diggory. He thought of all the terrible deeds he knew Lord Voldemort had done. A flame seemed to leap inside his chest, searing his throat.

"I'd want him finished," said Harry quietly. "And I'd want to do it."

"Of course you would!" cried Dumbledore. "You see, the prophecy does not mean you have to do anything! But the prophecy caused Lord Voldemort to mark you as his equal. ... In other words, you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the prophecy! But Voldemort continues to set store by the prophecy. He will continue to hunt you . . . which makes it certain, really, that —"

"That one of us is going to end up killing the other," said Harry. "Yes."

But he understood at last what Dumbledore had been trying to tell him. It was, he thought, the difference between being dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death and walking into the arena with your head held high. Some people, perhaps, would say that there was little to choose between the two ways, but Dumble-dore knew —

and so do I, thought Harry, with a rush of fierce pride, and so did my parents — that there was all the difference in the world.

Chapter 24 Sectumsempra

Exhausted but delighted with his night's work, Harry told Ron and Hermione everything that had happened during next morning's Charms lesson (having first cast the Muffliato spell upon those nearest them). They were both satisfyingly impressed by the way he had wheedled the memory out of Slughorn and positively awed when he told them about Voldemort's Horcruxes and Dumbledore's promise to take Harry along, should he find another one.

"Wow," said Ron, when Harry had finally finished telling them everything; Ron was waving his wand very vaguely in the direction of the ceiling without paying the slightest bit of attention to what he was doing. "Wow. You're actually going to go with Dumbledore . . . and try and destroy . . . wow.""Ron, you're making it snow," said Hermione patiently, grabbing his wrist and redirecting his wand away from the ceiling from which, sure enough, large white flakes had started to fall. Lavender Brown, Harry noticed, glared at Hermione from a neighboring table through very red eyes, and Hermione immediately let go of Rons arm.

"Oh yeah," said Ron, looking down at his shoulders in vague surprise. "Sorry... looks like we've all got horrible dandruff now. ..."He brushed some of the fake snow off Hermiones shoulder Lavender burst into tears. Ron looked immensely guilty and turned his back on her.

"We split up," he told Harry out of the corner of his mouth, "Last night. When she saw me coming out of the dormitory with Hermione. Obviously she couldn't see you, so she thought it had just been the two of us.""Ah," said Harry. "Well — you don't mind it's over, do you?", "No," Ron admitted. "It was pretty bad while she was yelling, but at least I didn't have to finish it.""Coward," said Hermione, though she looked amused. "Well, it was a bad night for romance all around. Ginny and Dean split up too, Harry."Harry thought there was a rather knowing look in her eye as she told him that, but she could not

possibly know that his insides were suddenly dancing the conga. Keeping his face as immobile and his voice as indifferent as he could, he asked, "How come?""Oh, something really silly . . . She said he was always trying to help her through the portrait hole, like she couldn't climb in herself . . . but they've been a bit rocky for ages."Harry glanced over at Dean on the other side of the classroom. He certainly looked unhappy.

"Of course, this puts you in a bit of a dilemma, doesn't it?" said Hermione.

"What d'you mean?" said Harry quickly.

"The Quidditch team," said Hermione. "If Ginnyand Dean aren't speaking . . .""Oh — oh yeah," said Harry.

"Flitwick," said Ron in a warning tone. The tiny little Charms master was bobbing his way toward them, and Hermione was the only one who had managed to turn vinegar into wine; her glass flask was full of deep crimson liquid, whereas the contents of Harry's and Ron's were still murky brown.

"Now, now, boys," squeaked Professor Flitwick reproachfully. "A little less talk, a little more action . . . Let me see you try. . . ."Together they raised their wands, concentrating with all their might, and pointed them at their flasks. Harry's vinegar turned to ice; Rons flask exploded.

"Yes ... for homework," said Professor Flitwick, reemerging from under the table and pulling shards of glass out of the top of his hat, "practice."They had one of their rare joint free periods after Charms and walked back to the common room together. Ron seemed to be positively lighthearted about the end of his relationship with Lavender, and Hermione seemed cheery too, though when asked what she was grinning about she simply said, "It's a nice day." Neither of them seemed to have noticed that a fierce battle was raging inside Harry's brain:

She's Rons sister.

But she's ditched Dean!

She's still Rons sister.

I'm his best mate!

That'll make it worse.

If I talked to him first —

He'd hit you.

What if I don't care?

He's your best mate!

Harry barely noticed that they were climbing through the portrait hole into the sunny common room, and only vaguely registered the small group of seventh years clustered together there, until Hermione cried, "Katie! You're back! Are you okay?"Harry stared: It was indeed Katie Bell, looking completely healthy and surrounded by her jubilant friends.

"I'm really well!" she said happily. "They let me out of St. Mungos on Monday, I had a couple of days at home with Mum and Dad and then came back here this morning. Leanne was just telling me about McLaggen and the last match, Harry. . . .""Yeah," said Harry, "well, now you're back and Ron's fit, we'll have a decent chance of thrashing Ravenclaw, which means we could still be in the running for the Cup. Listen, Katie . . ."He had to put the question to her at once; his curiosity even drove Ginny temporarily from his brain. He dropped his voice as Katie's friends started gathering up their things; apparently they were late for Transfiguration.

". . . that necklace . . . can you remember who gave it to you now?""No," said Katie, shaking her head ruefully. "Everyone's been asking me, but I haven't got a clue. The last thing I remember was walking into the ladies' in the Three Broomsticks.""You definitely went into the bathroom, then?" said Hermione.

"Well, I know I pushed open the door," said Katie, "so I suppose whoever Imperiused me was standing just behind it. After that, my memory's a blank until about two weeks ago in St. Mungo's. Listen, I'd better go, I wouldn't put it past McGonagall to give me lines even if it is my first day back. ..."She caught up her bag and books and hurried after her friends, leaving Harry, Ron, and Hermione to sit down at a window table and ponder what she had told them.

"So it must have been a girl or a woman who gave Katie the necklace," said Hermione, "to be in the ladies' bathroom.""Or someone who looked like a girl or a woman," said Harry. "Don't forget, there was a cauldron full of Polyjuice Potion at Hog-warts. We know some of it got stolen. . . ."In his mind's eye, he watched a parade of Crabbes and Goyles prance past, all transformed into girls.

"I think I'm going to take another swig of Felix," said Harry, "and have a go at the Room of Requirement again.""That would be a complete waste of potion," said Hermione flatly, putting down the copy of Spellmans Syllabary she had just taken out of her bag. "Luck can only get you so far, Harry. The situation with Slughorn was different; you always had the ability to persuade him, you just needed to tweak the circumstances a bit. Luck isn't enough to get you through a powerful enchantment, though. Don't go wasting the rest of that potion! You'll need all the luck you can get if Dumbledore takes you along with him ..." She dropped her voice to a whisper.

"Couldn't we make some more?" Ron asked Harry, ignoring Hermione. "It'd be great to have a stock of it. ... Have a look in the book... "Harry pulled his copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bap, and looked up Felix Felicis.

"Blimey, its seriously complicated," he said, running an eye down the list of ingredients. "And it takes six months.,. You've got to let it stew. ...""Typical," said Ron.

Harry was about to put his book away again when he noticed the corner of a page folded down; turning to it, he saw the Sectum-sempra spell, captioned "For Enemies," that he had marked a few weeks previously. He had still not found out what it did, mainly because he did not want to test it around Hermione, but he was considering trying it out on McLaggen next time he came up behind him unawares.

The only person who was not particularly pleased to see Katie Bell back at school was Dean Thomas, because he would no longer be required to fill her place as Chaser. He took the blow stoically enough when Harry told him, merely grunting and shrugging, but Harry had the distinct feeling as he walked away that Dean and Seamus were muttering mutinously behind his back.

The following fortnight saw the best Quidditch practices Harry had known as Captain. His team was so pleased to be rid of McLaggen, so glad to have Katie back at last, that they were flying extremely well.

Ginny did not seem at all upset about the breakup with Dean; on the contrary, she was the life and soul of the team. Her imitations of Ron anxiously bobbing up and down in front of the goal posts as the Quaffle sped toward him, or of Harry bellowing orders at McLaggen before being knocked out cold, kept them all highly amused. Harry, laughing with the others, was glad to have an innocent reason to look at Ginny; he had received several more Bludger injuries during practice because he had not been keeping his eyes on the Snitch.

The battle still raged inside his head: Ginny or Ron? Sometimes he thought that the post-Lavender Ron might not mind too much if he asked Ginny out, but then he remembered Ron's expression when he

had seen her kissing Dean, and was sure that Ron would consider it base treachery if Harry so much as held her hand. . . .

Yet Harry could not help himself talking to Ginny, laughing with her, walking back from practice with her; however much his conscience ached, he found himself wondering how best to get her on her own. It would have been ideal if Slughorn had given another of his little parties, for Ron would not be around — but unfortunately, Slughorn seemed to have given them up. Once or twice Harry considered asking for Hermione's help, but he did not think he could stand seeing the smug look on her face; he thought he caught it sometimes when Hermione spotted him staring at Ginny or laughing at her jokes. And to complicate matters, he had the nagging worry that if he didn't do it, somebody else was sure to ask Ginny out soon: He and Ron were at least agreed on the fact that she was too popular for her own good.

All in all, the temptation to take another gulp of Felix Felicis was becoming stronger by the day, for surely this was a case for, as Hermione put it, "tweaking the circumstances"? The balmy days slid gently through May, and Ron seemed to be there at Harry's shoulder every time he saw Ginny. Harry found himself longing for a stroke of luck that would somehow cause Ron to realize that nothing would make him happier than his best friend and his sister falling for each other and to leave them alone together for longer than a few seconds. There seemed no chance of either while the final Quidditch game of the season was looming; Ron wanted to talk tactics with Harry all the time and had little thought for anything else.

Ron was not unique in this respect; interest in the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw game was running extremely high throughout the school, for the match would decide the Championship, which was still wide open. If Gryffindor beat Ravenclaw by a margin of three hundred points (a tall order, and yet Harry had never known his team to fly better) then they would win the Championship. If they won by less than three hundred points, they would come second to Ravenclaw; if they lost by a hundred points they would be third behind Hufflepuff

and if they lost by more than a hundred, they would be in fourth place and nobody, Harry thought, would ever, ever let him forget that it had been he who had captained Gryffindor to their first bottom-of-the-table defeat in two centuries.

The run-up to this crucial match had all the usual features: members of rival Houses attempting to intimidate opposing teams in the corridors; unpleasant chants about individual players being rehearsed loudly as they passed; the team members themselves either swaggering around enjoying all the attention or else dashing into bathrooms between classes to throw up. Somehow, the game had become inextricably linked in Harry's mind with success or failure in his plans for Ginny. He could not help feeling that if they won by more than three hundred points, the scenes of euphoria and a nice loud after-match party might be just as good as a hearty swig of Felix Felicis.

In the midst of all his preoccupations, Harry had not forgotten his other ambition: finding out what Malfoy was up to in the Room of Requirement. He was still checking the Marauder's Map, and as he was unable to locate Malfoy on it, deduced that Malfoy was still spending plenty of time within the room. Although Harry was losing hope that he would ever succeed in getting inside the Room of Requirement, he attempted it whenever he was in the vicinity, but no matter how he reworded his request, the wall remained firmly doorless.

A few days before the match against Ravenclaw, Harry found himself walking down to dinner alone from the common room, Ron having rushed off into a nearby bathroom to throw up yet again, and Hermione having dashed off to see Professor Vector about a mistake she thought she might have made in her last Arithmancy essay. More out of habit than anything, Harry made his usual detour along the seventh-floor corridor, checking the Marauder's Map as he went. For a moment he could not find Malfoy anywhere and assumed he must indeed be inside the Room of Requirement again, but then he saw

Malfoy's tiny, labeled dot standing in a boys' bathroom on the floor below, accompanied, not by Crabbe or Goyle, but by Moaning Myrtle.

Harry only stopped staring at this unlikely coupling when he walked right into a suit of armor. The loud crash brought him out of his reverie; hurrying from the scene lest Filch turn up, he dashed down the marble staircase and along the passageway below. Outside the bathroom, he pressed his ear against the door. He could not hear anything. He very quietly pushed the door open.

Draco Malfoy was standing with his back to the door, his hands clutching either side of the sink, his white-blond head bowed.

"Don't," crooned Moaning Myrtle's voice from one of the cubicles. "Don't. . . tell me what's wrong ... I can help you. . . .""No one can help me," said Malfoy. His whole body was shaking. "I can't do it. ... I can't. ... It won't work . . . and unless 1 do it soon ... he says he'll kill me. ..."And Harry realized, with a shock so huge it seemed to root him to the spot, that Malfoy was crying — actually crying — tears streaming down his pale face into the grimy basin. Malfoy gasped and gulped and then, with a great shudder, looked up into flu-cracked mirror and saw Harry staring at him over his shoulder.

Malfoy wheeled around, drawing his wand. Instinctively, Harry pulled out his own. Malfoy's hex missed Harry by inches, shattering the lamp on the wall beside him; Harry threw himself sideways, thought Levicorpus! and flicked his wand, but Malfoy blocked the jinx and raised his wand for another —"No! No! Stop it!" squealed Moaning Myrtle, her voice echoing loudly around the tiled room. "Stop! STOP!"There was a loud bang and the bin behind Harry exploded; Harry attempted a Leg-Locker Curse that backfired off the wall behind Malfoy's ear and smashed the cistern beneath Moaning Myr-tle, who screamed loudly; water poured everywhere and Harry slipped as Malfoy, his face contorted, cried, "Cruci —""SECTUMSEMPRA!" bellowed Harry from the floor, waving his wand wildly.

Blood spurted from Malfoy's face and chest as though he had been slashed with an invisible sword. He staggered backward and collapsed onto the waterlogged floor with a great splash, his wand falling from his limp right hand.

"No —" gasped Harry.

Slipping and staggering, Harry got to his feet and plunged toward Malfoy, whose face was now shining scarlet, his white hands scrabbling at his blood-soaked chest.

"No — I didn't —"

Harry did not know what he was saying; he fell to his knees beside Malfoy, who was shaking uncontrollably in a pool of his own blood. Moaning Myrtle let out a deafening scream: "MURDER! MURDER IN THE BATHROOM! MURDER!"The door banged open behind Harry and he looked up, terrified: Snape had burst into the room, his face livid. Pushing Harry roughly aside, he knelt over Malfoy, drew his wand, and traced it over the deep wounds Harry's curse had made, muttering an incantation that sounded almost like song. The flow of blood seemed to ease; Snape wiped the residue from Malfoy's face and repeated his spell. Now the wounds seemed to be knitting.

Harry was still watching, horrified by what he had done, barely aware that he too was soaked in blood and water. Moaning Myrtle was still sobbing and wailing overhead. When Snape had performed his countercurse for the third time, he half-lifted Malfoy into a standing position.

"You need the hospital wing. There may be a certain amount of scarring, but if you take dittany immediately we might avoid even that.. . . Come...."He supported Malfoy across the bathroom, turning at the door to say in a voice of cold fury, "And you, Potter . . . You wait here for me."It did not occur to Harry for a second to disobey. He stood up slowly, shaking, and looked down at the wet floor. There were bloodstains floating like crimson flowers across its surface. He

could not even find it in himself to tell Moaning Myrtle to be quiet, as she continued to wail and sob with increasingly evident enjoyment.

Snape returned ten minutes later. He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

"Go," he said to Myrtle, and she swooped back into her toilet at once, leaving a ringing silence behind her.

"I didn't mean it to happen," said Harry at once. His voice echoed in the cold, watery space. "I didn't know what that spell did."But Snape ignored this. "Apparently I underestimated you, Potter," he said quietly. "Who would have thought you knew such Dark Magic? Who taught you that spell?""I — read about it somewhere.""Where?"

"It was — a library book," Harry invented wildly. "I can't remember what it was call —""Liar," said Snape. Harry's throat went dry. He knew what Snape was going to do and he had never been able to prevent it. ...

The bathroom seemed to shimmer before his eyes; he struggled to block out all thought, but try as he might, the Half-Blood Prince's copy of Advanced Potion-Making swam hazily to the forefront of his mind.

And then he was staring at Snape again, in the midst of this wrecked, soaked bathroom. He stared into Snape's black eyes, hoping against hope that Snape had not seen what he feared, but —"Bring me your schoolbag," said Snape softly, "and all of your schoolbooks. All of them. Bring them to me here. Now!"There was no point arguing. Harry turned at once and splashedout of the bathroom. Once in the corridor, he broke into a run toward Gryffindor Tower. Most people were walking the other way; they gaped at him, drenched in water and blood, but he answered none of the questions fired at him as he ran past.

He felt stunned; it was as though a beloved pet had turned suddenly savage; what had the Prince been thinking to copy such a spell into

his book? And what would happen when Snape saw it? Would he tell Slughorn — Harry's stomach churned — how Harry had been achieving such good results in Potions all year? Would he confiscate or destroy the book that had taught Harry so much . . . the book that had become a kind of guide and friend? Harry could not let it happen. . . . He could not. . .

"Where've you — ? Why are you soaking — ? Is that blood." Ron was standing at the top of the stairs, looking bewildered at , the sight of Harry.

"I need your book," Harry panted. "Your Potions book. Quick . . . give it to me . . .""But what about the Half-Blood —""I'll explain later!"

Ron pulled his copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag and handed it over; Harry sprinted off past him and back to the common room. Here, he seized his schoolbag, ignoring the amazed looks of several people who had already finished their dinner, threw himself back out of the portrait hole, and hurtled off along the seventh-floor corridor.

He skidded to a halt beside the tapestry of dancing trolls, closed his eyes, and began to walk.

I need a place to hide my book. . . . I need a place to hide my book. . . . I need a place to hide my book. ...

Three times he walked up and down in front of the stretch of blank wall. When he opened his eyes, there it was at last: the door to the Room of Requirement. Harry wrenched it open, flung him self inside, and slammed it shut.

He gasped. Despite his haste, his panic, his fear of what awaited him back in the bathroom, he could not help but be overawed by what he was looking at. He was standing in a room the size of a large cathedral, whose high windows were sending shafts of light down upon what looked like a city with towering walls, built of what Harry

knew must be objects hidden by generations of Hogwarts inhabitants. There were alleyways and roads bordered by tetering piles of broken and damaged furniture, stowed away, perhaps, to hide the evidence of mishandled magic, or else hidden by castle-proud house-elves. There were thousands and thousands of books, no doubt banned or graffitied or stolen. There were winged catapults and Fanged Frisbees, some still with enough life in them to hover halfheartedly over the mountains of other forbidden items; there were chipped bottles of congealed potions, hats, jewels, cloaks; there were what looked like dragon eggshells, corked bottles whose contents still shimmered evilly, several rusting swords, and a heavy, bloodstained axe.

Harry hurried forward into one of the many alleyways between all this hidden treasure. He turned right past an enormous stuffed troll, ran on a short way, took a left at the broken Vanishing Cabinet in which Montague had got lost the previous year, finally pausing beside a large cupboard that seemed to have had acid thrown at its blistered surface. He opened one of the cupboard's creaking doors: It had already been used as a hiding place for something in a cage that had long since died; its skeleton had five legs. He stuffed the Half-Blood Princes book behind the cage and slammed the door. He paused for a moment, his heart thumping horribly, gazing around at all the clutter. . . . Would he be able to find this spot again amidst all this junk? Seizing the chipped bust of an ugly old warlock from on top of a nearby crate, he stood it on top of the cupboard where the book was now hidden, perched a dusty old wig and a tarnished tiara on the statues head to make it more distinctive, then sprinted back through the alleyways of hidden junk as fast as he could go, back to the door, back out onto the corridor, where he slammed the door behind him, and it turned at once back into stone.

Harry ran flat-out toward the bathroom on the floor below, cramming Ron's copy of Advanced Potion-Making into his bag as he did so. A minute later, he was back in front of Snape, who held out his hand

wordlessly for Harry's schoolbag. Harry handed it over, panting, a searing pain in his chest, and waited.

One by one, Snape extracted Harrys books and examined them., Finally, the only book left was the Potions book, which he looked at very carefully before speaking.

"This is your copy of Advanced Potion-Making, is it, Potter?""Yes," said Harry, still breathing hard.

"You're quite sure of that, are you, Potter?""Yes," said Harry, with a touch more defiance.

"This is the copy of Advanced Potion-Making that you purchased from Flourish and Blotts?""Yes," said Harry firmly.

"Then why," asked Snape, "does it have the name 'Roonil Wazlib' written inside the front cover?"Harrys heart missed a beat. "That's my nickname," he said. "'Your nickname," repeated Snape. ; "Yeah . . . that's what my friends call me," said Harry.

"I understand what a nickname is," said Snape. The cold, black eyes were boring once more into Harry's; he tried not to look into them. Close your mind. . . . Close your mind. . . . But he had never learned how to do it properly. . . .

"Do you know what I think, Potter?" said Snape, very quietly. "I think that you are a liar and a cheat and that you deserve detention with me every Saturday until the end of term. "What do you think, Potter?""I — I don't agree, sir," said Harry, still refusing to look into Snape's eyes.

"Well, we shall see how you feel after your detentions," said Snape. "Ten o'clock Saturday morning, Potter. My office.""But sir . . ." said Harry, looking up desperately. "Quidditch . . . the last match of the ...""Ten o'clock," whispered Snape, with a smile that showed his yellow teeth. "Poor Gryffindor. . . fourth place this year, I fear ..."And

he left the bathroom without another word, leaving Harry to stare into the cracked mirror, feeling sicker, he was sure, than Ron had ever felt in his life.

"I won't say 'I told you so,'" said Hermione, an hour later in the common room.

"Leave it, Hermione," said Ron angrily.

Harry had never made it to dinner; he had no appetite at all. He had just finished telling Ron, Hermione, and Ginny what had happened, not that there seemed to have been much need. The news had traveled very fast: Apparently Moaning Myrtle had taken it upon herself to pop up in every bathroom in the castle to tell the story; Malfoy had already been visited in the hospital wing by Pansy Parkinson, who had lost no time in vilifying Harry far and wide, and Snape had told the staff precisely what had happened. Harry had already been called out of the common room to endure fifteen highly unpleasant minutes in the company of Professor McGonagall, who had told him he was lucky not to have been expelled and that she supported wholeheartedly Snape's punishment of detention every Saturday until the end of term.

"I told you there was something wrong with that Prince person," Hermione said, evidently unable to stop herself. "And I was right, wasn't I.""No, I don't think you were," said Harry stubbornly.

He was having a bad enough time without Hermione lecturing him; the looks on the Gryffindor team's faces when he had told them he would not be able to play on Saturday had been the worst punishment of all. He could feel Ginny's eyes on him now but did not meet them; he did not want to see disappointment or anger there. He had just told her that she would be playing Seeker on Saturday and that Dean would be rejoining the team as Chaser in her place. Perhaps, if they won, Ginny and Dean would make up during the

post-match euphoria. . . . The thought went through Harry like an icy knife. . . .

"Harry," said Hermione, "how can you still stick up for that book when that spell —""Will you stop harping on about the book!" snapped Harry. "The Prince only copied it out! It's not like he was advising anyone to use it! For all we know, he was making a note of something that had been used against him!""I don't believe this," said Hermione. "You're actually defending—"I'm not defending what I did!" said Harry quickly. "I wish 1 ; hadn't done it, and not just because I've got about a dozen detentions. You know I wouldn't've used a spell like that, not even on Malfoy, but you can't blame the Prince, he hadn't written 'try this out, it's really good' — he was just making notes for himself, wasn't he, not for anyone else. . . .""Are you telling me," said Hermione, "that you're going to go back — ?""And get the book? Yeah, I am," said Harry forcefully. "Listen, without the Prince I'd never have won the Felix Felicis. I'd never have known how to save Ron from poisoning, I'd never have —""— got a reputation for Potions brilliance you don't deserve," said Hermione nastily.

"Give it a rest, Hermione!" said Ginny, and Harry was so amazed, so grateful, he looked up. "By the sound of it, Malfoy was trying to use an Unforgivable Curse, you should be glad Harry had something good up his sleeve!""Well, of course I'm glad Harry wasn't cursed!" said Hermione, clearly stung. "But you can't call that Sectumsempra spell good, Ginny, look where it's landed him! And I'd have thought, seeing what this has done to your chances in the match —""Oh, don't start acting as though you understand Quidditch," snapped Ginny, "you'll only embarrass yourself."Harry and Ron stared: Hermione and Ginny, who had always got on together very well, were now sitting with their arms folded, glaring in opposite directions. Ron looked nervously at Harry, then snatched up a book at random and hid behind it. Harry, however,little though he knew he deserved it, felt unbelievably cheerful all of a sudden, even though none of them spoke again for the rest of the evening.

His lightheartedness was short-lived. There were Slytherin taunts to be endured next day, not to mention much anger from fellow Gryffindors, who were most unhappy that their Captain had got himself banned from the final match of the season. By Saturday morning, whatever he might have told Hermione, Harry would have gladly exchanged all the Felix Felicis in the world to be walking down to the Quidditch pitch with Ron, Ginny, and the others. It was almost unbearable to turn away from the mass of students streaming out into the sunshine, all of them wearing rosettes and hats and brandishing banners and scarves, to descend the stone steps into the dungeons and walk until the distant sounds of the crowd were quite obliterated, knowing that he would not be able to hear a word of commentary or a cheer or groan.

"Ah, Potter," said Snape, when Harry had knocked on his door and entered the unpleasantly familiar office that Snape, despite teaching floors above now, had not vacated; it was as dimly lit as ever and the same slimy dead objects were suspended in colored potions all around the walls. Ominously, there were many cob-webbed boxes piled on a table where Harry was clearly supposed to sit; they had an aura of tedious, hard, and pointless work about them.

"Mr. Filch has been looking for someone to clear out these old files," said Snape softly. "They are the records of other Hogwarts wrongdoers and their punishments. Where the ink has grown faint, or the cards have suffered damage from mice, we would like you to copy out the crimes and punishments afresh and, making sure that they are in alphabetical order, replace them in the boxes. You will not use magic.""Right, Professor," said Harry, with as much contempt as he could put into the last three syllables.

"I thought you could start," said Snape, a malicious smile on his lips, "with boxes one thousand and twelve to one thousand and fifty-six. You will find some familiar names in there, which should add interest to the task. Here, you see . . ."He pulled out a card from one of the topmost boxes with a flourish and read, "James Potter and Sirius

Black. Apprehended using an illegal hex upon Bertram Aubrey. Aubreys head twice normal size. Double detention." Snape sneered. "It must be such a comforting thing that, though they are gone, a record of their great achievements remains."Harry felt the familiar boiling sensation in the pit of his stomach. Biting his tongue to prevent himself retaliating, he sat down in front of the boxes and pulled one toward him.

It was, as Harry had anticipated, useless, boring work, punctuated (as Snape had clearly planned) with the regular jolt in the stomach that meant he had just read his father or Sirius's names, usually coupled together in various petty misdeeds, occasionally accompanied by those of Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew. And while he copied out all their various offenses and punishments, he wondered what was going on outside, where the match would have just started . . . Ginny playing Seeker against Cho . . .

Harry glanced again and again at the large clock ticking on the wall. It seemed to be moving half as fast as a regular clock; perhaps Snape had bewitched it to go extra slowly? He could not have been here for only half an hour ... an hour ... an hour and a half. . . .

Harry's stomach started rumbling when the clock showed half past twelve. Snape, who had not spoken at all since setting Harry his task, finally looked up at ten past one.

"I think that will do," he said coldly. "Mark the place you have reached. You will continue at ten o'clock next Saturday." Yes, sir.

Harry stuffed a bent card into the box at random and hurried out of the door before Snape could change his mind, racing back up the stone steps, straining his ears to hear a sound from the pitch, but all was quiet. ... It was over, then. . . .

He hesitated outside the crowded Great Hall, then ran up the marble staircase; whether Gryffindor had won or lost, the team usually celebrated or commiserated in their own common room.

"Quid agis?" he said tentatively to the Fat Lady, wondering what he would find inside.

Her expression was unreadable as she replied, "You'll see."And she swung forward.

A roar of celebration erupted from the hole behind her. Harry gaped as people began to scream at the sight of him; several hands pulled him into the room.

"We won!" yelled Ron, bounding into sight and brandishing the silver Cup at Harry. "We won! Four hundred and fifty to a hundred and forty! We won!"Harry looked around; there was Ginny running toward him; she had a hard, blazing look in her face as she threw her arms around him. And without thinking, without planning it, without worrying about the fact that fifty people were watching, Harry kissed her.

After several long moments — or it might have been half an hour — or possibly several sunlit days — they broke apart. The room had gone very quiet. Then several people wolf-whistled and there was an outbreak of nervous giggling. Harry looked over the top of Ginny's head to see Dean Thomas holding a shattered glass in his hand, and Romilda Vane looking as though she might throw something. Hermione was beaming, but Harry's eyes sought Ron. At last he found him, still clutching the Cup and wearing an expression appropriate to having been clubbed over the head. For a fraction of a second they looked at each other, then Ron gave a tiny jerk of the head that Harry understood to mean, Well—if you must.

The creature in his chest roaring in triumph, he grinned down at Ginny and gestured wordlessly out of the portrait hole. A long walk in the grounds seemed indicated, during which — if they had time — they might discuss the match.

Chapter 25 The Seer Overheard

The fact that Harry Potter was going out with Ginny Weasley seemed to interest a great number of people, most of them girls, yet Harry found himself newly and happily impervious to gossip over the next few weeks. After all, it made a very nice change to be talked about because of something that was making him happier than he could remember being for a very long time, rather than because he had been involved in hor-rific scenes of Dark magic.

'You'd think people had better things to gossip about,' said Ginny, as she sat on the common-room floor, leaning against Harry's legs and reading the Daily Prophet. Three Dementor attacks in a week, and all Romilda Vane does is ask me if it's true you've got a Hippogriff tattooed across your chest.'Ron and Hermione both roared with laughter. Harry ignored them.

'What did you tell her?'

' ? told her it's a Hungarian Horntail,' said Ginny, turning a page of the newspaper idly. 'Much more macho.'Thanks,' said Harry, grinning. 'And what did you tell her Ron's got?''A Pygmy Puff, but I didn't say where.'Ron scowled as Hermione rolled around laughing.

'Watch it,' he said, pointing wamingly at Harry and Ginny. 'Just because I've given my permission doesn't mean I can't withdraw it -'''Tour permission'',' scoffed Ginny. 'Since when did you give me permission to do anything? Anyway, you said yourself you'd rather it was Harry than Michael or Dean.''Yeah, 1 would,' said Ron grudgingly. 'And just as long as you don't start snogging each other in public -''You filthy hypocrite! What about you and Lavender, thrashing around like a pair of eels all over the place?' demanded Ginny.

But Ron's tolerance was not to be tested much as they moved into June, for Harry and Ginny's time together was becoming increasingly

restricted. Ginny's O.W.L.s were approaching and she was therefore forced to revise for hours into the night. On one such evening, when Ginny had retired to the library and Harry was sitting beside the window in the common room, supposedly finishing his Herbology home-work but in reality reliving a particularly happy hour he had spent down by the lake with Ginny at lunch-time, Hermione dropped into the seat between him and Ron with an unpleasantly purposeful look on her face.

'I want to talk to you, Harry.''What about?' said Harry suspiciously. Only the previous day, Hermione had told him off for distracting Ginny when she ought to be working hard for her examinations.

The so-called Half-Blood Prince.''Oh, not again,' he groaned. 'Will you please drop it?'He had not dared to return to the Room of Requirement to retrieve his book, and his performance in Potions was suffer-ing accordingly (though Slughorn, who approved of Ginny, had jocularly attributed this to Harry being lovesick). But Harry was sure that Snape had not yet given up hope of laying hands on the Prince's book, and was determined to leave it where it was while Snape remained on the lookout.

'I'm not dropping it,' said Hermione firmly, 'until you've heard me out. Now, I've been trying to find out a bit about who might make a hobby of inventing Dark spells -''He didn't make a hobby of it -''He, he - who says it's a he?''We've been through this,' said Harry crossly. 'Prince, Hermione, Prince!''Right!' said Hermione, red patches blazing in her cheeks as she pulled a very old piece of newsprint out of her pocket and slammed it down on the table in front of Harry. 'Look at that! Look at the picture!'Harry picked up the crumbling piece of paper and stared at the moving photograph, yellowed with age; Ron leaned over for a look, too. The picture showed a skinny girl of around fifteen. She was not pretty; she looked simultaneously cross and sullen, with heavy brows and a long, pallid face. Under-neath the photograph was the caption: Eileen Prince, Captain of the Hogwarts Gobstones Team.

'So?' said Harry, scanning the short news item to which the picture belonged; it was a rather dull story about inter-school competitions.

'Her name was Eileen Prince. Prince, Harry.'They looked at each other and Harry realised what Hermione was trying to say. He burst out laughing.

'No way.'

'What?'

'You think she was the Half-Blood ...? Oh, come on.''Well, why not? Harry, there aren't any real princes in the wizarding world! It's either a nickname, a made-up title somebody's given themselves, or it could be their actual name, couldn't it? No, listen! If, say, her father was a wizardwhose surname was "Prince", and her mother was a Muggle, then that would make her a "half-blood Prince"!''Yeah, very ingenious, Hermione ...''But it would! Maybe she was proud of being half a Prince!''Listen, Hermione, I can tell it's not a girl. I can just tell.'The truth is that you don't think a girl would have been clever enough,' said Hermione angrily.

'How can I have hung round with you for five years and not think girls are clever?' said Harry, stung by this. 'It's the way he writes. I just know the Prince was a bloke, I can tell. This girl hasn't got anything to do with it. Where did you get this, anyway?'‘The library,' said Hermione, predictably. There's a whole collection of old Prophets up there. Well, I'm going to find out more about Eileen Prince if I can.''Enjoy yourself,' said Harry irritably.

'I will,' said Hermione. 'And the first place I'll look,' she shot at him, as she reached the portrait hole, 'is records of old Potions awards!'Harry scowled after her for a moment, then continued his contemplation of the darkening sky.

'She's just never got over you outperforming her in Potions,' said Ron, returning to his copy of One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi.

'You don't think I'm mad, wanting that book back, do you?''Course not,' said Ron robustly. 'He was a genius, the Prince. Anyway ... without his bezoar tip ...' he drew his finger significantly across his own throat, 'I wouldn't be here to discuss it, would I? I mean, I'm not saying that spell you used on Malfoy was great -''Nor am I,' said Harry quickly.

'But he healed all right, didn't he? Back on his feet in no time.''Yeah,' said Harry; this was perfectly true, although his con-science squirmed slightly all the same. Thanks to Snape ...''You still got detention with Snape this Saturday?' Ron continued.

'Yeah, and the Saturday after that, and the Saturday after that,' sighed Harry. 'And he's hinting now that if I don't get all the boxes done by the end of term, we'll carry on next year.'He was finding these detentions particularly irksome because they cut into the already limited time he could have been spending with Ginny. Indeed, he had frequently won-dered lately whether Snape did not know this, for he was keeping Harry later and later every time, while making pointed asides about Harry having to miss the good weather and the varied opportunities it offered.

Harry was shaken from these bitter reflections by the appearance at his side of Jimmy Peakes, who was holding out a scroll of parchment.

‘Thanks, Jimmy ... hey, it's from Dumbledore!' said Harry excitedly, unrolling the parchment and scanning it. 'He wants me to go to his office as quick as 1 can!'They stared at each other.

'Blimey,' whispered Ron. 'You don't reckon ... he hasn't found ...?''Better go and see, hadn't I?' said Harry, jumping to his feet.

He hurried out of the common room and along the seventh floor as fast as he could, passing nobody but Peeves, who swooped past in the opposite direction, throwing bits of chalk at Harry in a routine sort of way and cackling loudly as he dodged Harry's defensive jinx. Once Peeves had vanished, there was silence in the corridors; with only

fifteen minutes left until curfew, most people had already returned to their common rooms.

And then Harry heard a scream and a crash. He stopped in his tracks, listening.

'How - dare - you - aaaaargh!'The noise was coming from a corridor nearby; Harry sprinted towards it, his wand at the ready, hurtled round another corner and saw Professor Trelawney sprawled upon the floor, her head covered in one of her many shawls, several sherry bottles lying beside her, one broken.

'Professor -'

Harry hurried forwards and helped Professor Trelawney to her feet. Some of her glittering beads had become entangled with her glasses. She hiccoughed loudly, patted her hair and pulled herself up on Harry's helping arm.

'What happened, Professor?'

'You may well ask!' she said shrilly. 'I was strolling along, brooding upon certain Dark portents 1 happen to have glimpsed ...'But Harry was not paying much attention. He had just noticed where they were standing: there on the right was the tapestry of dancing trolls and, on the left, that smoothly impenetrable stretch of stone wall that concealed -

'Professor, were you trying to get into the Room of Requirement?''... omens I have been vouchsafed - what?'She looked suddenly shifty.

The Room of Requirement,' repeated Harry. 'Were you try-ing to get in there?''I - well - I didn't know students knew about -''Not all of them do,' said Harry. 'But what happened? You screamed ... it sounded as though you were hurt...''I - well,' said Professor Trelawney, drawing her shawls around her defensively and staring down at him with her vastly magnified eyes. 'I wished to - ah - deposit certain – um -

personal items in the Room ...' And she muttered something about 'nasty accusations'.

'Right,' said Harry, glancing down at the sherry bottles. 'But you couldn't get in and hide them?'He found this very odd; the Room had opened for him, after all, when he had wanted to hide the Half-Blood Prince's book.

'Oh, I got in all right,' said Professor Trelawney, glaring at the wall. 'But there was somebody already in there.''Somebody in -? Who?' demanded Harry. 'Who was in there?'' ? have no idea,' said Professor Trelawney, looking slightly taken aback at the urgency in Harry's voice. 'I walked into the Room and I heard a voice, which has never happened before in all my years of hiding - of using the Room, I mean.''A voice? Saying what?'

'I don't know that it was saying anything,' said Professor Trelawney. 'It was ... whooping.''Whooping?'

'Gleefully,' she said, nodding.

Harry stared at her.

'Was it male or female?'

' ? would hazard a guess at male,' said Professor Trelawney.

'And it sounded happy?'

'Very happy,' said Professor Trelawney sniffily.

'As though it was celebrating?''Most definitely.'

'And then -?'

'And then I called out, "Who's there?"''You couldn't have found out who it was without asking?' Harry asked her, slightly frustrated.

‘The Inner Eye,' said Professor Trelawney with dignity, straightening her shawls and many strands of glittering beads, 'was fixed upon matters well outside the mundane realms of whooping voices.''Right,' said Harry hastily; he had heard about Professor Trelawney's Inner Eye all too often before. 'And did the voice say who was there?''No, it did not,' she said. 'Everything went pitch black and the next thing I knew, I was being hurled headfirst out of the Room!''And you didn't see that coming?' said Harry, unable to help himself.

'No, I did not, as I say, it was pitch -' She stopped and glared at him suspiciously.

'I think you'd better tell Professor Dumbledore,' said Harry. 'He ought to know Malfoy's celebrating - I mean, that some-one threw you out of the Room.'To his surprise, Professor Trelawney drew herself up at this suggestion, looking haughty.

The Headmaster has intimated that he would prefer fewer visits from me,' she said coldly. I am not one to press my company upon those who do not value it. If Dumbledore chooses to ignore the warnings the cards show -'Her bony hand closed suddenly around Harry's wrist.

'Again and again, no matter how I lay them out -'And she pulled a card dramatically from underneath her shawls.

'- the lightning-struck tower,' she whispered. 'Calamity. Disaster. Coming nearer all the time ...''Right,' said Harry again. 'Well ... I still think you should tell Dumbledore about this voice and everything going dark and being thrown out of the Room ...''You think so?' Professor Trelawney seemed to consider the matter for a moment, but Harry could tell that she liked the idea of retelling her little adventure.

'I'm going to see him right now,' said Harry. 'I've got a meeting with him. We could go together.''Oh, well, in that case,' said Professor Trelawney with a smile. She bent down, scooped up her sherry

bottles and dumped them unceremoniously in a large blue and white vase standing in a nearby niche.

'I miss having you in my classes, Harry,' she said soulfully, as they set off together. 'You were never much of a Seer ... but you were a wonderful Object...'Harry did not reply; he had loathed being the Object of Professor Trelawney's continual predictions of doom.

'I am afraid,' she went on, 'that the nag - I'm sorry, the centaur - knows nothing of cartomancy. I asked him - one Seer to another - had he not, too, sensed the distant vibra-tions of coming catastrophe? But he seemed to find me almost comical. Yes, comical!'Her voice rose rather hysterically and Harry caught a powerful whiff of sherry even though the bottles had been left behind.

'Perhaps the horse has heard people say that I have not inherited my great-great-grandmother's gift. Those rumours have been bandied about by the jealous for years. You know what I say to such people, Harry? Would Dumbledore have let me teach at this great school, put so much trust in me all these years, had I not proved myself to him?'Harry mumbled something indistinct.

'I well remember my first interview with Dumbledore,' went on Professor Trelawney, in throaty tones. 'He was deeply impressed, of course, deeply impressed ... I was staying at the Hog's Head, which I do not advise, incidentally - bed bugs, dear boy - but funds were low. Dumbledore did me the courtesy of calling upon me in my room at the inn. He questioned me ... I must confess that, at first, I thought he seemed ill-disposed towards Divination ... and I remember I was starting to feel a little odd, I had not eaten much that day ... but then ...'And now Harry was paying attention properly for the first time, for he knew what had happened then: Professor Trelawney had made the prophecy that had altered the course of his whole life, the prophecy about him and Voldemort.

'... but then we were rudely interrupted by Severus Snape!''What?'

'Yes, there was a commotion outside the door and it flew open, and there was that rather uncouth barman standing with Snape, who was waffling about having come the wrong way up the stairs, although I'm afraid that I myself rather thought he had been apprehended eavesdropping on my interview with Dumbledore - you see, he himself was seeking a job at the time, and no doubt hoped to pick up tips! Well, after that, you know, Dumbledore seemed much more dis-posed to give me a job, and I could not help thinking, Harry, that it was because he appreciated the stark contrast between my own unassuming manners and quiet talent, compared to the pushing, thrusting young man who was prepared to listen at keyholes - Harry, dear?'She looked back over her shoulder, having only just real-ised that Harry was no longer with her; he had stopped walking and they were now ten feet from each other.

'Harry?' she repeated uncertainly.

Perhaps his face was white, to make her look so concerned and frightened. Harry was standing stock-still as waves of shock crashed over him, wave after wave, obliterating every-thing except the information that had been kept from him for so long ...

It was Snape who had overheard the prophecy. It was Snape who had carried the news of the prophecy to Voldemort. Snape and Peter Pettigrew together had sent Voldemort hunt-ing after Lily and James and their son ...

Nothing else mattered to Harry just now.

'Harry?' said Professor Trelawney again. 'Harry - I thought we were going to see the Headmaster together?''You stay here,' said Harry through numb lips.

'But, dear ... I was going to tell him how I was assaulted in the Room of-''You stay here!' Harry repeated angrily.

She looked alarmed as he ran past her, round the corner into Dumbledore's corridor, where the lone gargoyle stood sentry. Harry shouted the password at the gargoyle and ran up the moving spiral staircase three steps at a time. He did not knock upon Dumbledore's door, he hammered; and the calm voice answered 'Enter' after Harry had already flung himself into the room.

Fawkes the phoenix looked round, his bright black eyes gleaming with reflected gold from the sunset beyond the window. Dumbledore was standing at the window look-ing out at the grounds, a long, black travelling cloak in his arms.

'Well, Harry, I promised that you could come with me.'For a moment or two, Harry did not understand; the con-versation with Trelawney had driven everything else out of his head and his brain seemed to be moving very slowly.

'Come ... with you ... ?'

'Only if you wish it, of course.''If I...'

And then Harry remembered why he had been eager to come to Dumbledore's office in the first place.

'You've found one? You've found a Horcrux?''I believe so.'

Rage and resentment fought shock and excitement: for several moments, Harry could not speak.

'It is natural to be afraid,' said Dumbledore.

'I'm not scared!' said Harry at once, and it was perfectly

true; fear was one emotion he was not feeling at all. 'Which Horcrux is it? Where is it?''I am not sure which it is - though I think we can rule out the snake - but I believe it to be hidden in a cave on the coast many miles from here, a cave I have been trying to locate for a very

long time: the cave in which Tom Riddle once terror-ised two children from his orphanage on their annual trip; you remember?''Yes,' said Harry. 'How is it protected?''I do not know; I have suspicions that may be entirely wrong.' Dumbledore hesitated, then said, 'Harry, I promised you that you could come with me, and I stand by that promise, but it would be very wrong of me not to warn you that this will be exceedingly dangerous.''I'm coming,' said Harry, almost before Dumbledore had finished speaking. Boiling with anger at Snape, his desire to do something desperate and risky had increased tenfold in the last few minutes. This seemed to show on Harry's face, for Dumbledore moved away from the window, and looked more closely at Harry, a slight crease between his silver eyebrows.

'What has happened to you?'

'Nothing,' lied Harry promptly.

'What has upset you?'

'I'm not upset.'

'Harry, you were never a good Occlumens -'The word was the spark that ignited Harry's fury.

'Snape!' he said, very loudly, and Fawkes gave a soft squawk behind them. 'Snape's what's happened! He told Voldemort about the prophecy, it was him, he listened outside the door, Trelawney told me!'Dumbledore's expression did not change, but Harry thought his face whitened under the bloody tinge cast by the setting sun. For a long moment, Dumbledore said nothing.

'When did you find out about this?' he asked at last.

'Just now!' said Many, who was refraining from yelling with enormous difficulty. And then, suddenly, he could not stop himself. 'AND YOU LET HIM TEACH HERE AND HE TOLD VOLDEMORT TO GO AFTER MY MUM AND DAD!'Breathing hard as though he were

fighting, Harry turned away from Dumbledore, who still had not moved a muscle, and paced up and down the study, rubbing his knuckles in his hand and exercising every last bit of restraint to prevent himself knocking things over. He wanted to rage and storm at Dumbledore, but he also wanted to go with him to try and destroy the Horcrux; he wanted to tell him that he was a fool-ish old man for trusting Snape, but he was terrified that Dumbledore would not take him along unless he mastered his anger ...

'Harry,' said Dumbledore quietly. 'Please listen to me.'It was as difficult to stop his relentless pacing as to refrain from shouting. Harry paused, biting his lip, and looked into Dumbledore's lined face.

'Professor Snape made a terrible -''Don't tell me it was a mistake, sir, he was listening at the door!''Please let me finish.' Dumbledore waited until Harry had nodded curtly, then went on. 'Professor Snape made a terrible mistake. He was still in Lord Voldemort's employ on the night he heard the first half of Professor Trelawney's prophecy. Naturally, he hastened to tell his master what he had heard, for it concerned his master most deeply. But he did not know - he had no possible way of knowing - which boy Voldemort would hunt from then onwards, or that the parents he would destroy in his murderous quest were people that Professor Snape knew, that they were your mother and father -'Harry let out a yell of mirthless laughter.

'He hated my dad like he hated Sirius! Haven't you noticed, Professor, how the people Snape hates tend to end up dead?''You have no idea of the remorse Professor Snape felt when he realised how Lord Voldemort had interpreted the prophecy, Harry. I believe it to be the greatest regret of his life and the reason that he returned -''But he's a very good Occlumens, isn't he, sir?' said Harry, whose voice was shaking with the effort of keeping it steady. 'And isn't Voldemort convinced that Snape's on his side, even now? Professor ... how can you be sure Snape's on our side?'Dumbledore did not speak for a moment; he looked as though he was trying to make up his mind about something. At last he said, 'I am sure. I trust Severus

Snape completely.'Harry breathed deeply for a few moments in an effort to steady himself. It did not work.

'Well, I don't!' he said, as loudly as before. 'He's up to something with Draco Malfoy right now, right under your nose, and you still -''We have discussed this, Harry,' said Dumbledore, and now he sounded stern again. 'I have told you my views.''You're leaving the school tonight and I'll bet you haven't even considered that Snape and Malfoy might decide to -'To what?' asked Dumbledore, his eyebrows raised. 'What is it that you suspect them of doing, precisely?''I ... they're up to something!' said Harry and his hands curled into fists as he said it. 'Professor Trelawney was just in the Room of Requirement, trying to hide her sherry bottles, and she heard Malfoy whooping, celebrating! He's trying to mend something dangerous in there and if you ask me he's fixed it at last and you're about to just walk out of school * without -''Enough,' said Dumbledore. He said it quite calmly, and yet Harry fell silent at once; he knew that he had finally crossed some invisible line. 'Do you think that I have once left the school unprotected during my absences this year? I have not. Tonight, when I leave, there will again be additional protec-tion in place. Please do not suggest that I do not take the safety of my students seriously, Harry.''I didn't -' mumbled Harry, a little abashed, but Dumbledore cut across him.

' ? do not wish to discuss the matter any further.'Harry bit back his retort, scared that he had gone too far, that he had ruined his chance of accompanying Dumbledore, but Dumbledore went on, 'Do you wish to come with me tonight?''Yes,' said Harry at once.

'Very well, then: listen.'

Dumbledore drew himself up to his full height.

'I take you with me on one condition: that you obey any command I might give you at once, and without question.''Of course.'

'Be sure to understand me, Harry. I mean that you must follow even such orders as "run", "hide" or "go back". Do I have your word?''I - yes, of course.'

'If 1 tell you to hide, you will do so?''Yes.'

'If I tell you to flee, you will obey?''Yes.'

'If I tell you to leave me, and save yourself, you will do as I tell you?''I -'

'Harry?'

They looked at each other for a moment.

'Yes, sir.'

'Very good. Then I wish you to go and fetch your Cloak and meet me in the Entrance Hall in five minutes' time.'Dumbledore turned back to look out of the fiery window; the sun was now a ruby-red glare along the horizon. Harry walked quickly from the office and down the spiral staircase. His mind was oddly clear all of a sudden. He knew what to do.

Ron and Hermione were sitting together in the common room when he came back. 'What does Dumbledore want?' Hermione said at once. 'Harry, are you OK?' she added anxiously.

'I'm fine,' said Harry shortly, racing past them. He dashed up the stairs and into his dormitory, where he flung open his trunk and pulled out the Marauder's Map and a pair of balled-up socks. Then he sped back down the stairs and into the common room, skidding to a halt where Ron and Hermione sat, looking stunned.

'I haven't got much time,' Harry panted, 'Dumbledore thinks I'm getting my Invisibility Cloak. Listen ...'Quickly he told them where he was going, and why. He did not pause either for Hermione's gasps of

horror or for Ron's hasty questions; they could work out the finer details for themselves later.

'... so you see what this means?' Harry finished at a gallop. 'Dumbledore won't be here tonight, so Malfoy's going to have another clear shot at whatever he's up to. No, listen to me!" he hissed angrily, as both Ron and Hermione showed every sign of interrupting. 'I know it was Malfoy celebrating in the Room of Requirement. Here -' He shoved the Marauder's Map into Hermione's hand. 'You've got to watch him and you've got to watch Snape, too. Use anyone else who you can rustle up from the DA. Hermione, those contact Galleons will still work, right? Dumbledore says he's put extra protection in the school, but if Snape's involved, he'll know what Dumbledore's protection is, and how to avoid it - but he won't be expecting you lot to be on the watch, will he?''Harry -' began Hermione, her eyes huge with fear.

' ? haven't got time to argue,' said Harry curtly. Take this as well -' He thrust the socks into Ron's hands.

‘Thanks,' said Ron. 'Er - why do I need socks?''You need what's wrapped in them, it's the Felix Felicis. Share it between yourselves and Ginny too. Say goodbye to her from me. I'd better go, Dumbledore's waiting -''No!' said Hermione, as Ron unwrapped the tiny little bottle of golden potion, looking awestruck. 'We don't want it, you take it, who knows what you're going to be facing?''I'll be fine, I'll be with Dumbledore,' said Harry. 'I want to know you lot are OK ... don't look like that, Hermione, I'll see you laterAnd he was off, hurrying back through the portrait hole towards the Entrance Hall.

Dumbledore was waiting beside the oaken front doors. He turned as Harry came skidding out on to the topmost stone step, panting hard, a searing stitch in his side.

'I would like you to wear your Cloak, please,' said Dumbledore, and he waited until Harry had thrown it on before saying, 'Very good. Shall

we go?'Dumbledore set off at once down the stone steps, his own travelling cloak barely stirring in the still summer air. Harry hurried alongside him under the Invisibility Cloak, still pant-ing and sweating rather a lot.

'But what will people think when they see you leaving, Professor?' Harry asked, his mind on Malfoy and Snape.

That I am off into Hogsmeade for a drink,' said Dumbledore lightly. 'I sometimes offer Rosmerta my custom, or else visit the Hog's Head ... or I appear to. It is as good a way as any of disguising one's true destination.'They made their way down the drive in the gathering twi-light. The air was full of the smells of warm grass, lake water and wood smoke from Hagrid's cabin. It was difficult to believe that they were heading for anything dangerous or frightening.

'Professor,' said Harry quietly, as the gates at the bottom of the drive came into view, 'will we be Apparating?''Yes,' said Dumbledore. 'You can Apparate now, I believe?''Yes,' said Harry, 'but I haven't got a licence.'He felt it best to be honest; what if he spoiled everything by turning up a hundred miles from where he was supposed to go?

'No matter,' said Dumbledore, 'I can assist you again.'They turned out of the gates into the twilit, deserted lane to Hogsmeade. Darkness descended fast as they walked and by the time they reached the High Street night was falling in earnest. Lights twinkled from windows over shops and as they neared the Three Broomsticks they heard raucous shouting.

'- and stay out!' shouted Madam Rosmerta, forcibly ejecting a grubby-looking wizard. 'Oh, hello, Albus ... you're out late ...''Good evening, Rosmerta, good evening ... forgive me, I'm off to the Hog's Head ... no offence, but I feel like a quieter atmosphere tonight...'A minute later they turned the corner into the side street where the Hog's Head's sign creaked a little, though there was no breeze. In contrast to the Three Broomsticks, the pub appeared to be completely empty.

'It will not be necessary for us to enter,' muttered Dumbledore, glancing around. 'As long as nobody sees us go ... now place your hand upon my arm, Harry. There is no need to grip too hard, I am merely guiding you. On the count of three - one ... two ... three ...'Harry turned. At once, there was that horrible sensation that he was being squeezed through a thick rubber tube; he could not draw breath, every part of him was being com-pressed almost past endurance and then, just when he thought he must suffocate, the invisible bands seemed to burst open, and he was standing in cool darkness, breathing in lungfuls of fresh, salty air.

Chapter 26 The Cave

Harry could smell salt and hear rushing waves; a light, chilly breeze ruffled his hair as he looked out at moon-lit sea and star-strewn sky. He was standing upon a high outcrop of dark rock, water foaming and churning below him. He glanced over his shoulder. A towering cliff stood behind them, a sheer drop, black and faceless. A few large chunks of rock, such as the one upon which Harry and Dumbledore were standing, looked as though they had broken away from the cliff face at some point in the past. It was a bleak, harsh view, the sea and the rock unrelieved by any tree or sweep of grass or sand.

"What do you think?" asked Dumbledore. He might have been asking Harry's opinion on whether it was a good site for a picnic.

"They brought the kids from the orphanage here?" asked Harry, who could not imagine a less cozy spot for a day trip.

"Not here, precisely," said Dumbledore. "There is a village of sorts about halfway along the cliffs behind us. I believe the orphans were taken there for a little sea air and a view of the waves. No, I think it was only ever Tom Riddle and his youthful victims who visited this spot. No Muggle could reach this rock unless they were uncommonly good mountaineers, and boats cannot approach the cliffs, the waters around them are too dangerous. I imagine that Riddle climbed down; magic would have served better than ropes. And he brought two small children with him, probably for the pleasure of terrorizing them. I think the journey alone would have done it, don't you?"Harry looked up at the cliff again and felt goose bumps.

"But his final destination — and ours — lies a little farther on. Come."Dumbledore beckoned Harry to the very edge of the rock where a series of jagged niches made footholds leading down to boulders that lay half-submerged in water and closer to the cliff. It was a treacherous descent and Dumbledore, hampered slightly by

his withered hand, moved slowly. The lower rocks were slippery with seawater. Harry could feel flecks of cold salt spray hitting his face. "Lumos," said Dumbledore, as he reached the boulder closest to the cliff face. A thousand flecks of golden light sparkled upon the dark surface of the water a few feet below where he crouched; the black wall of rock beside him was illuminated too. "You see?" said Dumbledore quietly, holding his wand a little higher. Harry saw a fissure in the cliff into which dark water was swirling. "You will not object to getting a little wet?""No," said Harry.

"Then take off your Invisibility Cloak — there is no need for it now — and let us take the plunge," And with the sudden agility of a much younger man, Dumble-dore slid from the boulder, landed in the sea, and began to swim, with a perfect breaststroke, toward the dark slit in the rock face, his lit wand held in his teeth. Harry pulled off his cloak, stuffed it into his pocket, and followed. The water was icy; Harry's waterlogged clothes billowed around him and weighed him down. Taking deep breaths that filled his nostrils with the tang of salt and seaweed, he struck out for the shimmering, shrinking light now moving deeper into the cliff. The fissure soon opened into a dark tunnel that Harry could tell would be filled with water at high tide. The slimy walls were barely three feet apart and glimmered like wet tar in the passing light of Dumbledore's wand. A little way in, the passageway curved to the left, and Harry saw that it extended far into the cliff. He continued to swim in Dumbledore's wake, the tips of his benumbed fingers brushing the rough, wet rock.

Then he saw Dumbledore rising out of the water ahead, his sil-ver hair and dark robes gleaming. When Harry reached the spot he found steps that led into a large cave. He clambered up them, water streaming from his soaking clothes, and emerged, shivering uncontrollably, into the still and freezing air.

Dumbledore was standing in the middle of the cave, his wand held high as he turned slowly on the spot, examining the walls and ceiling.

"Yes, this is the place," said Dumbledore.

"How can you tell?" Harry spoke in a whisper.

"It has known magic," said Dumbledore simply. Harry could not tell whether the shivers he was experiencing were due to his spine-deep coldness or to the same awareness ofenchantments. He watched as Dumbledore continued to revolve on the spot, evidently concentrating on things Harry could not see. "This is merely the antechamber, the entrance hall," said Dumbledore after a moment or two. "We need to penetrate the inner place. . . . Now it is Lord Voldemort's obstacles that stand in our way, rather than those nature made. . . ."Dumbledore approached the wall of the cave and caressed it with his blackened fingertips, murmuring words in a strange tongue that Harry did not understand. Twice Dumbledore walked right around the cave, touching as much of the rough rock as he could, occasionally pausing, running his fingers backward and for-ward over a particular spot, until finally he stopped, his hand pressed flat against the wall. "Here," he said. "We go on through here. The entrance is concealed." Harry did not ask how Dumbledore knew. He had never seen a wizard work things out like this, simply by looking and touching; but Harry had long since learned that bangs and smoke were more often the marks of ineptitude than expertise. Dumbledore stepped back from the cave wall and pointed his wand at the rock. For a moment, an arched outline appeared there, blazing white as though there was a powerful light behind the crack.

"You've d-done it!" said Harry through chattering teeth, but before the words had left his lips the outline had gone, leaving the rock as bare and solid as ever. Dumbledore looked around.

"Harry, I'm so sorry, I forgot," he said; he now pointed his wand at Harry and at once, Harry's clothes were as warm and dry as if they had been hanging in front of a blazing fire.

"Thank you," said Harry gratefully, but Dumbledore had al-ready turned his attention back to the solid cave wall. He did not try any more magic, but simply stood there staring at it intently, as though something extremely interesting was written on it. Harry stayed quite still; he did not want to break Dumbledores concen-tration. Then, after two solid minutes, Dumbledore said quietly, "Oh, surely not. So crude.""What is it, Professor?"

"I rather think," said Dumbledore, putting his uninjured hand inside his robes and drawing out a short silver knife of the kind Harry used to chop potion ingredients, "that we are required to make payment to pass.""Payment?" said Harry. "You've got to give the door something?""Yes," said Dumbledore. "Blood, if I am not much mistaken.""Blood?"

"I said it was crude," said Dumbledore, who sounded disdainful, even disappointed, as though Voldemort had fallen short of higher standards Dumbledore expected. "The idea, as I am sure you will have gathered, is that your enemy must weaken him- or herself to enter. Once again, Lord Voldemort fails to grasp that there are much more terrible things than physical injury.""Yeah, but still, if you can avoid it . . ." said Harry, who had ex-perienced enough pain not to be keen for more.

"Sometimes, however, it is unavoidable," said Dumbledore, shaking back the sleeve of his robes and exposing the forearm of his injured hand.

"Professor!" protested Harry, hurrying forward as Dumbledore raised his knife. "I'll do it, I'm —" He did not know what he was going to say — younger, fitter?

But Dumbledore merely smiled. There was a flash of silver, and a spurt of scarlet; the rock face was peppered with dark, glistening drops.

"You are very kind, Harry," said Dumbledore, now passing the tip of his wand over the deep cut he had made in his own arm, so that it healed instantly, just as Snape had healed Malfoy's wound, "But your blood is worth more than mine. Ah, that seems to have done the trick, doesn't it?" The blazing silver outline of an arch had appeared in the wall once more, and this time it did not fade away: The blood-spattered rock within it simply vanished, leaving an opening into what seemed total darkness. "After me, I think," said Dumbledore, and he walked through the archway with Harry on his heels, lighting his own wand hastily as he went.

An eerie sight met their eyes: They were standing on the edge of a great black lake, so vast that Harry could not make out the distant banks, in a cavern so high that the ceiling too was out of sight. A misty greenish light shone far away in what looked like the mid-dle of the lake; it was reflected in the completely still water below. The greenish glow and the light from the two wands were the only things that broke the otherwise velvety blackness, though their rays did not penetrate as far as Harry would have expected. The dark-ness was somehow denser than normal darkness.

"Let us walk," said Dumbledore quietly. "Be very careful not to step into the water. Stay close to me." He set off around the edge of the lake, and Harry followed close behind him. Their footsteps made echoing, slapping sounds on the narrow rim of rock that surrounded the water. On and on they walked, but the view did not vary: on one side of them, the rough cavern wall, on the other, the boundless expanse of smooth, glassy blackness, in the very middle of which was that mysterious greenish glow. Harry found the place and the silence oppressive, unnerving.

"Professor?" he said finally. "Do you think the Horcrux is here?""Oh yes," said Dumbledore. "Yes, I'm sure it is. The question is, how do we get to it?""We couldn't... we couldn't just try a Summoning Charm?" Harry said, sure that it was a stupid suggestion. But he was

much keener than he was prepared to admit on getting out of this place as soon as possible.

"Certainly we could," said Dumbledore, stopping so suddenly that Harry almost walked into him. "Why don't you do it?""Me? Oh . . . okay . . ." Harry had not expected this, but cleared his throat and said loudly, wand aloft, "Accio Horcrux!"With a noise like an explosion, something very large and pale erupted out of the dark water some twenty feet away; before Harry could see what it was, it had vanished again with a crashing splash that made great, deep ripples on the mirrored surface. Harry leapt backward in shock and hit the wall; his heart was still thundering as he turned to Dumbledore.

"What was that?"

"Something, I think, that is ready to respond should we attempt to seize the Horcrux."Harry looked back at the water. The surface of the lake was once more shining black glass: The ripples had vanished unnaturally fast; Harry's heart, however, was still pounding.

"Did you think that would happen, sir?""I thought something would happen if we made an obvious at-tempt to get our hands on the Horcrux. That was a very good idea, Harry; much the simplest way of finding out what we are facing.""But we don't know what the thing was," said Harry, looking at the sinisterly smooth water.

"What the things are, you mean," said Dumbledore. "I doubt very much that there is only one of them. Shall we walk on?""Professor?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Do you think we're going to have to go into the lake?""Into it? Only if we are very unfortunate.""You don't think the Horcrux is at the bottom?""Oh no ... I think the Horcrux is in the middle." And Dumbledore pointed toward the misty green light in the center of the lake.

"So we're going to have to cross the lake to get to it?""Yes, I think so." Harry did not say anything. His thoughts were all of water mon-sters, of giant serpents, of demons, kelpies, and sprites. . . .

"Aha," said Dumbledore, and he stopped again; this time, Harry really did walk into him; for a moment he toppled on the edge of the dark water, and Dumbledore's uninjured hand closed tightly around his upper arm, pulling him back. "So sorry, Harry, I should have given warning. Stand back against the wall, please; I think I have found the place."Harry had no idea what Dumbledore meant; this patch of dark bank was exactly like every other bit as far as he could tell, but Dumbledore seemed to have detected something special about it. This time he was running his hand, not over the rocky wall, but t hrough the thin air, as though expecting to find and grip some-thing invisible.

"Oho," said Dumbledore happily, seconds later. His hand had closed in midair upon something Harry could not see. Dumble-dore moved closer to the water; Harry watched nervously as the tips of Dumbledore's buckled shoes found the utmost edge of the rock rim. Keeping his hand clenched in midair, Dumbledore raised his wand with the other and tapped his fist with the point.

Immediately a thick coppery green chain appeared out of thin air, extending from the depths of the water into Dumbledore's clenched hand. Dumbledore tapped the chain, which began to slide through his fist like a snake, coiling itself on the ground with a clinking sound that echoed noisily off the rocky walls, pulling something from the depths of the black water. Harry gasped as the ghostly prow of a tiny boat broke the surface, glowing as green as the chain, and floated, with barely a ripple, toward the place on the bank where Harry and Dumbledore stood.

"How did you know that was there?" Harry asked in astonish-ment.

"Magic always leaves traces," said Dumbledore, as the boat hit the bank with a gentle bump, "sometimes very distinctive traces. I taught Tom Riddle. I know his style.""Is ... is this boat safe?"

"Oh yes, I think so. Voldemort needed to create a means to cross the lake without attracting the wrath of those creatures he had placed within it in case he ever wanted to visit or remove his Horcrux.""So the things in the water won't do anything to us if we cross in Voldemort's boat?""I think we must resign ourselves to the fact that they will, at some point, realize we are not Lord Voldemort. Thus far, however, we have done well. They have allowed us to raise the boat.""But why have they let us?" asked Harry, who could not shake off the vision of tentacles rising out of the dark water the moment they were out of sight of the bank.

"Voldemort would have been reasonably confident that none but a very great wizard would have been able to find the boat," said Dumbledore. "I think he would have been prepared to risk what was, to his mind, the most unlikely possibility that somebody else would find it, knowing that he had set other obstacles ahead that only he would be able to penetrate. We shall see whether he was right."Harry looked down into the boat. It really was very small. "It doesn't look like it was built for two people. Will it hold both of us? Will we be too heavy together?"Dumbledore chuckled. "Voldemort will not have cared about the weight, but about the amount of magical power that crossed his lake. I rather think an enchantment will have been placed upon this boat so that only one wizard at a time will be able to sail in it.""But then — ?"

"I do not think you will count, Harry: You are underage and un-qualified. Voldemort would never have expected a sixteen-year-old to reach this place: I think it unlikely that your powers will register compared to mine." These words did nothing to raise Harrys morale; perhaps Dumbledore knew it, for he added, "Voldemort's mistake, Harry, Voldemort's mistake. . . Age is foolish and forgetful when it underestimates youth. . . . Now, you first this time, and be careful not

to touch the water." Dumbledore stood aside and Harry climbed carefully into the boat. Dumbledore stepped in too, coiling the chain onto the floor. They were crammed in together; Harry could not comfortably sit, but crouched, his knees jutting over the edge of the boat, which be-gan to move at once. There was no sound other than the silken rus-tle of the boat's prow cleaving the water; it moved without their help, as though an invisible rope was pulling it onward toward the light in the center. Soon they could no longer see the walls of the cavern; they might have been at sea except that there were no waves.

Harry looked down and saw the reflected gold of his wandlight sparkling and glittering on the black water as they passed. The boat was carving deep ripples upon the glassy surface, grooves in the dark mirror. . . .

And then Harry saw it, marble white, floating inches below the surface. "Professor!" he said, and his startled voice echoed loudly over the silent water.

"Harry?"

"I think I saw a hand in the water — a human hand!""Yes, I am sure you did," said Dumbledore calmly.

Harry stared down into the water, looking for the vanished hand, and a sick feeling rose in his throat.

"So that thing that jumped out of the water — ?" But Harry had his answer before Dumbledore could reply; the wandlight had slid over a fresh patch of water and showed him, this time, a dead man lying faceup inches beneath the surface, his open eyes misted as though with cobwebs, his hair and his robes swirling around him like smoke. "There are bodies in here!" said Harry, and his voice sounded much higher than usual and most unlike his own.

"Yes," said Dumbledore placidly, "but we do not need to worry about them at the moment.""At the moment?" Harry repeated, tearing his gaze from the water to look at Dumbledore.

"Not while they are merely drifting peacefully below us," said Dumbledore. "There is nothing to be feared from a body, Harry, any more than there is anything to be feared from the darkness. Lord Voldemort, who of course secretly fears both, disagrees. But once again he reveals his own lack of wisdom. It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness, nothing more." Harry said nothing; he did not want to argue, but he found the idea that there were bodies floating around them and beneath them horrible and, what was more, he did not believe that they were not dangerous.

"But one of them jumped," he said, trying to make his voice as level and calm as Dumbledore's. "When I tried to Summon the Horcrux, a body leapt out of the lake.""Yes," said Dumbledore. "I am sure that once we take the Horcrux, we shall find them less peaceable. However, like many creatures that dwell in cold and darkness, they fear light and warmth, which we shall therefore call to our aid should the need arise. Fire, Harry," Dumbledore added with a smile, in response to Harry's bewildered expression.

"Oh . . . right. . ." said Harry quickly. He turned his head to look at the greenish glow toward which the boat was still inexorably sailing. He could not pretend now that he was not scared. The great black lake, teeming with the dead ... It seemed hours and hours ago that he had met Professor Trelawney, that he had given Ron and Hermione Felix Felicis. . . . He suddenly wished he had said a better good-bye to them . . . and he hadn't seen Ginny at all. . .

"Nearly there," said Dumbledore cheerfully. Sure enough, the greenish light seemed to be growing larger at last, and within minutes, the boat had come to a halt, bumping gently into something that Harry could not see at first, but when he raised his illuminated wand he saw that they had reached a small island of smooth rock in

the center of the lake. "Careful not to touch the water," said Dumbledore again as Harry climbed out of the boat.

The island was no larger than Dumbledore's office, an expanse of flat dark stone on which stood nothing but the source of that greenish light, which looked much brighter when viewed close to. Harry squinted at it; at first, he thought it was a lamp of some kind, but then he saw that the light was coming from a stone basin rather like the Pensieve, which was set on top of a pedestal. Dumbledore approached the basin and Harry followed. Side by side, they looked down into it. The basin was full of an emerald liq-uid emitting that phosphorescent glow.

"What is it?" asked Harry quietly.

"I am not sure," said Dumbledore. "Something more worrisome than blood and bodies, however." Dumbledore pushed back the sleeve of his robe over his black-ened hand, and stretched out the tips of his burned fingers toward the surface of the potion.

"Sir, no, don't touch — !"

"I cannot touch," said Dumbledore, smiling faintly. "See? I cannot approach any nearer than this. You try."Staring, Harry put his hand into the basin and attempted to touch the potion. He met an invisible barrier that prevented him coming within an inch of it. No matter how hard he pushed, his fingers encountered nothing but what seemed to be solid and flexible air.

"Out of the way, please, Harry," said Dumbledore. He raised his wand and made complicated movements over the surface of the-potion, murmuring soundlessly. Nothing happened, except per haps that the potion glowed a little brighter. Harry remained silent while Dumbledore worked, but after a while Dumbledore with-drew his wand, and Harry felt it was safe to talk again.

"You think the Horcrux is in there, sir?""Oh yes." Dumbledore peered more closely into the basin. Harry saw his face reflected, upside down, in the smooth surface of the green potion. "But how to reach it? This potion cannot be pen-etrated by hand, Vanished, parted, scooped up, or siphoned away, nor can it be Transfigured, Charmed, or otherwise made to change its nature." Almost absentmindedly, Dumbledore raised his wand again, twirled it once in midair, and then caught the crystal goblet that he had conjured out of nowhere. "I can only conclude that this potion is supposed to be drunk.""What?" said Harry. "No!"

"Yes, I think so: Only by drinking it can I empty the basin and see what lies in its depths.""But what if— what if it kills you?""Oh, I doubt that it would work like that," said Dumbledore easily. "Lord Voldemort would not want to kill the person who reached this island." Harry couldn't believe it. Was this more of Dumbledore's insane determination to see good in everyone?

"Sir," said Harry, trying to keep his voice reasonable, "sir, this is Voldemort we're —""I'm sorry, Harry; I should have said, he would not want to im-mediately kill the person who reached this island," Dumbledore corrected himself. "He would want to keep them alive long enough to find out how they managed to penetrate so far through his de-fenses and, most importantly of all, why they were so intent upon emptying the basin. Do not forget that Lord Voldemort believes that he alone knows about his Horcruxes."Harry made to speak again, but this time Dumbledore raised his hand for silence, frowning slightly at the emerald liquid, evidently thinking hard. "Undoubtedly," he said, finally, "this potion must act in a way that will prevent me taking the Horcrux. It might paralyze me, cause me to forget what I am here for, create so much pain I am dis-tracted, or render me incapable in some other way. This being the case, Harry, it will be your job to make sure I keep drinking, even if you have to tip the potion into my protesting mouth. You understand?"Their eyes met over the basin, each pale face lit with that strange, green light. Harry did not speak. Was this why he had been invited along — so that he

could force-feed Dumbledore a potion that might cause him unendurable pain?

"You remember," said Dumbledore, "the condition on which I brought you with me?"Harry hesitated, looking into the blue eyes that had turned green in the reflected light of the basin.

"But what if—?"

"You swore, did you not, to follow any command I gave you?""Yes, but —"

"I warned you, did I not, that there might be danger?""Yes," said Harry, "but —"

"Well, then," said Dumbledore, shaking back his sleeves once more and raising the empty goblet, "you have my orders.""Why can't I drink the potion instead?" asked Harry desperately.

"Because I am much older, much cleverer, and much less valuable," said Dumbledore. "Once and for all, Harry, do I have your word that you will do all in your power to make me keep drinking?""Couldn't — ?"

"Do I have it?"

"But—"

"Your word, Harry."

"I —all right, but—"

Before Harry could make any further protest, Dumbledore low-ered the crystal goblet into the potion. For a split second, Harry hoped that he would not be able to touch the potion with the gob-let, but the crystal sank into the surface as nothing else had; when the glass was full to the brim, Dumbledore lifted it to his mouth. "Your good health,

Harry."And he drained the goblet. Harry watched, terrified, his hands gripping the rim of the basin so hard that his fingertips were numb.

"Professor?" he said anxiously, as Dumbledore lowered the empty glass. "How do you feel?"Dumbledore shook his head, his eyes closed. Harry wondered whether he was in pain. Dumbledore plunged the glass blindly back into the basin, refilled it, and drank once more.

In silence, Dumbledore drank three gobletsful of the potion. Then, halfway through the fourth goblet, he staggered and fell for-ward against the basin. His eyes were still closed, his breathing heavy.

"Professor Dumbledore?" said Harry, his voice strained. "Can you hear me?"Dumbledore did not answer. His face was twitching as though he was deeply asleep, but dreaming a horrible dream. His grip on the goblet was slackening; the potion was about to spill from it. Harry reached forward and grasped the crystal cup, holding it steady. "Professor, can you hear me?" he repeated loudly, his voice echo-ing around the cavern.

Dumbledore panted and then spoke in a voice Harry did not recognize, for he had never heard Dumbledore frightened like this.

"I don't want. . . Don't make me ..."Harry stared into the whitened face he knew so well, at the crooked nose and half-moon spectacles, and did not know what to do.

". . . don't like . . . want to stop . . ." moaned Dumbledore.

"You . . . you can't stop, Professor," said Harry. "You've got to keep drinking, remember? You told me you had to keep drinking. Here . . ." Hating himself, repulsed by what he was doing, Harry forced the goblet back toward Dumbledore's mouth and tipped it, so that Dumbledore drank the remainder of the potion inside.

"No ..." he groaned, as Harry lowered the goblet back into the basin and refilled it for him. "I don't want to. ... I don't want to. . . . Let me go. . . .""Its all right, Professor," said Harry, his hand shaking. "Its all right, I'm here —""Make it stop, make it stop," moaned Dumbledore.

"Yes.. . yes, this'll make it stop," lied Harry. He tipped the con-tents of the goblet into Dumbledore's open mouth. Dumbledore screamed; the noise echoed all around the vast chamber, across the dead black water.

"No, no, no, no, I can't, I can't, don't make me, I don't warn to. . . .""It's all right, Professor, it's all right!" said Harry loudly, his hands shaking so badly he could hardly scoop up the sixth goblei ful of potion; the basin was now half empty. "Nothing's happening to you, you're safe, it isn't real, I swear it isn't real — take this, now, take this..." And obediently, Dumbledore drank, as though it was an anti-dote Harry offered him, but upon draining the goblet, he sank to his knees, shaking uncontrollably.

"Its all my fault, all my fault," he sobbed. "Please make it stop, I know I did wrong, oh please make it stop and I'll never, never again ...""This will make it stop, Professor," Harry said, his voice crack-ing as he tipped the seventh glass of potion into Dumbledore's mouth.

Dumbledore began to cower as though invisible torturers sur-rounded him; his flailing hand almost knocked the refilled goblet from Harry's trembling hands as he moaned, "Don't hurt them, don't hurt them, please, please, its my fault, hurt me instead ...""Here, drink this, drink this, you'll be all right," said Harry des-perately, and once again Dumbledore obeyed him, opening his mouth even as he kept his eyes tight shut and shook from head to foot. And now he fell forward, screaming again, hammering his fists upon the ground, while Harry filled the ninth goblet.

"Please, please, please, no ... not that, not that, I'll do any-thing ...""Just drink, Professor, just drink . . ."Dumbledore drank like a child

dying of thirst, but when he had finished, he yelled again as though his insides were on fire. "No more, please, no more ..."Harry scooped up a tenth gobletful of potion and felt the crystal scrape the bottom of the basin. "We're nearly there, Professor. Drink this, drink it. ..."He supported Dumbledore's shoulders and again, Dumbledore drained the glass; then Harry was on his feet once more, refilling the goblet as Dumbledore began to scream in more anguish than ever, "I want to die! I want to die! Make it stop, make it stop, I want to die!""Drink this, Professor. Drink this. . . ."Dumbledore drank, and no sooner had he finished than he yelled, "KILL ME!""This — this one will!" gasped Harry. "Just drink this .. . It'll be over ... all over!" Dumbledore gulped at the goblet, drained every last drop, and then, with a great, rattling gasp, rolled over onto his face.

"No!" shouted Harry, who had stood to refill the goblet again; instead he dropped the cup into the basin, flung himself down beside Dumbledore, and heaved him over onto his back; Dumbledore's glasses were askew, his mouth agape, his eyes closed. "No." said Harry, shaking Dumbledore, "no, you're not dead, you said it wasn't poison, wake up, wake up — Rennervate!" he cried, his wand pointing at Dumbledores chest; there was a flash of red light but nothing happened. "Rennervate — sir — please —"Dumbledores eyelids flickered; Harry's heart leapt, "Sir, are you — ?""Water," croaked Dumbledore.

"Water," panted Harry. "Yes —" He leapt to his feet and seized the goblet he had dropped in the basin; he barely registered the golden locket lying curled beneath it.

"Aguamenti!" he shouted, jabbing the goblet with his wand. The goblet filled with clear water; Harry dropped to his knees beside Dumbledore, raised his head, and brought the glass to his lips — but it was empty. Dumbledore groaned and began to pant. "But I had some — wait — Aguamenti!" said Harry again, pointing his wand at the goblet. Once more, for a second, clear wa-ter gleamed within it, but as he approached Dumbledores mouth, the water vanished

again. "Sir, I'm trying, I'm trying!" said Harry desperately, but he did not think that Dumbledore could hear him; he had rolled onto his side and was drawing great, rattling breaths that sounded agoniz-ing. "Aguamenti —Aguamenti —AGUAMENTI!"The goblet filled and emptied once more. And now Dumble-dores breathing was fading. His brain whirling in panic, Harry knew, instinctively, the only way left to get water, because Voldemort had planned it so ... He flung himself over to the edge of the rock and plunged the goblet into the lake, bringing it up full to the brim of icy water that did not vanish. "Sir — here!" Harry yelled, and lunging forward, he tipped the water clumsily over Dumbledores face.

It was the best he could do, for the icy feeling on his arm not holding the cup was not the lingering chill of the water. A slimy white hand had gripped his wrist, and the creature to whom it be-longed was pulling him, slowly, backward across the rock. The sur-face of the lake was no longer mirror-smooth; it was churning, and everywhere Harry looked, white heads and hands were emerging from the dark water, men and women and children with sunken, sightless eyes were moving toward the rock: an army of the dead rising from the black water.

"Petrificus Totalus!" yelled Harry, struggling to cling to the smooth, soaked surface of the island as he pointed his wand at the Inferius that had his arm. It released him, falling backward into the water with a splash; he scrambled to his feet, but many more Inferi were already climbing onto the rock, their bony hands clawing at its slippery surface, their blank, frosted eyes upon him, trailing waterlogged rags, sunken faces leering.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Harry bellowed again, backing away as he swiped his wand through the air; six or seven of them crumpled, but more were coming toward him. "Impedimenta! Incarcerous!" A few of them stumbled, one or two of them bound in ropes, but those climbing onto the rock behind them merely stepped over or on the fallen bodies. Still slashing at the air with his wand, Harry yelled,

"Sectumsempra! SECTUMSEMPRA!" But though gashes appeared in their sodden rags and their icy skin, they had no blood to spill: They walked on, unfeeling, their shrunken hands outstretched toward him, and as he backed away still farther, he felt arms enclose him from behind, thin, fleshlcv. arms cold as death, and his feet left the ground as they lifted him and began to carry him, slowly and surely, back to the water, anil he knew there would be no release, that he would be drowned, and become one more dead guardian of a fragment of Voldemorts shattered soul...

But then, through the darkness, fire erupted: crimson and gold, a ring of fire that surrounded the rock so that the Inferi holding Harry so tightly stumbled and faltered; they did not dare pass through the flames to get to the water. They dropped Harry; he hit the ground, slipped on the rock, and fell, grazing his arms, then scrambled back up, raising his wand and staring around.

Dumbledore was on his feet again, pale as any of the surround-ing Inferi, but taller than any too, the fire dancing in his eyes; his wand was raised like a torch and from its tip emanated the flames, like a vast lasso, encircling them all with warmth. The Inferi bumped into each other, attempting, blindly, to es-cape the fire in which they were enclosed. . . .

Dumbledore scooped the locket from the bottom of the stone basin and stowed it inside his robes. Wordlessly, he gestured to Harry to come to his side. Distracted by the flames, the Inferi seemed unaware that their quarry was leaving as Dumbledore led Harry back to the boat, the ring of fire moving with them, around them, the bewildered Inferi accompanying them to the waters edge, where they slipped gratefully back into their dark waters.

Harry, who was shaking all over, thought for a moment that Dumbledore might not be able to climb into the boat; he staggered a little as he attempted it; all his efforts seemed to be going into maintaining the ring of protective flame around them. Harry seized

him and helped him back to his seat. Once they were both safely jammed inside again, the boat began to move back across the black water, away from the rock, still encircled by that ring of fire, and it seemed that the Inferi swarming below them did not dare resurface.

"Sir," panted Harry, "sir, I forgot — about fire — they were coming at me and I panicked —""Quite understandable," murmured Dumbledore. Harry was alarmed to hear how faint his voice was.

They reached the bank with a little bump and Harry leapt out, then turned quickly to help Dumbledore. The moment that Dum-bledore reached the bank he let his wand hand fall; the ring of fire vanished, but the Inferi did not emerge again from the water. The little boat sank into the water once more; clanking and tinkling, its chain slithered back into the lake too. Dumbledore gave a great sigh and leaned against the cavern wall.

"I am weak..." he said.

"Don't worry, sir," said Harry at once, anxious about Dumbledore's extreme pallor and by his air of exhaustion. "Don't worry, I'll get us back. . . . Lean on me, sir. . . ."And pulling Dumbledore's uninjured arm around his shoulders, Harry guided his headmaster back around the lake, bearing most of his weight.

"The protection was . . . after all... well-designed," said Dum-bledore faintly. "One alone could not have done it. ... You did well, very well, Harry. ...""Don't talk now," said Harry, fearing how slurred Dumbledore's voice had become, how much his feet dragged. "Save your energy, sir. . . . We'll soon be out of here. . . .""The archway will have sealed again. . . . My knife ..." "There's no need, I got cut on the rock," said Harry firmly. "Just tell me where. . . .""Here . . ."

Harry wiped his grazed forearm upon the stone: Having re-ceived its tribute of blood, the archway reopened instantly. They crossed the outer cave, and Harry helped Dumbledore back into the icy seawater that filled the crevice in the cliff.

"It's going to be all right, sir," Harry said over and over again, more worried by Dumbledore's silence than he had been by his weakened voice. "We're nearly there. ... I can Apparate us both back . . . Don't worry. . . .""I am not worried, Harry," said Dumbledore, his voice a little stronger despite the freezing water. "I am with you."

Chapter 27 The Lightning-Struck Tower

Once back under the starry sky, Harry heaved Dumbledore on to the top of the nearest boulder and then to his feet. Sodden and shivering, Dumbledore's weight still upon him, Harry con- centrated harder than he had ever done upon his destination: Hogsmeade. Closing his eyes, gripping Dumbledore's arm as tightly as he could, he stepped forwards into that feeling of horrible compression.

He knew it had worked before he opened his eyes: the smell of salt, the sea breeze had gone. He and Dumbledore were shivering and dripping in the middle of the dark High Street in Hogsmeade. For one horrible moment Harry's imagination showed him more Inferi creeping towards him around the sides of shops, but he blinked and saw that noth-ing was stirring; all was still, the darkness complete but for a few streetlamps and lit upper windows.

'We did it, Professor!' Harry whispered with difficulty; he suddenly realised that he had a searing stitch in his chest. 'We did it! We got the Horcrux!'Dumbledore staggered against him. For a moment, Harry thought that his inexpert Apparition had thrown Dumbledore off-balance; then he saw his face, paler and damper than ever in the distant light of a streetlamp.

'Sir, are you all right?'

'I've been better,' said Dumbledore weakly, though the corners of his mouth twitched. That potion ... was no health drink ..."And to Harry's horror, Dumbledore sank on to the ground.

'Sir - it's OK, sir, you're going to be all right, don't worry -'He looked around desperately for help, but there was nobody to be seen and all he could think was that he must somehow get Dumbledore quickly to the hospital wing.

'We need to get you up to the school, sir ... Madam Pomfrey ...''No,' said Dumbledore. 'It is ... Professor Snape whom I need ... but I do not think ... I can walk very far just yet ...''Right - sir, listen - I'm going to knock on a door, find a place you can stay - then I can run and get Madam -''Severus,' said Dumbledore clearly. 'I need Severus ...''All right then, Snape - but I'm going to have to leave you for a moment so I can -'Before Harry could make a move, however, he heard run- ning footsteps. His heart leapt: somebody had seen, somebody knew they needed help - and looking around he saw Madam Rosmerta scurrying down the dark street towards them on high-heeled, fluffy slippers, wearing a silk dressing-gown embroidered with dragons.

'I saw you Apparate as I was pulling my bedroom curtains! Thank goodness, thank goodness, I couldn't think what to - but what's wrong with Albus?'She came to a halt, panting, and stared down, wide-eyed, at Dumbledore.

'He's hurt,' said Harry. 'Madam Rosmerta, can he come into the Three Broomsticks while I go up to the school and get help for him?''You can't go up there alone! Don't you realise - haven't you seen -?''If you help me support him,' said Harry, not listening to her, 'I think we can get him inside -''What has happened?' asked Dumbledore. 'Rosmerta, what's wrong?'The - the Dark Mark, Albus.'

And she pointed into the sky, in the direction of Hogwarts. Dread flooded Harry at the sound of the words ... he turned and looked.

There it was, hanging in the sky above the school: the blaz- ing green skull with a serpent tongue, the mark Death Eaters left behind whenever they had entered a building ... wherever they had murdered ...

'When did it appear?' asked Dumbledore, and his hand clenched painfully upon Harry's shoulder as he struggled to his feet.

'Must have been minutes ago, it wasn't there when I put the cat out, but when I got upstairs -''We need to return to the castle at once,' said

Dumbledore. 'Rosmerta,' and though he staggered a little, he seemed wholly in command of the situation, 'we need transport - brooms -''I've got a couple behind the bar,' she said, looking very frightened. 'Shall I run and fetch -?''No, Harry can do it.'

Harry raised his wand at once.

'Accio Rosmerta's brooms.'

A second later they heard a loud bang as the front door of the pub burst open; two brooms had shot out into the street and were racing each other to Harry's side, where they stopped dead, quivering slightly, at waist height.

'Rosmerta, please send a message to the Ministry,' said Dumbledore, as he mounted the broom nearest him. 'It might be that nobody within Hogwarts has yet realised anything is wrong ... Harry, put on your Invisibility Cloak.'Harry pulled his Cloak out of his pocket and threw it over himself before mounting his broom; Madam Rosmerta was already tottering back towards her pub as Harry and Dumble-dore kicked off from the ground and rose up into the air. As they sped towards the castle, Harry glanced sideways at Dumbledore, ready to grab him should he fall, but the sight of the Dark Mark seemed to have acted upon Dumbledore like a stimulant: he was bent low over his broom, his eyes fixed upon the Mark, his long silver hair and beard flying behind him in the night air. And Harry, too, looked ahead at the skull, and fear swelled inside him like a venomous bubble, compressing his lungs, driving all other discomfort from his mind ...

How long had they been away? Had Ron, Hermione and Ginny's luck run out by now? Was it one of them who had caused the Mark to be set over the school, or was it Neville, or Luna, or some other member of the DA? And if it was ... he was the one who had told them to patrol the corridors, he had asked them to leave the safety of their beds ... would he be responsible, again, for the death of a friend?

As they flew over the dark, twisting lane down which they had walked earlier, Harry heard, over the whistling of the night air in his ears, Dumbledore muttering in some strange language again. He thought he understood why as he felt his broom shudder for a moment when they flew over the bound-ary wall into the grounds: Dumbledore was undoing the enchantments he himself had set around the castle, so that they could enter at speed. The Dark Mark was glittering directly above the Astronomy Tower, the highest of the castle. Did that mean the death had occurred there?

Dumbledore had already crossed the crenellated ramparts and was dismounting; Harry landed next to him seconds later and looked around.

The ramparts were deserted. The door to the spiral staircase that led back into the castle was closed. There was no sign of a struggle, of a fight to the death, of a body.

'What does it mean?' Harry asked Dumbledore, looking up at the green skull with its serpent's tongue glinting evilly above them. 'Is it the real Mark? Has someone definitely been - Professor?'In the dim green glow from the Mark Harry saw Dumble-dore clutching at his chest with his blackened hand.

'Go and wake Severus,' said Dumbledore faintly but clearly. Tell him what has happened and bring him to me. Do noth- ing else, speak to nobody else and do not remove your Cloak. I shall wait here.''But -'

'You swore to obey me, Harry - go!'Harry hurried over to the door leading to the spiral stair-case, but his hand had only just closed upon the iron ring of the door when he heard running footsteps on the other side. He looked round at Dumbledore, who gestured to him to retreat. Harry backed away, drawing his wand as he did so.

The door burst open and somebody erupted through it and shouted: 'Expelliarmus!'Harry's body became instantly rigid and immobile, and he felt himself fall back against the Tower wall, propped like an

unsteady statue, unable to move or speak. He could not understand how it had happened - Expelliarmus was not a Freezing Charm -

Then, by the light of the Mark, he saw Dumbledore's wand flying in an arc over the edge of the ramparts and under-stood ... Dumbledore had wordlessly immobilised Harry, and the second he had taken to perform the spell had cost him the chance of defending himself.

Standing against the ramparts, very white in the face, Dumbledore still showed no sign of panic or distress. He merely looked across at his disarmer and said, 'Good evening, Draco.'Malfoy stepped forwards, glancing around quickly to check that he and Dumbledore were alone. His eyes fell upon the second broom.

'Who else is here?'

'A question 1 might ask you. Or are you acting alone?'Harry saw Malfoy's pale eyes shift back to Dumbledore in the greenish glare of the Mark.

'No,' he said. 'I've got back-up. There are Death Eaters here in your school tonight.''Well, well,' said Dumbledore, as though Malfoy was show- ing him an ambitious homework project. 'Very good indeed. You found a way to let them in, did you?''Yeah,' said Malfoy, who was panting. 'Right under your nose and you never realised!''Ingenious,' said Dumbledore. 'Yet ... forgive me ... where are they now? You seem unsupported.'They met some of your guard. They're having a fight down below. They won't be long ... I came on ahead. I - I've got a job to do.''Well, then, you must get on and do it, my dear boy,' said Dumbledore softly.

There was silence. Harry stood imprisoned within his own invisible, paralysed body, staring at the two of them, his ears straining to hear sounds of the Death Eaters' distant fight, and in front of him, Draco Malfoy did nothing but stare at Albus Dumbledore who, incredibly, smiled.

'Draco, Draco, you are not a killer.''How do you know?' said Malfoy at once.

He seemed to realise how childish the words had sounded; Harry saw him flush in the Mark's greenish light.

'You don't know what I'm capable of,' said Malfoy more forcefully, 'you don't know what I've done!''Oh, yes, I do,' said Dumbledore mildly. 'You almost killed Katie Bell and Ronald Weasley. You have been trying, with increasing desperation, to kill me all year. Forgive me, Draco, but they have been feeble attempts ... so feeble, to be honest, that I wonder whether your heart has been really in it...''It has been in it!' said Malfoy vehemently. 'I've been work- ing on it all year, and tonight -'Somewhere in the depths of the castle below Harry heard a muffled yell. Malfoy stiffened and glanced over his shoulder.

'Somebody is putting up a good fight,' said Dumbledore conversationally. 'But you were saying ... yes, you have man-aged to introduce Death Eaters into my school which, I admit, I thought impossible ... how did you do it?'But Malfoy said nothing: he was still listening to whatever was happening below and seemed almost as paralysed as Harry was.

'Perhaps you ought to get on with the job alone,' suggested Dumbledore. 'What if your back-up has been thwarted by my guard? As you have perhaps realised, there are members of the Order of the Phoenix here tonight, too. And after all, you don't really need help ... I have no wand at the moment ... I cannot defend myself.'Malfoy merely stared at him.

'I see,' said Dumbledore kindly, when Malfoy neithermoved nor spoke. 'You are afraid to act until they joinyou.'?

'I'm not afraid!' snarled Malfoy, though he still made no move to hurt Dumbledore. 'It's you who should be scared!''But why? I don't think you will kill me, Draco. Killing is not nearly as easy as the innocent believe ... so tell me, while we wait for your friends ... how did you

smuggle them in here? It seems to have taken you a long time to work out how to do it.'Malfoy looked as though he was fighting down the urge to shout, or to vomit. He gulped and took several deep breaths, glaring at Dumbledore, his wand pointing directly at the latter's heart. Then, as though he could not help himself, he said, '1 had to mend that broken Vanishing Cabinet that no one's used for years. The one Montague got lost in last year.''Aaaah.'

Dumbledore's sigh was half a groan. He closed his eyes for a moment.

That was clever ... there is a pair, I take it?''The other's in Borgin and Burkes,' said Malfoy, 'and they make a kind of passage between them. Montague told me that when he was stuck in the Hogwarts one, he was trapped in limbo but sometimes he could hear what was going on at school, and sometimes what was going on in the shop, as if the Cabinet was travelling between them, but he couldn't make anyone hear him ... in the end he managed to Apparate out, even though he'd never passed his test. He nearly died doing it. Everyone thought it was a really good story, but I was the only one who realised what it meant - even Borgin didn't know - 1 was the one who realised there could be a way into Hogwarts through the Cabinets if I fixed the broken one.''Very good,' murmured Dumbledore. 'So the Death Eaters were able to pass from Borgin and Burkes into the school to help you ... a clever plan, a very clever plan ... and, as you say, right under my nose ...''Yeah,' said Malfoy who, bizarrely, seemed to draw courage and comfort from Dumbledore's praise. 'Yeah, it was!''But there were times,' Dumbledore went on, 'weren't there, when you were not sure you would succeed in mending the Cabinet? And you resorted to crude and badly judged meas-ures such as sending me a cursed necklace that was bound to reach the wrong hands ... poisoning mead there was only the slightest chance I might drink ...''Yeah, well, you still didn't realise who was behind that stuff, did you?' sneered Malfoy, as Dumbledore slid a little down the ramparts, the strength in his legs apparently fading, and Harry struggled fruitlessly, mutely, against the enchantment binding him.

'As a matter of fact, I did,' said Dumbledore. 'I was sure it was you.''Why didn't you stop me, then?' Malfoy demanded.

'I tried, Draco. Professor Snape has been keeping watch over you on my orders -''He hasn't been doing your orders, he promised my mother -''Of course that is what he would tell you, Draco, but -''He's a double-agent, you stupid old man, he isn't working for you, you just think he is!''We must agree to differ on that, Draco. It so happens that I trust Professor Snape -''Well, you're losing your grip, then!' sneered Malfoy. 'He's been offering me plenty of help - wanting all the glory for himself - wanting a bit of the action - "What are you doing? Did you do the necklace, that was stupid, it could have blown everything -" But I haven't told him what I've been doing in the Room of Requirement, he's going to wake up tomorrow and it'll all be over and he won't be the Dark Lord's favourite any more, he'll be nothing compared to me, nothing!''Very gratifying,' said Dumbledore mildly. 'We all like* appreciation for our own hard work, of course ... but you must have had an accomplice, all the same ... someone in Hogsmeade, someone who was able to slip Katie the - the - aaaahDumbledore closed his eyes again and nodded, as though he was about to fall asleep.

'... of course ... Rosmerta. How long has she been under the Imperius Curse?''Got there at last, have you?' Malfoy taunted.

There was another yell from below, rather louder than the last. Malfoy looked nervously over his shoulder again, then back at Dumbledore, who went on, 'So poor Rosmerta was forced to lurk in her own bathroom and pass that necklace to any Hogwarts student who entered the room unaccompanied? And the poisoned mead ... well, naturally, Rosmerta was able to poison it for you before she sent the bottle to Slughorn, believing that it was to be my Christmas present ... yes, very neat ... very neat ... poor Mr Filch would not, of course, think to check a bottle of Rosmerta's ... tell me, how have you been communicating with Rosmerta? I thought we had all methods of communication in and out of the school monitored.''Enchanted coins,'

said Malfoy, as though he was compelled to keep talking, though his wand hand was shaking badly. 'I had one and she had the other and 1 could send her messages -''Isn't that the secret method of communication the group that called themselves Dumbledore's Army used last year?' asked Dumbledore. His voice was light and conversational, but Harry saw him slip an inch lower down the wall as he said it.

'Yeah, I got the idea from them,' said Malfoy, with a twisted smile. 'I got the idea of poisoning the mead from the Mudblood Granger, as well, I heard her talking in the library about Filch not recognising potions ...'

Hogsmeade, someone who was able to slip Katie the - the - aaaahDumbledore closed his eyes again and nodded, as though he was about to fall asleep.

'... of course ... Rosmerta. How long has she been under the Imperius Curse?''Got there at last, have you?' Malfoy taunted.

There was another yell from below, rather louder than the last. Malfoy looked nervously over his shoulder again, then back at Dumbledore, who went on, 'So poor Rosmerta was forced to lurk in her own bathroom and pass that necklace to any Hogwarts student who entered the room unaccompanied? And the poisoned mead ... well, naturally, Rosmerta was able to poison it for you before she sent the bottle to Slughorn, believing that it was to be my Christmas present ... yes, very neat ... very neat ... poor Mr Filch would not, of course, think to check a bottle of Rosmerta's ... tell me, how have you been communicating with Rosmerta? I thought we had all methods of communication in and out of the school monitored.''Enchanted coins,' said Malfoy, as though he was compelled to keep talking, though his wand hand was shaking badly. 'I had one and she had the other and 1 could send her messages -''Isn't that the secret method of communication the group that called themselves Dumbledore's Army used last year?' asked Dumbledore. His voice was light and

conversational, but Harry saw him slip an inch lower down the wall as he said it.

'Yeah, I got the idea from them,' said Malfoy, with a twisted smile. 'I got the idea of poisoning the mead from the Mudblood Granger, as well, I heard her talking in the library about Filch not recognising potions ...'

'Please do not use that offensive word in front of me,' said Dumbledore.

Malfoy gave a harsh laugh.

'You care about me saying "Mudblood" when I'm about to kill you?''Yes, I do,' said Dumbledore, and Harry saw his feet slide a little on the floor as he struggled to remain upright. 'But as for being about to kill me, Draco, you have had several long minutes now. We are quite alone. I am more defenceless than you can have dreamed of finding me, and still you have not acted ...'Malfoy's mouth contorted involuntarily, as though he had tasted something very bitter.

'Now, about tonight,' Dumbledore went on, 'I am a little puzzled about how it happened ... you knew that I had left the school? But of course,' he answered his own question, 'Rosmerta saw me leaving, she tipped you off using your ingenious coins, I'm sure ...''That's right,' said Malfoy. 'But she said you were just going for a drink, you'd be back ...''Well, I certainly did have a drink ... and I came back ... after a fashion,' mumbled Dumbledore. 'So you decided to spring a trap for me?''We decided to put the Dark Mark over the Tower and get you to hurry up here, to see who'd been killed,' said Malfoy. 'And it worked!''Well ... yes and no ...' said Dumbledore. 'But am I to take it, then, that nobody has been murdered?''Someone's dead,' said Malfoy and his voice seemed to go up an octave as he said it. 'One of your people ... I don't know who, it was dark ... I stepped over the body ... I was* supposed to be waiting up here when you got back, only your Phoenix lot got in the way ...''Yes, they do that,' said Dumbledore.

There was a bang and shouts from below, louder than ever; it sounded as though people were fighting on the actual spiral staircase that led to where Dumbledore, Malfoy and Harry stood, and Harry's heart thundered unheard in his invisible chest ... someone was dead ... Malfoy had stepped over the body ... but who was it?

There is little time, one way or another,' said Dumbledore. 'So let us discuss your options, Draco.''My options!' said Malfoy loudly. 'I'm standing here with a wand - I'm about to kill you -''My dear boy, let us have no more pretence about that. If you were going to kill me, you would have done it when you first Disarmed me, you would not have stopped for this pleasant chat about ways and means.''I haven't got any options!' said Malfoy, and he was sud- denly as white as Dumbledore. 'I've got to do it! He'll kill me! He'll kill my whole family!''I appreciate the difficulty of your position,' said Dumbledore. 'Why else do you think I have not confronted you before now? Because I knew that you would have been murdered if Lord Voldemort realised that I suspected you.'Malfoy winced at the sound of the name.

'I did not dare speak to you of the mission with which I knew you had been entrusted, in case he used Legilimency against you,' continued Dumbledore. 'But now at last we can speak plainly to each other ... no harm has been done, you have hurt nobody, though you are very lucky that your unintentional victims survived ... I can help you, Draco.''No, you can't,' said Malfoy, his wand hand shaking very badly indeed. 'Nobody can. He told me to do it or he'll kill me. I've got no choice.''Come over to the right side, Draco, and we can hide you more completely than you can possibly imagine. What is more, I can send members of the Order to your mother tonight to hide her likewise. Your father is safe at the moment in Azkaban ... when the time comes we can protect him too ... come over to the right side, Draco ... you are not a killer ...'Malfoy stared at Dumbledore.

'But I got this far, didn't I?' he said slowly. They thought I'd die in the attempt, but I'm here ... and you're in my power ... I'm the one with the wand ... you're at my mercy ...''No, Draco,' said Dumbledore quietly. 'It

is my mercy, and not yours, that matters now.'Malfoy did not speak. His mouth was open, his wand hand still trembling. Harry thought he saw it drop by a fraction -

But suddenly footsteps were thundering up the stairs and a second later Malfoy was buffeted out of the way as four people in black robes burst through the door on to the ram-parts. Still paralysed, his eyes staring unblinkingly, Harry gazed in terror upon four strangers: it seemed the Death Eaters had won the fight below.

A lumpy-looking man with an odd lopsided leer gave a wheezy giggle.

'Dumbledore cornered!' he said, and he turned to a stocky little woman who looked as though she could be his sister and who was grinning eagerly. 'Dumbledore wandless, Dumbledore alone! Well done, Draco, well done!''Good evening, Amycus,' said Dumbledore calmly, as though welcoming the man to a tea party. 'And you've brought Alecto too ... charming ...'The woman gave an angry little titter.

Think your little jokes'll help you on your death bed, then?' she jeered.

'Jokes? No, no, these are manners,' replied Dumbledore.

'Do it,' said the stranger standing nearest to Harry, a big, rangy man with matted grey hair and whiskers, whose black Death Eater's robes looked uncomfortably tight. He had a voice like none that Harry had ever heard: a rasping bark of a voice. Harry could smell a powerful mixture of dirt, sweat and, unmistakeably, of blood coming from him. His filthy hands had long yellowish nails.

'Is that you, Fenrir?' asked Dumbledore.

That's right,' rasped the other. 'Pleased to see me, Dumbledore?''No, I cannot say that I am ...'Fenrir Greyback grinned, showing pointed teeth. Blood trickled down his chin and he licked his lips slowly, obscenely.

'But you know how much I like kids, Dumbledore.''Am I to take it that you are attacking even without the full moon now? This is most unusual ... you have developed a taste for human flesh that cannot be satisfied once a month?'That's right,' said Greyback. 'Shocks you, that, does it, Dumbledore? Frightens you?''Well, I cannot pretend it does not disgust me a little,' said Dumbledore. 'And, yes, I am a little shocked that Draco here invited you, of all people, into the school where his friends live...''I didn't,' breathed Malfoy. He was not looking at Greyback; he did not seem to want to even glance at him. 'I didn't know he was going to come -''I wouldn't want to miss a trip to Hogwarts, Dumbledore,' rasped Greyback. 'Not when there are throats to be ripped out ... delicious, delicious ...'And he raised a yellow fingernail and picked at his front teeth, leering at Dumbledore.

'1 could do you for afters, Dumbledore ...''No,' said the fourth Death Eater sharply. He had a heavy, brutal-looking face. 'We've got orders. Draco's got to do it. Now, Draco, and quickly.'Malfoy was showing less resolution than ever. He looked terrified as he stared into Dumbledore's face, which was even paler, and rather lower than usual, as he had slid so far down the rampart wall.

'He's not long for this world anyway, if you ask me!' said the lopsided man, to the accompaniment of his sister's wheezing giggles. 'Look at him - what's happened to you, then, Dumby?''Oh, weaker resistance, slower reflexes, Amycus,' said Dumbledore. 'Old age, in short ... one day, perhaps, it will happen to you ... if you are lucky ...''What's that mean, then, what's that mean?' yelled the Death Eater, suddenly violent. 'Always the same, weren't yeh, Dumby, talking and doing nothing, nothing, I don't even know why the Dark Lord's bothering to kill yeh! Come on, Draco, do it!'But at that moment, there were renewed sounds of scuffling from below and a voice shouted, 'They've blocked the stairs - Reducto! REDUCTO!'Harry's heart leapt: so these four had not eliminated all opposition, but merely broken through the fight to the top of the Tower, and, by the sound of it, created a barrier behind them -

'Now, Draco, quickly!' said the brutal-faced man angrily.

But Malfoy's hand was shaking so badly that he could barely aim.

Til do it,' snarled Greyback, moving towards Dumbledore with his hands outstretched, his teeth bared.

'I said no!' shouted the brutal-faced man; there was a flash of light and the werewolf was blasted out of the way; he hit the ramparts and staggered, looking furious. Harry's heart was hammering so hard it seemed impossible that nobody could hear him standing there, imprisoned by Dumbledore's spell -if he could only move, he could aim a curse from under the Cloak -

'Draco, do it, or stand aside so one of us -' screeched the woman, but at that precise moment the door to the ramparts burst open once more and there stood Snape, his wand clutched in his hand as his black eyes swept the scene, from Dumbledore slumped against the wall, to the four Death Eaters, including the enraged werewolf, and Malfoy.

'We've got a problem, Snape,' said the lumpy Amycus, whose eyes and wand were fixed alike upon Dumbledore, 'the boy doesn't seem able -'But somebody else had spoken Snape's name, quite softly.

'Severus ...'

The sound frightened Harry beyond anything he had experienced all evening. For the first time, Dumbledore was pleading.

Snape said nothing, but walked forwards and pushed Malfoy roughly out of the way. The three Death Eaters fell back without a word. Even the werewolf seemed cowed.

Snape gazed for a moment at Dumbledore, and there was revulsion and hatred etched in the harsh lines of his face.

'Severus ... please ..."

Snape raised his wand and pointed it directly at Dumbledore.

'Avada Kedavra!'

Chapter 28 Flight of the Prince

Harry felt as though he too were hurtling through space; it had not happened. . . . It could not have happened. ...

"Out of here, quickly," said Snape.

He seized Malfoy by the scruff of the neck and forced him through the door ahead of the rest; Greyback and the squat brother and sister followed, the latter both panting excitedly. As they vanished through the door, Harry realized he could move again. What was now holding him paralyzed against the wall was not magic, but horror and shock. He threw the Invisibility Cloak aside as the brutal-faced Death Eater, last to leave the tower top, was disappearing through the door.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

The Death Eater buckled as though hit in the back with something solid and fell to the ground, rigid as a waxwork, but he had barely hit the floor when Harry was clambering over him and running down the darkened staircase.

Terror tore at Harry;s heart. ... He had to get to Dumbledore and he had to catch Snape. ... Somehow the two things were linked. ... He could reverse what had happened if he had them both together. ... Dumbledore could not have died. ...

He leapt the last ten steps of the spiral staircase and stopped where he landed, his wand raised. The dimly lit corridor was full of dust; half the ceiling seemed to have fallen in; and a battle was raging before him, but even as he attempted to make out who were fighting whom, he heard the hated voice shout, "It's over, time to go!" and saw Snape disappearing around the corner at the far end of the corridor; he and Malfoy seemed to have forced their way through the fight unscathed. As Harry plunged after them, one of the fighters detached themselves from the fray and flew at him: it was the werewolf, Fenrir. He was on

top of Harry before Harry could raise his wand: Harry fell backward, with filthy matted hair in his face, the stench of sweat and blood filling his nose and mouth, hot greedy breath at his throat -

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Harry felt Fenrir collapse against him; with a stupendous effort he pushed the werewolf off and onto the floor as a jet of green light came flying toward him; he ducked and ran, headfirst, into the fight. His feet met something squashy and slippery on the floor and he stumbled: There were two bodies lying there, lying facedown in a pool of blood, but there was no time to investigate. Harry now saw red hair flying like flames in front of him: Ginny was locked in combat with the lumpy Death Eater, Amycus, who was throwing hex after hex at her while she dodged them: Amycus was giggling, enjoying the sport: "Crucio - Crucio - you can't dance forever, pretty-""Impedimenta!" yelled Harry.

His jinx hit Amycus in the chest: He gave a piglike squeal of pain, was lifted off his feet and slammed into the opposite wall, slid down it, and fell out of sight behind Ron, Professor McGonagall, and Lupin, each of whom was battling a separate Death Eater. Beyond them, Harry saw Tonks fighting an enormous blond wizard who was sending curses flying in all directions, so that they ricocheted off the walls around them, cracking stone, shattering the nearest window -

"Harry, where did you come from?" Ginny cried, but there was no time to answer her. He put his head down and sprinted forward, narrowly avoiding a blast that erupted over his head, showering them all in bits of wall. Snape must not escape, he must catch up with Snape -

"Take that!" shouted Professor McGonagall, and Harry glimpsed the female Death Eater, Alecto, sprinting away down the corridor with her arms over her head, her brother right behind her. He launched himself after them but his foot caught on something, and next moment he was lying across someone's legs. Looking around, he saw Neville's pale, round face flat against the floor. "Neville, are you -

?""M'all right," muttered Neville, who was clutching his stomach, "Harry . . . Snape 'n' Malfoy . . . ran past. . .""I know, I'm on it!" said Harry, aiming a hex from the floor at the enormous blond Death Eater who was causing most of the chaos. The man gave a howl of pain as the spell hit him in the face: He wheeled around, staggered, and then pounded away after the brother and sister. Harry scrambled up from the floor and began to sprint along the corridor, ignoring the bangs issuing from behind him, the yells of the others to come back, and the mute call of the figures on the ground whose fate he did not yet know. . . .

He skidded around the corner, his trainers slippery with blood; Snape had an immense head start. Was it possible that he had already entered the cabinet in the Room of Requirement, or had the Order made steps to secure it, to prevent the Death Eaters retreating that way? He could hear nothing but his own pounding feet, his own hammering heart as he sprinted along the next empty corridor, but then spotted a bloody footprint that showed at least one of the fleeing Death Eaters was heading toward the front doors - perhaps the Room of Requirement was indeed blocked -

He skidded around another corner and a curse flew past him; he dived behind a suit of armor that exploded. He saw the brother and sister running down the marble staircase ahead and aimed jinxes at them, but merely hit several bewigged witches in a portrait on the landing, who ran screeching into neighboring paintings. As he leapt the wreckage of armor, Harry heard more shouts and screams; other people within the castle seemed to have awoken. . . .

He pelted toward a shortcut, hoping to overtake the brother and sister and close in on Snape and Malfoy, who must surely have reached the grounds by now. Remembering to leap the vanishing step halfway down the concealed staircase, he burst through a tapestry at the bottom and out into a corridor where a number of bewildered and pajama-clad Hufflepuffs stood.

"Harry! We heard a noise, and someone said something aboui the Dark Mark -" began Ernie Macmillan.

"Out of the way!" yelled Harry, knocking two boys aside as he sprinted toward the landing and down the remainder of the marble staircase. The oak front doors had been blasted open, there were smears of blood on the flagstones, and several terrified students stood huddled against the walls, one or two still cowering with their arms over their faces. The giant Gryffindor hourglass had been hit by a curse, and the rubies within were still falling, with a loud rattle, onto the flagstones below.

Harry flew across the entrance hall and out into the dark grounds: He could just make out three figures racing across the lawn, heading for the gates beyond which they could Disapparate - by the looks of them, the huge blond Death Eater and, some way ahead of him, Snape and Malfoy. ...

The cold night air ripped at Harry's lungs as he tore after them; he saw a flash of light in the distance that momentarily silhouetted his quarry. He did not know what it was but continued to run, not yet near enough to get a good aim with a curse -

Another flash, shouts, retaliatory jets of light, and Harry understood: Hagrid had emerged from his cabin and was trying to stop the Death Eaters escaping, and though every breath seemed to shred his lungs and the stitch in his chest was like fire, Harry sped up as an unbidden voice in his head said: not Hagrid. . . not Hagrid too . . .

Something caught Harry hard in the small of the back and he fell forward, his face smacking the ground, blood pouring out of both nostrils: He knew, even as he rolled over, his wand ready, that the brother and sister he had overtaken using his shortcut were closing in behind him. . . .

"Impedimenta!" he yelled as he rolled over again, crouching close to the dark ground, and miraculously his jinx hit one of them, who

stumbled and fell, tripping up the other; Harry leapt to his feet and sprinted on after Snape.

And now he saw the vast outline of Hagrid, illuminated by the light of the crescent moon revealed suddenly behind clouds; the blond Death Eater was aiming curse after curse at the gamekeeper; but Hagrids immense strength and the toughened skin he had inherited from his giantess mother seemed to be protecting him. Snape and Malfoy, however, were still running; they would soon be beyond the gates, able to Disapparate -

Harry tore past Hagrid and his opponent, took aim at Snape's back, and yelled, "Stupefy!"He missed; the jet of red light soared past Snape's head; Snape shouted, "Run, Draco!"and turned. Twenty yards apart, he and Harry looked at each other before raising their wands simultaneously.

"Cruc - "

But Snape parried the curse, knocking Harry backward off his feet before he could complete it; Harry rolled over and scrambled back up again as the huge Death Eater behind him yelled, "Incendio!" Harry heard an explosive bang and a dancing orange light spilled over all of them: Hagrid's house was on fire.

"Fang's in there, yer evil - !" Hagrid bellowed.

"Cruc -" yelled Harry for the second time, aiming for the figure ahead illuminated in the dancing firelight, but Snape blocked the spell again. Harry could see him sneering.

"No Unforgivable Curses from you, Potter!" he shouted over the rushing of the flames, Hagrid's yells, and the wild yelping of the trapped Fang. "You haven't got the nerve or the ability -""Incarc- "Harry roared, but Snape deflected the spell with an almost lazy flick of his arm.

"Fight back!" Harry screamed at him. "Fight back, you cowardly-----""Coward, did you call me, Potter?" shouted Snape. "Your father would never attack me unless it was four on one, what would you call him, I wonder?" "Stupe-""Blocked again and again and again until you learn to keep your mouth shut and your mind closed, Potter!" sneered Snape, deflecting the curse once more. "Now come!" he shouted at the huge Death Eater behind Harry. "It is time to be gone, before the Ministry turns up -""Impedi -"

But before he could finish this jinx, excruciating pain hit Harry; he keeled over in the grass. Someone was screaming, he would surely die of this agony, Snape was going to torture him to death or madness -

"No!" roared Snape's voice and the pain stopped as suddenly as it had started; Harry lay curled on the dark grass, clutching his wand and panting; somewhere overhead Snape was shouting, "Have you forgotten our orders? Potter belongs to the Dark Lord - we are to leave him! Go! Go!"And Harry felt the ground shudder under his face as the brother and sister and the enormous Death Eater obeyed, running toward the gates. Harry uttered an inarticulate yell of rage: In that instant, he cared not whether he lived or died. Pushing himself to his feet again, he staggered blindly toward Snape, the man he now hated as much as he hated Voldemort himself -

"Sectum - "

Snape flicked his wand and the curse was repelled yet again; but Harry was mere feet away now and he could see Snape's face clearly at last: He was no longer sneering or jeering; the blazing flames showed a face full of rage. Mustering all his powers of concentration, Harry thought, Levi -

"No, Potter!" screamed Snape. There was a loud BANG and Harry was soaring backward, hitting the ground hard again, ;un\ this time his wand flew out of his hand. He could hear Hagrid yelling and Fang

howling as Snape closed in and looked down on him where he lay, wandless and defenseless as Dumbledore hadl been. Snape's pale face, illuminated by the flaming cabin, was suffused with hatred just as it had been before he had cursed Dumbledore.

"You dare use my own spells against me, Potter? It was I who invented them - I, the Half-Blood Prince! And you'd turn my inventions on me, like your filthy father, would you? I don't think so . . . no"Harry had dived for his wand; Snape shot a hex at it and it flew feet away into the darkness and out of sight.

"Kill me then," panted Harry, who felt no fear at all, but only rage and contempt. "Kill me like you killed him, you coward -""DON'T -" screamed Snape, and his face was suddenly demented, inhuman, as though he was in as much pain as the yelping, howling dog stuck in the burning house behind them - "CALL ME COWARD!"And he slashed at the air: Harry felt a white-hot, whiplike something hit him across the face and was slammed backward into the ground. Spots of light burst in front of his eyes and for a moment all the breath seemed to have gone from his body, then he heard a rush of wings above him and something enormous obscured the stars. Buckbeak had flown at Snape, who staggered backward as the razor-sharp claws slashed at him. As Harry raised himself into a sitting position, his head still swimming from its last contact with the ground, he saw Snape running as hard as he could, the enormous beast flapping behind him and screeching as Harry had never heard him screech -

Harry struggled to his feet, looking around groggily for his wand, hoping to give chase again, but even as his fingers fumbled in the grass, discarding twigs, he knew it would be too late, and sure enough, by the time he had located his wand, he turned only to see the hippogriff circling the gates. Snape had managed to Disapparate just beyond the school's boundaries.

"Hagrid," muttered Harry, still dazed, looking around. "HAGRID?"He stumbled toward the burning house as an enormous figure emerged

from out of the flames carrying Fang on his back. With a cry of thankfulness, Harry sank to his knees; he was shaking in every limb, his body ached all over, and his breath came in painful stabs.

"Yeh all righ', Harry? Yeh all righ'? Speak ter me, Harry. . .."Hagrids huge, hairy face was swimming above Harry, blocking out the stars. Harry could smell burnt wood and dog hair; he put out a hand and felt Fang's reassuringly warm and alive body quivering beside him.

"I'm all right," panted Harry. "Are you?" "'Course I am . . . take more'n that ter finish me."Hagrid put his hands under Harry's arms and raised him up with such force that Harry's feet momentarily left the ground before Hagrid set him upright again. He could see blood trickling down Hagrid's cheek from a deep cut under one eye, which was swelling rapidly.

"We should put out your house," said Harry, "the charm's 'Aguamenti' ...""Knew it was summat like that," mumbled Hagrid, and he raised a smoldering pink, flowery umbrella and said, "Aguamenti!"A jet of water flew out of the umbrella tip. Harry raised his wand arm, which felt like lead, and murmured "Aguamenti" too: Together, he and Hagrid poured water on the house until the last flame was extinguished.

"S'not too bad," said Hagrid hopefully a few minutes later, looking at the smoking wreck. "Nothin Dumbledore won' be able to put righ' . . ."Harry felt a searing pain in his stomach at the sound of the name. In the silence and the stillness, horror rose inside him.

"Hagrid ..."

"I was bindin' up a couple o' bowtruckle legs when I heard 'em coming," said Hagrid sadly, still staring at his wrecked cabin. "They'll bin burnt ter twigs, poor little things. . . .""Hagrid . . ."

"But what happened, Harry? I jus' saw them Death Eaters run-nin down from the castle, but what the ruddy hell was Snape doin' with

'em? Where's he gone - was he chasin' them?""He . . ." Harry cleared his throat; it was dry from panic and the smoke. "Hagrid, he killed . . .""Killed?" said Hagrid loudly, staring down at Harry. "Snape killed? What're yeh on abou', Harry?""Dumbledore," said Harry. "Snape killed .. . Dumbledore."Hagrid simply looked at him, the little of his face that could be seen completely blank, uncomprehending.

"Dumbledore wha, Harry?"

"He's dead. Snape killed him....""Don' say that," said Hagrid roughly. "Snape kill Dumbledore - don' be stupid, Harry. Wha's made yeh say tha'?""I saw it happen." , ,..

"Yeh couldn' have."

"I saw it, Hagrid."

Hagrid shook his head; his expression was disbelieving but sympathetic, and Harry knew that Hagrid thought he had sustained a blow to the head, that he was confused, perhaps by the aftereffects of a jinx. ...

"What musta happened was, Dumbledore musta told Snape ter go with them Death Eaters," Hagrid said confidently. "I suppose he's gotta keep his cover. Look, let's get yeh back up ter the school. Come on, Harry. ..."Harry did not attempt to argue or explain. He was still shaking uncontrollably. Hagrid would find out soon enough, too soon. ... As they directed their steps back toward the castle, Harry saw that many of its windows were lit now. He could imagine, clearly, the scenes inside as people moved from room to room, telling each other that Death Eaters had got in, that the Mark was shining over Hogwarts, that somebody must have been killed. . . .

The oak front doors stood open ahead of them, light flooding out onto the drive and the lawn. Slowly, uncertainly, dressing-gowned people were creeping down the steps, looking around nervously for some sign of the Death Eaters who had fled into the night. Harry's eyes,

however, were fixed upon the ground at the foot of the tallest tower. He imagined that he could see a black, huddled mass lying in the grass there, though he was really too far away to see anything of the sort. Even as he stared wordlessly at the place where he thoughtDumbledore's body must lie, however, he saw people beginning to move toward it.

"What're they all lookin' at?" said Hagrid, as he and Harry approached the castle front, Fang keeping as close as he could to their ankles. "Wha's that lyin' on the grass?" Hagrid added sharply, heading now toward the foot of the Astronomy Tower, where a small crowd was congregating. "See it, Harry? Right at the foot of the tower? Under where the Mark . . . Blimey . . . yeh don' think someone got thrown - ?"Hagrid fell silent, the thought apparently too horrible to express aloud. Harry walked alongside him, feeling the aches and pains in his face and his legs where the various hexes of the last half hour had hit him, though in an oddly detached way, as though somebody near him was suffering them. What was real and inescapable was the awful pressing feeling in his chest. . . .

He and Hagrid moved, dreamlike, through the murmuring crowd to the very front, where the dumbstruck students and teachers had left a gap.

Harry heard Hagrid's moan of pain and shock, but he did not stop; he walked slowly forward until he reached the place where Dumbledore lay and crouched down beside him. He had known there was no hope from the moment that the full Body-Bind Curse Dumbledore had placed upon him lifted, known that it could have happened only because its caster was dead, but there was still no preparation for seeing him here, spread-eagled, broken: the greatest wizard Harry had ever, or would ever, meet.

Dumbledore's eyes were closed; but for the strange angle of his arms and legs, he might have been sleeping. Harry reached out, straightened the half-moon spectacles upon the crooked nose, and

wiped a trickle of blood from the mouth with his own sleeve. Then he gazed down at the wise old face and tried to absorb the enormous and incomprehensible truth: that never again would Dumbledore speak to him, never again could he help-----

The crowd murmured behind Harry. After what seemed like a long time, he became aware that he was kneeling upon something hard and looked down.

The locket they had managed to steal so many hours before had fallen out of Dumbledore's pocket. It had opened, perhaps due to the force with which it hit the ground. And although he could not feel more shock or horror or sadness than he felt already, Harry knew, as he picked it up, that there was something wrong-----

He turned the locket over in his hands. This was neither as large as the locket he remembered seeing in the Pensieve, nor were there any markings upon it, no sign of the ornate S that was supposed to be Slytherins mark. Moreover, there was nothing inside but for a scrap of folded parchment wedged tightly into the place where a portrait should have been.

Automatically, without really thinking about what he was doing, Harry pulled out the fragment of parchment, opened it, and read by the light of the many wands that had now been lit behind him:To the Dark Lord

I now I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know that it was I who dicovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.

I face death in the hope that when you meet your match you will be mortal once more.

R.A.B.

Harry neither knew nor cared what the message meant. Only one thing mattered: This was not a Horcrux. Dumbledore had weakened

himself by drinking that terrible potion for nothing. Harry crumpled the parchment in his hand, and his eyes burned with tears as behind him Fang began to howl.

Chapter 29 The Phoenix Lament

C 'mere, Harry ..."

"No."

"Yeh can' stay here, Harry. ... Come on, now...." "No."He did not want to leave Dumbledores side, he did not want to move anywhere. Hagrid's hand on his shoulder was trembling. Then another voice said, "Harry, come on."A much smaller and warmer hand had enclosed his and was pulling him upward. He obeyed its pressure without really thinking about it. Only as he walked blindly back through the crowd did he realize, from a trace of flowery scent on the air, that it was Ginny who was leading him back into the castle. Incomprehensible voices battered him, sobs and shouts and wails stabbed the night, but Harry and Ginny walked on, back up the steps into the entrance hall. Faces swam on the edges of Harry's vision, people were peering at him, whispering, wondering, and Gryffindor rubies glistened on the floor like drops of blood as they made their way toward the marble staircase.

"We're going to the hospital wing," said Ginny.

"I'm not hurt," said Harry. !

"It's McGonagalls orders," said Ginny. "Everyone's up there, Ron and Hermione and Lupin and everyone -"Fear stirred in Harry's chest again: He had forgotten the inert figures he had left behind.

"Ginny, who else is dead?"

"Don't worry, none of us."

"But the Dark Mark - Malfoy said he stepped over a body -""He stepped over Bill, but its all right, he's alive."There was something in her voice, however, that Harry knew boded ill.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure . . . he's a - a bit of a mess, that's all. Greyback attacked him. Madam Pomfrey says he won't - won't look the same anymore. . . ."Ginny's voice trembled a little.

"We don't really know what the aftereffects will be - I mean, Greyback being a werewolf, but not transformed at the time.""But the others . . . There were other bodies on the ground. . . .""Neville and Professor Flitwick are both hurt, but Madam Pomfrey says they'll be all right. And a Death Eater's dead, he got hit by a Killing Curse that huge blond one was firing off everywhere - Harry, if we hadn't had your Felix potion, I think we'd all have been killed, but everything seemed to just miss us -"They had reached the hospital wing. Pushing open the doors, Harry saw Neville lying, apparently asleep, in a bed near the door. Ron, Hermione, Luna, Tonks, and Lupin were gathered around another bed near the far end of the ward. At the sound of the doors opening, they all looked up. Hermione ran to Harry and hugged him; Lupin moved forward too, looking anxious.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

"I'm fine.... How's Bill?"

Nobody answered. Harry looked over Hermione's shoulder and saw an unrecognizable face lying on Bill's pillow, so badly slashed and ripped that he looked grotesque. Madam Pomfrey was dabbing at his wounds with some harsh-smelling green ointment. Harry remembered how Snape had mended Malfoy's Sectumsempra wounds so easily with his wand.

"Can't you fix them with a charm or something?" he asked the matron.

"No charm will work on these," said Madam Pomfrey. "I've tried everything I know, but there is no cure for werewolf bites.""But he wasn't bitten at the full moon," said Ron, who was gazing down into his brother's face as though he could somehow force him to mend

just by staring. "Greyback hadn't transformed, so surely Bill won't be a - a real - ?" :He looked uncertainly at Lupin.

"No, I don't think that Bill will be a true werewolf," said Lupin, "but that does not mean that there won't be some contamination. Those are cursed wounds. They are unlikely ever to heal fully, and - and Bill might have some wolfish characteristics from now on.""Dumbledore might know something that'd work, though," Ron said. "Where is he? Bill fought those maniacs on Dumbledore's orders, Dumbledore owes him, he can't leave him in this state -""Ron - Dumbledores dead," said Ginny.

"No!" Lupin looked wildly from Ginny to Harry, as though hoping the latter might contradict her, but when Harry did nor, Lupin collapsed into a chair beside Bill's bed, his hands over his face. Harry had never seen Lupin lose control before; he felt as though he was intruding upon something private, indecent. He turned away and caught Ron's eye instead, exchanging in silence a look that confirmed what Ginny had said.

"How did he die?" whispered Tonks. "How did it happen?""Snape killed him," said Harry. "I was there, I saw it. We arrived back on the Astronomy Tower because that's where the Mark was. . . . Dumbledore was ill, he was weak, but I think he realized it was a trap when we heard footsteps running up the stairs. He immobilized me, I couldn't do anything, I was under the Invisibility Cloak - and then Malfoy came through the door and disarmed him -"Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth and Ron groaned. Luna's mouth trembled.

"- more Death Eaters arrived - and then Snape - and Snape did it. The Avada Kedavra." Harry couldn't go on.

Madam Pomfrey burst into tears. Nobody paid her any attention except Ginny, who whispered, "Shh! Listen!"Gulping, Madam Pomfrey pressed her fingers to her mouth, her eyes wide. Somewhere out in the darkness, a phoenix was singing in a way

Harry had never heard before: a stricken lament of terrible beauty. And Harry felt, as he had felt about phoenix song before, that the music was inside him, not without: It was his own grief turned magically to song that echoed across the grounds and through the castle windows.

How long they all stood there, listening, he did not know, nor why it seemed to ease their pain a little to listen to the sound of their mourning, but it felt like a long time later that the hospital door opened again and Professor McGonagall entered the ward. Like all the rest, she bore marks of the recent battle: There were grazes on her face and her robes were ripped.

"Molly and Arthur are on their way," she said, and the spell of the music was broken: Everyone roused themselves as though coming out of trances, turning again to look at Bill, or else to rub their own eyest shake their heads. "Harry, what happened? According to Hagrid you were with Professor Dumbledore when he - when it happened. He says Professor Snape was involved in some -" "Snape killed Dumbledore," said Harry.

She stared at him for a moment, then swayed alarmingly; Madam Pomfrey, who seemed to have pulled herself together, ran forward, conjuring a chair from thin air, which she pushed under McGonagall.

"Snape," repeated McGonagall faintly, falling into the chair. "We all wondered . . . but he trusted . . . always . . . Snape... I can't believe it. ...""Snape was a highly accomplished Occlumens," said Lupin, his voice uncharacteristically harsh. "We always knew that.""But Dumbledore swore he was on our side!" whispered Tonks. "I always thought Dumbledore must know something about Snape that we didn't. ..." .

"He always hinted that he had an ironclad reason for trusting Snape," muttered Professor McGonagall, now dabbing at the corners of her leaking eyes with a tartan-edged handkerchief. "I mean . . . with

Snapes history ... of course people were bound to wonder. . . but Dumbledore told me explicitly that Snape's repentance was absolutely genuine-----Wouldn't hear a word against him!""I'd love to know what Snape told him to convince him," said Tonks.

"I know," said Harry, and they all turned to look at him. "Snape passed Voldemort the information that made Voldemort hunt down my mum and dad. Then Snape told Dumbledore he hadn't realized what he was doing, he was really sorry he'd done it, sorry that they were dead."They all stared at him.

"And Dumbledore believed that?" said Lupin incredulously. "Dumbledore believed Snape was sorry James was dead? Snape hated James. . . .""And he didn't think my mother was worth a damn either," said Harry, "because she was Muggle-born... 'Mudblood,' he called her. ..."Nobody asked how Harry knew this. All of them seemed to be lost in horrified shock, trying to digest the monstrous truth of what had happened.

"This is all my fault," said Professor McGonagall suddenly. She looked disoriented, twisting her wet handkerchief in her hands. "My fault. I sent Filius to fetch Snape tonight, I actually sent for him to come and help us! If I hadn't alerted Snape to what was going on, he might never have joined forces with the Death Eaters. I don't think he knew they were there before Filius told him, I don't think he knew they were coming.""It isn't your fault, Minerva," said Lupin firmly. "We all wanted more help, we were glad to think Snape was on his way....""So when he arrived at the fight, he joined in on the Death Eaters' side?" asked Harry, who wanted every detail of Snape's duplicity and infamy, feverishly collecting more reasons to hate him, to swear vengeance.

"I don't know exactly how it happened," said Professor McGonagall distractedly. "It's all so confusing. . . . Dumbledore had told us that he would be leaving the school for a few hours and that we were to patrol the corridors just in case . . . Remus, Bill, and Nymphadora

were to join us ... and so we patrolled. All seemed quiet. Every secret passageway out of the school was covered. We knew nobody could fly in. There were powerful enchantments on every entrance into the castle. I still don't know how the Death Eaters can possibly have entered. . . .""I do," said Harry, and he explained, briefly, about the pair of Vanishing Cabinets and the magical pathway they formed. "So they got in through the Room of Requirement."Almost against his will he glanced from Ron to Hermione, both of whom looked devastated.

"I messed up, Harry," said Ron bleakly. "We did like you told us: We checked the Marauder's Map and we couldn't see Malfoy on it, so we thought he must be in the Room of Requirement, so me, Ginny, and Neville went to keep watch on it... but Malfoy got past us.""He came out of the room about an hour after we started keeping watch," said Ginny. "He was on his own, clutching that awful shriveled arm -""His Hand of Glory," said Ron. "Gives light only to the holder, remember?""Anyway," Ginny went on, "he must have been checking whether the coast was clear to let the Death Eaters out, because the moment he saw us he threw something into the air and it all went pitch-black -""- Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder," said Ron bitterly. "Fred and George's. I'm going to be having a word with them about who they let buy their products.""We tried everything, Lumos, Incendio," said Ginny. "Nothing would penetrate the darkness; all we could do was grope our way out of the corridor again, and meanwhile we could hear people rushing past us. Obviously Malfoy could see because of that hand thing and was guiding them, but we didn't dare use any curses or anything in case we hit each other, and by the time we'd reached a corridor that was light, they'd gone.""Luckily," said Lupin hoarsely, "Ron, Ginny, and Neville ran into us almost immediately and told us what had happened. We found the Death Eaters minutes later, heading in the direction of the Astronomy Tower. Malfoy obviously hadn't expected more people to be on the watch; he seemed to have exhausted his supply of Darkness Powder, at any rate. A fight broke out, they scattered and we gave chase. One of them, Gibbon, broke away and headed up the tower stairs -""To set off the Mark?" asked Harry.

"He must have done, yes, they must have arranged that before they left the Room of Requirement," said Lupin. "But I don't think Gibbon liked the idea of waiting up there alone for Dumbledore, because he came running back downstairs to rejoin the fight and was hit by a Killing Curse that just missed me.""So if Ron was watching the Room of Requirement with Ginny and Neville," said Harry, turning to Hermione, "were you - ?""Outside Snape's office, yes," whispered Hermione, her eyes sparkling with tears, "with Luna. We hung around for ages outside it and nothing happened. . . . We didn't know what was going on upstairs, Ron had taken the map-----It was nearly midnight when Professor Flitwick came sprinting down into the dungeons. He was shouting about Death Eaters in the castle, I don't think he really registered that Luna and I were there at all, he just burst his way into Snape's office and we heard him saying that Snape had to go back with him and help and then we heard a loud thump and Snape came hurtling out of his room and he saw us and - and -" "What?" Harry urged her.

"I was so stupid, Harry!" said Hermione in a high-pitched whisper. "He said Professor Flitwick had collapsed and that we should go and take care of him while he - while he went to help fight the Death Eaters -" She covered her face in shame and continued to talk into her fingers, so that her voice was muffled. "We went into his office to see if we could help Professor Flitwick and found him unconscious on the floor. . . and oh, it's so obvious now, Snape must have Stupefied Flitwick, but we didn't realize, Harry, we didn't realize, we just let Snape go!""It's not your fault," said Lupin firmly. "Hermione, had you not obeyed Snape and got out of the way, he probably would have killed you and Luna.""So then he came upstairs," said Harry, who was watching Snape running up the marble staircase in his mind's eye, his black robes billowing behind him as ever, pulling his wand from under his cloak as he ascended, "and he found the place where you were all fighting. ...""We were in trouble, we were losing," said Tonks in a low voice. "Gibbon was down, but the rest of the Death Eaters seemed ready to fight to the death. Neville had been hurt, Bill had been savaged by Greyback... It was all dark . . . curses flying

everywhere . . . The Malfoy boy had vanished, he must have slipped past, up the stairs . . . then more of them ran after him, but one of them blocked the stair behind them with some kind of curse. . . . Neville ran at it and got thrown up into the air -""None of us could break through," said Ron, "and that massive Death Eater was still firing off jinxes all over the place, they were bouncing off the walls and barely missing us. . . .""And then Snape was there," said Tonks, "and then he wasn't -""I saw him running toward us, but that huge Death Eaters jinx just missed me right afterward and I ducked and lost track of things," said Ginny.

"I saw him run straight through the cursed barrier as though it wasn't there," said Lupin. "I tried to follow him, but was thrown back just like Neville. . . .""He must have known a spell we didn't," whispered McGonagall. "After all - he was the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. ... I just assumed that he was in a hurry to chase after the Death Eaters who'd escaped up to the tower. ...""He was," said Harry savagely, "but to help them, not to stop them . . . and I'll bet you had to have a Dark Mark to get through that barrier - so what happened when he came back down?""Well, the big Death Eater had just fired off a hex that caused half the ceiling to fall in, and also broke the curse blocking the stairs," said Lupin. "We all ran forward - those of us who were still standing anyway - and then Snape and the boy emerged out of the dust - obviously, none of us attacked them -""We just let them pass," said Tonks in a hollow voice. "We thought they were being chased by the Death Eaters - and next thing, the other Death Eaters and Greyback were back and we were fighting again - I thought I heard Snape shout something, but I don't know what -""He shouted, 'It's over,'" said Harry. "He'd done what he'd meant to do."They all fell silent. Fawkes's lament was still echoing over the dark grounds outside. As the music reverberated upon the air, unbidden, unwelcome thoughts slunk into Harry's mind. . . . Had they taken Dumbledore's body from the foot of the tower yet? What would happen to it next? Where would it rest? He clenched his fists tighdy in his pockets. He could feel the small cold lump of the fake Horcrux against the knuckles of his right hand.

The doors of the hospital wing burst open, making them all jump: Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were striding up the ward, Fleur just behind them, her beautiful face terrified.

"Molly - Arthur -" said Professor McGonagall, jumping up and hurrying to greet them. "I am so sorry -""Bill," whispered Mrs. Weasley, darting past Professor McGonagall as she caught sight of Bill's mangled face. "Oh, Bill!"Lupin and Tonks had got up hastily and retreated so that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could get nearer to the bed. Mrs. Weasley bent over her son and pressed her lips to his bloody forehead.

"You said Greyback attacked him?" Mr. Weasley asked Professor McGonagall distractedly. "But he hadn't transformed? So what does that mean? What will happen to Bill?""We don't yet know," said Professor McGonagall, looking helplessly at Lupin.

"There will probably be some contamination, Arthur," .said Lupin. "It is an odd case, possibly unique. . . . We don't know what his behavior might be like when he awakens. . . ."Mrs. Weasley took the nasty-smelling ointment from Madam Pomfrey and began dabbing at Bill's wounds.

"And Dumbledore ..." said Mr. Weasley. "Minerva, is it true ... Is he really. . . ?"As Professor McGonagall nodded, Harry felt Ginny move beside him and looked at her. Her slightly narrowed eyes were fixed upon Fleur, who was gazing down at Bill with a frozen expression on her face.

"Dumbledore gone," whispered Mr. Weasley, but Mrs. Weasley had eyes only for her eldest son; she began to sob, tears falling onto Bill's mutilated face.

"Of course, it doesn't matter how he looks. . . . It's not r-really important. . . but he was a very handsome little b-boy . . . always very handsome . . . and he was g-going to be married!""And what do you mean by zat?" said Fleur suddenly and loudly. "What do you mean, ' he was going to be married?'"Mrs. Weasley raised her tear-stained

face, looking startled. "Well -only that-""You theenk Bill will not wish to marry me anymore?" demanded Fleur. "You theenk, because of these bites, he will not love me?""No, that's not what I -"

"Because 'e will!" said Fleur, drawing herself up to her full height and throwing back her long mane of silver hair. "It would take more zan a werewolf to stop Bill loving me!""Well, yes, I'm sure," said Mrs. Weasley, "but I thought perhaps - given how - how he -""You thought I would not weesh to marry him? Or per'aps, you hoped?" said Fleur, her nostrils flaring. "What do I care how he looks? I am good-looking enough for both of us, I theenk! All these scars show is zat my husband is brave! And I shall do zat!" she added fiercely, pushing Mrs. Weasley aside and snatching the ointment from her.

Mrs. Weasley fell back against her husband and watched Fleur mopping up Bill's wounds with a most curious expression upon her face. Nobody said anything; Harry did not dare move. Like everybody else, he was waiting for the explosion.

"Our Great-Auntie Muriel," said Mrs. Weasley after a long pause, "has a very beautiful tiara - goblin-made - which I am sure I could persuade her to lend you for the wedding. She is very fond of Bill, you know, and it would look lovely with your hair.""Thank you," said Fleur stiffly. "I am sure zat will be lovely."And then, Harry did not quite see how it happened, both , women were crying and hugging each other. Completely bewildered, wondering whether the world had gone mad, he turned around: Ron looked as stunned as he felt and Ginny and Hermione were exchanging startled looks.

"You see!" said a strained voice. Tonks was glaring at Lupin. "She still wants to marry him, even though he's been bitten! She doesn't care!

"It's different," said Lupin, barely moving his lips and looking suddenly tense. "Bill will not be a full werewolf. The cases are completely -""But I don't care either, I don't care!" said Tonks, seizing the front of Lupin's robes and shaking them. "I've told you a million times. . . ."And

the meaning of Tonks's Patronus and her mouse-colored hair, and the reason she had come running to find Dumbledore when she had heard a rumor someone had been attacked by Greyback, all suddenly became clear to Harry; it had not been Sinus that Tonks had fallen in love with after all.

"And I've told you a million times," said Lupin, refusing to meet her eyes, staring at the floor, "that I am too old for you, too poor . . . too dangerous. . . .""I've said all along you're taking a ridiculous line on this, Remus," said Mrs. Weasley over Fleur's shoulder as she patted her on the back.

"I am not being ridiculous," said Lupin steadily. "Tonks deserves somebody young and whole.""But she wants you," said Mr. Weasley, with a small smile. "And after all, Remus, young and whole men do not necessarily remain so."He gestured sadly at his son, lying between them.

"This is... not the moment to discuss it," said Lupin, avoiding everybody's eyes as he looked around distractedly. "Dumbledore is dead. ...""Dumbledore would have been happier than anybody to think that there was a little more love in the world," said Professor McGonagall curtly, just as the hospital doors opened again and Hagrid walked in.

The little of his face that was not obscured by hair or beard was soaking and swollen; he was shaking with tears, a vast, spotted handkerchief in his hand.

"I've . . . I've done it, Professor," he choked. "M-moved him. Professor Sprout's got the kids back in bed. Professor Flitwick's lyin down, but he says he'll be all righ' in a jiffy, an' Professor Slughorn says the Ministry's bin informed.""Thank you, Hagrid," said Professor McGonagall, standing up at once and turning to look at the group around Bill's bed. "I shall have to see the Ministry when they get here. Hagrid, please tell the Heads of Houses - Slughorn can represent

Slytherin - that I want to see them in my office forthwith. I would like you to join us too."As Hagrid nodded, turned, and shuffled out of the room again, she looked down at Harry. "Before I meet them I would like a quick word with you, Harry. If you'll come with me. ..."Harry stood up, murmured "See you in a bit" to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, and followed Professor McGonagall back down the ward. The corridors outside were deserted and the only sound was the distant phoenix song. It was several minutes before Harry became aware that they were not heading for Professor McGonagall's office, but for Dumbledore's, and another few seconds before he realized that of course, she had been deputy headmistress, . . . Apparently she was now headmistress ... so the room behind the gargoyle was now hers.

In silence they ascended the moving spiral staircase and entered the circular office. He did not know what he had expected: that the room would be draped in black, perhaps, or even that Dumbledore's body might be lying there. In fact, it looked almost exactly as it had done when he and Dumbledore had left it mere hours previously: the silver instruments whirring and puffing on their spindle legged tables, Gryffindor's sword in its glass case gleaming in the moonlight, the Sorting Hat on a shelf behind the desk, the Fawkes's perch stood empty, he was still crying his lament to the grounds. And a new portrait had joined the ranks of the dead headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts: Dumbledore was slumbering in a golden frame over the desk, his half-moon spectacle perched upon his crooked nose, looking peaceful and untroubled.

After glancing once at this portrait, Professor McGonagall made an odd movement as though steeling herself, then rounded the' desk to look at Harry, her face taut and lined.

"Harry," she said, "I would like to know what you and Professor Dumbledore were doing this evening when you left the school.""I can't tell you that, Professor," said Harry. He had expected the question and had his answer ready. It had been here, in this very

room, that Dumbledore had told him that he was to confide the contents of their lessons to nobody but Ron and Hermione.

"Harry, it might be important," said Professor McGonagall.

"It is," said Harry, "very, but he didn't want me to tell anyone."Professor McGonagall glared at him. "Potter" - Harry registered the renewed use of his surname - "in the light of Professor Dumbledore's death, I think you must see that the situation has changed somewhat -""I don't think so," said Harry, shrugging. "Professor Dumbledore never told me to stop following his orders if he died." But -

"There's one thing you should know before the Ministry gets here, though. Madam Rosmerta's under the Imperius Curse, she was helping Malfoy and the Death Eaters, that's how the necklace and the poisoned mead -""Rosmerta?" said Professor McGonagall incredulously, but before she could go on, there was a knock on the door behind them and Professors Sprout, Flitwick, and Slughorn traipsed into the room, followed by Hagrid, who was still weeping copiously, his huge frame trembling with grief.

"Snape!" ejaculated Slughorn, who looked the most shaken, pale and sweating. "Snape! I taught him! I thought I knew him!"But before any of them could respond to this, a sharp voice spoke from high on the wall: A sallow-faced wizard with a short black fringe had just walked back into his empty canvas. "Minerva, the Minister will be here within seconds, he has just Disapparated from the Ministry.""Thank you, Everard," said Professor McGonagall, and she turned quickly to her teachers.

"I want to talk about what happens to Hogwarts before he gets here," she said quickly. "Personally, I am not convinced that the school should reopen next year. The death of the headmaster at the hands of one of our colleagues is a terrible stain upon Hogwarts's history. It is horrible.""I am sure Dumbledore would have wanted the school to

remain open," said Professor Sprout. "I feel that if a single pupil wants to come, then the school ought to remain open for that pupil.""But will we have a single pupil after this?" said Slughorn, now dabbing his sweating brow with a silken handkerchief. "Parents will want to keep their children at home and I can't say I blame them. Personally, I don't think we're in more danger at Hogwarts than we are anywhere else, but you can't expect mothers to think like that. They'll want to keep their families together, it's only natural.""I agree," said Professor McGonagall. "And in any case, it is not true to say that Dumbledore never envisaged a situation in which Hogwarts might close. When the Chamber of Secrets reopened he considered the closure of the school - and I must say that Professor Dumbledore's murder is more disturbing to me than the idea of Slytherin's monster living undetected in the bowels of the castle. . . .""We must consult the governors," said Professor Flitwick in his squeaky little voice; he had a large bruise on his forehead but seemed otherwise unscathed by his collapse in Snape's office. "We must follow the established procedures. A decision should not be made hastily.""Hagrid, you haven't said anything," said Professor McGonagall. "What are your views, ought Hogwarts to remain open?"Hagrid, who had been weeping silently into his large, spotted handkerchief throughout this conversation, now raised puffy red eyes and croaked, "I dunno, Professor . . . that's fer the Heads of House an the headmistress ter decide ...""Professor Dumbledore always valued your views," said Professor McGonagall kindly, "and so do I.""Well, I'm stayin," said Hagrid, fat tears still leaking out of the corners of his eyes and trickling down into his tangled beard. "It's me home, it's bin me home since I was thirteen. An' if there's kids who wan' me ter teach 'em, I'll do it. But... I dunno ... Hogwarts without Dumbledore .. ." He gulped and disappeared behind his handkerchief once more, and there was silence.

"Very well," said Professor McGonagall, glancing out of the window at the grounds, checking to see whether the Minister was yet approaching, "then I must agree with Filius that the right thing to do is to consult the governors, who will make the final decision.

"Now, as to getting students home . . . there is an argument for doing it sooner rather than later. We could arrange for the Hogwarts Express to come tomorrow if necessary -""What about Dumbledore's funeral?" said Harry, speaking at last.

"Well. . ." said Professor McGonagall, losing a little of her briskness as her voice shook. "I - I know that it was Dumbledore's wish to be laid to rest here, at Hogwarts -""Then that's what'll happen, isn't it?" said Harry fiercely.

"If the Ministry thinks it appropriate," said Professor McGonagall. "No other headmaster or headmistress has ever been -""No other headmaster or headmistress ever gave more to this school," growled Hagrid.

"Hogwarts should be Dumbledore's final resting place," said Professor Flitwick.

"Absolutely," said Professor Sprout.

"And in that case," said Harry, "you shouldn't send the students home until the jfuneral's over. They'll want to say -"The last word caught in his throat, but Professor Sprout completed the sentence for him. "Good-bye.""Well said," squeaked Professor Flitwick. "Well said indeed! Our students should pay tribute, it is fitting. We can arrange transport home afterward.""Seconded," barked Professor Sprout.]"I suppose ... yes .. ." said Slughorn in a rather agitated voice, while Hagrid let out a strangled sob of assent.

"He's coming," said Professor McGonagall suddenly, gazing down into the grounds. "The Minister . . . and by the looks of it. he's brought a delegation . . .""Can I leave, Professor?" said Harry at once.

He had no desire at all to see, or be interrogated by, Rufus Scrimgeour tonight.

"You may," said Professor McGonagall. "And quickly."She strode toward the door and held it open for him. He sped down the spiral staircase and off along the deserted corridor; he-had left his Invisibility Cloak at the top of the Astronomy Tower, but it did not matter; there was nobody in the corridors to see him pass, not even Filch, Mrs. Norris, or Peeves. He did not meet another soul until he turned into the passage leading to the Gryffindor common room.

"Is it true?" whispered the Fat Lady as he approached her. "It is really true? Dumbledore - dead?""Yes," said Harry.

She let out a wail and, without waiting for the password, swung forward to admit him.

As Harry had suspected it would be, the common room was jam-packed. The room fell silent as he climbed through the portrait hole. He saw Dean and Seamus sitting in a group nearby: This meant that the dormitory must be empty, or nearly so. Without speaking to anybody, without making eye contact at all, Harry walked straight across the room and through the door to the boys' dormitories.

As he had hoped, Ron was waiting for him, still fully dressed, sitting on his bed. Harry sat down on his own four-poster and for a moment, they simply stared at each other.

"They're talking about closing the school," said Harry.

"Lupin said they would," said Ron.

There was a pause.

"So?" said Ron in a very low voice, as though he thought the furniture might be listening in. "Did you find one? Did you get it? A - a Horcrux?"Harry shook his head. All that had taken place around that black lake seemed like an old nightmare now; had it really happened, and only hours ago?

"You didn't get it?" said Ron, looking crestfallen. "It wasn't there?""No," said Harry. "Someone had already taken it and left a fake in its place.""Already taken - ?"

Wordlessly, Harry pulled the fake locket from his pocket, opened it, and passed it to Ron. The full story could wait. ... It did not matter tonight. . . nothing mattered except the end, the end of their pointless adventure, the end of Dumbledore's life. . . .

"R.A.B.," whispered Ron, "but who was that?""Dunno," said Harry, lying back on his bed fully clothed and staring blankly upwards. He felt no curiosity at all about R.A.B.: He doubted that he would ever feel curious again. As he lay there, he became aware suddenly that the grounds were silent. Fawkes had stopped singing. And he knew, without knowing how he knew it, that ilie phoenix had gone, had left Hogwarts for good, just as Dumbledore had left the school, had left the world . . . had left Harry.

Chapter 30 The White Tomb

All lessons were suspended, all examinations postponed. Some students were hurried away from Hogwarts by their parents over the next couple of days - the Patil twins were gone before breakfast on the morning following Dumbledore's death and Zacharias Smith was escorted from the castle by his haughty-looking father. Seamus Finnigan, on the other hand, refused point-blank to accompany his mother home; they had a shouting match in the Entrance Hall which was resolved when she agreed that he could remain behind for the funeral. She had difficulty in finding a bed in Hogsmeade, Seamus told Harry and Ron, for wizards and witches were pouring into the village, preparing to pay their last respects to Durnbledore.

Some excitement was caused among the younger students, who had never seen it before, when a powder-blue carriage the size of a house, pulled by a dozen giant winged palo-minos, came soaring out of the sky in the late afternoon before the funeral and landed on the edge of the Forest. Harry watched from a window as a gigantic and handsome olive-skinned, black-haired woman descended the carriage steps and threw herself into the waiting Hagrid's arms. Meanwhile a delegation of Ministry officials, including the Minister for Magic himself, was being accommodated within the castle. Harry was diligently avoiding contact with any of them; hewas sure that, sooner or later, he would be asked again to account for Dumbledore's last excursion from Hogwarts.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were spending all of their time together. The beautiful weather seemed to mock them; Harry could imagine how it would have been if Durnbledore had not died, and they had had this time together at the very end of the year, Ginny's examinations finished, the pressure of homework lifted ... and hour by hour, he put off saying the thing that he knew he must say, doing what he knew it was right to do, because it was too hard to forgo his best source of comfort.

They visited the hospital wing twice a day: Neville had been discharged, but Bill remained under Madam Pomfrey's care. His scars were as bad as ever; in truth, he now bore a distinct resemblance to Mad-Eye Moody, though thankfully with both eyes and legs, but in personality he seemed jusi the same as ever. All that appeared to have changed was that he now had a great liking for very rare steaks.

'... so eet ees lucky 'e is marrying me,' said Fleur happily, plumping up Bill's pillows, 'because ze British overcook their meat, I 'ave always said this.''I suppose I'm just going to have to accept that he really is going to marry her,' sighed Ginny later that evening, as she, Harry, Ron and Hermione sat beside the open window of the Gryffindor common room, looking out over the twilit grounds,'She's not that bad,' said Harry. 'Ugly, though,' he added hastily, as Ginny raised her eyebrows, and she let out a reluctant giggle.

'Well, I suppose if Mum can stand it, 1 can.''Anyone else we know died?' Ron asked Hermione, who was perusing the Evening Prophet.

Hermione winced at the forced toughness in his voice.

'No,' she said reprovingly, folding up ihe newspaper. 'They're still looking for Snape, but no sign ...''Of course there isn't,' said Harry, who became angry every lime this subject cropped up. They won't find Snape till they find Voldemort, and seeing as they've never managed to do that in all this time ...''I'm going to go to bed,' yawned Ginny. 'I haven't been sleeping thai well since ... well ... I could do with some sleep.'She kissed Harry (Ron looked away pointedly), waved al the other two and departed for the girls' dormitories. The moment the door had closed behind her, Hermione leaned forwards towards Harry with a most Hermione-ish look on her face.

'Harry, I found something ou(this morning, in the library ..,''R.A.B.?' said Harry, silling up straight.

He did not feel the way he had so often felt before, excited, curious, burning to get to the bottom of a mystery; he simply knew that the task of discovering the truth about the real Horcrux had to be completed before he could move a little further along the dark and winding path stretching ahead of him, the path that he and Dumbledore had set out upon together, and which he now knew he would have to journey alone. There might still be as many as four Horcruxes out there somewhere and each would need to be found and elim-inated before there was even a possibility that Voldemort could be killed. He kept reciting their names to himself, as though by listing them he could bring them within reach: 'the locket .., the cup ... the snake ... something of Gryffindor's or Ravenclaw's ... the locket ... the cup ... the snake ... something of Gryffindor's or Ravenclaw's ...'This mantra seemed to pulse through Harry's mind as hefell asleep at night, and his dreams were thick with cups, lockets and mysterious objects that he could not quite reach, though Dumbledore helpfully offered Harry a rope ladder that turned to snakes the moment he began to climb ...

He had shown Hermione the note inside the locket the morning after Dumbledore's death, and although she had not immediately recognised the initials as belonging to some obscure wizard about whom she had been reading, she had since been rushing off to the library a little more often than was strictly necessary for somebody who had no homework to do.

'No,' she said sadly, 'I've been trying, Harry, but I haven't found anything ... there are a couple of reasonably well-known wizards with those initials - Rosalind Antigone Bungs ... Rupert "Axebanger" Brookstanton ... but they don't seem to fit at all. Judging by that note, the person who stole the Horcrux knew Voldemort, and I can't find a shred of evidence that Bungs or Axebanger ever had anything to do with him ... no, actually, it's about ... well, Snape.'She looked nervous even saying the name again.

'What about him?' asked Harry heavily, slumping back in his chair.

'Well, it's just that I was sort of right about the Half-Blood Prince business,' she said tentatively.

'D'you have to rub it in, Hermione? How tTyou think 1 feel about that now?''No - no - Harry, I didn't mean that!' she said hastily, look-ing around to check that they were not being overheard. 'It's just that 1 was right about Eileen Prince once owning the book. You see ... she was Snape's mother!'T thought she wasn't much of a looker,' said Ron. Hermione ignored him.

'1 was going through ihe rest of the old Prophets and therewas a tiny announcement about Eileen Prince marrying a man called Tobias Snape, and then later an announcement saying that she'd given birth to a -''- murderer,' spat Harry.

'Well ... yes,' said Hermione. 'So ... 1 was sort of right. Snape must have been proud of being "half a Prince", you see? Tobias Snape was a Muggie from what it said in the Prophet''Yeah, that fits,' said Harry. 'He'd play up the pure-blood side so he could get in with Lucius Malfoy and the rest of them ... he's just like Voldemort. Pure-blood mother, Muggie father ... ashamed of his parentage, trying to make himself feared using the Dark Arts, gave himself an impressive new name - Lard Voldemort - the Half-Blood Prince - how could Dumbledore have missed -?'He broke off, looking out of the window. He could not stop himself dwelling upon Dumbledore's inexcusable trust in Snape ... but as Hermione had just inadvertently reminded him, he, Harry, had been taken in just the same ... in spite of the increasing nastiness of those scribbled spells, he had refused to believe ill of the boy who had been so clever, who had helped him so much ...

Helped him ... it was an almost unendurable thought, now ...

'I still don't get why he didn't turn you in for using that book,' said Ron. 'He must've known where you were getting it ali from.''He knew,' said Harry bitterly. 'He knew when I used Secfumsempra. He didn't really

need Legilimency ... he might even have known before then, with Slughom talking about how brilliant I was at Potions ... shouldn't have left his old book in the bottom of that cupboard, should he?''But why didn't he turn you in?''I don't ihink he wanted to associate himself with that book,' said Hermione. 'I don't think Dumbledore would have liked it very much if he'd known. And even if Snape pre-tended it hadn't been his, Slughom would have recognised his writing at once. Anyway, the book was left in Snape's old classroom, and I'll bet Dumbledore knew his mother was called "Prince".'T should've shown the book to Dumbledore,' said Harry. 'All that lime he was showing me how Voldemort was evil even when he was at school, and 1 had proof Snape was, too -''"Evil" is a strong word,' said Hermione quietly.

'You were the one who kept telling me the book was dangerous!''I'm trying to say, Harry, that you're pulling too much blame on yourself. 1 thought the Prince seemed to have a nasty sense of humour, but I would never have guessed he was a potential killer ...''None of us could've guessed Snape would ... you know,' said Ron.

Silence fell between them, each of them lost in their own thoughts, but Harry was sure that they, like him, were think-ing about the following morning, when Dumbledore's body would be laid to rest. Harry had never attended a funeral before; there had been no body to bury when Sirius had died. He did not know what to expect and was a little worried about what he might see, about how he would feel. He won-dered whether Dumbledore's death would be more real to him once the funeral was over. Though he had moments when the horrible fact of it threatened to overwhelm him, there were blank stretches of numbness where, despite the fact that nobody was talking about anything else in the whole castle, he still found it difficult 10 believe that Dumbledorehad really gone. Admittedly he had not, as he had with Sirius, looked desperately for some kind of loophole, some way that Dumbledore would come back ... he felt in his pocket for the cold chain of the fake Horcrux, which he now carried with him everywhere, not as a talisman, but as a reminder of what it had cost and what remained still to do.

Harry rose early to pack the next day; the Hogwarts Express would be leaving an hour after the funeral. Down-stairs he found the mood in the Great Hall subdued. Every-body was wearing their dress robes and no one seemed very hungry. Professor McGonagall had left the thronelike chair in the middle of the staff table empty. Hagrid's chair was des-erted too: Harry thought thai perhaps he had not been able to face breakfast; but Snape's place had been unceremoniously filled by Rufus Scrimgeour. Harry avoided his yellowish eyes as they scanned the Hall; Harry had the uncomfortable feeling that Scrimgeour was looking for him. Among Scrimgeour's entourage Harry spotted the red hair and horn-rimmed glasses of Percy Weasley. Ron gave no sign that he was aware of Percy, apart from stabbing pieces of kipper with unwonted venom.

Over at the Slytherin table Crabbe and Goyle were mutter-

ing together. Hulking boys though they were, they lookedoddly lonely without the tall, pale figure of Malfoy betweenthem, bossing them around. Harry had not spared Malfoymuch thought. His animosity was all for Snape, but he hadnot forgotten the fear in Malfoy's voice on that Tower top, northe fact that he had lowered his wand before the other DeathEaters arrived. Harry did not believe that Malfoy would havekilled Dumbledore. He despised Malfoy still for his infatu-

ation with the Dark Arts, but now the tiniest drop of pitymingled with his dislike. Where, Harry wondered, was Malfoynow, and what was Voldemort making him do under threat ofkilling him and his parents? ? ???>.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by a nudge in the ribs from Ginny. Professor McGonagall had risen to her feet and the mournful hum in the Hall died away at once.

'It is nearly time,' she said. 'Please follow your Heads of House out into the grounds. Gryffindors, after me.'They filed out from behind their benches in near silence. Harry glimpsed Slughorn at the head of the Slytherin column, wearing magnificent long emerald-green robes

embroidered with silver. He had never seen Professor Sprout, Head of the Hufflepuffs, looking so clean; there was not a single patch on her hat, and when they reached the Entrance Hall, they found Madam Pince standing beside Filch, she in a thick black veil that fell to her knees, he in an ancient black suit and tie reek-ing of mothbails.

They were heading, as Harry saw when he stepped out on to the stone steps from the front doors, towards the lake. The warmth of the sun caressed his face as they followed Professor McGonagall in silence to the place where hundreds of chairs had been set out in rows. An aisle ran down the centre of them: there was a marble table standing at the front, all chairs facing it. It was the most beautiful summer's day.

An extraordinary assortment of people had already settled into half of the chairs: shabby and smart, old and young. Most Harry did not recognise, but there were a few that he did, including members of the Order of the Phoenix: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Mad-Eye Moody, Tonks, her hair miraculously returned to vividest pink, Remus Lupin, with whom she seemed to be holding hands, Mr and Mrs Weasley, Bill sup-ported by Fleur and followed by Fred and George, who were wearing jackets of black dragonskin. Then there was Madame Maxime, who took up two-and-a-half chairs on her own, Tom, the landlord of the Leaky Cauldron, Arabella Figg, Harry's Squib neighbour, the hairy bass player from thewizardmg group the Weird bisters, hrnie Frang, dnver ol the Knight Bus, Madam Malkin, of the robe shop in Diagon Alley, and some people whom Harry merely knew by sight, such as the barman of the Hog's Head and the witch who pushed the trolley on the Hogwarts Express. The castle ghosts were there too, barely visible in the bright sunlight, discernible only when they moved, shimmering insubstantially in the gleaming air.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny filed into seats at the end of a row beside the lake. People were whispering to each other; it sounded like a breeze in the grass, but the birdsong was louder by far. The crowd continued to swell; with a great rush of affection for both of

them, Harry saw Neville being helped into a seat by Luna. They alone of all the DA had responded to Hermione's summons the night that Dumbledore had died, and Harry knew why: they were the ones who had missed the DA most ... probably the ones who had checked their coins regularly in the hope that there would be another meeting ...

Cornelius Fudge walked past them towards the front rows, his expression miserable, twirling his green bowler hat as usual; Harry next recognised Rita Skeeter, who, he was infuri-ated to see, had a notebook clutched in her red-takmed hand; and then, with a worse jolt of fury, Dolores Umbridge, an unconvincing expression of grief upon her toadlike face, a black velvet bow set atop her iron-coloured curls. At the sight of the centaur Firenze, who was standing like a sentinel near the water's edge, she gave a start and scurried hastily into a seat a good distance away.

The staff were seated at last. Harry could see Scrimgeour looking grave and dignified in the front row with Professor McGonagall. He wondered whether Scrimgeour or any of these important people were really sorry that Dumbledore wasand he forgot his dislike of the Ministry in looking around for the source of it. He was not the only one: many heads were turning, searching, a little alarmed.

'In there,' whispered Ginny in Harry's ear.

And he saw them in the clear green sunlit water, inches below the surface, reminding him horribly of the Inferi; a chorus of merpeople singing in a strange language he did not understand, their pallid faces rippling, their purplish hair flowing all around them. The music made the hair on Harry's neck stand up and yet it was not unpleasant. It spoke very clearly of loss and of despair. As he looked down into the wild faces of the singers he had the feeling that they, at least, were sorry for Dumbledore's passing. Then Ginny nudged him again and he looked round.

Hagrid was walking slowly up the aisle between the chairs. He was crying quite silently, his face gleaming with tears, and in his arms, wrapped in purple velvet spangled with golden stars, was what Harry knew to be Dumbledore's body. A sharp pain rose in Harry's throat at this sight: for a moment, the strange music and the knowledge that Dumbledore's body was so close seemed to take all warmth from the day. Ron looked white and shocked. Tears were falling thick and fast into both Ginny and Hermione's laps.

They could not see clearly what was happening at the front. Hagrid seemed to have placed the body carefully upon the table. Now he retreated down the aisle, blowing his nose with loud trumpeting noises that drew scandalised looks from some, including, Harry saw, Dolores Umbridge ... but Harry knew that Dumbledore would not have cared. He tried to make a friendly gesture to Hagrid as he passed, but Hagrid's eyes were so swollen it was a wonder he could see where he was going. Harry glanced at the back row to which Hagridwas heading and realised what was guiding him, for there, dressed in a jacket and trousers each the size of a small mar-quee, was the giant Grawp, his great ugly boulder-like head bowed, docile, almost human. Hagrid sat down next to his half-brother and Grawp palled Hagrid hard on the head, so that his chair legs sank into the ground. Harry had a wonder-ful momentary urge to laugh. But then the music stopped and he turned to face the front again.

A little tufty-haired man in plain black robes had got to his feet and stood now in front of Dumbledore's body. Harry could not hear what he was saying. Odd words floated back to them over the hundreds of beads. 'Nobility of spirit' ... 'intel-lectual contribution' ... 'greatness of heart' ... it did not mean very much. It had little to do with Dumbledore as Harry had known him. He suddenly remembered Dumbledore's idea of a few words: 'nitwit', 'oddment', 'blubber' and 'tweak 1, and again, had to suppress a grin ... what was the matter with him?

There was a soft splashing noise to his left and he saw that the merpeople had broken the surface to listen, too. He remembered

Dumbledore crouching at the water's edge two years ago, very close to where Harry now sat, and conversing in Mermish with the Merchieftainess. Harry wondered where Dumbledore had learned Mermish. There was so much he had never asked him, so much he should have said ...

And then, without warning, it swept over him, the dreadful truth, more completely and undeniably than it had until now. Dumbledore was dead, gone ... he clutched the cold locket in his hand so tightly that it hurt, but he could not prevent hot tears spilling from his eyes: he looked away from Ginny and the others and stared out over the lake, towards the Forest, as the little man in black droned on ... there was movement among the trees. The centaurs had come to pay their respects, too. They did not move into the open but Harry saw themstanding quite still, half-hidden in shadow, watching the wizards, their bows hanging at their sides. And Harry remem-bered his first nightmarish trip into the Forest, the first time he had ever encountered the thing that was then Voldemort, and how he had faced him, and how he and Dumbledore had discussed fighting a losing battle not long thereafter. It was important, Dumbledore said, to fight, and fight again, and keep fighting, for only then could evil be kept at bay, though never quite eradicated ...

And Harry saw very clearly as be sal there under the hot sun bow people who cared about him had stood in front of him one by one, his mother, his father, his godfather, and finally Dumbledore, all determined to protect him; but now that was over. He could not let anybody else stand between him and Voldemort; he must abandon for ever the illusion he ought to have lost at the age of one: that the shelter of a parent's arms meant that nothing could hurt him. There was no waking from his nightmare, no comforting whisper in the dark that he was safe really, that it was all in his imagination; the last and greatest of his proteclors had died and he was more alone than he had ever been before.

The little man in black had stopped speaking at last and resumed his seat. Harry waited for somebody else to get to their feet; he expected speeches, probably from the Minister, but nobody moved.

Then several people screamed. Bright, white flames had erupted around Dumbledore's body and the table upon which it lay: higher and higher they rose, obscuring the body. White smoke spiralled into the air and made strange shapes: Harry thought, for one heart-stopping moment, that he saw a phoenix fly joyfully into the blue, but next second the fire had vanished. In its place was a white marble tomb, encasing Dumbledore's body and the table on which he had rested.

There were a few more cries of shock as a shower of arrows soared through the air, but they fell far short of the crowd. It was, Harry knew, the centaurs' tribute: he saw them turn tail and disappear back into the cool trees. Likewise the mer-people sank slowly back into the green water and were lost from view.

Harry looked ai Ginny, Ron and Hermione: Ron's face was screwed up as though the sunlight was blinding him. Hermione's face was glazed with tears, but Ginny was no longer crying. She met Harry's gaze with the same hard, blazing look that he had seen when she had hugged him after winning the Quidditch Cup in his absence, and he knew that at that moment they understood each other perfectly, and that when he told her what he was going to do now, she would not say 'Be careful', or 'Don't do it', but accept his decision, because she would not have expected anything less of him. And so he steeled himself to say what he had known he must say ever since Dumbledore had died.

'Ginny, listen ...' he said very quietly, as the buzz of con-versation grew louder around them and people began to get to their feet. 'I can't be involved with you any more. We've got to stop seeing each other. We can't be together.'She said, with an oddly twisted smile, 'It's for some stupid, noble reason, isn't it?''It's been like ... like something out

of someone else's life, these last few weeks with you,' said Harry. 'But 1 can't ... we can't ... I've got things to do alone now.'She did not cry, she simply looked at him,'Voldemort uses people his enemies are close to. He's already used you as bait once, and that was just because you're my best friend's sister. Think how much danger you'll be in if we keep this up. He'll know, he'll find out. He'll try and get to me through you.''What if I don't care?' said Ginny fiercely.

'I care,' said Harry. 'How do you think I'd feel if this was your funeral ... and it was my fault ...'She looked away from him, over the lake.

T never really gave up on you,' she said. 'Not really. I always hoped ... Hermione told me to get on with life, maybe go out with some other people, relax a bit around you, because I never used to be able to talk if you were in the room, remember? And she thought you might take a bit more notice if I was a bit more - myself.''Smart girl, that Hermione,' said Harry, trying to smile. 'I just wish I'd asked you sooner. We coukTve had ages ... months ... years maybe ...''But you've been too busy saving the wizarding world,' said Ginny, half-laughing. 'Well ... I can't say I'm surprised. I knew this would happen in the end. I knew you wouldn't be happy unless you were hunting Voldemort. Maybe that's why I like you so much.'Harry could not bear to hear these things, nor did he think his resolution would hold if he remained sitting beside her. Ron, he saw, was now holding Hermione and stroking her hair while she sobbed into his shoulder, tears dripping from the end of his own long nose. With a miserable gesture, Harry got up, turned his back on Ginny and on Dumbledore's tomb and walked away around the lake. Moving felt much more bearable than sitting still: just as setting out as soon as possible to track down the Horcruxes and kill Voldemort would feel better than waiting to do it ...

'Harry!'

He turned. Rufus Scrimgeour was limping rapidly towards him around the bank, leaning on his walking stick.

'I've been hoping to have a word ... do you mind if I walk a little way with you?''No,' said Harry indifferently, and set off again.

'Harry, this was a dreadful tragedy,' said Scrimgeour quietly, 'I cannot tell you how appalled I was to hear of it. Dumbledore was a very great wizard. We had our disagree-ments, as you know, but no one knows better than 1 -'?What do you want?' asked Harry flatly.

Scrimgeour looked annoyed but, as before, hastily modified his expression to one of sorrowful understanding.

'You are, of course, devastated,' he said. 'I know that you were very close to Dumbledore. I think you may have been his favourite ever pupil. The bond between the two of you -''What do you want?' Harry repeated, coming to a halt.

Scrimgeour stopped too, leaned on his stick and stared at Harry, his expression shrewd now.

'The word is that you were with him when he left the school the night that he died.''Whose word?' said Harry.

'Somebody Stupefied a Death Eater on top of the Tower after Dumbledore died. There were also two broomsticks up there. The Ministry can add two and two, Harry.''Glad to hear it,' said Harry. 'Well, where I went with Dumbledore and what we did is my business. He didn't want people to know.''Such loyalty is admirable, of course,' said Scrimgeour, who seemed to be restraining his irritation with difficulty, 'bul Dumbledore is gone, Harry. He's gone.''He will only be gone from the school when none here are loyal to him,' said Harry, smiling in spite of himself.

'My dear boy ... even Dumbledore cannot return from the-''I am not saying he can. You wouldn't understand. But I've got nothing to tell you.'Scrimgeour hesitated, then said, in what was evidentlysupposed to be a tone of delicacy, The Ministry can offer you all sorts of

protection, you know, Harry. I would be delighted to place a couple of my Aurors at your service -'Harry laughed.

'Voldemort wants to kill me himself and Aurors won't stop him. So thanks for the offer, but no thanks.''So,' said Scrimgeour, his voice cold now, 'the request 1 made of you at Christmas -''What request? Oh yeah ... the one where I tell the world what a great job you're doing in exchange for —''- for raising everyone's morale!' snapped Scrimgeour.

Harry considered him for a moment.

'Released Stan Shunpike yet?'Scrimgeour turned a nasty purple colour highly remin-iscent of Uncle Vernon.

'1 see you are -'

'Dumbledore's man through and through,' said Harry. 'That's right.'Scrimgeour glared at him for another moment, then turned and limped away without another word. Harry could see Percy and the rest of the Ministry delegation waiting for him, casting nervous glances at the sobbing Hagrid and Grawp, who were still in their seats. Ron and Hermione were hurry-ing towards Harry, passing Scrimgeour going in the opposite direction; Harry turned and walked slowly on, waiting for them to catch up, which they finally did in the shade of a beech tree under which they had sat in happier times.

''What did Scrimgeour want?' Hermione whispered.

'Same as he wanted at Christmas,' shrugged Harry. 'Wanted me to give him inside information on Dumbledore and be the Ministry's new poster boy.'Ron seemed to struggle with himself for a moment, then he said loudly to Hermione, 'Look, let me go back and hit Percy!''No,' she said firmly, grabbing his arm.

'It'll make me feel better!'

Harry laughed. Even Hermione grinned a little, though her smile faded as she looked up at the castle.

'I can't bear the idea that we might never come back.' she said softly. 'How can Hogwarts close?''Maybe it won't,' said Ron. 'We're not in any more danger here than we are at home, are we? Everywhere's the same now. I'd even say Hogwarts is safer, there are more wizards inside to defend the place. What d'you reckon, Harry?''I'm not coming back even if it does reopen,' said Harry.

Ron gaped at him, but Hermione said sadly, 'I knew you were going to say that. But then what will you do? 1'I'm going back to the Dursleys' once more, because Dumbledore wanted me to,' said Harry. 'But it'll be a short visit, and then I'll be gone for good.''But where will you go if you don't come back to school?''I thought I might go back to Godric's Hollow,' Harry mut-tered. He had had the idea in his head ever since the night of Dumbledore's death. 'For me, it started there, all of it. I've just got a feeling I need to go there. And I can visit my parents' graves, I'd like that.''And then what?' said Ron.

Then I've got to track down the rest of the Horcruxes, haven't I?' said Harry, his eyes upon Dumbledore's white tomb, reflected in the water on the other side of the lake. That's what he wanted me to do, that's why he told me all about them. If Dumbledore was right - and I'm sure he was -there are still four of them out there. I've got to find them and destroy them and then I've got to go after the seventh bit of Voldemort's soul, the bit that's still in his body, and I'm the one who's going to kill him. And if I meet Severus Snapealong the way,' he added, 'so much trie better tor me, so mucn the worse for him.'There was a long silence. The crowd had almost dispersed now, the stragglers giving the monumental figure of Grawp a wide berth as he cuddled Hagrid, whose howls of grief were still echoing across the water.

'We'll be there, Harry,' said Ron.

'What?'

At your aunt and uncle's house,' said Ron. 'And then we'll go with you, wherever you're going.''No -' said Harry quickly; he had not counted on this, he had meant them to understand that he was undertaking this most dangerous journey alone.

'You said to us once before,' said Hermione quietly, 'that there was time to turn back if we wanted to. We've had time, haven't we?''We're with you whatever happens,' said Ron. 'But, mate, you're going to have to come round my mum and dad's house before we do anything else, even Godric's Hollow.''Why?'

'Bill and Fleur's wedding, remember?'Harry looked at him, startled; the idea that anything as normal as a wedding could still exist seemed incredible and yet wonderful.

'Yeah, we shouldn't miss that,' he said finally.

His hand closed automatically around the fake Horcrux, but in spite of everything, in spite of the dark and twisting path he saw stretching ahead for himself, in spite of the final meet-ing with Voldemort he knew must come, whether in a month, in a year, or in ten, he felt his heart lift at the thought that there was still one last golden day of peace left to enjoy with Ron and Hermione.

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

Chapter 1 The Dark Lord Ascending

Chapter 2 In Memorandum

Chapter 3 The Dursleys Departing

Chapter 4 The Seven Potters

Chapter 5 Fallen Warrior

Chapter 6 The Ghoul In Pajamas

Chapter 7 The Will of Albus Dumbledore

Chapter 8 The Wedding

Chapter 9 A Place To Hide

Chapter 10 Kreacher's Tale

Chapter 11 The Bribe

Chapter 12 Magic Is Might

Chapter 13 The Muggle-born Registration Commission

Chapter 14 The Thief

Chapter 15 The Goblin's Revenge

Chapter 16 Godric's Hollow

Chapter 17 Bathilda's Secret

Chapter 18 The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore

Chapter 19 The Silver Doe

Chapter 20 Xenophilius Lovegood

Chapter 21 The Tale of The Three Brothers

Chapter 22 The Deathly Hallows

Chapter 23 Malfoy Manor

Chapter 24 The Wandmaker

Chapter 25 Shell Cottage

Chapter 26 Gringotts

Chapter 27 The Final Hiding Place

Chapter 28 The Missing Mirror

Chapter 29 The Lost Diadem

Chapter 30 The Sacking of Severus Snape

Chapter 31 The Battle of Hogwarts

Chapter 32 The Elder Wand

Chapter 33 The Prince's Tale

Chapter 34 The Forest Again

Chapter 35 King's Cross

Chapter 36 The Flaw In The Plan

Chapter 37 Epilogue Nineteen Years Later

Return to the Main Contents

Chapter 1 The Dark Lord Ascending

The two men appeared out of nowhere, a few yards apart in the narrow, moonlit lane. For a second they stood quite still, wands directed at each other's chests; then, recognizing each other, they stowed their wands beneath their cloaks and started walking briskly in the same direction.

"News?" asked the taller of the two.

"The best," replied Severus Snape.

The lane was bordered on the left by wild, low-growing brambles, on the right by a high, neatly manicured hedge. The men's long cloaks flapped around their ankles as they marched.

"Thought I might be late," said Yaxley, his blunt features sliding in and out of sight as the branches of overhanging trees broke the moonlight. "It was a little trickier than I expected. But I hope he will be satisfied. You sound confident that your reception will be good?"

Snape nodded, but did not elaborate. They turned right, into a wide driveway that led off the lane. The high hedge curved into them, running off into the distance beyond the pair of imposing wrought-iron gates barring the men's way. Neither of them broke step: In silence both raised their left arms in a kind of salute and passed straight through, as though the dark metal was smoke.

The yew hedges muffled the sound of the men's footsteps. There was a rustle somewhere to their right: Yaxley drew his wand again pointing it over his companion's head, but the source of the noise proved to be nothing more than a pure-white peacock, strutting majestically along the top of the hedge.

"He always did himself well, Lucius. Peacocks …" Yaxley thrust his wand back under his cloak with a snort.

A handsome manor house grew out of the darkness at the end of the straight drive, lights glinting in the diamond paned downstairs windows. Somewhere in the dark garden beyond the hedge a fountain was playing. Gravel crackled beneath their feet as Snape and Yaxley sped toward the front door, which swung inward at their approach, though nobody had visibly opened it.

The hallway was large, dimly lit, and sumptuously decorated, with a magnificent carpet covering most of the stone floor. The eyes of the pale-faced portraits on the wall followed Snape and Yaxley as they strode past. The two men halted at a heavy wooden door leading into the next room, hesitated for the space of a heartbeat, then Snape turned the bronze handle.

The drawing room was full of silent people, sitting at a long and ornate table. The room's usual furniture had been pushed carelessly up against the walls. Illumination came from a roaring fire beneath a handsome marble mantelpiece surmounted by a gilded mirror. Snape and Yaxley lingered for a moment on the threshold. As their eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light, they were drawn upward to the strangest feature of the scene: an apparently unconscious human figure hanging upside down over the table, revolving slowly as if suspended by an invisible rope, and reflected in the mirror and in the bare, polished surface of the table below. None of the people seated underneath this singular sight were looking at it except for a pale young man sitting almost directly below it. He seemed unable to prevent himself from glancing upward every minute or so.

“Yaxley. Snape,” said a high, clear voice from the head of the table. “You are very nearly late.”

The speaker was seated directly in front of the fireplace, so that it was difficult, at first, for the new arrivals to make out more than his silhouette. As they drew nearer, however, his face shone through the gloom, hairless, snakelike, with slits for nostrils and gleaming red

eyes whose pupils were vertical. He was so pale that he seemed to emit a pearly glow.

“Severus, here,” said Voldemort, indicating the seat on his immediate right. “Yaxley – beside Dolohov.”

The two men took their allotted places. Most of the eyes around the table followed Snape, and it was to him that Voldemort spoke first.

“So?”

“My Lord, the Order of the Phoenix intends to move Harry Potter from his current place of safety on Saturday next, at nightfall.”

The interest around the table sharpened palpably: Some stiffened, others fidgeted, all gazing at Snape and Voldemort.

“Saturday … at nightfall,” repeated Voldemort. His red eyes fastened upon Snape’s black ones with such intensity that some of the watchers looked away, apparently fearful that they themselves would be scorched by the ferocity of the gaze. Snape, however, looked calmly back into Voldemort’s face and, after a moment or two, Voldemort’s lipless mouth curved into something like a smile.

“Good. Very good. And this information comes – ”

“ – from the source we discussed,” said Snape.

“My Lord.”

Yaxley had leaned forward to look down the long table at Voldemort and Snape. All faces turned to him.

“My Lord, I have heard differently.”

Yaxley waited, but Voldemort did not speak, so he went on, “Dawlish, the Auror, let slip that Potter will not be moved until the thirtieth, the night before the boy turns seventeen.”

Snape was smiling.

"My source told me that there are plans to lay a false trail; this must be it. No doubt a Confundus Charm has been placed upon Dawlish. It would not be the first time; he is known to be susceptible."

"I assure you, my Lord, Dawlish seemed quite certain," said Yaxley.

"If he has been Confunded, naturally he is certain," said Snape. "I assure you, Yaxley, the Auror Office will play no further part in the protection of Harry Potter. The Order believes that we have infiltrated the Ministry."

"The Order's got one thing right, then, eh?" said a squat man sitting a short distance from Yaxley; he gave a wheezy giggle that was echoed here and there along the table.

Voldemort did not laugh. His gaze had wandered upward to the body revolving slowly overhead, and he seemed to be lost in thought.

"My Lord," Yaxley went on, "Dawlish believes an entire party of Aurors will be used to transfer the boy – "

Voldemort held up a large white hand, and Yaxley subsided at once, watching resentfully as Voldemort turned back to Snape.

"Where are they going to hide the boy next?"

"At the home of one of the Order," said Snape. "The place, according to the source, has been given every protection that the Order and Ministry together could provide. I think that there is little chance of taking him once he is there, my Lord, unless, of course, the Ministry has fallen before next Saturday, which might give us the opportunity to discover and undo enough of the enchantments to break through the rest."

“Well, Yaxley?” Voldemort called down the table, the firelight glinting strangely in his red eyes. “Will the Ministry have fallen by next Saturday?”

Once again, all heads turned. Yaxley squared his shoulders.

“My Lord, I have good news on that score. I have – with difficulty, and after great effort – succeeded in placing an Imperius Curse upon Pius Thicknesse.”

Many of those sitting around Yaxley looked impressed; his neighbor, Dolohov, a man with a long, twisted face, clapped him on the back.

“It is a start,” said Voldemort. “But Thicknesse is only one man. Scrimgeour must be surrounded by our people before I act. One failed attempt on the Minister’s life will set me back a long way.”

“Yes – my Lord, that is true – but you know, as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Thicknesse has regular contact not only with the Minister himself, but also with the Heads of all the other Ministry departments. It will, I think, be easy now that we have such a high-ranking official under our control, to subjugate the others, and then they can all work together to bring Scrimgeour down.”

“As long as our friend Thicknesse is not discovered before he has converted the rest,” said Voldemort. “At any rate, it remains unlikely that the Ministry will be mine before next Saturday. If we cannot touch the boy at his destination, then it must be done while he travels.”

“We are at an advantage there, my Lord,” said Yaxley, who seemed determined to receive some portion of approval. “We now have several people planted within the Department of Magical Transport. If Potter Apparates or uses the Floo Network, we shall know immediately.”

“He will not do either,” said Snape. “The Order is eschewing any form of transport that is controlled or regulated by the Ministry; they mistrust everything to do with the place.”

“All the better,” said Voldemort. “He will have to move in the open. Easier to take, by far.”

Again, Voldemort looked up at the slowly revolving body as he went on, “I shall attend to the boy in person. There have been too many mistakes where Harry Potter is concerned. Some of them have been my own. That Potter lives is due more to my errors than to his triumphs.”

The company around the table watched Voldemort apprehensively, each of them, by his or her expression, afraid that they might be blamed for Harry Potter’s continued existence. Voldemort, however, seemed to be speaking more to himself than to any of them, still addressing the unconscious body above him.

“I have been careless, and so have been thwarted by luck and chance, those wreckers of all but the best-laid plans. But I know better now. I understand those things that I did not understand before. I must be the one to kill Harry Potter, and I shall be.”

At these words, seemingly in response to them, a sudden wail sounded, a terrible, drawn-out cry of misery and pain. Many of those at the table looked downward, startled, for the sound had seemed to issue from below their feet.

“Wormtail,” said Voldemort, with no change in his quiet, thoughtful tone, and without removing his eyes from the revolving body above, “have I not spoken to you about keeping our prisoner quiet?”

“Yes, m-my Lord,” gasped a small man halfway down the table, who had been sitting so low in his chair that it appeared, at first glance, to be unoccupied. Now he scrambled from his seat and scurried from the room, leaving nothing behind him but a curious gleam of silver.

“As I was saying,” continued Voldemort, looking again at the tense faces of his followers, “I understand better now. I shall need, for instance, to borrow a wand from one of you before I go to kill Potter.”

The faces around him displayed nothing but shock; he might have announced that he wanted to borrow one of their arms.

“No volunteers?” said Voldemort. “Let’s see … Lucius, I see no reason for you to have a wand anymore.”

Lucius Malfoy looked up. His skin appeared yellowish and waxy in the firelight, and his eyes were sunken and shadowed. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

“My Lord?”

“Your wand, Lucius. I require your wand.”

“I …”

Malfoy glanced sideways at his wife. She was staring straight ahead, quite as pale as he was, her long blonde hair hanging down her back, but beneath the table her slim fingers closed briefly on his wrist. At her touch, Malfoy put his hand into his robes, withdrew a wand, and passed it along to Voldemort, who held it up in front of his red eyes, examining it closely.

“What is it?”

“Elm, my Lord,” whispered Malfoy.

“And the core?”

“Dragon – dragon heartstring.”

“Good,” said Voldemort. He drew out his wand and compared the lengths. Lucius Malfoy made an involuntary movement; for a fraction of a second, it seemed he expected to receive Voldemort’s wand in

exchange for his own. The gesture was not missed by Voldemort, whose eyes widened maliciously.

“Give you my wand, Lucius? My wand?”

Some of the throng sniggered.

“I have given you your liberty, Lucius, is that not enough for you? But I have noticed that you and your family seem less than happy of late … What is it about my presence in your home that displaces you, Lucius?”

“Nothing – nothing, my Lord!”

“Such lies Lucius … ”

The soft voice seemed to hiss on even after the cruel mouth had stopped moving. One or two of the wizards barely repressed a shudder as the hissing grew louder; something heavy could be heard sliding across the floor beneath the table.

The huge snake emerged to climb slowly up Voldemort’s chair. It rose, seemingly endlessly, and came to rest across Voldemort’s shoulders: its neck the thickness of a man’s thigh; its eyes, with their vertical slits for pupils, unblinking. Voldemort stroked the creature absently with long thin fingers, still looking at Lucius Malfoy.

“Why do the Malfoys look so unhappy with their lot? Is my return, my rise to power, not the very thing they professed to desire for so many years?”

“Of course, my Lord,” said Lucius Malfoy. His hand shook as he wiped sweat from his upper lip. “We did desire it – we do.”

To Malfoy’s left, his wife made an odd, stiff nod, her eyes averted from Voldemort and the snake. To his right, his son, Draco, who had been

gazing up at the inert body overhead, glanced quickly at Voldemort and away again, terrified to make eye contact.

“My Lord,” said a dark woman halfway down the table, her voice constricted with emotion, “it is an honor to have you here, in our family’s house. There can be no higher pleasure.”

She sat beside her sister, as unlike her in looks, with her dark hair and heavily lidded eyes, as she was in bearing and demeanor; where Narcissa sat rigid and impassive, Bellatrix leaned toward Voldemort, for mere words could not demonstrate her longing for closeness.

“No higher pleasure,” repeated Voldemort, his head tilted a little to one side as he considered Bellatrix. “That means a great deal, Bellatrix, from you.”

Her face flooded with color; her eyes welled with tears of delight.

“My Lord knows I speak nothing but the truth!”

“No higher pleasure … even compared with the happy event that, I hear, has taken place in your family this week?”

She stared at him, her lips parted, evidently confused.

“I don’t know what you mean, my Lord.”

“I’m talking about your niece, Bellatrix. And yours, Lucius and Narcissa. She has just married the werewolf, Remus Lupin. You must be so proud.”

There was an eruption of jeering laughter from around the table. Many leaned forward to exchange gleeful looks; a few thumped the table with their fists. The giant snake, disliking the disturbance, opened its mouth wide and hissed angrily, but the Death Eaters did not hear it, so jubilant were they at Bellatrix and the Malfoys’

humiliation. Bellatrix's face, so recently flushed with happiness, had turned an ugly, blotchy red.

"She is no niece of ours, my Lord," she cried over the outpouring of mirth. "We – Narcissa and I – have never set eyes on our sister since she married the Mudblood. This brat has nothing to do with either of us, nor any beast she marries."

"What say you, Draco?" asked Voldemort, and though his voice was quiet, it carried clearly through the catcalls and jeers. "Will you babysit the cubs?"

The hilarity mounted; Draco Malfoy looked in terror at his father, who was staring down into his own lap, then caught his mother's eye. She shook her head almost imperceptibly, then resumed her own deadpan stare at the opposite wall.

"Enough," said Voldemort, stroking the angry snake. "Enough."

And the laughter died at once.

"Many of our oldest family trees become a little diseased over time," he said as Bellatrix gazed at him, breathless and imploring, "You must prune yours, must you not, to keep it healthy? Cut away those parts that threaten the health of the rest."

"Yes, my Lord," whispered Bellatrix, and her eyes swam with tears of gratitude again. "At the first chance!"

"You shall have it," said Voldemort. "And in your family, so in the world … we shall cut away the cancer that infects us until only those of the true blood remain …"

Voldemort raised Lucius Malfoy's wand, pointed it directly at the slowly revolving figure suspended over the table, and gave it a tiny flick. The figure came to life with a groan and began to struggle against invisible bonds.

“Do you recognize our guest, Severus?” asked Voldemort.

Snape raised his eyes to the upside down face. All of the Death Eaters were looking up at the captive now, as though they had been given permission to show curiosity. As she revolved to face the firelight, the woman said in a cracked and terrified voice, “Severus! Help me!”

“Ah, yes,” said Snape as the prisoner turned slowly away again.

“And you, Draco?” asked Voldemort, stroking the snake’s snout with his wand-free hand. Draco shook his head jerkily. Now that the woman had woken, he seemed unable to look at her anymore.

“But you would not have taken her classes,” said Voldemort. “For those of you who do not know, we are joined here tonight by Charity Burbage who, until recently, taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

There were small noises of comprehension around the table. A broad, hunched woman with pointed teeth cackled.

“Yes … Professor Burbage taught the children of witches and wizards all about Muggles … how they are not so different from us …”

One of the Death Eaters spat on the floor. Charity Burbage revolved to face Snape again.

“Severus … please … please …”

“Silence,” said Voldemort, with another twitch of Malfoy’s wand, and Charity fell silent as if gagged. “Not content with corrupting and polluting the minds of Wizarding children, last week Professor Burbage wrote an impassioned defense of Mudbloods in the Daily Prophet. Wizards, she says, must accept these thieves of their knowledge and magic. The dwindling of the purebloods is, says

Professor Burbage, a most desirable circumstance … She would have us all mate with Muggles … or, no doubt, werewolves …”

Nobody laughed this time. There was no mistaking the anger and contempt in Voldemort’s voice. For the third time, Charity Burbage revolved to face Snape. Tears were pouring from her eyes into her hair. Snape looked back at her, quite impassive, as she turned slowly away from him again.

“Avada Kedavra”

The flash of green light illuminated every corner of the room. Charity fell, with a resounding crash, onto the table below, which trembled and creaked. Several of the Death Eaters leapt back in their chairs. Draco fell out of his onto the floor.

“Dinner, Nagini,” said Voldemort softly, and the great snake swayed and slithered from his shoulders onto the polished wood.

Chapter 2 In Memorandum

Harry was bleeding. Clutching his right hand in his left and swearing under his breath, he shouldered open his bedroom door. There was a crunch of breaking china. He had trodden on a cup of cold tea that had been sitting on the floor outside his bedroom door.

“What the –?”

He looked around, the landing of number four, Privet Drive, was deserted. Possibly the cup of tea was Dudley’s idea of a clever booby trap. Keeping his bleeding hand elevated, Harry scraped the fragments of cup together with the other hand and threw them into the already crammed bin just visible inside his bedroom door. Then he tramped across to the bathroom to run his finger under the tap.

It was stupid, pointless, irritating beyond belief that he still had four days left of being unable to perform magic…but he had to admit to himself that this jagged cut in his finger would have defeated him. He had never learned how to repair wounds, and now he came to think of it – particularly in light of his immediate plans – this seemed a serious flaw in his magical education. Making a mental note to ask Hermione how it was done, he used a large wad of toilet paper to mop up as much of the tea as he could before returning to his bedroom and slamming the door behind him.

Harry had spent the morning completely emptying his school trunk for the first time since he had packed it six years ago. At the start of the intervening school years, he had merely skimmed off the topmost three quarters of the contents and replaced or updated them, leaving a layer of general debris at the bottom – old quills, desiccated beetle eyes, single socks that no longer fit. Minutes previously, Harry had plunged his hand into this mulch, experienced a stabbing pain in the fourth finger of his right hand, and withdrawn it to see a lot of blood.

He now proceeded a little more cautiously. Kneeling down beside the trunk again, he groped around in the bottom and, after retrieving an old badge that flickered feebly between SUPPORT CEDRIC DIGGORY and POTTER STINKS, a cracked and worn-out Sneakoscope, and a gold locket inside which a note signed R.A.B. had been hidden, he finally discovered the sharp edge that had done the damage. He recognized it at once. It was a two-inch-long fragment of the enchanted mirror that his dead godfather, Sirius, had given him. Harry laid it aside and felt cautiously around the trunk for the rest, but nothing more remained of his godfather's last gift except powdered glass, which clung to the deepest layer of debris like glittering grit.

Harry sat up and examined the jagged piece on which he had cut himself, seeing nothing but his own bright green eye reflected back at him. Then he placed the fragment on top of that morning's Daily prophet, which lay unread on the bed, and attempted to stem the sudden upsurge of bitter memories, the stabs of regret and of longing the discovery of the broken mirror had occasioned, by attacking the rest of the rubbish in the trunk.

It took another hour to empty it completely, throw away the useless items, and sort the remainder in piles according to whether or not he would need them from now on. His school and Quidditch robes, cauldron, parchment, quills, and most of his textbooks were piled in a corner, to be left behind. He wondered what his aunt and uncle would do with them; burn them in the dead of night, probably, as if they were evidence of some dreadful crime. His Muggle clothing, Invisibility Cloak, potion-making kit, certain books, the photograph album Hagrid had once given him, a stack of letters, and his wand had been repacked into an old rucksack. In a front pocket were the Marauder's Map and the locket with the note signed R.A.B. inside it. The locket was accorded this place of honor not because it was valuable – in all usual senses it was worthless – but because of what it had cost to attain it.

This left a sizable stack of newspapers sitting on his desk beside his snowy owl, Hedwig: one for each of the days Harry had spent at Privet Drive this summer.

He got up off the floor, stretched, and moved across to his desk. Hedwig made no movement as he began to flick through newspapers, throwing them into the rubbish pile one by one. The owl was asleep or else faking; she was angry with Harry about the limited amount of time she was allowed out of her cage at the moment.

As he neared the bottom of the pile of newspapers, Harry slowed down, searching for one particular issue that he knew had arrived shortly after he had returned to Privet Drive for the summer; he remembered that there had been a small mention on the front about the resignation of Charity Burbage, the Muggle Studies teacher at Hogwarts. At last he found it. Turning to page ten, he sank into his desk chair and reread the article he had been looking for.

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE REMEMBERED

By Elphias Doge

I met Albus Dumbledore at the age of eleven, on our first day at Hogwarts. Our mutual attraction was undoubtedly due to the fact that we both felt ourselves to be outsiders. I had contracted dragon pox shortly before arriving at school, and while I was no longer contagious, my pock-marked visage and greenish hue did not encourage many to approach me. For his part, Albus had arrived at Hogwarts under the burden of unwanted notoriety. Scarcely a year previously, his father, Percival, had been convicted of a savage and well-publicized attack upon three young Muggles.

Albus never attempted to deny that his father (who was to die in Azkaban) had committed this crime; on the contrary, when I plucked up courage to ask him, he assured me that he knew his father to be guilty. Beyond that, Dumbledore refused to speak of the sad business, though many attempted to make him do so. Some, indeed,

were disposed to praise his father's action and assumed that Albus too was a Muggle-hater. They could not have been more mistaken: As anybody who knew Albus would attest, he never revealed the remotest anti-Muggle tendency. Indeed, his determined support for Muggle rights gained him many enemies in subsequent years.

In a matter of months, however, Albus's own fame had begun to eclipse that of his father. By the end of his first year he would never again be known as the son of a Muggle-hater, but as nothing more or less than the most brilliant student ever seen at the school. Those of us who were privileged to be his friends benefited from his example, not to mention his help and encouragement, with which he was always generous. He confessed to me later in life that he knew even then that his greatest pleasure lay in teaching.

He not only won every prize of note that the school offered, he was soon in regular correspondence with the most notable magical names of the day, including Nicolas Flamel, the celebrated alchemist; Bathilda Bagshot, the noted historian; and Adalbert Waffling, the magical theoretician. Several of his papers found their way into learned publications such as Transfiguration Today, Challenges in Charming, and The Practical Potioneer. Dumbledore's future career seemed likely to be meteoric, and the only question that remained was when he would become Minister of Magic. Though it was often predicted in later years that he was on the point of taking the job, however, he never had Ministerial ambitions.

Three years after we had started at Hogwarts, Albus's brother, Aberforth, arrived at school. They were not alike: Aberforth was never bookish and, unlike Albus, preferred to settle arguments by dueling rather than through reasoned discussion. However, it is quite wrong to suggest, as some have, that the brothers were not friends. They rubbed along as comfortably as two such different boys could do. In fairness to Aberforth, it must be admitted that living in Albus's shadow cannot have been an altogether comfortable experience. Being continually outshone was an occupational hazard of being his friend

and cannot have been any more pleasurable as a brother. When Albus and I left Hogwarts we intended to take the then-traditional tour of the world together, visiting and observing foreign wizards, before pursuing our separate careers. However, tragedy intervened. On the very eve of our trip, Albus's mother, Kendra, died, leaving Albus the head, and sole breadwinner, of the family. I postponed my departure long enough to pay my respects at Kendra's funeral, then left for what was now to be a solitary journey. With a younger brother and sister to care for, and little gold left to them, there could no longer be any question of Albus accompanying me.

That was the period of our lives when we had least contact. I wrote to Albus, describing, perhaps insensitively, the wonders of my journey, from narrow escapes from chimaeras in Greece to the experiments of the Egyptian alchemists. His letters told me little of his day-to-day life, which I guessed to be frustratingly dull for such a brilliant wizard. Immersed in my own experiences, it was with horror that I heard, toward the end of my year's travels, that another tragedy had struck the Dumbledores: the death of his sister, Ariana.

Though Ariana had been in poor health for a long time, the blow, coming so soon after the loss of their mother, had a profound effect on both of her brothers. All those closest to Albus – and I count myself one of that lucky number – agree that Ariana's death, and Albus's feeling of personal responsibility for it (though, of course, he was guiltless), left their mark upon him forevermore.

I returned home to find a young man who had experienced a much older person's suffering. Albus was more reserved than before, and much less light-hearted. To add to his misery, the loss of Ariana had led, not to a renewed closeness between Albus and Aberforth, but to an estrangement. (In time this would lift – in later years they reestablished, if not a close relationship, then certainly a cordial one.) However, he rarely spoke of his parents or of Ariana from then on, and his friends learned not to mention them.

Other quills will describe the triumphs of the following years. Dumbledore's innumerable contributions to the store of Wizarding knowledge, including his discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, will benefit generations to come, as will the wisdom he displayed in the many judgments while Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. They say, still, that no Wizarding duel ever matched that between Dumbledore and Grindelwald in 1945. Those who witnessed it have written of the terror and the awe they felt as they watched these two extraordinary wizards to battle. Dumbledore's triumph, and its consequences for the Wizarding world, are considered a turning point in magical history to match the introduction of the International Statute of Secrecy or the downfall of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Albus Dumbledore was never proud or vain; he could find something to value in anyone, however apparently insignificant or wretched, and I believe that his early losses endowed him with great humanity and sympathy. I shall miss his friendship more than I can say, but my loss is nothing compared to the Wizarding world's. That he was the most inspiring and best loved of all Hogwarts headmasters cannot be in question. He died as he lived: working always for the greater good and, to his last hour, as willing to stretch out a hand to a small boy with dragon pox as he was on the day I met him.

Harry finished reading, but continued to gaze at the picture accompanying the obituary. Dumbledore was wearing his familiar, kindly smile, but as he peered over the top of his half-moon spectacles, he gave the impression, even in newsprint, of X-raying Harry, whose sadness mingled with a sense of humiliation.

He had thought he knew Dumbledore quite well, but ever since reading this obituary he had been forced to recognize that he had barely known him at all. Never once had he imagined Dumbledore's childhood or youth; it was as though he had sprung into being as Harry had known him, venerable and silver-haired and old. The idea

of a teenage Dumbledore was simply odd, like trying to imagine a stupid Hermione or a friendly Blast-Ended Skrewt.

He had never thought to ask Dumbledore about his past. No doubt it would have felt strange, impertinent even, but after all it had been common knowledge that Dumbledore had taken part in that legendary duel with Grindelwald, and Harry had not thought to ask Dumbledore what that had been like, nor about any of his other famous achievements. No, they had always discussed Harry, Harry's past, Harry's future, Harry's plans… and it seemed to Harry now, despite the fact that his future was so dangerous and so uncertain, that he had missed irreplaceable opportunities when he had failed to ask Dumbledore more about himself, even though the only personal question he had ever asked his headmaster was also the only one he suspected that Dumbledore had not answered honestly:"What do you see when you look in the mirror?"

"I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks."

After several minutes' thought, Harry tore the obituary out of the Prophet, folded it carefully, and tucked it inside the first volume of Practical Defensive Magic and its Use against the Dark Arts. Then he threw the rest of the newspaper onto the rubbish pile and turned to face the room. It was much tidier. The only things left out of place were today's Daily Prophet, still lying on the bed, and on top of it, the piece of broken mirror.

Harry moved across the room, slid the mirror fragment off today's Prophet, and unfolded the newspaper. He had merely glanced at the headline when he had taken the rolled-up paper from the delivery owl early that morning and thrown it aside, after noting that it said nothing about Voldemort. Harry was sure that the Ministry was leaning on the Prophet to suppress news about Voldemort. It was only now, therefore, that he saw what he had missed.

Across the bottom half of the front page a smaller headline was set over a picture of Dumbledore striding along, looking harried:DUMBLEDORE – THE TRUTH AT LAST?

Coming next week, the shocking story of the flawed genius considered by many to be the greatest wizard of his generation. Striping away the popular image of serene, silver-bearded wisdom, Rita Skeeter reveals the disturbed childhood, the lawless youth, the life-long feuds, and the guilty secrets that Dumbledore carried to his grave, WHY was the man tipped to be the Minister of Magic content to remain a mere headmaster? WHAT was the real purpose of the secret organization known as the Order of the Phoenix? HOW did Dumbledore really meet his end?

The answers to these and many more questions are explored in the explosive new biography, The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore, by Rita Skeeter, exclusively interviewed by Berry Braithwaite, page 13, inside.

Harry ripped open the paper and found page thirteen. The article was topped with a picture showing another familiar face: a woman wearing jeweled glasses with elaborately curled blonde hair, her teeth bared in what was clearly supposed to be a winning smile, wiggling her fingers up at him. Doing his best to ignore this nauseating image, Harry read on.

In person, Rita Skeeter is much warmer and softer than her famously ferocious quill-portraits might suggest. Greeting me in the hallway of her cozy home, she leads me straight into the kitchen for a cup of tea, a slice of pound cake and, it goes without saying, a steaming vat of freshest gossip.

“Well, of course, Dumbledore is a biographer’s dream,” says Skeeter. “Such a long, full life. I’m sure my book will be the first of very, very many.”

Skeeter was certainly quick off the mark. Her nine-hundred-page book was completed in a mere four weeks after Dumbledore's mysterious death in June. I ask her how she managed this superfast feat.

"Oh, when you've been a journalist as long as I have, working to a deadline is second nature. I knew that the Wizarding world was clamoring for the full story and I wanted to be the first to meet that need."

I mention the recent, widely publicized remarks of Elphias Doge, Special Advisor to the Wizengamot and longstanding friend of Albus Dumbledore's, that "Skeeter's book contains less fact than a Chocolate Frog card."

Skeeter throws back her head and laughs.

"Darling Dodgy! I remember interviewing him a few years back about merpeople rights, bless him. Completely gaga, seemed to think we were sitting at the bottom of Lake Windermere, kept telling me to watch out for trout."

And yet Elphias Doge's accusations of inaccuracy have been echoed in many places. Does Skeeter really feel that four short weeks have been enough to gain a full picture of Dumbledore's long and extraordinary life?

"Oh, my dear," beams Skeeter, rapping me affectionately across the knuckles, "you know as well as I do how much information can be generated by a fat bag of Galleons, a refusal to hear the word 'no,' and a nice sharp Quick-Quotes Quill! People were queuing to dish the dirt on Dumbledore anyway. Not everyone thought he was so wonderful, you know – he trod on an awful lot of important toes. But old Dodgy Doge can get off his high hippogriff, because I've had access to a source most journalists would swap their wands for, one who has never spoken in public before and who was close to

Dumbledore during the most turbulent and disturbing phase of his youth."

The advance publicity for Skeeter's biography has certainly suggested that there will be shocks in store for those who believe Dumbledore to have led a blameless life. What were the biggest surprises she uncovered, I ask?

"Now, come off it. Betty, I'm not giving away all the highlights before anybody's bought the book!" laughs Skeeter. "But I can promise that anybody who still thinks Dumbledore was white as his beard is in for a rude awakening! Let's just say that nobody hearing him rage against You-Know-Who would have dreamed that he dabbled in the Dark Arts himself in his youth! And for a wizard who spent his later years pleading for tolerance, he wasn't exactly broad-minded when he was younger! Yes, Albus Dumbledore had an extremely murky past, not to mention that very fishy family, which he worked so hard to keep hushed up."

I ask whether Skeeter is referring to Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth, whose conviction by the Wizengamot for misuse of magic caused a minor scandal fifteen years ago.

"Oh, Aberforth is just the tip of the dung heap," laughs Skeeter. "No, no, I'm talking about much worse than a brother with a fondness for fiddling about with goats, worse even than the Muggle-maiming father – Dumbledore couldn't keep either of them quiet anyway, they were both charged by the Wizengamot. No, it's the mother and the sister that intrigued me, and a little digging uncovered a positive nest of nastiness – but, as I say, you'll have to wait for chapters nine to twelve for full details. All I can say now is, it's no wonder Dumbledore never talked about how his nose got broken."

Family skeletons notwithstanding, does Skeeter deny the brilliance that led to Dumbledore's many magical discoveries?

“He had brains,” she concedes, “although many now question whether he could really take full credit for all of his supposed achievements. As I reveal in chapter sixteen, Ivor Dillonsby claims he had already discovered eight uses of dragon’s blood when Dumbledore ‘borrowed’ his papers.”

But the importance of some of Dumbledore’s achievements cannot, I venture, be denied. What of his famous defeat of Grindelwald?

“Oh, now, I’m glad you mentioned Grindelwald,” says Skeeter with such a tantalizing smile. “I’m afraid those who go dewy-eyed over Dumbledore’s spectacular victory must brace themselves for a bombshell – or perhaps a Dungbomb. Very dirty business indeed. All I’ll say is, don’t be so sure that there really was a spectacular duel of legend. After they’ve read my book, people may be forced to conclude that Grindelwald simply conjured a white handkerchief from the end of his wand and came quietly!”

Skeeter refuses to give any more away on this intriguing subject, so we turn instead to the relationship that will undoubtedly fascinate her readers more than any other.

“Oh yes,” says Skeeter, nodding briskly, “I devote an entire chapter to the whole Potter-Dumbledore relationship. It’s been called unhealthy, even sinister. Again, your readers will have to buy my book for the whole story, but there is no question that Dumbledore took an unnatural interest in Potter from the word go. Whether that was really in the boy’s best interests – well, we’ll see. It’s certainly an open secret that Potter has had a most troubled adolescence.”

I ask whether Skeeter is still in touch with Harry Potter, whom she so famously interviewed last year: a breakthrough piece in which Potter spoke exclusively of his conviction that You-Know-Who had returned.

“Oh, yes, we’ve developed a closer bond,” says Skeeter. “Poor Potter has few real friends, and we met at one of the most testing moments

of his life – the Triwizard Tournament. I am probably one of the only people alive who can say that they know the real Harry Potter."

Which leads us neatly to the many rumors still circulating about Dumbledore's final hours. Does Skeeter believe that Potter was there when Dumbledore died?

"Well, I don't want to say too much – it's all in the book – but eyewitnesses inside Hogwarts castle saw Potter running away from the scene moments after Dumbledore fell, jumped, or was pushed. Potter later gave evidence against Severus Snape, a man against whom he has a notorious grudge. Is everything as it seems? That is for the Wizarding community to decide – once they've read my book."

On that intriguing note, I take my leave. There can be no doubt that Skeeter has quilled an instant bestseller. Dumbledore's legion of admirers, meanwhile, may well be trembling at what is soon to emerge about their hero.

Harry reached the bottom of the article, but continued to stare blankly at the page. Revulsion and fury rose in him like vomit; he balled up the newspaper and threw it, with all his force, at the wall, where it joined the rest of the rubbish heaped around his overflowing bin.

He began to stride blindly around the room, opening empty drawers and picking up books only to replace them on the same piles, barely conscious of what he was doing, as random phrases from Rita's article echoed in his head: An entire chapter to the whole Potter-Dumbledore relationship… It's been called unhealthy, even sinister… He dabbled in the Dark Arts himself in his youth… I've had access to a source most journalists would swap their wands for…"Lies!" Harry bellowed, and through the window he saw the next-door neighbor, who had paused to restart his lawn mower, look up nervously.

Harry sat down hard on the bed. The broken bit of mirror danced away from him; he picked it up and turned it over in his fingers, thinking, thinking of Dumbledore and the lies with which Rita Skeeter

was defaming him…A flash of brightest blue. Harry froze, his cut finger slipping on the jagged edge of the mirror again. He had imagined it, he must have done. He glanced over his shoulder, but the wall was a sickly peach color of Aunt Petunia’s choosing: There was nothing blue there for the mirror to reflect. He peered into the mirror fragment again, and saw nothing but his own bright green eye looking back at him.

He had imagined it, there was no other explanation; imagined it, because he had been thinking of his dead headmaster. If anything was certain, it was that the bright blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore would never pierce him again.

Chapter 3 The Dursleys Departing

The sound of the front door slamming echoed up the stairs and a voice roared, "Oh! You!"

Sixteen years of being addressed thus left Harry in no doubt when his uncle was calling, nevertheless, he did not immediately respond. He was still at the narrow fragment in which, for a split second, he had thought he saw Dumbledore's eye. It was not until his uncle bellowed, "BOY!" that Harry got slowly out of bed and headed for the bedroom door, pausing to add the piece of broken mirror to the rucksack filled with things he would be taking with him.

"You took you time!" roared Vernon Dursley when Harry appeared at the top of the stairs, "Get down here. I want a word!"

Harry strolled downstairs, his hands deep in his pants pockets. When he searched the living room he found all three Dursleys. They were dressed for packing; Uncle Vernon in an old ripped-up jacket and Dudley, Harry's, large, blond, muscular cousin, in his leather jacket.

"Yes?" asked Harry.

"Sit down!" said Uncle Vernon. Harry raised his eyebrows. "Please!" added Uncle Vernon, wincing slightly as though the word was sharp in his throat. Harry sat. He thought he knew what was coming. His uncle began to pace up and down, Aunt Petunia and Dudley, following his movement with anxious expressions. Finally, his large purple face crumpled with concentration. Uncle Vernon stopped in front of Harry and spoke.

"I've changed my mind," he said.

"What a surprise," said Harry.

“Don’t you take that tone – ” began Aunt Petunia in a shrill voice, but Vernon Dursley waved her down “It’s all a lot of claptrap,” said Uncle Vernon, glaring at Harry with piggy little eyes. “I’ve decided I don’t believe a word of it. We’re staying put, we’re not going anywhere.”

Harry looked up at his uncle and felt a mixture of exasperation and amusement. Vernon Dursley had been changing his mind every twenty four hours for the past four weeks, packing and unpacking and repacking the car with every change of heart. Harry’s favorite moment had been the one when Uncle Vernon, unaware that Dudley had added his dumbbells to his case since the last time it been repacked, had attempted to hoist it back into the boot and collapsed with a yelp of pain and much swearing.

“According to you,” Vernon Dursley said, now resuming his pacing up and down the living room, “we – Petunia, Dudley, and I – are in danger. From – from – ”

“Some of ‘my lot’ right?” said Harry.

“Well I don’t believe it,” repeated Uncle Vernon, coming to a halt in front of Harry again. “I was awake half the night thinking it all over, and I believe it’s a plot to get the house.”

“The house?” repeated Harry. “What house?”

“This house!” shrieked Uncle Vernon, the vein his forehead starting to pulse. “Our house! House prices are skyrocketing around here! You want us out of the way and then you’re going to do a bit of hocus pocus and before we know it the deeds will be in your name and – ”

“Are you out of your mind?” demanded Harry. “A plot to get this house? Are you actually as stupid as you look?”

“Don’t you dare –!” squealed Aunt Petunia, but again Vernon waved her down. Slights on his personal appearance were it seemed as nothing to the danger he had spotted.

“Just in case you’ve forgotten,” said Harry, “I’ve already got a house my godfather left me one. So why would I want this one? All the happy memories?”

There was silence. Harry thought he had rather impressed his uncle with this argument.

“You claim,” said Uncle Vernon, starting to pace yet again, “that this Lord Thing – ”

“ – Voldemort,” said Harry impatiently, “and we’ve been through this about a hundred times already. This isn’t a claim, it’s fact. Dumbledore told you last year, and Kingsley and Mr. Weasley – ”

Vernon Dursley hunched his shoulders angrily, and Harry guessed that his uncle was attempting to ward off recollections of the unannounced visit, a few days into Harry’s summer holidays, of two fully grown wizards. The arrival on the doorstep of Kingsley Shacklebolt and Arthur Weasley had come as a most unpleasant shock to the Dursleys. Harry had to admit, however that as Mr. Weasley had once demolished half of the living room, his reappearance could not have been expected to delight Uncle Vernon.

“ – Kingsley and Mr. Weasley explained it all as well,” Harry pressed on remorselessly, “Once I’m seventeen, the protective charm that keeps me safe will break, and that exposes you as well as me. The Order is sure Voldemort will target you, whether to torture you to try and find out where I am, or because he thinks by holding you hostage I’d come and try to rescue you.”

Uncle Vernon’s and Harry’s eyes met. Harry was sure that in that instant they were both wondering the same thing. Then Uncle Vernon walked on and Harry resumed, “You’ve got to go into hiding and the Order wants to help. You’re being offered serious protection, the best there is.”

Uncle Vernon said nothing but continued to pace up and down. Outside the sun hung low over the privet hedges. The next door neighbor's lawn mower stalled again.

"I thought there was a Ministry of Magic?" asked Vernon Dursley abruptly.

"There is," said Harry, surprised.

"Well, then, why can't they protect us? It seems to me that, as innocent victims, guilty of nothing more than harboring a marked man, we ought to qualify for government protection!"

Harry laughed; he could not help himself. It was so very typical of his uncle to put his hopes in the establishment, even within this world that he despised and mistrusted. "You heard what Mr. Weasley and Kingsley said," Harry replied. "We think the Ministry has been infiltrated."

Uncle Vernon strode back to the fireplace and back breathing so strongly that his great black mustache rippled his face still purple with concentration.

"All right," he said. Stopping in front of Harry get again. "All right, let's say for the sake of argument we accept this protection. I still don't see why we can't have that Kingsley bloke."

Harry managed not to roll his eyes, but with difficulty. This question had also been addressed half a dozen times.

"As I've told you," he said through gritted teeth, "Kingsley is protecting the Mug – I mean, your Prime Minister."

"Exactly – he's the best!" said Uncle Vernon, pointing at the blank television screen. The Dursleys had spotted Kingsley on the news, walking along the Muggle Prime Minister as he visited a hospital. This, and the fact that Kingsley had mastered the knack of dressing

like a Muggle, not to mention a certain reassuring something in his slow, deep voice, had caused the Dursleys to take to Kingsley in a way that they had certainly not done with any other wizard, although it was true that they had never seen him with earring in.

“Well, he’s taken,” said Harry. “But Hestia Jones and Dedalus Diggle are more than up to the job – ”

“If we’d even seen CVs…” began Uncle Vernon, but Harry lost patience. Getting to his feet, he advanced on his uncle, not pointing at the TV set himself.

“These accidents aren’t accidents – the crashed and explosions and derailments and whatever else has happened since we last watched the news. People are disappearing and dying and he’s behind it – Voldemort. I’ve told you this over and over again, he kills Muggles for fun. Even the fogs – they’re caused by dementors, and if you can’t remember what they are, ask your son!”

Dudley’s hands jerked upward to tower his mouth. With his parents’ and Harry’s eyes upon him, he slowly lowered them again and asked, “There are… more of them?”

“More?” laughed Harry. “More than the two that attacked us, you mean? Of course there are hundreds, maybe thousands by this time, seeing as they feed off fear and despair – ”

“All right, all right blustered,” blustered Vernon Dursley. “You’ve made your point – ”

“I hope so,” said Harry, “because once I’m seventeen, all of them – Death Eaters, elementors, maybe even Inferi – which means dead bodies enchanted by a Dark wizard – will be able to find you and will certainly attack you. And if you remember the last time you tried to outrun wizards, I think you’ll agree you need help.”

There was a brief silence in which the distant echo of Hagrid smashing down a wooden front door seemed to reverberate through the intervening years. Aunt Petunia was looking at Uncle Vernon; Dudley was staring at Harry. Finally Uncle Vernon blurted out, “But what about my work? What about Dudley’s school? I don’t suppose those things matter to a bunch of layabout wizards – ”

“Don’t you understand?” shouted Harry. “They will torture and kill you like they did my parents!”

“Dad,” said Dudley in a loud voice, “Dad – I’m going with these Order people.”

“Dudley,” said Harry, “for the first time in your life, you’re talking sense.” He knew the battle was won. If Dudley was frightened enough to accept the Order’s help, his parents would accompany him. There could be no question of being separated from their Duddykins. Harry glanced at the carriage clock on the mantelpiece.

“They’ll be here in about five minutes,” he said, and when one of the Dursleys replied, he left the room. The prospect of parting – probably forever – from his aunt, uncle, and cousin was one that he was able to contemplate quite cheerfully but there was nevertheless a certain awkwardness in the air. What did you say to one another at the end of sixteen years’ solid dislike?

Back in his bedroom, Harry fiddled aimlessly with his rucksack then poked a couple of owl nuts through the bats of Hedwig’s cage. They fell with dull thuds to the bottom where she ignored them.

“We’re leaving soon, really soon,” Harry told her. “And then you’ll be able to fly again.”

The doorbell rang. Harry hesitated, then headed back out of his room and downstairs. It was too much to expect Hestia and Dedalus to cope with the Dursleys on their own.

“Harry Potter!” squeaked an excited voice, the moment Harry had opened the door; a small man in a mauve top hat that was sweeping him a deep bow. “An honor as ever!”

“Thanks, Dedalus,” said Harry, bestowing a small and embarrassed smile upon the dark haired Hestia. “It’s really good of you to do this… They’re through here, my aunt and uncle and cousin…”

“Good day to you, Harry Potter’s relatives!” said Dedalus happily striding into the living room. The Dursleys did not look at all happy to be addressed thus; Harry half expected another change of mind. Dudley shrank neared to his mother at the sight of the witch and wizard.

“I see you are packed and ready. Excellent! The plan, as Harry has told you, is a simple one,” said Dedalus, pulling an immense pocket watch out of his waistcoat and examining it. “We shall be leaving before Harry does. Due to the danger of using magic in your house – Harry being still underage it could provide the Ministry with an excuse to arrest him – we shall be driving, say, ten miles or so before Disapparating to the safe location we have picked out for you. You know how to drive, I take it?” He asked Uncle Vernon politely.

“Know how to –? Of course I ruddy well know how to drive!” spluttered Uncle Vernon.

“Very clever of you, sir, very clever. I personally would be utterly bamboozled by all those buttons and knobs,” said Dedalus. He was clearly under the impression that he was flattering Vernon Dursley, who was visibly losing confidence in the plan with every word Dedalus spoke.

“Can’t even drive,” he muttered under his breath, his mustache rippling indignantly, but fortunately neither Dedalus nor Hestia seemed to hear him.

“You, Harry,” Dedalus continued, “will wait here for your guard. There has been a little change in the arrangements – ”

“What d’you mean?” said Harry at once. “I thought Mad-Eye was going to come and take me by Side Along-Apparition?”

“Can’t do it,” said Hestia tersely, “Mad-Eye will explain.”

The Dursleys, who had listened to all of this with looks of utter incomprehension on their faces, jumped as a loud voice screeched, “Hurry up!” Harry looked all around the room before realizing the voice had issued from Dedalus’s pocket watch.

“Quite right, were operating to a very tight schedule,” said Dedalus nodding at his watch and tucking it back into his waist coat. “We are attempting to time your departure from the house with your family’s Disapparition, Harry thus the charm breaks the moment you all head for safety.” He turned to the Dursleys, “Well, are we all packed and ready to go?”

None of them answered him. Uncle Vernon was still staring appalled at the bulge in Dedalus’s waistcoat pocket.

“Perhaps we should wait outside in the hall, Dedalus,” murmured Hestia. She clearly felt that it would be tactless for them to remain the room while Harry and the Dursleys exchanged loving, possibly tearful farewells.

“There’s no need,” Harry muttered, but Uncle Vernon made any further explanation unnecessary by saying loudly, “Well, this is good-bye then boy.”

He swung his right arm upward to shake Harry’s hand, but at the last moment seemed unable to face it, and merely closed his fist and began swinging it backward and forward like a metronome.

"Ready, Duddy?" asked Petunia, fussily checking the clasp of her handbag so as to avoid looking at Harry altogether.

Dudley did not answer but stood there with his mouth slightly ajar, reminding Harry a little of the giant, Grawp.

"Come along, then," said Uncle Vernon.

He had already reached the living room door when Dudley mumbled, "I don't understand."

"What don't you understand, popkin?" asked Petunia looking up at her son.

Dudley raised a large, hamlike hand to point at Harry.

"Why isn't he coming with us?"

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia froze when they stood staring at Dudley as though he had just expressed a desire to become a ballerina.

"What?" said Uncle Vernon loudly.

"Why isn't he coming too?" asked Dudley.

"Well, he – doesn't want to," said Uncle Vernon, turning to glare at Harry and adding, "You don't want to, do you?"

"Not in the slightest," said Harry.

"There you are," Uncle Vernon told Dudley. "Now come on we're off."

He marched out of the room. They heard the front door open, but Dudley did not move and after a few faltering steps Aunt Petunia stopped too.

"What now?" barked Uncle Vernon, reappearing in the doorway.

It seemed that Dudley was struggling with concepts too difficult to put into words. After several moments of apparently painful internal struggle he said, “But where’s he going to go?”

Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon looked at each other. It was clear that Dudley was frightening them. Hestia Jones broke the silence.

“But… surely you know where your nephew is going?” she asked looking bewildered.

“Certainly we know,” said Vernon Dursley. “He’s off with some of your lot, isn’t he? Right, Dudley, let’s get in the car, you heard the man, we’re in a hurry.”

Again, Vernon Dursley marched as far as the front door, but Dudley did not follow.

“Off with some of our lot?”

Hestia looked outraged. Harry had met this attitude before Witches and wizards seemed stunned that his closed living relatives took so little interest in the famous Harry Potter.

“It’s fine,” Harry assured her. “It doesn’t matter, honestly.”

“Doesn’t matter?” repeated Hestia, her voice rising considerably.

“Don’t these people realize what you’ve been through? What danger you are in? The unique position you hold in the hearts of the anti Voldemort movement?”

“Er – no, they don’t,” said Harry. “They think I’m a waste of space, actually but I’m used to – ”

“I don’t think you’re a waste of space”

If Harry had not seen Dudley’s lips move, he might not have believed it. As it was, he stared at Dudley for several seconds before accepting

that it must have been his cousin who had spoken; for one thing, Dudley had turned red. Harry was embarrassed and astonished himself.

“Well… er… thanks, Dudley.”

Again, Dudley appeared to grapple with thoughts too unwieldy for expression before mumbling, “You saved my life,”

“Not really,” said Harry. “It was your soul the dementor would have taken…”

He looked curiously at his cousin. They had had virtually no contact during this summer or last, as Harry had come back to Privet Drive so briefly and kept to his room so much. It now dawned on Harry, however, that the cup of cold tea on which he had trodden that morning might not have been a booby trap at all. Although rather touched he was nevertheless quite relieved that Dudley appeared to have exhausted his ability to express his feelings. After opening his mouth once or twice more, Dudley subsided into scarlet-faced silence.

Aunt Petunia burst into tears. Hestia Jones gave her an approving look that changed to outrage as Aunt Petunia ran forward and embraced Dudley rather than Harry. “S-so sweet, Dudders…” she sobbed into his massive chest. “S-such a lovely b-boy… s-saying thank you…”

“But he hasn’t said thank you at all!” said Hestia indignantly. “He only said he didn’t think Harry was a waste of space!”

“Yea but coming from Dudley that’s like ‘I love you,’” said Harry, torn between annoyance and a desire to laugh as Aunt Petunia continued to clutch at Dudley as if he had just saved Harry from a burning building.

“Are we going or not?” roared Uncle Vernon, reappearing yet again at the living room door. “I thought we were on a tight schedule!”

“Yes –yes, we are,” said Dedalus Diggle, who had been watching these exchanged with an air of bemusement and now seemed to pull himself together. “We really must be off. Harry – ”

He tripped forward and wrung Harry’s hand with both of his own.

“ – good luck. I hope we meet again. The hopes of the Wizarding world rest upon your shoulders.”

“Oh,” said Harry, “right. Thanks.”

“Farwell, Harry,” said Hestia also clasping his hand. “Our thoughts go with you.”

“I hope everything’s okay,” said Harry with a glance toward Aunt Petunia and Dudley.

“Oh I’m sure we shall end up the best of chums,” said Diggle slightly, waving his hat as he left the room. Hestia followed him.

Dudley gently released himself from his mother’s clutches and walked toward Harry who had to repress an urge to threaten him with magic. Then Dudley held out his large, pink hand.

“Blimey, Dudley,” said Harry over Aunt Petunia’s renewed sobs, “did the dementors blow a different personality into you?”

“Dunno,” muttered Dudley, “See you, Harry.”

“Yea …” said Harry, raking Dudley’s hand and shaking it. “Maybe. Take care, Big D.”

Dudley nearly smiled. They lumbered from the room. Harry heard his heavy footfalls on the graveled drive, and then a car door slammed.

Aunt Petunia whose face had been buried in her handkerchief looked around at the sound. She did not seem to have expected to find herself alone with Harry. Hastily stowing her wet handkerchief into her pocket, she said, “Well – good-bye” and marched towards the door without looking at him.

“Good-bye” said Harry.

She stopped and looked back. For a moment Harry had the strangest feeling that she wanted to say something to him; She gave him an odd, tremulous look and seemed to teeter on the edge of speech, but then, with a little of her head, she hustled out of the room after he husband and son.

Chapter 4 The Seven Potters

Harry ran back upstairs to his bedroom, arriving at the window just in time to see the Dursleys' car swinging out of the drive and off up the road. Dedalus's top hat was visible between Aunt Petunia and Dudley in the backseat. The car turned right at the end of Privet Drive, its windows burned scarlet for a moment in the now setting sun, and then it was gone.

Harry picked up Hedwig's cage, his Firebolt, and his rucksack, gave his unnaturally tidy bedroom one last sweeping look, and then made his ungainly way back downstairs to the hall, where he deposited cage, broomstick, and bag near the foot of the stairs. The light was fading rapidly, the hall full of shadows in the evening light. It felt most strange to stand here in the silence and know that he was about to leave the house for the last time. Long ago, when he had been left alone while the Dursleys went out to enjoy themselves, the hours of solitude had been a rare treat. Pausing only to sneak something tasty from the fridge, he had rushed upstairs to play on Dudley's computer, or put on the television and flicked through the channels to his heart's content. It gave him an odd, empty feeling remembering those times; it was like remembering a younger brother whom he had lost.

"Don't you want to take a last look at the place?" he asked Hedwig, who was still sulking with her head under her wing. "We'll never be here again. Don't you want to remember all the good times? I mean, look at this doormat. What memories … Dudley sobbed on it after I saved him from the dementors … Turns out he was grateful after all, can you believe it? … And last summer, Dumbledore walked through that front door …"

Harry lost the thread of his thoughts for a moment and Hedwig did nothing to help him retrieve it, but continued to sit with her head under her wing. Harry turned his back on the front door.

"And under here, Hedwig" – Harry pulled open a door under the stairs – "is where I used to sleep! You never knew me then – Blimey, it's small, I'd forgotten …"

Harry looked around at the stacked shoes and umbrellas remembering how he used to wake every morning looking up at the underside of the staircase, which was more often than not adorned with a spider or two. Those had been the days before he had known anything about his true identity; before he had found out how his parents had died or why such strange things often happened around him. But Harry could still remember the dreams that had dogged him, even in those days: confused dreams involving flashes of green light and once – Uncle Vernon had nearly crashed the car when Harry had recounted it – a flying motorbike …There was a sudden, deafening roar from somewhere nearby. Harry straightened up with a jerk and smacked the top of his head on the low door frame. Pausing only to employ a few of Uncle Vernon's choicest swear words, he staggered back into the kitchen, clutching his head and staring out of the window into the back garden.

The darkness seemed to be rippling, the air itself quivering. Then, one by one, figures began to pop into sight as their Disillusionment Charms lifted. Dominating the scene was Hagrid, wearing a helmet and goggles and sitting astride an enormous motorbike with a black sidecar attached. All around him other people were dismounting from brooms and, in two cases, skeletal, black winged horses.

Wrenching open the back door, Harry hurtled into their midst. There was a general cry of greeting as Hermione flung her arms around him, Ron clapped him on the back, and Hagrid said, "All righ', Harry? Ready fer the off?"

"Definitely," said Harry, beaming around at them all. "But I wasn't expecting this many of you!"

“Change of plan,” growled Mad-Eye, who was holding two enormous bulging sacks, and whose magical eye was spinning from darkening sky to house to garden with dizzying rapidity. “Let’s get undercover before we talk you through it.”

Harry led them all back into the kitchen where, laughing and chattering, they settled on chairs, sat themselves upon Aunt Petunia’s gleaming work surfaces, or leaned up against her spotless appliances; Ron, long and lanky; Hermione, her bushy hair tied back in a long plait; Fred and George, grinning identically; Bill, badly scarred and longhaired; Mr. Weasley, kind-faced, balding, his spectacles a little awry; Mad-Eye, battle-worn, one-legged, his bright blue magical eye whizzing in its socket; Tonks, whose short hair was her favorite shade of bright pink; Lupin, grayer, more lined; Fleur, slender and beautiful, with her long silvery blonde hair; Kingsley, bald and broad-shouldered; Hagrid, with his wild hair and beard, standing hunchbacked to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling; and Mundungus Fletcher, small, dirty, and hangdog, with his droopy beady hound’s eyes and matted hair. Harry’s heart seemed to expand and glow at the sight: He felt incredibly fond of all of them, even Mundungus, whom he had tried to strangle the last time they had met.

“Kingsley, I thought you were looking after the Muggle Prime Minister?” he called across the room.

“He can get along without me for one night,” said Kingsley, “You’re more important.”

“Harry, guess what?” said Tonks from her perch on top of the washing machine, and she wiggled her left hand at him; a ring glistened there.

“You got married?” Harry yelped, looking from her to Lupin.

“I’m sorry you couldn’t be there, Harry, it was very quiet.”

“That’s brilliant, congrat – ”

“All right, all right, we’ll have time for a cozy catch-up later,” roared Moody over the hubbub, and silence fell in the kitchen. Moody dropped his sacks at his feet and turned to Harry. “As Dedalus probably told you, we had to abandon Plan A. Pius Thicknesse has gone over, which gives us a big problem. He’s made it an imprisonable offense to connect this house to the Floo Network, place a Portkey here, or Apparate in or out. All done in the name of your protection, to prevent You-Know-Who getting in at you. Absolutely pointless, seeing as your mother’s charm does that already. What he’s really done is to stop you getting out of here safely.”

“Second problem: You’re underage, which means you’ve still got the Trace on you.”

“I don’t – ”

“The Trace, the Trace!” said Mad-Eye impatiently. “The charm that detects magical activity around under-seventeens, the way the Ministry finds out about underage magic! If you, or anyone around you, casts a spell to get you out of here, Thicknesse is going to know about it, and so will the Death Eaters.”

“We can’t wait for the Trace to break, because the moment you turn seventeen you’ll lose all the protection your mother gave you. In short, Pius Thicknesse thinks he’s got you cornered good and proper.”

Harry could not help but agree with the unknown Thicknesse.

“So what are we going to do?”

“We’re going to use the only means of transport left to us, the only ones the Trace can’t detect, because we don’t need to cast spells to use them: brooms, thestrals, and Hagrid’s motorbike.”

Harry could see flaws in this plan; however, he held his tongue to give Mad-Eye the chance to address them.

"Now, your mother's charm will only break under two conditions: when you come of age, or" – Moody gestured around the pristine kitchen – "you no longer call this place home. You and your aunt and uncle are going your separate ways tonight, in the full understanding that you're never going to live together again, correct?"

Harry nodded.

"So this time, when you leave, there'll be no going back, and the charm will break the moment you get outside its range. We're choosing to break it early, because the alternative is waiting for You-Know-Who to come and seize you the moment you turn seventeen."

"The one thing we've got on our side is that You-Know-Who doesn't know we're moving you tonight. We've leaked a fake trail to the Ministry: They think you're not leaving until the thirtieth. However, this is You-Know-Who we're dealing with, so we can't rely on him getting the date wrong; he's bound to have a couple of Death Eaters patrolling the skies in this general area, just in case. So, we've given a dozen different houses every protection we can throw at them. They all look like they could be the place we're going to hide you, they've all got some connection with the Order: my house, Kingsley's place, Molly's Auntie Muriel's – you get the idea."

"Yeah," said Harry, not entirely truthfully, because he could still spot a gaping hole in the plan.

"You'll be going to Tonks's parents. Once you're within the boundaries of the protective enchantments we've put on their house you'll be able to use a Portkey to the Burrow. Any questions?"

"Er – yes," said Harry. "Maybe they won't know which of the twelve secure houses I'm heading for at first, but won't it be sort of obvious once" – he performed a quick headcount – "fourteen of us fly off toward Tonks's parents?"

“Ah,” said Moody, “I forgot to mention the key point. Fourteen of us won’t be flying to Tonks’s parents. There will be seven Harry Potters moving through the skies tonight, each of them with a companion, each pair heading for a different safe house.”

From inside his cloak Moody now withdrew a flask of what looked like mud. There was no need for him to say another word; Harry understood the rest of the plan immediately.

“No!” he said loudly, his voice ringing through the kitchen. “No way!”

“I told them you’d take it like this,” said Hermione with a hint of complacency.

“If you think I’m going to let six people risk their lives –!”

“ – because it’s the first time for all of us,” said Ron.

“This is different, pretending to be me – ”

“Well, none of us really fancy it, Harry,” said Fred earnestly. “Imagine if something went wrong and we were stuck as specky, scrawny gits forever.”

Harry did not smile.

“You can’t do it if I don’t cooperate, you need me to give you some hair.”

“Well, that’s the plan scuppered,” said George. “Obviously there’s no chance at all of us getting a bit of your hair unless you cooperate.”

“Yeah, thirteen of us against one bloke who’s not allowed to use magic; we’ve got no chance,” said Fred.

“Funny,” said Harry, “really amusing.”

"If it has to come to force, then it will," growled Moody, his magical eye now quivering a little in its socket as he glared at Harry. "Everyone here's overage, Potter, and they're all prepared to take the risk."

Mundungus shrugged and grimaced; the magical eye swerved sideways to glance at him out of the side of Moody's head.

"Let's have no more arguments. Time's wearing on. I want a few of your hairs, boy, now."

"But this is mad, there's no need – "

"No need!" snarled Moody. "With You-Know-Who out there and half the Ministry on his side? Potter, if we're lucky he'll have swallowed the fake bait and he'll be planning to ambush you on the thirtieth, but he'd be mad not to have a Death Eater or two keeping an eye out, it's what I'd do. They might not be able to get at you or this house while your mother's charm holds, but it's about to break and they know the rough position of the place. Our only chance is to use decoys. Even You-Know-Who can't split himself into seven."

Harry caught Hermione's eye and looked away at once.

"So, Potter – some of your hair, if you please."

Harry glanced at Ron, who grimaced at him in a just-do-it sort of way.

"Now!" barked Moody.

With all of their eyes upon him, Harry reached up to the top of his head, grabbed a hank of hair, and pulled.

"Good," said Moody, limping forward as he pulled the stopper out of the flask of potion. "Straight in here, if you please."

Harry dropped the hair into the mudlike liquid. The moment it made contact with its surface, the potion began to froth and smoke, then, all at once, it turned a clear, bright gold.

"Ooh, you look much tastier than Crabbe and Goyle, Harry," said Hermione, before catching sight of Ron's raised eyebrows, blushing slightly, and saying, "Oh, you know what I mean – Goyle's potion tasted like bogies."

"Right then, fake Potters line up over here, please," said Moody.

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Fleur lined up in front of Aunt Petunia's gleaming sink.

"We're one short," said Lupin.

"Here," said Hagrid gruffly, and he lifted Mundungus by the scruff of the neck and dropped him down beside Fleur, who wrinkled her nose pointedly and moved along to stand between Fred and George instead.

"I'm a soldier, I'd sooner be a protector," said Mundungus.

"Shut it," growled Moody. "As I've already told you, you spineless worm, any Death Eaters we run into will be aiming to capture Potter, not kill him. Dumbledore always said You-Know-Who would want to finish Potter in person. It'll be the protectors who have got the most to worry about, the Death Eaters'll want to kill them."

Mundungus did not look particularly reassured, but Moody was already pulling half a dozen eggcup-sized glasses from inside his cloak, which he handed out, before pouring a little Polyjuice Potion into each one.

"Altogether, then …"

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, Fleur, and Mundungus drank. All of them gasped and grimaced as the potion hit their throats; At once, their features began to bubble and distort like hot wax. Hermione and Mundungus were shooting upward; Ron, Fred, and George were shrinking; their hair was darkening, Hermione's and Fleur's appearing to shoot backward into their skulls.

Moody, quite unconcerned, was now loosening the ties of the large sacks he had brought with him. When he straightened up again, there were six Harry Potters gasping and panting in front of him.

Fred and George turned to each other and said together, "Wow – we're identical!"

"I dunno, though, I think I'm still better-looking," said Fred, examining his reflection in the kettle.

"Bah," said Fleur, checking herself in the microwave door, "Bill, don't look at me – I'm 'ideous."

"Those whose clothes are a bit roomy, I've got smaller here," said Moody, indicating the first sack, "and vice versa. Don't forget the glasses, there's six pairs in the side pocket. And when you're dressed, there's luggage in the other sack."

The real Harry thought that this might just be the most bizarre thing he had ever seen, and he had seen some extremely odd things. He watched as his six doppelgangers rummaged in the sacks, pulling out sets of clothes, putting on glasses, stuffing their own things away. He felt like asking them to show a little more respect for privacy as they all began stripping off with impunity, clearly more at ease with displaying his body than they would have been with their own.

"I knew Ginny was lying about that tattoo," said Ron, looking down at his bare chest.

“Harry, your eyesight really is awful,” said Hermione, as she put on glasses.

Once dressed, the fake Harrys took rucksacks and owl cages, each containing a stuffed snowy owl, from the second sack.

“Good,” said Moody, as at last seven dressed, bespectacled, and luggage-laden Harrys faced him. “The pairs will be as follows: Mundungus will be traveling with me, by broom – ”

“Why’m I with you?” grunted the Harry nearest the back door.

“Because you’re the one that needs watching,” growled Moody, and sure enough, his magical eye did not waver from Mundungus as he continued, “Arthur and Fred – ”

“I’m George,” said the twin at whom Moody was pointing. “Can’t you even tell us apart when we’re Harry?”

“Sorry, George – ”

“I’m only yanking your wand, I’m Fred really – ”

“Enough messing around!” snarled Moody. “The other one – George or Fred or whoever you are – you’re with Remus. Miss Delacour – ”

“I’m taking Fleur on a thestral,” said Bill. “She’s not that fond of brooms.”

Fleur walked over to stand beside him, giving him a soppy, slavish look that Harry hoped with all his heart would never appear on his face again.

“Miss Granger with Kingsley, again by thestral – ”

Hermione looked reassured as she answered Kingsley’s smile; Harry knew that Hermione too lacked confidence on a broomstick.

“Which leaves you and me, Ron!” said Tonks brightly, knocking over a mug tree as she waved at him.

Ron did not look quite as pleased as Hermione.

“An’ you’re with me, Harry. That all righ’?” said Hagrid, looking a little anxious. “We’ll be on the bike, brooms an’ thestrals can’t take me weight, see. Not a lot o’ room on the seat with me on it, though, so you’ll be in the sidecar.”

“That’s great,” said Harry, not altogether truthfully.

“We think the Death Eaters will expect you to be on a broom,” said Moody, who seemed to guess how Harry was feeling. “Snape’s had plenty of time to tell them everything about you he’s never mentioned before, so if we do run into any Death Eaters, we’re betting they’ll choose one of the Potters who looks at home on a broomstick. All right then,” he went on, tying up the sack with the fake Potters’ clothes in it and leading the way back to the door, “I make it three minutes until we’re supposed to leave. No point locking the back door, it won’t keep the Death Eaters out when they come looking. Come on …”

Harry hurried to gather his rucksack, Firebolt, and Hedwig’s cage and followed the group to the dark back garden.

On every side broomsticks were leaping into hands; Hermione had already been helped up onto a great black thestral by Kingsley, Fleur onto the other by Bill. Hagrid was standing ready beside the motorbike, goggles on.

“Is this it? Is this Sirius’s bike?”

“The very same,” said Hagrid, beaming down at Harry. “An’ the last time yeh was on it, Harry, I could fit yeh in one hand!”

Harry could not help but feel a little humiliated as he got into the sidecar. It placed him several feet below everybody else: Ron smirked at the sight of him sitting there like a child in a bumper car. Harry stuffed his rucksack and broomstick down by his feet and rammed Hedwig's cage between his knees. He was extremely uncomfortable.

"Arthur's done a bit o' tinkerin'," said Hagrid, quite oblivious to Harry's discomfort. He settled himself astride the motorcycle, which creaked slightly and sank inches into the ground. "It's got a few tricks up its sleeves now. Tha' one was my idea." He pointed a thick finger at a purple button near the speedometer.

"Please be careful, Hagrid." said Mr. Weasley, who was standing beside them, holding his broomstick. "I'm still not sure that was advisable and it's certainly only to be used in emergencies."

"All right, then." said Moody. "Everyone ready, please. I want us all to leave at exactly the same time or the whole point of the diversion's lost."

Everybody motioned their heads. "Hold tight now, Ron," said Tonks, and Harry saw Ron throw a forcing, guilty look at Lupin before placing his hands on each side of her waist. Hagrid kicked the motorbike into life: It roared like a dragon, and the sidecar began to vibrate.

"Good luck, everyone," shouted Moody. "See you all in about an hour at the Burrow. On the count of three. One … two . THREE."

There was a great roar from the motorbike, and Harry felt the sidecar give a nasty lurch. He was rising through the air fast, his eyes watering slightly, hair whipped back off his face. Around him brooms were soaring upward too; the long black tail of a thestral flicked past. His legs, jammed into the sidecar by Hedwig's cage and his rucksack, were already sore and starting to go numb. So great was his discomfort that he almost forgot to take a last glimpse of number four

Privet Drive. By the time he looked over the edge of the sidecar he could no longer tell which one it was.

And then, out of nowhere, out of nothing, they were surrounded. At least thirty hooded figures, suspended in midair, formed a vast circle in the middle of which the Order members had risen, oblivious – Screams, a blaze of green light on every side: Hagrid gave a yell and the motorbike rolled over. Harry lost any sense of where they were. Streetlights above him, yells around him, he was clinging to the sidecar for dear life. Hedwig's cage, the Firebolt, and his rucksack slipped from beneath his knees –"No – HELP!"

The broomstick spun too, but he just managed to seize the strap of his rucksack and the top of the cage as the motorbike swung the right way up again. A second's relief, and then another burst of green light. The owl screeched and fell to the floor of the cage.

"No – NO!"

The motorbike zoomed forward; Harry glimpsed hooded Death Eaters scattering as Hagrid blasted through their circle.

"Hedwig – Hedwig – "

But the owl lay motionless and pathetic as a toy on the floor of her cage. He could not take it in, and his terror for the others was paramount. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a mass of people moving, flares of green light, two pairs of people on brooms soaring off into the distance, but he could not tell who they were –"Hagrid, we've got to go back, we've got to go back!" he yelled over the thunderous roar of the engine, pulling out his wand, ramming Hedwig's cage into the floor, refusing to believe that she was dead. "Hagrid, TURN AROUND!"

"My job's ter get you there safe, Harry!" bellow Hagrid, and he opened the throttle. "Stop – STOP!" Harry shouted, but as he looked back again two jets of green light flew past his left ear: Four Death

Eaters had broken away from the circle and were pursuing them, aiming for Hagrid's broad back. Hagrid swerved, but the Death Eaters were keeping up with the bike; more curses shot after them, and Harry had to sink low into the sidecar to avoid them. Wriggling around he cried, "Stupefy!" and a red bolt of light shot from his own wand, cleaving a gap between the four pursuing Death Eaters as they scattered to avoid it.

"Hold on, Harry, this'll do for 'em!" roared Hagrid, and Harry looked up just in time to see Hagrid slamming a thick finger into a green button near the fuel gauge. A wall, a solid black wall, erupted out of the exhaust pipe. Craning his neck, Harry saw it expand into being in midair. Three of the Death Eaters swerved and avoided it, but the fourth was not so lucky; He vanished from view and then dropped like a boulder from behind it, his broomstick broken into pieces. One of his fellows slowed up to save him, but they and the airborne wall were swallowed by darkness as Hagrid leaned low over the handlebars and sped up.

More Killing Curses flew past Harry's head from the two remaining Death Eaters' wands; they were aiming for Hagrid. Harry responded with further Stunning Spells: Red and green collided in midair in a shower of multicolored sparks, and Harry thought wildly of fireworks, and the Muggles below who would have no idea what was happening –"Here we go again, Harry, hold on!" yelled Hagrid, and he jabbed at a second button. This time a great net burst from the bike's exhaust, but the Death Eaters were ready for it. Not only did they swerve to avoid it, but the companion who had slowed to save their unconscious friend had caught up. He bloomed suddenly out of the darkness and now three of them were pursuing the motorbike, all shooting curses after it.

"This'll do it, Harry, hold on tight!" yelled Hagrid, and Harry saw him slam his whole hand onto the purple button beside the speedometer.

With an unmistakable bellowing roar, dragon fire burst from the exhaust, white-hot and blue, and the motorbike shot forward like a bullet with a sound of wrenching metal. Harry saw the Death Eaters swerve out of sight to avoid the deadly trail of flame, and at the same time felt the sidecar sway ominously: Its metal connections to the bike had splintered with the force of acceleration.

“It’s all righ’, Harry!” bellowed Hagrid, now thrown flat onto the back by the surge of speed; nobody was steering now, and the sidecar was starting to twist violently in the bike’s slipstream.

“I’m on it, Harry, don’ worry!” Hagrid yelled, and from inside his jacket pocket he pulled his flowery pink umbrella.

“Hagrid! No! Let me!”

“REPARO!”

There was a deafening bang and the sidecar broke away from the bike completely. Harry sped forward, propelled by the impetus of the bike’s flight, then the sidecar began to lose height –In desperation Harry pointed his wand at the sidecar and shouted, “Wingardium Leviosa!”

The sidecar rose like a cork, unsteerable but at least still airborne. He had but a split second’s relief, however, as more curses streaked past him: The three Death Eaters were closing in.

“I’m comin’, Harry!“ Hagrid yelled from out of the darkness, but Harry could feel the sidecar beginning to sink again: Crouching as low as he could, he pointed at the middle of the oncoming figures and yelled, ”Impedimenta!“The jinx hit the middle Death Eater in the chest; For a moment the man was absurdly spread-eagled in midair as though he had hit an invisible barrier: One of his fellows almost collided with him – Then the sidecar began to fall in earnest, and the remaining Death Eater shot a curse so close to Harry that he had to duck below the rim

of the car, knocking out a tooth on the edge of his seat –"I'm comin', Harry, I'm comin'!"

A huge hand seized the back of Harry's robes and hoisted him out of the plummeting sidecar; Harry pulled his rucksack with him as he dragged himself onto the motorbike's seat and found himself back-to-back with Hagrid. As they soared upward, away from the two remaining Death Eaters, Harry spat blood out of his mouth, pointed his wand at the falling sidecar, and yelled, "Confringo!"

He knew a dreadful, gut-wrenching pang for Hedwig as it exploded; the Death Eater nearest it was blasted off his broom and fell from sight; his companion fell back and vanished.

"Harry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," moaned Hagrid, "I shouldn'ta tried ter repair it meself – yeh've got no room – "

"It's not a problem, just keep flying!" Harry shouted back, as two more Death Eaters emerged out of the darkness, drawing closer.

As the curses came shooting across the intervening space again, Hagrid swerved and zigzagged: Harry knew that Hagrid did not dare use the dragon-fire button again, with Harry seated so insecurely. Harry sent Stunning Spell after Stunning Spell back at their pursuers, barely holding them off. He shot another blocking jinx at them: The closest Death Eater swerved to avoid it and his hood slipped, and by the red light of his next Stunning Spell, Harry saw the strangely blank face of Stanley Shunpike – Stan –"Expelliarmus!" Harry yelled.

"That's him, it's him, it's the real one!"

The hooded Death Eater's shout reached Harry even above the thunder of the motorbike's engine: Next moment, both pursuers had fallen back and disappeared from view.

"Harry, what's happened?" bellowed Hagrid. "Where've they gone?"

“I don’t know!”

But Harry was afraid: The hooded Death Eater had shouted, “It’s the real one!”; how had he known? He gazed around at the apparently empty darkness and felt its menace. Where were they?

He clambered around on the seat to face forward and seized hold of the back of Hagrid’s jacket.

“Hagrid, do the dragon-fire thing again, let’s get out of here!”

“Hold on tight, then, Harry!”

There was a deafening, screeching roar again and the white-blue fire shot from the exhaust: Harry felt himself slipping backwards off what little of the seat he had. Hagrid flung backward upon him, barely maintaining his grip on the handlebars – “I think we’ve lost ‘em Harry, I think we’ve done it!” yelled Hagrid.

But Harry was not convinced; Fear lapped at him as he looked left and right for pursuers he was sure would come…. Why had they fallen back? One of them had still had a wand…. It’s him… it’s the real one…. They had said it right after he had tried to Disarm Stan….

“We’re nearly there, Harry, we’ve nearly made it!” shouted Hagrid.

Harry felt the bike drop a little, though the lights down on the ground still seemed remote as stars.

Then the scar on his forehead burned like fire: as a Death Eater appeared on either side of the bike, two Killing Curses missed Harry by millimeters, cast from behind – And then Harry saw him. Voldemort was flying like smoke on the wind, without broomstick or thestral to hold him, his snake-like face gleaming out of the blackness, his white fingers raising his wand again –Hagrid let out a bellow of fear and steered the motorbike into a vertical dive. Clinging on for dear life, Harry sent Stunning Spells flying at random into the

whirling night. He saw a body fly past him and knew he had hit one of them, but then he heard a bang and saw sparks from the engine; the motorbike spiraled through the air, completely out of control –Green jets of light shot past them again. Harry had no idea which way was up, which down: His scar was still burning; he expected to die at any second. A hooded figure on a broomstick was feet from him, he saw it raise its arm –“NO!”

With a shout of fury Hagrid launched himself off the bike at the Death Eater; to his horror, Harry saw both Hagrid and the Death Eater, falling out of sight, their combined weight too much for the broomstick –Barely gripping the plummeting bike with his knees, Harry heard Voldemort scream, “Mine!”

It was over: He could not see or hear where Voldemort was; he glimpsed another Death Eater swooping out of the way and heard, “Avada – ”

As the pain from Harry’s scar forced his eyes shut, his wand acted of its own accord. He felt it drag his hand around like some great magnet, saw a spurt of golden fire through his half-closed eyelids, heard a crack and a scream of fury. The remaining Death Eater yelled; Voldemort screamed, “NO!” Somehow, Harry found his nose an inch from the dragon-fire button. He punched it with his wand-free hand and the bike shot more flames into the air, hurtling straight toward the ground.

“Hagrid!“ Harry called, holding on to the bike for dear life. “Hagrid – Accio Hagrid!”

The motorbike sped up, sucked towards the earth. Face level with the handlebars, Harry could see nothing but distant lights growing nearer and nearer: He was going to crash and there was nothing he could do about it. Behind him came another scream, “Your wand, Selwyn, give me your wand!”

He felt Voldemort before he saw him. Looking sideways, he stared into the red eyes and was sure they would be the last thing he ever saw: Voldemort preparing to curse him once more –And then Voldemort vanished. Harry looked down and saw Hagrid spread-eagled on the ground below him. He pulled hard at the handlebars to avoid hitting him, groped for the brake, but with an earsplitting, ground trembling crash, he smashed into a muddy pond.

Chapter 5 Fallen Warrior

Hagrid?“

Harry struggled to raise himself out of the debris of metal and leather that surrounded him; his hands sank into inches of muddy water as he tried to stand. He could not understand where Voldemort had gone and expected him to swoop out of the darkness at any moment. Something hot and wet was trickling down his chin and from his forehead. He crawled out of the pond and stumbled toward the great dark mass on the ground that was Hagrid.

“Hagrid? Hagrid, talk to me – “But the dark mass did not stir.

“Who’s there? Is it Potter? Are you Harry Potter?”

Harry did not recognize the man’s voice. Then a woman shouted. “They’ve crashed. Ted! Crashed in the garden!”

Harry’s head was swimming.

“Hagrid,” he repeated stupidly, and his knees buckled.

The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back on what felt like cushions, with a burning sensation in his ribs and right arm. His missing tooth had been regrown. The scar on his forehead was still throbbing.

“Hagrid?”

He opened his eyes and saw that he was lying on a sofa in an unfamiliar, lamplit sitting room. His rucksack lay on the floor a short distance away, wet and muddy. A fair-haired, big-bellied man was watching Harry anxiously.

"Hagrid's fine, son," said the man, "the wife's seeing to him now. How are you feeling? Anything else broken? I've fixed your ribs, your tooth, and your arm. I'm Ted, by the way, Ted Tonks – Dora's father."

Harry sat up too quickly. Lights popped in front of his eyes and he felt sick and giddy.

"Voldemort – "

"Easy, now," said Ted Tonks, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder and pushing him back against the cushions. "That was a nasty crash you just had. What happened, anyway? Something go wrong with the bike? Arthur Weasley overstretch himself again, him and his Muggle contraptions?"

"No," said Harry, as his scar pulsed like an open wound. "Death Eaters, loads of them – we were chased – "

"Death Eaters?" said Ted sharply. "What d'you mean, Death Eaters? I thought they didn't know you were being moved tonight, I thought – "

"They knew," said Harry.

Ted Tonks looked up at the ceiling as though he could see through it to the sky above.

"Well, we know our protective charms hold, then, don't we? They shouldn't be able to get within a hundred yards of the place in any direction."

Now Harry understood why Voldemort had vanished; it had been at the point when the motorbike crossed the barrier of the Order's charms. He only hoped they would continue to work: He imagined Voldemort, a hundred yards above them as they spoke, looking for a way to penetrate what Harry visualized as a great transparent bubble.

He swung his legs off the sofa; he needed to see Hagrid with his own eyes before he would believe that he was alive. He had barely stood up, however, when a door opened and Hagrid squeezed through it, his face covered in mud and blood, limping a little but miraculously alive.

“Harry!”

Knocking over two delicate tables and an aspidistra, he covered the floor between them in two strides and pulled Harry into a hug that nearly cracked his newly repaired ribs. “Blimey, Harry, how did yeh get out o’ that? I thought we were both goners.”

“Yeah, me too. I can’t believe – ”

Harry broke off. He had just noticed the woman who had entered the room behind Hagrid.

“You!” he shouted, and he thrust his hand into his pocket, but it was empty.

“Your wand’s here, son,” said Ted, tapping it on Harry’s arm. “It fell right beside you, I picked it up…And that’s my wife you’re shouting at.”

“Oh, I’m – I’m sorry.”

As she moved forward into the room, Mrs. Tonks’s resemblance to her sister Bellatrix became much less pronounced: Her hair was a light soft brown and her eyes were wider and kinder. Nevertheless, she looked a little haughty after Harry’s exclamation.

“What happened to our daughter?” she asked. “Hagrid said you were ambushed; where is Nymphadora?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “We don’t know what happened to anyone else.”

She and Ted exchanged looks. A mixture of fear and guilt gripped Harry at the sight of their expressions, if any of the others had died, it was his fault, all his fault. He had consented to the plan, given them his hair…"The Portkey," he said, remembering all of a sudden. "We've got to get back to the Burrow and find out – then we'll be able to send you word, or – or Tonks will, once she's – "

"Dora'll be ok, 'Dromeda," said Ted. "She knows her stuff, she's been in plenty of tight spots with the Aurors. The Portkey's through here," he added to Harry. "It's supposed to leave in three minutes, if you want to take it."

"Yeah, we do," said Harry. He seized his rucksack, swung it onto his shoulders. "I – "

He looked at Mrs. Tonks, wanting to apologize for the state of fear in which he left her and for which he felt so terribly responsible, but no words occurred to him that he did not seem hollow and insincere.

"I'll tell Tonks – Dora – to send word, when she… Thanks for patching us up, thanks for everything, I – "

He was glad to leave the room and follow Ted Tonks along a short hallway and into a bedroom. Hagrid came after them, bending low to avoid hitting his head on the door lintel.

"There you go, son. That's the Portkey."

Mr. Tonks was pointing to a small, silver-backed hairbrush lying on the dressing table.

"Thanks," said Harry, reaching out to place a finger on it, ready to leave.

"Wait a moment," said Hagrid, looking around. "Harry, where's Hedwig?"

"She… she got hit," said Harry.

The realization crashed over him: He felt ashamed of himself as the tears stung his eyes. The owl had been his companion, his one great link with the magical world whenever he had been forced to return to the Dursleys.

Hagrid reached out a great hand and patted him painfully on the shoulder.

"Never mind," he said gruffly, "Never mind. She had a great old life – "

"Hagrid!" said Ted Tonks warningly, as the hairbrush glowed bright blue, and Hagrid only just got his forefinger to it in time.

With a jerk behind the navel as though an invisible hook and line had dragged him forward, Harry was pulled into nothingness, spinning uncontrollably, his finger glued to the Portkey as he and Hagrid hurtled away from Mr. Tonks. Second later, Harry's feet slammed onto hard ground and he fell onto his hands and knees in the yard of the Burrow. He heard screams. Throwing aside the no longer glowing hairbrush, Harry stood up, swaying slightly, and saw Mrs. Weasley and Ginny running down the steps by the back door as Hagrid, who had also collapsed on landing, clambered laboriously to his feet.

"Harry? You are the real Harry? What happened? Where are the others?" cried Mrs. Weasley.

"What d'you mean? Isn't anyone else back?" Harry panted.

The answer was clearly etched in Mrs. Weasley's pale face.

"The Death Eaters were waiting for us," Harry told her, "We were surrounded the moment we took off – they knew it was tonight – I don't know what happened to anyone else, four of them chased us, it was all we could do to get away, and then Voldemort caught up with us – "

He could hear the self-justifying note in his voice, the plea for her to understand why he did not know what had happened to her sons, but –"Thank goodness you're all right," she said, pulling him into a hug he did not feel he deserved.

"Haven't go' any brandy, have yeh, Molly?" asked Hagrid a little shakily, "Fer medicinal purposes?"

She could have summoned it by magic, but as she hurried back toward the crooked house, Harry knew that she wanted to hide her face. He turned to Ginny and she answered his unspoken plea for information at once.

"Ron and Tonks should have been back first, but they missed their Portkey, it came back without them," she said, pointing at a rusty oil can lying on the ground nearby. "And that one," she pointed at an ancient sneaker, "should have been Dad and Fred's, they were supposed to be second. You and Hagrid were third and," she checked her watch, "if they made it, George and Lupin aught to be back in about a minute."

Mrs. Weasley reappeared carrying a bottle of brandy, which she handed to Hagrid. He uncorked it and drank it straight down in one.

"Mum!" shouted Ginny pointing to a spot several feet away.

A blue light had appeared in the darkness: It grew larger and brighter, and Lupin and George appeared, spinning and then falling. Harry knew immediately that there was something wrong: Lupin was supporting George, who was unconscious and whose face was covered in blood.

Harry ran forward and seized George's legs. Together, he and Lupin carried George into the house and through the kitchen to the living room, where they laid him on the sofa. As the lamplight fell across George's head, Ginny gasped and Harry's stomach lurched: One of

George's ears was missing. The side of his head and neck were drenched in wet, shockingly scarlet blood.

No sooner had Mrs. Weasley bent over her son that Lupin grabbed Harry by the upper arm and dragged him, none too gently, back into the kitchen, where Hagrid was still attempting to ease his bulk through the back door.

"Oi!" said Hagrid indignantly, "Le' go of him! Le' go of Harry!"

Lupin ignored him.

"What creature sat in the corner the first time that Harry Potter visited my office at Hogwarts?" he said, giving Harry a small shake. "Answer me!"

"A – a grindylow in a tank, wasn't it?"

Lupin released Harry and fell back against a kitchen cupboard.

"Wha' was tha' about?" roared Hagrid.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I had to check," said Lupin tersely. "We've been betrayed. Voldemort knew that you were being moved tonight and the only people who could have told him were directly involved in the plan. You might have been an impostor."

"So why aren' you checkin' me?" panted Hagrid, still struggling with the door.

"You're half-giant," said Lupin, looking up at Hagrid. "The Polyjuice Potion is designed for human use only."

"None of the Order would have told Voldemort we were moving tonight," said Harry. The idea was dreadful to him, he could not believe it of any of them. "Voldemort only caught up with me toward the end, he didn't know which one I was in the beginning. If he'd been

in on the plan he'd have known from the start I was the one with Hagrid."

"Voldemort caught up with you?" said Lupin sharply. "What happened? How did you escape?"

Harry explained how the Death Eaters pursuing them had seemed to recognize him as the true Harry, how they had abandoned the chase, how they must have summoned Voldemort, who had appeared just before he and Hagrid had reached the sanctuary of Tonks's parents.

"They recognized you? But how? What had you done?"

"I…" Harry tried to remember; the whole journey seemed like a blur of panic and confusion. "I saw Stan Shunpike…. You know, the bloke who was the conductor on the Knight Bus? And I tried to Disarm him instead of – well, he doesn't know what he's doing, does he? He must be Imperiused!"

Lupin looked aghast.

"Harry, the time for Disarming is past! These people are trying to capture and kill you! At least Stun if you aren't prepared to kill!"

"We were hundreds of feet up! Stan's not himself, and if I Stunned him and he'd fallen, he'd have died the same as if I'd used Avada Kedavra! Expelliarmus saved me from Voldemort two years ago," Harry added defiantly. Lupin was reminding him of the sneering Hufflepuff Zacharias Smith, who had jeered at Harry for wanting to teach Dumbledore's Army how to Disarm.

"Yes, Harry," said Lupin with painful restraint, "and a great number of Death Eaters witnessed that happening! Forgive me, but it was a very unusual move then, under the imminent threat of death. Repeating it tonight in front of Death Eaters who either witnessed or heard about the first occasion was close to suicidal!"

“So you think I should have killed Stan Shunpike?” said Harry angrily.

“Of course not,” said Lupin, “but the Death Eaters – frankly, most people! – would have expected you to attack back! Expelliarmus is a useful spell, Harry, but the Death Eaters seem to think it is your signature move, and I urge you not to let it become so!”

Lupin was making Harry feel idiotic, and yet there was still a grain of defiance inside him.

“I won’t blast people out of my way just because they’re there,” said Harry, “That’s Voldemort’s job.”

Lupin’s retort was lost: Finally succeeding in squeezing through the door, Hagrid staggered to a chair and sat down; it collapsed beneath him. Ignoring his mingled oaths and apologies, Harry addressed Lupin again.

“Will George be okay?”

All Lupin’s frustration with Harry seemed to drain away at the question.

“I think so, although there’s no chance of replacing his ear, not when it’s been cursed off – ”

There was a scuffling from outside. Lupin dived for the back door; Harry leapt over Hagrid’s legs and sprinted into the yard.

Two figures had appeared in the yard, and as Harry ran toward them he realized they were Hermione, now returning to her normal appearance, and Kingsley, both clutching a bent coat hanger, Hermione flung herself into Harry’s arms, but Kingsley showed no pleasure at the sight of any of them. Over Hermione’s shoulder Harry saw him raise his wand and point it at Lupin’s chest.

“The last words Albus Dumbledore spoke to the pair of us!”

"'Harry is the best hope we have. Trust him,'" said Lupin calmly.

Kingsley turned his wand on Harry, but Lupin said, "It's him, I've checked!"

"All right, all right!" said Kingsley, stowing his wand back beneath his cloak, "But somebody betrayed us! They knew, they knew it was tonight!"

"So it seems," replied Lupin, "but apparently they did not realize that there would be seven Harrys."

"Small comfort!" snarled Kingsley. "Who else is back?"

"Only Harry, Hagrid, George, and me."

Hermione stifled a little moan behind her hand.

"What happened to you?" Lupin asked Kingsley.

"Followed by five, injured two, might've killed one," Kingsley reeled off, "and we saw You-Know-Who as well, he joined the chase halfway through but vanished pretty quickly. Remus, he can – "

"Fly," supplied Harry. "I saw him too, he came after Hagrid and me."

"So that's why he left, to follow you!" said Kingsley, "I couldn't understand why he'd vanished. But what made him change targets?"

"Harry behaved a little too kindly to Stan Shunpike," said Lupin.

"Stan?" repeated Hermione. "But I thought he was in Azkaban?"

Kingsley let out a mirthless laugh.

"Hermione, there's obviously been a mass breakout which the Ministry has hushed up. Travers's hood fell off when I cursed him,

he's supposed to be inside too. But what happened to you, Remus? Where's George?"

"He lost an ear," said Lupin.

"lost an –?" repeated Hermione in a high voice.

"Snape's work," said Lupin.

"Snape?" shouted Harry. "You didn't say – "

"He lost his hood during the chase. Sectumsempra was always a specialty of Snape's. I wish I could say I'd paid him back in kind, but it was all I could do to keep George on the broom after he was injured, he was losing so much blood."

Silence fell between the four of them as they looked up at the sky. There was no sign of movement; the stars stared back, unblinking, indifferent, unobscured by flying friends. Where was Ron? Where were Fred and Mr. Weasley? Where were Bill, Fleur, Tonks, Mad-Eye, and Mundungus?

"Harry, give us a hand!" called Hagrid hoarsely from the door, in which he was stuck again. Glad of something to do, Harry pulled him free, the headed through the empty kitchen and back into the sitting room, where Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were still tending to George. Mrs. Weasley had staunched his bleeding now, and by the lamplight Harry saw a clean gaping hole where George's ear had been.

"How is he?"

Mrs. Weasley looked around and said, "I can't make it grow back, not when it's been removed by Dark Magic. But it could've been so much worse…. He's alive."

"Yeah," said Harry. "Thank God."

“Did I hear someone else in the yard?” Ginny asked.

“Hermione and Kingsley,” said Harry.

“Thank goodness,” Ginny whispered. They looked at each other; Harry wanted to hug her, hold on to her; he did not even care much that Mrs. Weasley was there, but before he could act on the impulse, there was a great crash from the kitchen.

“I’ll prove who I am, Kingsley, after I’ve seen my son, now back off if you know what’s good for you!”

Harry had never heard Mr. Weasley shout like that before. He burst into the living room, his bald patch gleaming with sweat, his spectacles askew, Fred right behind him, both pale but uninjured.

“Arthur!” sobbed Mrs. Weasley. “Oh thank goodness!”

“How is he?”

Mr. Weasley dropped to his knees beside George. For the first time since Harry had known him, Fred seemed to be lost for words. He gaped over the back of the sofa at his twin’s wound as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

Perhaps roused by the sound of Fred and their father’s arrival, George stirred.

“How do you feel, Georgie?” whispered Mrs. Weasley.

George’s fingers groped for the side of his head.

“Saintlike,” he murmured.

“What’s wrong with him?” croaked Fred, looking terrified. “Is his mind affected?”

“Saintlike,” repeated George, opening his eyes and looking up at his brother. “You see… I’m holy. Holey, Fred, geddit?”

Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever. Color flooded Fred’s pale face.

“Pathetic,” he told George. “Pathetic! With the whole wide world of ear-related humor before you, you go for holey?”

“Ah well,” said George, grinning at his tear-soaked mother. “You’ll be able to tell us apart now, anyway, Mum.”

He looked around.

“Hi, Harry – you are Harry, right?”

“Yeah, I am,” said Harry, moving closer to the sofa.

“Well, at least we got you back okay,” said George. “Why aren’t Ron and Bill huddled round my sickbed?”

“They’re not back yet, George,” said Mrs. Weasley. George’s grin faded. Harry glanced at Ginny and motioned to her to accompany him back outside. As they walked through the kitchen she said in a low voice.

“Ron and Tonks should be back by now. They didn’t have a long journey; Auntie Muriel’s not that far from here.”

Harry said nothing. He had been trying to keep fear at bay ever since reaching the Burrow, but now it enveloped him, seeming to crawl over his skin, throbbing in his chest, clogging his throat. As they walked down the back steps into the dark yard, Ginny took his hand.

Kingsley was striding backward and forward, glancing up at the sky every time he turned. Harry was reminded of Uncle Vernon pacing the living room a million years ago. Hagrid, Hermione, and Lupin

stood shoulder to shoulder, gazing upward in silence. None of them looked around when Harry and Ginny joined their silent vigil.

The minutes stretched into what might as well have been years. The slightest breath of wind made them all jump and turn toward the whispering bush or tree in the hope that one of the missing Order members might leap unscathed from its leaves –And then a broom materialized directly above them and streaked toward the ground –"It's them!" screamed Hermione.

Tonks landed in a long skid that sent earth and pebbles everywhere.

"Remus!" Tonks cried as she staggered off the broom into Lupin's arms. His face was set and white: He seemed unable to speak, Ron tripped dazedly toward Harry and Hermione.

"You're okay," he mumbled, before Hermione flew at him and hugged him tightly.

"I thought – I thought – "

"'M all right," said Ron, patting her on the back. "'M fine."

"Ron was great," said Tonks warmly, relinquishing her hold on Lupin. "Wonderful. Stunned one of the Death Eaters, straight to the head, and when you're aiming at a moving target from a flying broom – "

"You did?" said Hermione, gazing up at Ron with her arms still around his neck.

"Always the tone of surprise," he said a little grumpily, breaking free. "Are we the last back?"

"No," said Ginny, "we're still waiting for Bill and Fleur and Mad-Eye and Mundungus. I'm going to tell Mum and Dad you're okay, Ron – "

She ran back inside.

“So what kept you? What happened?” Lupin sounded almost angry at Tonks.

“Bellatrix,” said Tonks. “She wants me quite as much as she wants Harry, Remus, She tried very hard to kill me. I just wish I’d got her, I owe Bellatrix. But we definitely injured Rodolphus…. Then we got to Ron’s Auntie Muriel’s and we missed our Portkey and she was fussing over us – ”

A muscle was jumping in Lupin’s jaw. He nodded, but seemed unable to say anything else.

“So what happened to you lot?” Tonks asked, turning to Harry, Hermione, and Kingsley.

They recounted the stories of their own journeys, but all the time the continued absence of Bill, Fleur, Mad-Eye, and Mundungus seemed to lie upon them like a frost, its icy bite harder and harder to ignore.

“I’m going to have to get back to Downing Street, I should have been there an hour ago,” said Kingsley finally, after a last sweeping gaze at the sky. “Let me know when they’re back.”

Lupin nodded. With a wave to the others, Kingsley walked away into the darkness toward the gate. Harry thought he heard the faintest pop as Kingsley Disapparated just beyond the Burrow’s boundaries.

Mr. And Mrs. Weasley came racing down the back steps, Ginny behind them. Both parents hugged Ron before turning to Lupin and Tonks.

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Weasley, “for our sons.”

“Don’t be silly, Molly,” said Tonks at once.

“How’s George?” asked Lupin.

“What’s wrong with him?” piped up Ron.

“He’s lost – ”

But the end of Mrs. Weasley’s sentence was drowned in a general outcry. A thestral had just soared into sight and landed a few feet from them. Bill and Fleur slid from its back, windswept but unhurt.

“Bill! Thank God, thank God – ”

Mrs. Weasley ran forward, but the hug Bill bestowed upon her was perfunctory. Looking directly at his father, he said, “Mad-Eye’s dead.”

Nobody spoke, nobody moved. Harry felt as though something inside him was falling, falling through the earth, leaving him forever.

“We saw it,” said Bill; Fleur nodded, tear tracks glittering on her cheeks in the light from the kitchen window. “It happened just after we broke out of the circle: Mad-Eye and Dung were close by us, they were heading north too. Voldemort – he can fly – went straight for them. Dung panicked, I heard him cry out, Mad-Eye tried to stop him, but he Disapparated. Voldemort’s curse hit Mad-Eye full in the face, he fell backward off his broom and – there was nothing we could do, nothing, we had half a dozen of them on our own tail – ”

Bill’s voice broke.

“Of course you couldn’t have done anything,” said Lupin.

They all stood looking at each other. Harry could not quite comprehend it. Mad-Eye dead; it could not be…. Mad-Eye, so tough, so brave, the consummate survivor…At last it seemed to dawn on everyone, though nobody said it, that there was no point of waiting in the yard anymore, and in silence they followed Mr. And Mrs. Weasley back into the Burrow, and into the living room, where Fred and George were laughing together.

“What’s wrong?” said Fred, scanning their faces as they entered, “What’s happened? Who’s –?”

“Mad-Eye,” said Mr. Weasley, “Dead.”

The twins’ grins turned to grimaces of shock. Nobody seemed to know what to do. Tonks was crying silently into a handkerchief: She had been close to Mad-Eye, Harry knew, his favorite and his protégée at the Ministry of Magic. Hagrid, who had sat down on the floor in the corner where he had most space, was dabbing at his eyes with his tablecloth-sized handkerchief.

Bill walked over to the sideboard and pulled out a bottle of fire-whisky and some glasses.

“Here,” he said, and with a wave of his wand, eh sent twelve full glasses soaring through the room to each of them, holding the thirteenth aloft. “Mad-Eye.”

“Mad-Eye,” they all said, and drank.

“Mad-Eye,” echoed Hagrid, a little late, with a hiccup. The firewhisky seared Harry’s throat. It seemed to burn feeling back into him, dispelling the numbness and sense of unreality firing him with something that was like courage.

“So Mundungus disappeared?” said Lupin, who had drained his own glass in one.

The atmosphere changed at once. Everybody looked tense, watching Lupin, both wanting him to go on, it seemed to Harry, and slightly afraid of what they might hear.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Bill, “and I wondered that too, on the way back here, because they seemed to be expecting us, didn’t they? But Mundungus can’t have betrayed us. They didn’t know there would be seven Harrys, that confused them the moment we

appeared, and in case you've forgotten, it was Mundungus who suggested that little bit of skullduggery. Why wouldn't he have told them the essential point? I think Dung panicked, it's as simple as that. He didn't want to come in the first place, but Mad-Eye made him, and You-Know-Who went straight for them. It was enough to make anyone panic."

"You-Know-Who acted exactly as Mad-Eye expected him to," sniffed Tonks. "Mad-Eye said he'd expect the real Harry to be with the toughest, most skilled Aurors. He chased Mad-Eye first, and when Mundungus gave them away he switched to Kingsley…. "

"Yes, and zat eez all very good," snapped Fleur, "but still eet does not explain 'ow zey know we were moving 'Arry tonight, does eet? Somebody must 'ave been careless. Somebody let slip ze date to an outsider. It is ze only explanation for zem knowing ze date but not ze 'ole plan."

She glared around at them all, tear tracks still etched on her beautiful face, silently daring any of them to contradict her. Nobody did. The only sound to break the silence was that of Hagrid hiccupping from behind his handkerchief. Harry glanced at Hagrid, who had just risked his own life to save Harry's – Hagrid, whom he loved, whom he trusted, who had once been tricked into giving Voldemort crucial information in exchange for a dragon's egg….

"No," Harry said aloud, and they all looked at him, surprised: The firewhisky seemed to have amplified his voice. "I mean… if somebody made a mistake," Harry went on, "and let something slip, I know they didn't mean to do it. It's not their fault," he repeated, again a little louder than he would usually have spoken. "We've got to trust each other. I trust all of you, I don't think anyone in this room would ever sell me to Voldemort."

More silence followed his words. They were all looking at him; Harry felt a little hot again, and drank some more firewhisky for something

to do. As he drank, he thought of Mad-Eye. Mad-Eye had always been scathing about Dumbledore’s willingness to trust people.

“Well said, Harry,” said Fred unexpectedly.

“Year, ‘ear, ‘ear,” said George, with half a glance at Fred, the corner of whose mouth twitched.

Lupin was wearing an odd expression as he looked at Harry. It was close to pitying.

“You think I’m a fool?” demanded Harry.

“No, I think you’re like James,” said Lupin, “who would have regarded it as the height of dishonor to mistrust his friends.”

Harry knew what Lupin was getting at: that his father had been betrayed by his friend Peter Pettigrew. He felt irrationally angry. He wanted to argue, but Lupin had turned away from him, set down his glass upon a side table, and addressed Bill, “There’s work to do. I can ask Kingsley whether – ”

“No,” said Bill at once, “I’ll do it, I’ll come.”

“Where are you going?” said Tonks and Fleur together.

“Mad-Eye’s body,” said Lupin. “We need to recover it.”

“Can’t it –?” began Mrs. Weasley with an appealing look at Bill.

“Wait?” said Bill, “Not unless you’d rather the Death Eaters took it?”

Nobody spoke. Lupin and Bill said good bye and left.

The rest of them now dropped into chairs, all except for Harry, who remained standing. The suddenness and completeness of death was with them like a presence.

“I’ve got to go too,” said Harry.

Ten pairs of startled eyes looked at him.

“Don’t be silly, Harry,” said Mrs. Weasley, “What are you talking about?”

“I can’t stay here.”

He rubbed his forehead; it was prickling again, he had not hurt like this for more than a year.

“You’re all in danger while I’m here. I don’t want – ”

“But don’t be so silly!” said Mrs. Weasley. “The whole point of tonight was to get you here safely, and thank goodness it worked. And Fleur’s agreed to get married here rather than in France, we’ve arranged everything so that we can all stay together and look after you – ”

She did not understand; she was making him feel worse, not better.

“If Voldemort finds out I’m here – ”

“But why should he?” asked Mrs. Weasley.

“There are a dozen places you might be now, Harry,” said Mr. Weasley. “He’s got no way of knowing which safe house you’re in.”

“It’s not me I’m worried for!” said Harry.

“We know that,” said Mr. Weasley quietly, “but it would make our efforts tonight seem rather pointless if you left.”

“Yer not goin’ anywhere,” growled Hagrid. “Blimey, Harry, after all we wen’ through ter get you here?”

“Yeah, what about my bleeding ear?” said George, hoisting himself up on his cushions.

“I know that – ”

“Mad-Eye wouldn’t want – ”

“I KNOW!” Harry bellowed.

He felt beleaguered and blackmailed: Did they think he did not know what they had done for him, didn’t they understand that it was for precisely that reason that he wanted to go now, before they had to suffer any more on his behalf? There was a long and awkward silence in which his scar continued to prickle and throb, and which was broken at last by Mrs. Weasley.

“Where’s Hedwig, Harry?” she said coaxingly. “We can put her up with Pidwidgeon and give her something to eat.”

His insides clenched like a fist. He could not tell her the truth. He drank the last of his firewhisky to avoid answering.

“Wait till it gets out yeh did it again, Harry,” said Hagrid. “Escaped him, fought him off when he was right on top of yeh!”

“It wasn’t me,” said Harry flatly. “It was my wand. My wand acted of its own accord.”

After a few moments, Hermione said gently, “But that’s impossible, Harry. You mean that you did magic without meaning to; you reacted instinctively.”

“No,” said Harry. “The bike was falling, I couldn’t have told you where Voldemort was, but my wand spun in my hand and found him and shot a spell at him, and it wasn’t even a spell I recognized. I’ve never made gold flames appear before.”

“Often,” said Mr. Weasley, “when you’re in a pressured situation you can produce magic you never dreamed of. Small children often find, before they’re trained – ”

“It wasn’t like that,” said Harry through gritted teeth. His scar was burning. He felt angry and frustrated; he hated the idea that they were all imagining him to have power to match Voldemort’s.

No one said anything. He knew that they did not believe him. Now that he came to think of it, he had never heard of a wand performing magic on its own before.

His scar seared with pain, it was all he could do not to moan aloud. Muttering about fresh air, he set down his glass and left the room.

As he crossed the yard, the great skeletal thestral looked up – rustled its enormous batlike wings, then resumed its grazing. Harry stopped at the gate into the garden, staring out at its overgrown plants, rubbing his pounding forehead and thinking of Dumbledore.

Dumbledore would have believed him, he knew it. Dumbledore would have known how and why Harry’s wand had acted independently, because Dumbledore always had the answers; he had known about wands, had explained to Harry the strange connection that existed between his wand and Voldemort’s…. But Dumbledore, like Mad-Eye, like Sirius, like his parents, like his poor owl, all were gone where Harry could never talk to them again. He felt a burning in his throat that had nothing to do with firewhisky….

And then, out of nowhere, the pain in his scar peaked. As he clutched his forehead and closed his eyes, a voice screamed inside his head.

“You told me the problem would be solved by using another’s wand!”

And into his mind burst the vision of an emaciated old man lying in rags upon a stone floor, screaming, a horrible drawn-out scream, a scream of unendurable agony….

“No! No! I beg you, I beg you….”

“You lied to Lord Voldemort, Ollivander!”

“I did not…. I swear I did not….”

“You sought to help Potter, to help him escape me!”

“I swear I did not…. I believed a different wand would work….”

“Explain, then, what happened. Lucius’s wand is destroyed!”

“I cannot understand…. The connection… exists only . between your two wands….”

“Lies!”

“Please… I beg you….”

And Harry saw the white hand raise its wand and felt Voldemort’s surge of vicious anger, saw the frail old main on the floor writhe in agony –“Harry?”

It was over as quickly as it had come: Harry stood shaking in the darkness, clutching the gate into the garden, his heart racing, his scar still tingling. It was several moments before he realized that Ron and Hermione were at his side.

“Harry, come back in the house,” Hermione whispered, “You aren’t still thinking of leaving?”

“Yeah, you’ve got to stay, mate,” said Ron, thumping Harry on the back.

“Are you all right?” Hermione asked, close enough now to look into Harry’s face. “You look awful!”

“Well,” said Harry shakily, “I probably look better than Ollivander….”

When he had finished telling them what he had seen, Ron looked appalled, but Hermione downright terrified.

“But it was supposed to have stopped! Your scar – it wasn’t supposed to do this anymore! You mustn’t let that connection open up again – Dumbledore wanted you to close your mind!”

When he did not reply, she gripped his arm.

“Harry, he’s taking over the Ministry and the newspapers and half the Wizarding world! Don’t let him inside your head too!”

Chapter 6 The Ghoul In Pajamas

The shock of losing Mad-Eye hung over the house in the days that followed; Harry kept expecting to see him stumping in through the back door like the other Order members, who passed in and out to relay news. Harry felt that nothing but action would assuage his feelings of guilt and grief and that he ought to set out on his mission to find and destroy Horcruxes as soon as possible.

“Well, you can’t do anything about the” – Ron mouthed the word Horcruxes – “till you’re seventeen. You’ve still got the Trace on you. And we can plan here as well as anywhere, can’t we? Or,” he dropped his voice to a whisper, “d’you reckon you already know where the You-Know-Whats are?”

“No,” Harry admitted.

“I think Hermione’s been doing a bit of research,” said Ron. “She said she was saving it for when you got here.”

They were sitting at the breakfast table; Mr. Weasley and Bill had just left for work. Mrs. Weasley had gone upstairs to wake Hermione and Ginny, while Fleur had drifted off to take a bath.

“The Trace’ll break on the thirty-first,” said Harry. “That means I only need to stay here four days. Then I can – ”

“Five days,” Ron corrected him firmly. “We’ve got to stay for the wedding. They’ll kill us if we miss it.”

Harry understood “they” to mean Fleur and Mrs. Weasley.

“It’s one extra day,” said Ron, when Harry looked mutinous.

“Don’t they realize how important –?”

"'Course they don't," said Ron. "They haven't got a clue. And now you mention it, I wanted to talk to you about that."

Ron glanced toward the door into the hall to check that Mrs. Weasley was not returning yet, then leaned in closer to Harry.

"Mum's been trying to get it out of Hermione and me. What we're off to do. She'll try you next, so brace yourself. Dad and Lupin've both asked as well, but when we said Dumbledore told you not to tell anyone except us, they dropped it. Not Mum, though. She's determined."

Ron's prediction came true within hours. Shortly before lunch, Mrs. Weasley detached Harry from the others by asking him to help identify a lone man's sock that she thought might have come out of his rucksack. Once she had him cornered in the tiny scullery off the kitchen, she started.

"Ron and Hermione seem to think that the three of you are dropping out of Hogwarts," she began in a light, casual tone.

"Oh," said Harry. "Well, yeah. We are."

The mangle turned of its own accord in a corner, wringing out what looked like one of Mr. Weasley's vests.

"May I ask why you are abandoning your education?" said Mrs. Weasley.

"Well, Dumbledore left me… stuff to do," mumbled Harry. "Ron and Hermione know about it, and they want to come too."

"What sort of 'stuff'?"

"I'm sorry, I can't – "

“Well, frankly, I think Arthur and I have a right to know, and I’m sure Mr. And Mrs. Granger would agree!” said Mrs. Weasley. Harry had been afraid of the “concerned parent” attack. He forced himself to look directly into her eyes, noticing as he did so that they were precisely the same shade of brown as Ginny’s. This did not help.

“Dumbledore didn’t want anyone else to know, Mrs. Weasley. I’m sorry. Ron and Hermione don’t have to come, it’s their choice – ”

“I don’t see that you have to go either!” she snapped, dropping all pretense now. “You’re barely of age, any of you! It’s utter nonsense, if Dumbledore needed work doing, he had the whole Order at his command! Harry, you must have misunderstood him. Probably he was telling you something he wanted done, and you took it to mean that he wanted you–”

“I didn’t misunderstand,” said Harry flatly. “It’s got to be me.”

He handed her back the single sock he was supposed to be identifying, which was patterned with golden bulrushes.

“And that’s not mine. I don’t support Puddlemere United.”

“Oh, of course not,” said Mrs. Weasley with a sudden and rather unnerving return to her casual tone. “I should have realized. Well, Harry, while we’ve still got you here, you won’t mind helping with the preparations for Bill and Fleur’s wedding, will you? There’s still so much to do.”

“No – I – of course not,” said Harry, disconcerted by this sudden change of subject.

“Sweet of you,” she replied, and she smiled as she left the scullery.

From that moment on, Mrs. Weasley kept Harry, Ron and Hermione so busy with preparations for the wedding that they hardly had any time to think. The kindest explanation of this behavior would have

been that Mrs. Weasley wanted to distract them all from thoughts of Mad-Eye and the terrors of their recent journey. After two days of nonstop cutlery cleaning, of color-matching favors, ribbons, and flowers, of de-gnoming the garden and helping Mrs. Weasley cook vast batches of canapés, however, Harry started to suspect her of a different motive. All the jobs she handed out seemed to keep him, Ron, and Hermione away from one another; he had not had a chance to speak to the two of them alone since the first night, when he had told them about Voldemort torturing Ollivander.

"I think Mum thinks that if she can stop the three of you getting together and planning, she'll be able to delay you leaving," Ginny told Harry in an undertone, as they laid the table for dinner on the third night of his stay.

"And then what does she think's going to happen?" Harry muttered. "Someone else might kill off Voldemort while she's holding us here making vol-au-vents?"

He had spoken without thinking, and saw Ginny's face whiten.

"So it's true?" she said. "That's what you're trying to do?"

"I – not – I was joking," said Harry evasively.

They stared at each other, and there was something more than shock in Ginny's expression. Suddenly Harry became aware that this was the first time that he had been alone with her since those stolen hours in secluded corners of the Hogwarts grounds. He was sure she was remembering them too. Both of them jumped as the door opened, and Mr. Weasley, Kingsley, and Bill walked in.

They were often joined by other Order members for dinner now, because the Burrow had replaced number twelve, Grimmauld Place as the headquarters. Mr. Weasley had explained that after the death of Dumbledore, their Secret-Keeper, each of the people to whom

Dumbledore had confided Grimmauld Place's location had become a Secret-Keeper in turn.

"And as there are around twenty of us, that greatly dilutes the power of the Fidelius Charm. Twenty times as many opportunities for the Death Eaters to get the secret out of somebody. We can't expect it to hold much longer."

"But surely Snape will have told the Death Eaters the address by now?" asked Harry.

"Well, Mad-Eye set up a couple of curses against Snape in case he turns up there again. We hope they'll be strong enough both to keep him out and to bind his tongue if he tries to talk about the place, but we can't be sure. It would have been insane to keep using the place as headquarters now that its protection has become so shaky."

The kitchen was so crowded that evening it was difficult to maneuver knives and forks. Harry found himself crammed beside Ginny; the unsaid things that had just passed between them made him wish they had been separated by a few more people. He was trying so hard to avoid brushing her arm he could barely cut his chicken.

"No news about Mad-Eye?" Harry asked Bill.

"Nothing," replied Bill.

They had not been able to hold a funeral for Moody, because Bill and Lupin had failed to recover his body. It had been difficult to know where he might have fallen, given the darkness and the confusion of the battle.

"The Daily Prophet hasn't said a word about him dying or about finding the body," Bill went on. "But that doesn't mean much. It's keeping a lot quiet these days."

“And they still haven’t called a hearing about all the underage magic I used escaping the Death Eaters?” Harry called across the table to Mr. Weasley, who shook his head.

“Because they know I had no choice or because they don’t want me to tell the world Voldemort attacked me?”

“The latter, I think. Scrimgeour doesn’t want to admit that You-Know-Who is as powerful as he is, nor that Azkaban’s seen a mass breakout.”

“Yeah, why tell the public the truth?” said Harry, clenching his knife so tightly that the faint scars on the back of his right hand stood out, white against his skin: I must not tell lies.

“Isn’t anyone at the Ministry prepared to stand up to him?” asked Ron angrily.

“Of course, Ron, but people are terrified,” Mr. Weasley replied, “terrified that they will be next to disappear, their children the next to be attacked! There are nasty rumors going around; I for one don’t believe the Muggle Studies professor at Hogwarts resigned. She hasn’t been seen for weeks now. Meanwhile Scrimgeour remains shut up in his office all day; I just hope he’s working on a plan.”

There was a pause in which Mrs. Weasley magicked the empty plates onto the work surface and served apple tart.

“We must decide ‘ow you will be disguised, ‘Arry,” said Fleur, once everyone had pudding. “For ze wedding,” she added, when he looked confused. “Of course, none of our guests are Death Eaters, but we cannot guarantee zat zey will not let something slip after zey ‘ave ‘ad champagne.”

From this, Harry gathered that she still suspected Hagrid.

“Yes, good point,” said Mrs. Weasley from the top of the table where she sat, spectacles perched on the end of her nose, scanning an immense list of jobs that she had scribbled on a very long piece of parchment. “Now, Ron, have you cleaned out your room yet?”

“Why?” exclaimed Ron, slamming his spoon down and glaring at his mother. “Why does my room have to be cleaned out? Harry and I are fine with it the way it is!”

“We are holding your brother’s wedding here in a few days’ time, young man – ”

“And are they getting married in my bedroom?” asked Ron furiously. “No! So why in the name of Merlin’s saggy left – ”

“Don’t talk to your mother like that,” said Mr. Weasley firmly. “And do as you’re told.”

Ron scowled at both his parents, then picked up his spoon and attacked the last few mouthfuls of his apple tart.

“I can help, some of it’s my mess.” Harry told Ron, but Mrs. Weasley cut across him.

“No, Harry, dear, I’d much rather you helped Arthur much out the chickens, and Hermione, I’d be ever so grateful if you’d change the sheets for Monsieur and Madame Delacour; you know they’re arriving at eleven tomorrow morning.”

But as it turned out, there was very little to do for the chickens. “There’s no need to, er, mention it to Molly,” Mr. Weasley told Harry, blocking his access to the coop, “but, er, Ted Tonks sent me most of what was left of Sirius’s bike and, er, I’m hiding – that’s to say, keeping – it in here. Fantastic stuff: There’s an exhaust gaskin, as I believe it’s called, the most magnificent battery, and it’ll be a great opportunity to find out how brakes work. I’m going to try and put it all back together again when Molly’s not – I mean, when I’ve got time.”

When they returned to the house, Mrs. Weasley was nowhere to be seen, so Harry slipped upstairs to Ron's attic bedroom.

"I'm doing it, I'm doing –! Oh, it's you," said Ron in relief, as Harry entered the room. Ron lay back down on the bed, which he had evidently just vacated. The room was just as messy as it had been all week; the only chance was that Hermione was now sitting in the far corner, her fluffy ginger cat, Crookshanks, at her feet, sorting books, some of which Harry recognized as his own, into two enormous piles.

"Hi, Harry," she said, as he sat down on his camp bed.

"And how did you manage to get away?"

"Oh, Ron's mum forgot that she asked Ginny and me to change the sheets yesterday," said Hermione. She threw Numerology and Grammatica onto one pile and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts onto the other.

"We were just talking about Mad-Eye," Ron told Harry. "I reckon he might have survived."

"But Bill saw him hit by the Killing Curse," said Harry.

"Yeah, but Bill was under attack too," said Ron. "How can he be sure what he saw?"

"Even if the Killing Curse missed, Mad-Eye still fell about a thousand feet," said Hermione, now weight Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland in her hand.

"He could have used a Shield Charm – "

"Fleur said his wand was blasted out of his hand," said Harry.

"Well, all right, if you want him to be dead," said Ron grumpily, punching his pillow into a more comfortable shape.

“Of course we don’t want him to be dead!” said Hermione, looking shocked. “It’s dreadful that he’s dead! But we’re being realistic!”

For the first time, Harry imagined Mad-Eye’s body, broken as Dumbledore’s had been, yet with that one eye still whizzing in its socket. He felt a stab of revulsion mixed with a bizarre desire to laugh.

“The Death Eaters probably tidied up after themselves, that’s why no one’s found him,” said Ron wisely.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Like Barty Crouch, turned into a bone and buried in Hagrid’s front garden. They probably transfigured Moody and stuffed him – ”

“Don’t!” squealed Hermione. Startled, Harry looked over just in time to see her burst into tears over her copy of Spellman’s Syllabary.

“Oh no,” said Harry, struggling to get up from the old camp bed. “Hermione, I wasn’t trying to upset – ”

But with a great creaking of rusty bedsprings, Ron bounded off the bed and got there first. One arm around Hermione, he fished in his jeans pocket and withdrew a revolting-looking handkerchief that he had used to clean out the oven earlier. Hastily pulling out his wand, he pointed it at the rag and said, “Tergeo.”

The wand siphoned off most of the grease. Looking rather pleased with himself, Ron handed the slightly smoking handkerchief to Hermione.

“Oh… thanks, Ron…. I’m sorry….” She blew her nose and hiccupped. “It’s just so awf-ful, isn’t it? R-right after Dumbledore… I j-just n-never imagined Mad-Eye dying, somehow, he seemed so tough!”

“Yeah, I know,” said Ron, giving her a squeeze. “But you know what he’d say to us if he was here?”

"'C-constant vigilance,'" said Hermione, mopping her eyes.

"That's right," said Ron, nodding. "He'd tell us to learn from what happened to him. And what I've learned is not to trust that cowardly little squit, Mundungus."

Hermione gave a shaky laugh and leaned forward to pick up two more books. A second later, Ron had snatched his arm back from around her shoulders; she had dropped The Monster of Monsters on his foot. The book had broken free from its restraining belt and snapped viciously at Ron's ankle.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Hermione cried as Harry wrenched the book from Ron's leg and retied it shit.

"What are you doing with all those books anyway?" Ron asked, limping back to his bed.

"Just trying to decide which ones to take with us," said Hermione, "When we're looking for the Horcruxes."

"Oh, of course," said Ron, clapping a hand to his forehead. "I forgot we'll be hunting down Voldemort in a mobile library."

"Ha ha," said Hermione, looking down at Spellman's Syllabary. "I wonder… will we need to translate runes? It's possible…. I think we'd better take it, to be safe."

She dropped the syllabary onto the larger of the two piles and picked up Hogwarts, A History.

"Listen," said Harry.

He had sat up straight. Ron and Hermione looked at him with similar mixtures of resignation and defiance.

“I know you said after Dumbledore’s funeral that you wanted to come with me,” Harry began.

“Here he goes,” Ron said to Hermione, rolling his eyes.

“As we knew he would,” he sighed, turning back to the books. “You know, I think I will take Hogwarts, A History. Even if we’re not going back there, I don’t think I’d feel right if I didn’t have it with – ”

“Listen!” said Harry again.

“No, Harry, you listen,” said Hermione. “We’re coming with you. That was decided months ago – years, really.”

“But – ”

“Shut up,” Ron advised him.

“– are you sure you’ve thought this through?” Harry persisted.

“Let’s see,” said Hermione, slamming Travels with Trolls onto the discarded pile with a rather fierce look. “I’ve been packing for days, so we’re ready to leave at a moment’s notice, which for your information has included doing some pretty difficult magic, not to mention smuggling Mad-Eye’s whole stock of Polyjuice Potion right under Ron’s mum’s nose.”

“I’ve also modified my parents’ memories so that they’re convinced they’re really called Wendell and Monica Wilkins, and that their life’s ambition is to move to Australia, which they have now done. That’s to make it more difficult for Voldemort to track them down and interrogate them about me – or you, because unfortunately, I’ve told them quite a bit about you.”

“Assuming I survive our hunt for the Horcruxes, I’ll find Mum and Dad and lift the enchantment. If I don’t – well, I think I’ve cast a good

enough charm to keep them safe and happy. Wendell and Monica Wilkins don't know that they've got a daughter, you see."

Hermione's eyes were swimming with tears again. Ron got back off the bed, put his arm around her once more, and frowned at Harry as though reproaching him for lack of tact. Harry could not think of anything to say, not least because it was highly unusual for Ron to be teaching anyone else tact.

"I – Hermione, I'm sorry – I didn't – "

"Didn't realize that Ron and I know perfectly well what might happen if we come with you? Well, we do. Ron, show Harry what you've done."

"Nah, he's just eaten," said Ron.

"Go on, he needs to know!"

"Oh, all right. Harry, come here."

For the second time Ron withdrew his arm from around Hermione and stumped over to the door.

"C'mon."

"Why?" Harry asked, following Ron out of the room onto the tiny landing.

"Descendo," muttered Ron, pointing his wand at the low ceiling. A hatch opened right over their heads and a ladder slid down to their feet. A horrible, half-sucking, half-moaning sound came out of the square hole, along with an unpleasant smell like open drains.

"That's your ghoul, isn't it?" asked Harry, who had never actually met the creature that sometimes disrupted the nightly silence.

"Yeah, it is," said Ron, climbing the ladder. "Come and have a look at him."

Harry followed Ron up the few short steps into the tiny attic space. His head and shoulders were in the room before he caught sight of the creature curled up a few feet from him, fast asleep in the gloom with its large mouth wide open.

“But it… it looks… do ghouls normally wear pajamas?”

“No,” said Ron. “Nor have they usually got red hair or that number of pustules.”

Harry contemplated the thing, slightly revolted. It was human in shape and size, and was wearing what, now that Harry’s eyes became used to the darkness, was clearly an old pair of Ron’s pajamas. He was also sure that ghouls were generally rather slimy and bald, rather than distinctly hairy and covered in angry purple blisters.

“He’s me, see?” said Ron.

“No,” said Harry. “I don’t.”

“I’ll explain it back in my room, the smell’s getting to me,” said Ron. They climbed back down the ladder, which Ron returned to the ceiling, and rejoined Hermione, who was still sorting books.

“Once we’ve left, the ghoul’s going to come and live down here in my room,” said Ron. “I think he’s really looking forward to it – well, it’s hard to tell, because all he can do is moan and drool – but he nods a lot when you mention it. Anyway, he’s going to be me with spattergroit. Good, eh?”

Harry merely looked his confusion.

“It is!” said Ron, clearly frustrated that Harry had not grasped the brilliance of the plan. “Look, when we three don’t turn up at Hogwarts again, everyone’s going to think Hermione and I must be with you, right? Which means the Death Eaters will go straight for our families to see if they’ve got information on where you are.”

“But hopefully it’ll look like I’ve gone away with Mum and Dad; a lot of Muggle-borns are talking about going into hiding at the moment,” said Hermione.

“We can’t hide my whole family, it’ll look too fishy and they can’t all leave their jobs,” said Ron. “So we’re going to put out the story that I’m seriously ill with spattergroit, which is why I can’t go back to school. If anyone comes calling to investigate, Mum or Dad can show them the ghoul in my bed, covered in pustules. Spattergroit’s really contagious, so they’re not going to want to go near him. It won’t matter that he can’t say anything, either, because apparently you can’t once the fungus has spread to your uvula.”

“And your mum and dad are in on this plan?” asked Harry.

“Dad is. He helped Fred and George transform the ghoul. Mum… well, you’ve seen what she’s like. She won’t accept we’re going till we’re gone.”

There was silence in the room, broken only by gentle thuds as Hermione continued to throw books onto one pile or the other. Ron sat watching her, and Harry looked from one to the other, unable to say anything. The measure they had taken to protect their families made him realize, more than anything else could have done, that they really were going to come with him and that they knew exactly how dangerous that would be. He wanted to tell them what that meant to him, but he simply could not find words important enough.

Through the silence came the muffled sounds of Mrs. Weasley shouting from four floors below.

“Ginny’s probably left a speck of dust on a poxy napkin ring,” said Ron. “I dunno why the Delacours have got to come two days before the wedding.”

“Fleur’s sister’s a bridesmaid, she needs to be here for the rehearsal, and she’s too young to come on her own,” said Hermione, as she

pored indecisively over Break with a Banshee.

“Well, guests aren’t going to help Mum’s stress levels,” said Ron.

“What we really need to decide,” said Hermione, tossing Defensive Magical Theory into the bin without a second glance and picking up An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe, “is where we’re going after we leave here. I know you said you wanted to go to Godric’s Hollow first, Harry, and I understand why, but… well… shouldn’t we make the Horcruxes our priority?”

“If we knew where any of the Horcruxes were, I’d agree with you,” said Harry, who did not believe that Hermione really understood his desire to return to Godric’s Hollow. His parents’ graves were only part of the attraction: He had a strong, though inexplicable, feeling that the place held answers for him. Perhaps it was simply because it was there that he had survived Voldemort’s Killing Curse; now that he was facing the challenge of repeating the feat, Harry was drawn to the place where it had happened, wanting to understand.

“Don’t you think there’s a possibility that Voldemort’s keeping a watch on Godric’s Hollow?” Hermione asked. “He might expect you to go back and visit your parents’ graves once you’re free to go wherever you like?”

This had not occurred to Harry. While he struggled to find a counterargument, Ron spoke up, evidently following his own train of thought.

“This R.A.B. person,” he said. “You know, the one who stole the real locket?”

Hermione nodded.

“He said in his note he was going to destroy it, didn’t he?”

Harry dragged his rucksack toward him and pulled out the fake Horcrux in which R.A.B.'s note was still folded.

"'I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.'" Harry read out.

"Well, what if he did finish it off?" said Ron.

"Or she." Interposed Hermione.

"Whichever," said Ron. "it'd be one less for us to do!"

"Yes, but we're still going to have to try and trace the real locket, aren't we?" said Hermione, "to find out whether or not it's destroyed."

"And once we get hold of it, how do you destroy a Horcrux?" asked Ron.

"Well," said Hermione, "I've been researching that."

"How?" asked Harry. "I didn't think there were any books on Horcruxes in the library?"

"There weren't," said Hermione, who had turned pink. "Dumbledore removed them all, but he – he didn't destroy them."

Ron sat up straight, wide-eyed.

"How in the name of Merlin's pants have you managed to get your hands on those Horcrux books?"

"It – it wasn't stealing!" said Hermione, looking from Harry to Ron with a kind of desperation. "They were still library books, even if Dumbledore had taken them off the shelves. Anyway, if he really didn't want anyone to get at them, I'm sure he would have made it much harder to – "

"Get to the point!" said Ron.

“Well… it was easy,” said Hermione in a small voice. “I just did a Summoning Charm. You know – Accio. And – they zoomed out of Dumbledore’s study window right into the girls’ dormitory.”

“But when did you do this?” Harry asked, regarding Hermione with a mixture of admiration and incredulity.

“Just after his – Dumbledore’s – funeral,” said Hermione in an even smaller voice. “Right after we agreed we’d leave school and go and look for the Horcruxes. When I went back upstairs to get my things it – it just occurred to me that the more we knew about them, the better it would be… and I was alone in there… so I tried… and it worked. They flew straight in through the open window and I – I packed them.”

She swallowed and then said imploringly, “I can’t believe Dumbledore would have been angry, it’s not as though we’re going to use the information to make a Horcrux, is it?”

“Can you hear us complaining?” said Ron. “Where are these books anyway?”

Hermione rummaged for a moment and then extracted from the pile a large volume, bound in faded black leather. She looked a little nauseated and held it as gingerly as if it were something recently dead.

“This is the one that gives explicit instructions on how to make a Horcrux. Secrets of the Darkest Art – it’s a horrible book, really awful, full of evil magic. I wonder when Dumbledore removed it from the library…. if he didn’t do it until he was headmaster, I bet Voldemort got all the instruction he needed from here.”

“Why did he have to ask Slughorn how to make a Horcrux, then, if he’d already read that?” asked Ron.

“He only approached Slughorn to find out what would happen if you split your soul into seven,” said Harry. “Dumbledore was sure Riddle

already knew how to make a Horcrux by the time he asked Slughorn about them. I think you're right, Hermione, that could easily have been where he got the information."

"And the more I've read about them," said Hermione, "the more horrible they seem, and the less I can believe that he actually made six. It warns in this book how unstable you make the rest of your soul by ripping it, and that's just by making one Horcrux!"

Harry remembered what Dumbledore had said about Voldemort moving beyond "usual evil."

"Isn't there any way of putting yourself back together?" Ron asked.

"Yes," said Hermione with a hollow smile, "but it would be excruciatingly painful."

"Why? How do you do it?" asked Harry.

"Remorse," said Hermione. "You've got to really feel what you've done. There's a footnote. Apparently the pain of it can destroy you. I can't see Voldemort attempting it somehow, can you?"

"No," said Ron, before Harry could answer. "So does it say how to destroy Horcruxes in that book?"

"Yes," said Hermione, now turning the fragile pages as if examining rotting entrails, "because it warns Dark wizards how strong they have to make the enchantments on them. From all that I've read, what Harry did to Riddle's diary was one of the few really foolproof ways of destroying a Horcrux."

"What, stabbing it with a basilisk fang?" asked Harry.

"Oh well, lucky we've got such a large supply of basilisk fangs, then," said Ron. "I was wondering what we were going to do with them."

“It doesn’t have to be a basilisk fang,” said Hermione patiently. “It has to be something so destructive that the Horcrux can’t repair itself. Basilisk venom only has one antidote, and it’s incredibly rare – ”

“– phoenix tears,” said Harry, nodding.

“Exactly,” said Hermione. “Our problem is that there are very few substances as destructive as basilisk venom, and they’re all dangerous to carry around with you. That’s a problem we’re going to have to solve, though, because ripping, smashing, or crushing a Horcrux won’t do the trick. You’ve got to put it beyond magical repair.”

“But even if we wreck the thing it lives in,” said Ron, “why can’t the bit of soul in it just go and live in something else?”

“Because a Horcrux is the complete opposite of a human being.”

Seeing that Harry and Ron looked thoroughly confused, Hermione hurried on. “Look, if I picked up a sword right now, Ron, and ran you through with it, I wouldn’t damage your soul at all.”

“Which would be a real comfort to me, I’m sure,” said Ron. Harry laughed.

“It should be, actually! But my point is that whatever happens to your body, your soul will survive, untouched,” said Hermione. “But it’s the other way round with a Horcrux. The fragment of soul inside it depends on its container, its enchanted body, for survival. It can’t exist without it.”

“That diary sort of died when I stabbed it,” said Harry, remembering ink pouring like blood from the punctured pages, and the screams of the piece of Voldemort’s soul as it vanished.

“And once the diary was properly destroyed, the bit of soul trapped in it could no longer exist. Ginny tried to get rid of the diary before you did, flushing it away, but obviously it came back good as new.”

“Hang on,” said Ron, frowning. “The bit of soul in that diary was possessing Ginny, wasn’t it? How does that work, then?”

“While the magical container is still intact, the bit of soul inside it can flit in and out of someone if they get too close to the object. I don’t mean holding it for too long, it’s nothing to do with touching it,” she added before Ron could speak. “I mean close emotionally. Ginny poured her heart out into that diary, she made herself incredibly vulnerable. You’re in trouble if you get too fond of or dependent on the Horcrux.”

“I wonder how Dumbledore destroyed the ring?” said Harry. “Why didn’t I ask him? I never really…”

His voice trailed away: He was thinking of all the things he should have asked Dumbledore, and of how, since the headmaster had died, it seemed to Harry that he had wasted so many opportunities when Dumbledore had been alive, to find out more… to find out everything….

The silence was shattered as the bedroom door flew open with a wall-shaking crash. Hermione shrieked and dropped Secrets of the Darkest Art; Crookshanks streaked under the bed, hissing indignantly; Ron jumped off the bed, skidded on a discarded Chocolate Frog wrapper, and smacked his head on the opposite wall; and Harry instinctively dived for his wand before realizing that he was looking up at Mrs. Weasley, whose hair was disheveled and whose face was contorted with rage.

“I’m so sorry to break up this cozy little gathering,” she said, her voice trembling. “I’m sure you all need your rest… but there are wedding presents stacked in my room that need sorting out and I was under the impression that you had agreed to help.”

“Oh yes,” said Hermione, looking terrified as she leapt to her feet, sending books flying in every direction. “we will… we’re sorry…”

With an anguished look at Harry and Ron, Hermione hurried out of the room after Mrs. Weasley.

“it’s like being a house-elf,” complained Ron in an undertone, still massaging his head as he and Harry followed. “Except without the job satisfaction. The sooner this wedding’s over, the happier, I’ll be.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “then we’ll have nothing to do except find Horcruxes…. It’ll be like a holiday, won’t it?”

Ron started to laugh, but at the sight of the enormous pile of wedding presents waiting for them in Mrs. Weasley’s room, stopped quite abruptly.

The Delacours arrived the following morning at eleven o’ clock. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were feeling quite resentful toward Fleur’s family by this time; and it was with ill grace that Ron stumped back upstairs to put on matching socks, and Harry attempted to flatten his hair. Once they had all been deemed smart enough, they trooped out into the sunny backyard to await the visitors.

Harry had never seen the place looking so tidy. The rusty cauldrons and old Wellington boots that usually littered the steps by the back door were gone, replaced by two new Flutterby bushes standing either side of the door in large pots; though there was no breeze, the leaves waved lazily, giving an attractive rippling effect. The chickens had been shut away, the yard had been swept, and the nearby garden had been pruned, plucked, and generally spruced up, although Harry, who liked it in its overgrown state, thought that it looked rather forlorn without its usual contingent of capering gnomes.

He had lost track of how many security enchantments had been placed upon the Burrow by both the Order and the Ministry; all he knew was that it was no longer possible for anybody to travel by magic directly into the place. Mr. Weasley had therefore gone to meet the Delacours on top of a nearby hill, where they were to arrive by Portkey. The first sound of their approach was an unusually high-

pitched laugh, which turned out to be coming from Mr. Weasley, who appeared at the gate moments later, laden with luggage and leading a beautiful blonde woman in long, leaf green robes, who could be Fleur's mother.

"Maman!" cried Fleur, rushing forward to embrace her. "Papa!"

Monsieur Delacour was nowhere near as attractive as his wife; he was a head shorter and extremely plumb, with a little, pointed black beard. However, he looked good-natured. Bouncing towards Mrs. Weasley on high-heeled boots, he kissed her twice on each cheek, leaving her flustered.

"You 'ave been so much trouble," he said in a deep voice. "Fleur tells us you 'ave been working very 'ard."

"Oh, it's been nothing, nothing!" trilled Mrs. Weasley. "No trouble at all!"

Ron relieved his feelings by aiming a kick at a gnome who was peering out from behind one of the new Flutterby bushes.

"Dear lady!" said Monsieur Delacour, still holding Mrs. Weasley's hand between his own two plump ones and beaming. "We are most honored at the approaching union of our two families! Let me present my wife, Apolline."

Madame Delacour glided forward and stooped to kiss Mrs. Weasley too.

"Enchantée," she said. "Your 'usband 'as been telling us such amusing stories!"

Mr. Weasley gave a maniacal laugh; Mrs. Weasley threw him a look, upon which he became immediately silent and assumed an expression appropriate to the sickbed of a close friend.

“And, of course, you ‘ave met my leetle daughter, Gabrielle!” said Monsieur Delacour. Gabrielle was Fleur in miniature; eleven years old, with waist-length hair of pure, silvery blonde, she gave Mrs. Weasley a dazzling smile and hugged her, then threw Harry a glowing look, batting her eyelashes. Ginny cleared her throat loudly.

“Well, come in, do!” said Mrs. Weasley brightly, and she ushered the Delacours into the house, with many “No, please!”s and “After you!’s and “Not at all!’s.

The Delacours, it soon transpired, were helpful, pleasant guests. They were pleased with everything and keen to assist with the preparations for the wedding. Monsieur Delacour pronounced everything from the seating plan to the bridesmaids’ shoes “Charmant!” Madame Delacour was most accomplished at household spells and had the oven properly cleaned in a trice; Gabrielle followed her elder sister around, trying to assist in any way she could and jabbering away in rapid French.

On the downside, the Burrow was not built to accommodate so many people. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were now sleeping in the sitting room, having shouted down Monsieur and Madame Delacour’s protests and insisted they take their bedroom. Gabrielle was sleeping with Fleur in Percy’s old room, and Bill would be sharing with Charlie, his best man, once Charlie arrived from Romania. Opportunities to make plans together became virtually nonexistent, and it was in desperation that Harry, Ron and Hermione took to volunteering to feed the chickens just to escape the overcrowded house.

“But she still won’t leave us alone!” snarled Ron, and their second attempt at a meeting in the yard was foiled by the appearance of Mrs. Weasley carrying a large basket of laundry in her arms.

“Oh, good, you’ve fed the chickens,” she called as she approached them. “We’d better shut them away again before the men arrive tomorrow… to put up the tent for the wedding,” she explained,

pausing to lean against the henhouse. She looked exhausted. “Millamant’s Magic Marquees… they’re very good. Bill’s escorting them…. You’d better stay inside while they’re here, Harry. I must say it does complicate organizing a wedding, having all these security spells around the place.”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry humbly.

“Oh, don’t be silly, dear!” said Mrs. Weasley at once. “I didn’t mean – well, your safety’s much more important! Actually, I’ve been wanting to ask you how you want to celebrate your birthday, Harry. Seventeen, after all, it’s an important day….”

“I don’t want a fuss,” said Harry quickly, envisaging the additional strain this would put on them all. “Really, Mrs. Weasley, just a normal dinner would be fine…. It’s the day before the wedding….”

“Oh, well, if you’re sure, dear. I’ll invite Remus and Tonks, shall I? And how about Hagrid?”

“That’d be great,” said Harry. “But please, don’t go to loads of trouble.”

“Not at all, not at all… It’s no trouble….”

She looked at him, a long, searching look, then smiled a little sadly, straightened up, and walked away. Harry watched as she waved her wand near the washing line, and the damp clothes rose into the air to hang themselves up, and suddenly he felt a great wave of remorse for the inconvenience and the pain he was giving her.

Chapter 7 The Will of Albus Dumbledore

He was walking along a mountain road in the cool blue light of dawn. Far below, swathed in mist, was the shadow of a small town. Was the man he sought down there, the man he needed so badly he could think of little else, the man who held the answer, the answer to his problem…?

“Oi, wake up.”

Harry opened his eyes. He was lying again on the camp bed in Ron’s dingy attic room. The sun had not yet risen and the room was still shadowy. Pigwidgeon was asleep with his head under his tiny wing. The scar on Harry’s forehead was prickling.

“You were muttering in your sleep.”

“Was I?”

“Yeah. ‘Gregorovitch.’ You kept saying ‘Gregorovitch.’”

Harry was not wearing his glasses; Ron’s face appeared slightly blurred.

“Who’s Gregorovitch?”

“I dunno, do I? You were the one saying it.”

Harry rubbed his forehead, thinking. He had a vague idea he had heard the name before, but he could not think where.

“I think Voldemort’s looking for him.”

“Poor bloke,” said Ron fervently.

Harry sat up, still rubbing his scar, now wide awake. He tried to remember exactly what he had seen in the dream, but all that came

back was a mountainous horizon and the outline of the little village cradled in a deep valley.

“I think he’s abroad.”

“Who, Gregorovitch?”

“Voldemort. I think he’s somewhere abroad, looking for Gregorovitch. It didn’t look like anywhere in Britain.”

“You reckon you were seeing into his mind again?”

Ron sounded worried.

“Do me a favor and don’t tell Hermione,” said Harry. “Although how she expects me to stop seeing stuff in my sleep…”

He gazed up at little Pigwidgeon’s cage, thinking…Why was the name “Gregorovitch” familiar?

“I think,” he said slowly, “he’s got something to do with Quidditch. There’s some connection, but I can’t–I can’t think what it is.”

“Quidditch?” said Ron. “Sure you’re not thinking of Gorgovitch?”

“Who?”

“Dragomir Gorgovitch, Chaser, transferred to the Chudley Cannons for a record fee two years ago. Record holder for most Quaffle drops in a season.”

“No,” said Harry. “I’m definitely not thinking of Gorgovitch.”

“I try not to either,” said Ron. “Well, happy birthday anyway.”

“Wow – that’s right, I forgot! I’m seventeen!”

Harry seized the wand lying beside his camp bed, pointed it at the cluttered desk where he had left his glasses, and said, “Accio Glasses!” Although they were only around a foot away, there was something immensely satisfying about seeing them zoom toward him, at least until they poked him in the eye.

“Slick,” snorted Ron.

Reveling in the removal of his Trace, Harry sent Ron’s possessions flying around the room, causing Pigwidgeon to wake up and flutter excitedly around his cage. Harry also tried tying the laces of his trainers by magic (the resultant knot took several minutes to untie by hand) and, purely for the pleasure of it, turned the orange robes on Ron’s Chudley Cannons posters bright blue.

“I’d do your fly by hand, though,” Ron advised Harry, sniggering when Harry immediately checked it. “Here’s your present. Unwrap it up here, it’s not for my mother’s eyes.”

“A book?” said Harry as he took the rectangular parcel. “Bit of a departure from tradition, isn’t it?”

“This isn’t your average book,” said Ron. “It’d pure gold: Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches. Explains everything you need to know about girls. If only I’d had this last year I’d have known exactly how to get rid of Lavender and I would’ve known how to get going with… Well, Fred and George gave me a copy, and I’ve learned a lot. You’d be surprised, it’s not all about wandwork, either.”

When they arrived in the kitchen they found a pile of presents waiting on the table. Bill and Monsieur Delacour were finishing their breakfasts, while Mrs. Weasley stood chatting to them over the frying pan.

“Arthur told me to wish you a happy seventeenth, Harry,” said Mrs. Weasley, beaming at him. “He had to leave early for work, but he’ll be back for dinner. That’s our present on top.”

Harry sat down, took the square parcel she had indicated, and unwrapped it. Inside was a watch very like the one Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had given Ron for his seventeenth; it was gold, with stars circling around the race instead of hands.

“It’s traditional to give a wizard a watch when he comes of age,” said Mrs. Weasley, watching him anxiously from beside the cooker. “I’m afraid that one isn’t new like Ron’s, it was actually my brother Fabian’s and he wasn’t terribly careful with his possessions, it’s a bit dented on the back, but–”

The rest of her speech was lost; Harry had got up and hugged her. He tried to put a lot of unsaid things into the hug and perhaps she understood them, because she patted his cheek clumsily when he released her, then waved her wand in a slightly random way, causing half a pack of bacon to flop out of the frying pan onto the floor.

“Happy birthday, Harry!” said Hermione, hurrying into the kitchen and adding her own present to the top of the pile. “It’s not much, but I hope you like it. What did you get him?” she added to Ron, who seemed not to hear her.

“Come on, then, open Hermione’s!” said Ron.

She had bought him a new Sneakoscope. The other packages contained an enchanted razor from Bill and Fleur (“Ah yes, zis will give you ze smoothest shave you will ever ‘ave,” Monsieur Delacour assured him, “but you must tell it clearly what you want…ozzerwise you might find you ‘ave a leetle less hair zan you would like…”), chocolates from the Delacours, and an enormous box of the latest Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes merchandise from Fred and George.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione did not linger at the table, as the arrival of Madame Delacour, Fleur, and Gabrielle made the kitchen uncomfortably crowded.

“I’ll pack these for you,” Hermione said brightly, taking Harry’s presents out of his arms as the three of them headed back upstairs. “I’m nearly done, I’m just waiting for the rest of your underpants to come out of the wash, Ron–”

Ron’s splutter was interrupted by the opening of a door on the first-floor landing.

“Harry, will you come in here a moment?”

It was Ginny. Ron came to an abrupt halt, but Hermione took him by the elbow and tugged him on up the stairs. Feeling nervous, Harry followed Ginny into her room.

He had never been inside it before. It was small, but bright. There was a large poster of the Wizarding band the Weird Sisters on one wall, and a picture of Gwenog Jones, Captain of the all-witch Quidditch team the Holyhead Harpies, on the other. A desk stood facing the open window, which looked out over the orchard where he and Ginny had once played a two-a-side Quidditch with Ron and Hermione, and which now housed a large, pearly white marquee. The golden flag on top was level with Ginny’s window.

Ginny looked up into Harry’s face, took a deep breath, and said, “Happy seventeenth.”

“Yeah…thanks.”

She was looking at him steadily; he however, found it difficult to look back at her; it was like gazing into a brilliant light.

“Nice view,” he said feebly, pointing toward with window.

She ignored this. He could not blame her.

“I couldn’t think what to get you,” she said.

“You didn’t have to get me anything.”

She disregarded this too.

“I didn’t know what would be useful. Nothing too big, because you wouldn’t be able to take it with you.”

He chanced a glance at her. She was not tearful; that was one of the many wonderful things about Ginny, she was rarely weepy. He had sometimes thought that having six brothers must have toughened her up.

She took a step closer to him.

“So then I thought, I’d like you to have something to remember me by, you know, if you meet some veela when you’re off doing whatever you’re doing.”

“I think dating opportunities are going to be pretty thin on the ground, to be honest.”

“There’s the silver lining I’ve been looking for,” she whispered, and then she was kissing him as she had never kissed him before, and Harry was kissing her back, and it was blissful oblivion better than firewhisky; she was the only real thing in the world, Ginny, the feel of her, one hand at her back and one in her long, sweet-smelling hair–
The door banged open behind them and they jumped apart.

“Oh,” said Ron pointedly. “Sorry.”

“Ron!” Hermione was just behind him, slight out of breath. There was a strained silence, then Ginny had said in a flat little voice, “Well, happy birthday anyway, Harry.”

Ron’s ears were scarlet; Hermione looked nervous. Harry wanted to slam the door in their faces, but it felt as though a cold draft had entered the room when the door opened, and his shining moment

had popped like a soap bubble. All the reasons for ending his relationship with Ginny, for staying well away from her, seemed to have slunk inside the room with Ron, and all happy forgetfulness was gone.

He looked at Ginny, wanting to say something, though he hardly knew what, but she had turned her back on him. He thought that she might have succumbed, for once, to tears. He could not do anything to comfort her in front of Ron.

"I'll see you later," he said, and followed the other two out of the bedroom.

Ron marched downstairs, though the still-crowded kitchen and into the yard, and Harry kept pace with him all the way, Hermione trotting along behind them looking scared.

Once he reached the seclusion of the freshly mown lawn, Ron rounded on Harry.

"You ditched her. What are you doing now, messing her around?"

"I'm not messing her around," said Harry, as Hermione caught up with them.

"Ron–"

But Ron held up a hand to silence her.

"She was really cut up when you ended it–"

"So was I. You know why I stopped it, and it wasn't because I wanted to."

"Yeah, but you go snogging her now and she's just going to get her hopes up again–"

“She’s not an idiot, she knows it can’t happen, she’s not expecting us to–to end up married, or–”

As he said it, a vivid picture formed in Harry’s mind of Ginny in a white dress, marrying a tall, faceless, and unpleasant stranger.

In one spiraling moment it seemed to hit him: Her future was free and unencumbered, whereas his…he could see nothing but Voldemort ahead.

“If you keep groping her every chance you get–”

“It won’t happen again,” said Harry harshly. The day was cloudless, but he felt as though the sun had gone in. “Okay?”

Ron looked half resentful, half sheepish; he rocked backward and forward on his feet for a moment, then said, “Right then, well, that’s… yeah.”

Ginny did not seek another one-to-one meeting with Harry for the rest of the day, nor by any look or gesture did she show that they had shared more than polite conversation in her room. Nevertheless, Charlie’s arrival came as a relief to Harry. It provided a distraction, watching Mrs. Weasley force Charlie into a chair, raise her wand threateningly, and announce that he was about to get a proper haircut.

As Harry’s birthday dinner would have stretched the Burrow’s kitchen to breaking point even before the arrival of Charlie, Lupin, Tonks, and Hagrid, several tables were placed end to end in the garden. Fred and George bewitched a number of purple lanterns all emblazoned with a large number 17, to hang in midair over the guests. Thanks to Mrs. Weasley’s ministrations, George’s wound was neat and clean, but Harry was not yet used to the dark hole in the side of his head, despite the twins’ many jokes about it.

Hermione made purple and gold streamers erupt from the end of her wand and drape themselves artistically over the trees and bushes.

“Nice,” said Ron, as with one final flourish of her wand, Hermione turned the leaves on the crabapple tree to gold. “You’ve really got an eye for that sort of thing.”

“Thank you, Ron!“ said Hermione, looking both pleased and a little confused. Harry turned away, smiling to himself. He had a funny notion that he would find a chapter on compliments when he found time to peruse his copy of Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches; he caught Ginny’s eye and grinned at her before remembering his promise to Ron and hurriedly striking up a conversation with Monsieur Delacour.

“Out of the way, out of the way!” sang Mrs. Weasley, coming through the gate with what appeared to be a giant, beach-ball-sized Snitch floating in front of her. Seconds later Harry realized that it was his birthday cake, which Mrs. Weasley was suspending with her wand, rather than risk carrying it over the uneven ground. When the cake had finally landed in the middle of the table, Harry said, “That looks amazing, Mrs. Weasley.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, dear,” she said fondly. Over her shoulder, Ron gave Harry the thumbs-up and mouthed, Good one.

By seven o’clock all the guests had arrived, led into the house by Fred and George, who had waited for them at the end of the lane. Hagrid had honored the occasion by wearing his best, and horrible, hairy brown suit. Although Lupin smiled as he shook Harry’s hand, Harry thought he looked rather unhappy. It was all very odd; Tonks, beside him, looked simply radiant.

“Happy birthday, Harry,” she said, hugging him tightly.

“Seventeen, eh!” said Hagrid as he accepted a bucket-sized glass of wine from Fred. “Six years ter the day since we met, Harry, d’yeh

remember it?”

“Vaguely,” said Harry, grinning up at him. “Didn’t you smash down the front door, give Dudley a pig’s tail, and tell me I was a wizard?”

“I forge’ the details,” Hagrid chortled. “All righ’, Ron, Hermione?”

“We’re fine,” said Hermione. “How are you?”

“Ar, not bad. Bin busy, we got some newborn unicorns. I’ll show yeh when yeh get back–” Harry avoided Ron’s and Hermione’s gazes as Hagrid rummaged in his pocket. “Here. Harry – couldn’t think what ter get teh, but then I remembered this.” He pulled out a small, slightly furry drawstring pouch with a long string, evidently intended to be worn around the neck. “Mokeskin. Hide anythin’ in there an’ no one but the owner can get it out. They’re rare, them.”

“Hagrid, thanks!”

“‘S’nothin’,” said Hagrid with a wave of a dustbin-lid-sized hand. “An’ there’s Charlie! Always liked him – hey! Charlie!”

Charlie approached, running his hand slightly ruefully over his new, brutally short haircut. He was shorter than Ron, thickset, with a number of burns and scratches up his muscled arms.

“Hi, Hagrid, how’s it going?”

“Bin meanin’ ter write fer ages. How’s Norbert doin’?”

“Norbert?” Charlie laughed. “The Norwegian Ridgeback? We call her Norberta now.”

“Wha – Norbert’s a girl?”

“Oh yeah,” said Charlie.

“How can you tell?” asked Hermione.

“They’re a lot more vicious,” said Charlie. He looked over his shoulder and dropped his voice. “Wish Dad would hurry up and get here. Mum’s getting edgy.”

They all looked over at Mrs. Weasley. She was trying to talk to Madame Delacour while glancing repeatedly at the gate.

“I think we’d better start without Arthur,“ she called to the garden at large after a moment or two. ”He must have been held up at – oh!“They all saw it at the same time: a streak of light that came flying across the yard and onto the table, where it resolved itself into a bright silver weasel, which stood on its hind legs and spoke with Mr. Weasley’s voice.

“Minister of Magic coming with me.”

The Patronus dissolved into thin air, leaving Fleur’s family peering in astonishment at the place where it had vanished.

“We shouldn’t be here,” said Lupin at once. “Harry – I’m sorry – I’ll explain some other time–”

He seized Tonks’s wrist and pulled her away; they reached the fence, climbed over it, and vanished from sight. Mrs. Weasley looked bewildered.

“The Minister – but why–? I don’t understand–”

But there was no time to discuss the matter; a second later, Mr. Weasley had appeared out of thin air at the gate, accompanied by Rufus Scrimgeour, instantly recognizable by his mane of grizzled hair.

The two newcomers marched across the yard toward the garden and the lantern-lit table, where everybody sat in silence, watching them draw closer. As Scrimgeour came within range of the lantern light.

Harry saw that he looked much older than the last time that had met, scraggy and grim.

“Sorry to intrude,” said Scrimgeour, as he limped to a halt before the table. “Especially as I can see that I am gate-crashing a party.”

His eyes lingered for a moment on the giant Snitch cake.

“Many happy returns.”

“Thanks,” said Harry.

“I require a private word with you,” Scrimgeour went on. “Also with Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger.”

“Us?” said Ron, sounding surprised. “Why us?”

“I shall tell you that when we are somewhere more private,” said Scrimgeour. “Is there such a place?” he demanded of Mr. Weasley.

“Yes, of course,” said Mr. Weasley, who looked nervous. “The, er, sitting room, why don’t you use that?”

“You can lead the way,” Scrimgeour said to Ron. “There will be no need for you to accompany us, Arthur.”

Harry saw Mr. Weasley exchange a worried look with Mrs. Weasley as he, Ron, and Hermione stood up. As they led the way back to the house in silence, Harry knew that the other two were thinking the same as he was; Scrimgeour must, somehow, had learned that the three of them were planning to drop out of Hogwarts.

Scrimgeour did not speak as they all passed through the messed kitchen and into the Burrow’s sitting room. Although the garden had been full of soft golden evening light, it was already dark in here; Harry flicked his wand at the oil lamps as he entered and they illuminated the shabby but cozy room. Scrimgeour sat himself in the

sagging armchair that Mr. Weasley normally occupied, leaving Harry, Ron, and Hermione to squeeze side by side onto the sofa. Once they had done so, Scrimgeour spoke.

“I have some questions for the three of you, and I think it will be best if we do it individually. If you two” – he pointed at Harry and Hermione – “can wait upstairs, I will start with Ronald.”

“We’re not going anywhere,“ said Harry, while Hermione nodded vigorously. ”You can speak to us together, or not at all.“Scrimgeour gave Harry a cold, appraising look. Harry had the impression that the Minister was wondering whether it was worthwhile opening hostilities this early.

“Very well then, together,“ he said, shrugging. He cleared his throat. ”I am here, as I’m sure you know, because of Albus Dumbledore’s will.“Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another.

“A surprise, apparently! You were not aware then that Dumbledore had left you anything?““A-all of us?” said Ron, “Me and Hermione too?”

“Yes, all of –”

But Harry interrupted.

“Dumbledore died over a month ago. Why has it taken this long to give us what he left us?”

“Isn’t it obvious?“ said Hermione, before Scrimgeour could answer. ”They wanted to examine whatever he’s left us. You had no right to do that!“ she said, and her voice trembled slightly.

“I had every right,“ said Scrimgeour dismissively. ”The Decree for Justifiable Confiscation gives the Ministry the power the confiscate the contents of a will–““That law was created to stop wizards passing on Dark artifacts,“ said Hermione, ”and the Ministry is supposed to

have powerful evidence that the deceased's possessions are illegal before seizing them! Are you telling me that you thought Dumbledore was trying to pass us something cursed?""Are you planning to follow a career in Magical Law, Miss Granger?" asked Scrimgeour.

"No, I'm not," retorted Hermione. "I'm hoping to do some good in the world!"

Ron laughed. Scrimgeour's eyes flickered toward him and away again as Harry spoke.

"So why have you decided to let us have our things now? Can't think of a pretext to keep them?"

"No, it'll be because thirty-one days are up," said Hermione at once. "They can't keep the objects longer than that unless they can prove they're dangerous. Right?"

"Would you say you were close to Dumbledore, Ronald?" asked Scrimgeour, ignoring Hermione. Ron looked startled.

"Me? Not – not really… It was always Harry who…"

Ron looked around at Harry and Hermione, to see Hermione giving him a stop-talking-now! sort of look, but the damage was done; Scrimgeour looked as though he had heard exactly what he had expected, and wanted, to hear. He swooped like a bird of prey upon Ron's answer.

"If you were not very close to Dumbledore, how do you account for the fact that he remembered you in his will? He made exceptionally few personal bequests. The vast majority of his possessions – his private library, his magical instruments, and other personal effects – were left to Hogwarts. Why do you think you were singled out?""I… dunno," said Ron. "I…when I say we weren't close…I mean, I think he liked me…"

“You’re being modest, Ron,” said Hermione. “Dumbledore was very fond of you.”

This was stretching the truth to breaking point; as far as Harry knew, Ron and Dumbledore had never been alone together, and direct contact between them had been negligible. However, Scrimgeour did not seem to be listening. He put his hand inside his cloak and drew out a drawstring pouch much larger than the one Hagrid had given Harry. From it, he removed a scroll of parchment which he unrolled and read aloud.

“‘The Last Will and Testament of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore’… Yes, here we are… ‘To Ronald Bilius Weasley, I leave my Deluminator, in the hope that he will remember me when he uses it.’”

Scrimgeour took from the bag an object that Harry had seen before: It looked something like a silver cigarette lighter, but it had, he knew, the power to suck all light from a place, and restore it, with a simple click. Scrimgeour leaned forward and passed the Deluminator to Ron, who took it and turned it over in the fingers looking stunned.

“That is a valuable object,” said Scrimgeour, watching Ron. “It may even be unique. Certainly it is of Dumbledore’s own design. Why would he have left you and item so rare?”

Ron shook his head, looking bewildered.

“Dumbledore must have taught thousands of students,“ Scrimgeour persevered. ”Yet the only ones he remembered in his will are you three. Why is that? To what use did he think you would put to the Deluminator, Mr. Weasley?““Put out lights, I s’pose,” mumbled Ron. “What else could I do with it?”

Evidently Scrimgeour had no suggestions. After squinting at Ron for a moment or tow, he turned back to Dumbledore’s will.

"'To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard, in the hope that she will find it entertaining and instructive.'"

Scrimgeour now pulled out of the bag a small book that looked as ancient as the copy of Secrets of the Darkest Art upstairs. Its binding was stained and peeling in places. Hermione took it from Scrimgeour without a word. She held the book in her lap and gazed at it. Harry saw that the title was in runes; he had never learned to read them. As he looked, a tear splashed onto the embossed symbols.

"Why do you think Dumbledore left you that book, Miss Granger?" asked Scrimgeour.

"He… he knew I liked books," said Hermione in a thick voice, mopping her eyes with her sleeve.

"But why that particular book?"

"I don't know. He must have thought I'd enjoy it."

"Did you ever discuss codes, or any means of passing secret messages, with Dumbledore?""No, I didn't," said Hermione, still wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "And if the Ministry hasn't found any hidden codes in this book in thirty-one days, I doubt that I will."

She suppressed a sob. They were wedged together so tightly that Ron had difficulty extracting his arm to put it around Hermione's shoulders. Scrimgeour turned back to the will.

"'To Harry James Potter,'" he read, and Harry's insides contracted with a sudden excitement, "'I leave the Snitch he caught in his first Quidditch match at Hogwarts, as a reminder of the rewards of perseverance and skill.'"As Scrimgeour pulled out the tiny, walnut-sized golden ball, its silver wings fluttered rather feebly, and Harry could not help feeling a definite sense of anticlimax.

“Why did Dumbledore leave you this Snitch?” asked Scrimgeour.

“No idea,“ said Harry. ”For the reasons you just read out, I suppose… to remind me what you can get if you… persevere and whatever it was.““You think this a mere symbolic keepsake, then?”

“I suppose so,” said Harry. “What else could it be?”

“I’m asking the questions,” said Scrimgeour, shifting his chair a little closer to the sofa. Dusk was really falling outside now; the marquee beyond the windows towered ghostly white over the hedge.

“I notice that your birthday cake is in the shape of a Snitch,” Scrimgeour said to Harry. “Why is that?”

Hermione laughed derisively.

“Oh, it can’t be a reference to the fact Harry’s a great Seeker, that’s way too obvious,” she said. “There must be a secret message from Dumbledore hidden in the icing!”

“I don’t think there’s anything hidden in the icing,“ said Scrimgeour, ”but a Snitch would be a very good hiding place for a small object. You know why, I’m sure?“Harry shrugged, Hermione, however, answered: Harry thought that answering questions correctly was such a deeply ingrained habit she could not suppress the urge.

“Because Snitches have flesh memories,” she said.

“What?” said Harry and Ron together; both considered Hermione’s Quidditch knowledge negligible.

“Correct,” said Scrimgeour. “A Snitch is not touched by bare skin before it is released, not even by the maker, who wears gloves. It carries an enchantment by which it can identify the first human to lay hands upon it, in case of a disputed capture. This Snitch” – he held up the tiny golden ball – “will remember your touch, Potter.

It occurs to me that Dumbledore, who had prodigious magical skill, whatever his other faults, might have enchanted this Snitch so that it will open only for you.“Harry’s heart was beating rather fast. He was sure that Scrimgeour was right. How could he avoid taking the Snitch with his bare hand in front of the Minister?

“You don’t say anything,“ said Scrimgeour. ”Perhaps you already know what the Snitch contains?““No,” said Harry, still wondering how he could appear to touch the Snitch without really doing so. If only he knew Legilimency, really knew it, and could read Hermione’s mind; he could practically hear her brain whizzing beside him.

“Take it,” said Scrimgeour quietly.

Harry met the Minister’s yellow eyes and knew he had no option but to obey. He held out his hand, and Scrimgeour leaned forward again and place the Snitch, slowly and deliberately, into Harry’s palm.

Nothing happened. As Harry’s fingers closed around the Snitch, its tired wings fluttered and were still. Scrimgeour, Ron, and Hermione continued to gaze avidly at the now partially concealed ball, as if still hoping it might transform in some way.

“That was dramatic,” said Harry coolly. Both Ron and Hermione laughed.

“That’s all, then, is it?” asked Hermione, making to raise herself off the sofa.

“Not quite,” said Scrimgeour, who looked bad tempered now. “Dumbledore left you a second bequest, Potter.”

“What is it?” asked Harry, excitement rekindling.

Scrimgeour did not bother to read from the will this time.

“The sword of Godric Gryffindor,” he said. Hermione and Ron both stiffened. Harry looked around for a sign of the ruby-encrusted hilt, but Scrimgeour did not pull the sword from the leather pouch, which in any case looked much too small to contain it.

“So where is it?” Harry asked suspiciously.

“Unfortunately,“ said Scrimgeour, “that sword was not Dumbledore’s to give away. The sword of Godric Gryffindor is an important historical artifact, and as such, belongs–”

“It belongs to Harry!” said Hermione hotly. “It chose him, he was the one who found it, it came to him out of the Sorting Hat–”

“According to reliable historical sources, the sword may present itself to any worthy Gryffindor,” said Scrimgeour. “That does not make it the exclusive property of Mr. Potter, whatever Dumbledore may have decided.” Scrimgeour scratched his badly shaven cheek, scrutinizing Harry. “Why do you think–?”

“–Dumbledore wanted to give me the sword?“ said Harry, struggling to keep his temper. ”Maybe he thought it would look nice on my wall.““This is not a joke, Potter!“ growled Scrimgeour. ”Was it because Dumbledore believed that only the sword of Godric Gryffindor could defeat the Heir of Slytherin? Did he wish to give you that sword, Potter, because he believed, as do many, that you are the one destined to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?““Interesting theory,” said Harry. “Has anyone ever tried sticking a sword in Voldemort? Maybe the Ministry should put some people onto that, instead of wasting their time stripping down Deluminators or covering up breakouts from Azkaban. So this is what you’ve been doing, Minister, shut up in your office, trying to break open a Snitch? People are dying – I was nearly one of them – Voldemort chased me across three countries, he killed Mad-Eye Moody, but there’s no word about any of that from the Ministry, has there? And you still expect us to cooperate with you!”

“You go too far!” shouted Scrimgeour, standing up: Harry jumped to his feet too. Scrimgeour limped toward Harry and jabbed him hard in the chest with the point of his wand; It singed a hole in Harry’s T-shirt like a lit cigarette.

“Oi!” said Ron, jumping up and raising his own wand, but Harry said, “No! D’you want to give him an excuse to arrest us?”

“Remembered you’re not at school, have you?“ said Scrimgeour breathing hard into Harry’s face. ”Remembered that I am not Dumbledore, who forgave your insolence and insubordination? You may wear that scar like a crown, Potter, but it is not up to a seventeen-year-old boy to tell me how to do my job! It’s time you learned some respect!““It’s time you earned it.” said Harry.

The floor trembled; there was a sound of running footsteps, then the door to the sitting room burst open and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley ran in.

“We – we thought we heard –“ began Mr. Weasley, looking thoroughly alarmed at the sight of Harry and the Minister virtually nose to nose.

“ – raised voices,” panted Mrs. Weasley.

Scrimgeour took a couple of steps back from Harry, glancing at the hole he had made in Harry’s T-shirt. He seemed to regret his loss of temper.

“It – it was nothing,” he growled. “I … regret your attitude,” he said, looking Harry full in the face once more. “You seem to think that the Ministry does not desire what you – what Dumbledore – desired. We ought to work together.”

“I don’t like your methods, Minister,” said Harry. “Remember?”

For the second time, he raised his right fist and displayed to Scrimgeour the scar that still showed white on the back of it, spelling I

must not tell lies . Scrimgeour's expression hardened. He turned away without another word and limped from the room. Mrs. Weasley hurried after him; Harry heard her stop at the back door. After a minute or so she called, "He's gone!"

"What did he want?" Mr. Weasley asked, looking around at Harry, Ron, and Hermione as Mrs. Weasley came hurrying back to them.

"To give us what Dumbledore left us," said Harry. "They've only just released the content of his will."

Outside in the garden, over the dinner tables, the three objects Scrimgeour had given them were passed from hand to hand. Everyone exclaimed over the Deluminator and The Tales of Beedle the Bard and lamented the fact that Scrimgeour had refused to pass on the sword, but none of them could offer any suggestion as to why Dumbledore would have left Harry an old Snitch. As Mr. Weasley examined the Deluminator for the third of fourth time, Mrs. Weasley said tentatively, "Harry, dear, everyone's awfully hungry we didn't like to start without you… Shall I serve dinner now?"

They all ate rather hurriedly and then after a hasty chorus of "Happy Birthday" and much gulping of cake, the party broke up. Hagrid, who was invited to the wedding the following day, but was far too bulky to sleep in the overstretched Burrow, left to set up a tent for himself in a neighboring field.

"Meet us upstairs," Harry whispered to Hermione, while they helped Mrs. Weasley restore the garden to its normal state. "After everyone's gone to bed."

Up in the attic room, Ron examined his Deluminator, and Harry filled Hagrid's moleskin purse, not with gold, but with those items he most prized, apparently worthless though some of them were the Marauder's Map, the shard of Sirius's enchanted mirror, and R.A.B.'s locket. He pulled the string tight and slipped the purse around his

neck, then sat holding the old Snitch and watching its wings flutter feebly. At last, Hermione tapped on the door and tiptoed inside.

“Muffiato,” she whispered, waving her wand in the direction of the stairs.

“Thought you didn’t approve of that spell?” said Ron.

“Times change,“ said Hermione. ”Now, show us that Deluminator.“Ron obliged at once. Holding I up in front of him, he clicked it. The solitary lamp they had lit went out at once.

“The thing is,” whispered Hermione through the dark, “we could have achieved that with Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder.”

There was a small click, and the ball of light from the lamp flew back to the ceiling and illuminated them all once more.

“Still, it’s cool,” said Ron, a little defensively. “And from what they said, Dumbledore invented it himself!”

“I know but, surely he wouldn’t have singled you out in his will just to help us turn out the lights!”

“D’you think he knew the Ministry would confiscate his will and examine everything he’d left us?” asked Harry.

“Definitely,” said Hermione. “He couldn’t tell us in the will why he was leaving us these things, but that will doesn’t explain…”

“… why he couldn’t have given us a hint when he was alive?” asked Ron.

“Well, exactly,“ said Hermione, now flicking through The Tales of Beedle the Bard. ”If these things are important enough to pass on right under the nose of the Ministry, you’d think he’d have left us know why… unless he thought it was obvious?““Thought wrong, then, didn’t

he?” said Ron. “I always said he was mental. Brilliant and everything, but cracked. Leaving Harry an old Snitch – what the hell was that about?”

“I’ve no idea,” said Hermione. “When Scrimgeour made you take it, Harry, I was so sure that something was going to happen!”

“Yeah, well,” said Harry, his pulse quickened as he raised the Snitch in his fingers. “I wasn’t going to try too hard in front of Scrimgeour was I?”

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione.

“The Snitch I caught in my first ever Quidditch match?” said Harry. “Don’t you remember?”

Hermione looked simply bemused. Ron, however, gasped, pointing frantically from Harry to the Snitch and back again until he found his voice.

“That was the one you nearly swallowed!”

“Exactly,” said Harry, and with his heart beating fast, he pressed his mouth to the Snitch.

It did not open. Frustration and bitter disappointment welled up inside him: He lowered the golden sphere, but then Hermione cried out.

“Writing! There’s writing on it, quick, look!” He nearly dropped the Snitch in surprise and excitement. Hermione was quite right. Engraved upon the smooth golden surface, where seconds before there had been nothing, were five words written in the thin, slanted handwriting that Harry recognized as Dumbledore’sI open at the close.

He had barely read them when the words vanished again.

“I open at the close…. What’s that supposed to mean?”

Hermione and Ron shook their heads, looking blank.

“I open at the close… at the close… I open at the close…”

But no matter how often they repeated the words, with many different inflections, they were unable to wring any more meaning from them.

“And the sword,” said Ron finally, when they had at last abandoned their attempts to divine meaning in the Snitch’s inscription.

“Why did he want Harry to have the sword?”

“And why couldn’t he just have told me?” Harry said quietly. “I was there, it was right there on the wall of his office during all our talks last year! If he wanted me to have it, why didn’t he just give it to me then?”

He felt as thought he were sitting in an examination with a question he ought to have been able to answer in front of him, his brain slow and unresponsive. Was there something he had missed in the long talks with Dumbledore last year? Ought he to know what it all meant? Had Dumbledore expected him to understand?

“And as for this book.” Said Hermione, “The Tales of Beedle the Bard … I’ve never even heard of them!”

“You’ve never heard of The Tales of Beedle the Bard?” said Ron incredulously. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not,” said Hermione in surprise. “Do you know them then?”

“Well, of course I do!”

Harry looked up, diverted. The circumstance of Ron having read a book that Hermione had not was unprecedented. Ron, however, looked bemused by their surprise.

“Oh come on! All the old kids’ stories are supposed to be Beedle’s aren’t they? ‘The Fountain of Fair Fortune’ … ‘The Wizard and the Hopping Pot’… ‘Babbitty Rabbitty and her Cackling Stump’…”

“Excuse me?” said Hermione giggling. “What was the last one?”

“Come off it!” said Ron, looking in disbelief from Harry to Hermione. “You must’ve heard of Babbitty Rabbitty – ”

“Ron, you know full well Harry and I were brought up by Muggles!” said Hermione. “We didn’t hear stories like that when we were little, we heard ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarves’ and ‘Cinderella’ – ”

“What’s that, an illness?” asked Ron.

“So these are children’s stories?” asked Hermione, bending against over the runes.

“Yeah.” Said Ron uncertainly. “I mean, just what you hear, you know, that all these old stories came from Beedle. I dunno what they’re like in the original versions.”

“But I wonder why Dumbledore thought I should read them?”

Something cracked downstairs.

“Probably just Charlie, now Mum’s asleep, sneaking off to regrow his hair,” said Ron nervously.

“All the same, we should get to bed,” whispered Hermione. “It wouldn’t do to oversleep tomorrow.”

“No,” agreed Ron. “A brutal triple murder by the bridegroom’s mother might put a bit of damper on the wedding. I’ll get the light.”

And he clicked the Deluminator once more as Hermione left the room.

Chapter 8 The Wedding

Three o'clock on the following afternoon found Harry, Ron, Fred and George standing outside the great white marquee in the orchard, awaiting the arrival of the wedding guests. Harry had taken a large dose of Polyjuice Potion and was now the double of a redheaded Muggle boy from the local village, Ottery St. Catchpole, from whom Fred had stolen hairs using a Summoning Charm. The plan was to introduce Harry as "Cousin Barny" and trust to the great number of Weasley relatives to camouflage him.

All four of them were clutching seating plans, so that they could help show people to the right seats. A host of white-robed waiters had arrived an hour earlier, along with a golden jacketed band, and all of these wizards were currently sitting a short distance away under a tree. Harry could see a blue haze of pipe smoke issuing from the spot. Behind Harry, the entrance to the marquee revealed rows and rows of fragile golden chairs set on either side of a long purple carpet. The supporting poles were entwined with white and gold flowers. Fred and George had fastened an enormous bunch of golden balloons over the exact point where Bill and Fleur would shortly become husband and wife. Outside, butterflies and bees were hovering lazily over the grass and hedgerow. Harry was rather uncomfortable. The Muggle boy whose appearance he was affecting was slightly fatter than him and his dress robes felt hot and tight in the full glare of a summer's day.

"When I get married," said Fred, tugging at the collar of his own robes, "I won't be bothering with any of this nonsense. You can all wear what you like, and I'll put a full Body Bird Curse on Mum until it's all over."

"She wasn't too bad this morning, considering," said George. "Cried a bit about Percy not being here, but who wants him. Oh blimey, brace yourselves, here they come, look."

Brightly colored figures were appearing, one by one out of nowhere at the distant boundary of the yard. Within minutes a procession had formed, which began to snake its way up through the garden toward the marquee. Exotic flowers and bewitched birds fluttered on the witches' hats, while precious gems glittered from many of the wizards' cravats; a hum of excited chatter grew louder and louder, drowning the sound of the bees as the crowd approached the tent.

"Excellent, I think I see a few veela cousins," said George, craning his neck for a better look. "They'll need help understanding our English customs, I'll look after them…."

"Not so fast, Your Holeyness," said Fred, and darting past the gaggle of middle-aged witches heading for the procession, he said, "Here – permetiez moi to assister vous," to a pair of pretty French girls, who giggled and allowed him to escort them inside. George was left to deal with the middle-aged witches and Ron took charge of Mr. Weasley's old Ministry-colleague Perkins, while a rather deaf old couple fell to Harry's lot.

"Wotcher," said a familiar voice as he came out of the marquee again and found Tonks and Lupin at the front of the queue. She had turned blonde for the occasion. "Arthur told us you were the one with the curly hair. Sorry about last night," she added in a whisper as Harry led them up the aisle. "The Ministry's being very anti-werewolf at the museum and we thought our presence might not do you any favors."

"It's fine, I understand," said Harry, speaking more to Lupin than Tonks. Lupin gave him a swift smile, but as they turned away Harry saw Lupin's face fall again into lines of misery. He did not understand it, but there was no time to dwell on the matter. Hagrid was causing a certain amount of disruption. Having misunderstood Fred's directions as he had sat himself, not upon the magically enlarged and reinforced seat set aside for him in the back row, but on five sets that now resembled a large pile of golden matchsticks.

While Mr. Weasley repaired the damage and Hagrid shouted apologies to anybody who would listen, Harry hurried back to the entrance to find Ron face-to-face with a most eccentric-looking wizard. Slightly cross-eyed, with shoulder-length white hair the texture of candyfloss, he wore a cap whose tassel dangled in front of his nose and robes of an eye-watering shade of egg-yolk yellow. An odd symbol, rather like a triangular eye, glistened from a golden chain around his neck.

“Xenophilius Lovegood,” he said, extending a hand to Harry, “my daughter and I live just over the hill, so kind of the good Weasleys to invite us. But I think you know my Luna?” he added to Ron.

“Yes,” said Ron. “Isn’t she with you?”

“She lingered in that charming little garden to say hello to the gnomes, such a glorious infestation! How few wizards realize just how much we can learn from the wise little gnomes – or, to give them their correct name, the Gernumbli gardensi.”

“Ours do know a lot of excellent swear words,” said Ron, “but I think Fred and George taught them those.”

He led a party of warlocks into the marquee as Luna rushed up.

“Hello, Harry!” she said.

“Er – my name’s Barry,” said Harry, flummoxed.

“Oh, have you changed that too?” she asked brightly.

“How did you know -?”

“Oh, just your expression,” she said.

Like her father, Luna was wearing bright yellow robes, which she had accessorized with a large sunflower in her hair. Once you get over

the brightness of it all, the general effect was quite pleasant. At least there were no radishes dangling from her ears.

Xenophilius, who was deep in conversation with an acquaintance, had missed the exchange between Luna and Harry. Biding the wizard farewell, he turned to his daughter, who held up her finger and said, “Daddy, look – one of the gnomes actually bit me.”

“How wonderful! Gnome saliva is enormously beneficial.” Said Mr. Lovegood, seizing Luna’s outstretched fingers and examining the bleeding puncture marks. “Luna, my love, if you should feel any burgeoning talent today – perhaps an unexpected urge to sing opera or to declaims in Mermish – do not repress it! You may have been gifted by the Gernumblies!”

Ron, passing them in the opposite direction let out a loud snort.

“Ron can laugh,” said Luna serenely as Harry led her and Xenophilius toward their seats, “but my father has done a lot of research on Gernumbli magic.”

“Really?” said Harry, who had long since decided not to challenge Luna or her father’s peculiar views. “Are you sure you don’t want to put anything on that bite, though?”

“Oh, it’s fine,” said Luna, sucking her finger in a dreamy fashion and looking Harry up and down. “You look smart. I told Daddy most people would probably wear dress robes, but he believes you ought to wear sun colors to a wedding, for luck, you know.”

As she drifted off after her father, Ron reappeared with an elderly witch clutching his arm. Her beaky nose, red-rimmed eyes, and leathery pink hat gave her the look of a bad-tempered flamingo.

“…and your hair’s much too long, Ronald, for a moment I thought you were Ginevra. Merlin’s beard, what is Xenophilius Lovegood wearing? He looks like an omelet. And who are you?” she barked at Harry.

“Oh yeah, Auntie Muriel, this is our cousin Barny.”

“Another Weasley? You breed like gnomes. Isn’t Harry Potter here? I was hoping to meet him. I thought he was a friend of yours, Ronald, or have you merely been boasting?”

“No – he couldn’t come – ”

“Hmm. Made an excuse, did he? Not as gormless as he looks in press photographs, then. I’ve just been instructing the bride on how best to wear my tiara,” she shouted at Harry. “Goblin-made, you know, and been in my family for centuries. She’s a good-looking girl, but still – French. Well, well, find me a good seat, Ronald, I am a hundred and seven and I ought not to be on my feet too long.”

Ron gave Harry a meaningful look as he passed and did not reappear for some time. When next they met at the entrance, Harry had shown a dozen more people to their places. The Marquee was nearly full now and for the first time there was no queue outside.

“Nightmare, Muriel is,” said Ron, mopping his forehead on his sleeve. “She used to come for Christmas every year, then, thank God, she took offense because Fred and George set off a Dungbomb under her chair at diner. Dad always says she’ll have written them out of her will – like they care, they’re going to end up richer than anyone in the family, rate they’re going… Wow,” he added, blinking rather rapidly as Hermione came hurrying toward them. “You look great!”

“Always the tone of surprise,” said Hermione, though she smiled. She was wearing a floaty, lilac-colored dress with matching high heels; her hair was sleek and shiny. “Your Great-Aunt Muriel doesn’t agree, I just met her upstairs while she was giving Fleur the tiara. She said, ‘Oh dear, is this the Muggle-born?’ and then, ‘Bad posture and skinny ankles.’”

“Don’t take it personally, she’s rude to everyone,” said Ron.

“Talking about Muriel?” inquired George, reemerging from the marquee with Fred. “Yeah, she’s just told me my ears are lopsided. Old bat. I wish old Uncle Bilius was still with us, though; he was a right laugh at weddings.”

“Wasn’t he the one who saw a Grim and died twenty-four hours later?” asked Hermione.

“Well, yeah, he went a bit odd toward the end,” conceded George.

“But before he went loopy he was the life and soul of the party,” said Fred. “He used to down an entire bottle of firewhisky, then run onto the dance floor, hoist up his robes, and start pulling bunches of flowers out of his – ”

“Yes, he sounds a real charmer,” said Hermione, while Harry roared with laughter.

“Never married, for some reason,” said Ron.

“You amaze me,” said Hermione.

They were all laughing so much that none of them noticed the latecomer, a dark-haired young man with a large, curved nose and thick black eyebrows, until he held out his invitation to Ron and said, with his eyes on Hermione, “You look vunderful.”

“Viktor!” she shrieked, and dropped her small beaded bag, which made a loud thump quite disproportionate to its size. As she scrambled, blushing, to pick it up, she said “I didn’t know you were – goodness – it’s lovely to see – how are you?”

Ron’s ears had turned bright red again. After glancing at Krum’s invitation as if he did not believe a word of it, he said, much too loudly, “how come you’re here?”

“Fleur invited me,” said Krum, eyebrows raised.

Harry, who had no grudge against Krum, shook hands; then feeling that it would be prudent to remove Krum from Ron's vicinity, offered to show him his seat.

"Your friend is not pleased to see me," said Krum, as they entered the now packed marquee. "Or is he a relative?" he added with a glance at Harry's red curly hair.

"Cousin." Harry muttered, but Krum was not really listening. His appearance was causing a stir, particularly amongst the veela cousins: He was, after all, a famous Quidditch player. While people were still craning their necks to get a good look at him, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George came hurrying down the aisle.

"Time to sit down," Fred told Harry, "or we're going to get run over by the bride."

Harry, Ron and Hermione took their seats in the second row behind Fred and George. Hermione looked rather pink and Ron's ears were still scarlet. After a few moments he muttered to Harry, "Did you see he's grown a stupid little beard?"

Harry gave a noncommittal grunt.

A sense of jittery anticipation had filled the warm tent, the general murmuring broken by occasional spurts of excited laughter. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley strolled up the aisle, smiling and waving at relatives; Mrs. Weasley was wearing a brand-new set of amethyst colored robes with a matching hat.

A moment later Bill and Charlie stood up at the front of the marquee, both wearing dress robes, with larger white roses in their buttonholes; Fred wolf-whistled and there was an outbreak of giggling from the veela cousins. Then the crowd fell silent as music swelled from what seemed to be the golden balloons.

“Ooooh!” said Hermione, swiveling around in her seat to look at the entrance.

A great collective sigh issued from the assembled witches and wizards as Monsieur Delacour and Fleur came walking up the aisle, Fleur gliding, Monsieur Delacour bouncing and beaming. Fleur was wearing a very simple white dress and seemed to be emitting a strong, silvery glow. While her radiance usually dimmed everyone else by comparison, today it beautified everybody it fell upon. Ginny and Gabrielle, both wearing golden dresses, looked even prettier than usual and once Fleur had reached for him, Bill did not look as though he had ever met Fenrit Greyback.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said a slightly singsong voice, and with a slight shock, Harry saw the same small, tufty-hired wizard who had presided at Dumbledore’s funeral, now standing in front of Bill and Fleur. “We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of two faithful souls…”

“Yes, my tiara set off the whole thing nicely,” said Auntie Muriel in a rather carrying whisper. “But I must say, Ginevra’s dress is far too low cut.”

Ginny glanced around, grinning, winked at Harry, then quickly faced the front again. Harry’s mind wandered a long way from the marquee, back to the afternoons spent alone with Ginny in lonely parts of the school grounds. They seemed so long ago; they had always seemed too good to be true, as though he had been stealing shining hours from a normal person’s life, a person without a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead….

“Do you, William Arthur, take Fleur Isabelle…?”

In the front row, Mrs. Weasley and Madame Delacour were both sobbing quietly into scraps of lace. Trumpetlike sounds from the back of the marquee told everyone that Hagrid had taken out one of his

own tablecloth-sized handkerchiefs. Hermione turned around and beamed at Harry; her eyes too were full of tears.

"…then I declare you bonded for life."

The tufty-haired wizard waved his hand high over the heads of Bill and Fleur and a shower of silver stars fell upon them, spiraling around their now entwined figures. As Fred and George led a round of applause, the golden balloons overhead burst. Birds of paradise and tiny golden bells flew and floated out of them, adding their songs and chimes to the din.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" called the tufty-haired wizard. "If you would please stand up!"

They all did so, Auntie Muriel grumbling audibly; he waved his wand again. The scars on which they had been sitting rose gracefully into the air as the canvas walls of the marquee vanished, so that they stood beneath a canopy supported by golden poles, with a glorious view of the sunlit orchard and surrounding countryside. Next, a pool of molten gold spread from the center of the tent to form a gleaming dance floor; the hovering chairs grouped themselves around small, white-clothed tables, which all floated gracefully back to earth round it, and the golden-jacketed hand trooped toward a podium.

"Smooth," said Ron approvingly as the waiters popped up on all sides, some hearing silver trays of pumpkin juice, butterbeer, and firewhisky, others tottering piles of tarts and sandwiches.

"We should go and congratulate them!" said Hermione, standing on tiptoe to see the place where Bill and Fleur had vanished amid a crowd of well-wishers.

"We'll have time later," shrugged Ron, snatching three butterbeers from a passing tray and handing one to Harry. "Hermione, cop hold, let's grab a table…. Not there! Nowhere near Muriel – "

Ron led the way across the empty dance floor, glancing left and right as he went; Harry felt sure that he was keeping an eye out for Krum. By the time they had reached the other side of the marquee, most of the tables were occupied: The emptiest was the one where Luna sat alone.

“All right if we join you?” asked Ron.

“Oh yes,” she said happily. “Daddy’s just gone to give Bill and Fleur our present.”

“What is it, a lifetime’s supply of Gurdyroots?” asked Ron.

Hermione aimed a kick at him under the table, but caught Harry instead. Eyes watering in pain, Harry lost track of the conversation for a few moments.

The band had begun to play, Bill and Fleur took to the dance floor first, to great applause; after a while, Mr. Weasley led Madame Delacour onto the floor, followed by Mr. Weasley and Fleur’s father.

“I like this song,” said Luna, swaying in time to the waltzlike tune, and a few seconds later she stood up and glided onto the dance floor, where she revolved on the spot, quite alone, eyes closed and waving her arms.

“She’s great isn’t she?” said Ron admiringly. “Always good value.”

But the smile vanished from his face at once: Viktor Krum had dropped into Luna’s vacant seat. Hermione looked pleasurably flustered but this time Krum had not come to compliment her. With a scowl on his face he said, “Who is that man in the yellow?”

“That’s Xenophilius Lovegood, he’s the father of a friend of ours,” said Ron. His pugnacious tone indicated that they were not about to laugh at Xenophilius, despite the clear provocation. “Come and dance,” he added abruptly to Hermione.

She looked taken aback, but pleased too, and got up. They vanished together into the growing throng on the dance floor.

“Ah, they are together now?” asked Krum, momentarily distracted.

“Er – sort of,” said Harry.

“Who are you?” Krum asked.

“Barny Weasley.”

They shook hands.

“You, Barny – you know this man Lovegood well?”

“No, I only met him today. Why?”

Krum glowered over the top of his drink, watching Xenophilius, who was chatting to several warlocks on the other side of the dance floor.

“Because,” said Krum, “If he vus not a guest of Fleur’s I vould dud him, here and now, for veering that filthy sign upon his chest.”

“Sign?” said Harry, looking over at Xenophilius too. The strange triangular eye was gleaming on his chest. “Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“Grindelvald. That is Grindelvald’s sign.”

“Grindelwald… the Dark wizard Dumbledore defeated?”

“Exactly.”

Krum’s jaw muscles worked as if he were chewing, then he said, “Grindelvald killed many people, my grandfather, for instance. Of course, he vos never powerful in this country, they said he feared Dumbledore – and rightly, seeing how he vos finished. But this” – he pointed a finger at Xenophilius – “this is his symbol, I recognized it at

vunce: Grindelvald carved it into a vall at Durmstrang ver he vos a pupil there. Some idiots copied it onto their books and clothes thinking to shock, make themselves impressive – until those of us who had lost family members to Grindelvald taught them better."

Krum cracked his knuckles menacingly and glowered at Xenophilius. Harry felt perplexed. It seemed incredibly unlikely that Luna's father was a supporter of the Dark Arts, and nobody else in the tent seemed to have recognized the triangular, finlike shape.

"Are you – er – quite sure it's Grindelwald's -?"

"I am not mistaken," said Krum coldly. "I walked past that sign for several years, I know it vell."

"Well, there's a chance," said Harry, "that Xenophilius doesn't actually know what the symbol means, the Lovegoods are quite… unusual. He could have easily picked it up somewhere and think it's a cross section of the head of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack or something."

"The cross section of a vot?"

"Well, I don't know what they are, but apparently he and his daughter go on holiday looking for them…."

Harry felt he was doing a bad job explaining Luna and her father.

"That's her," he said, pointing at Luna, who was still dancing alone, waving her arms around her head like someone attempting to beat off midges.

"Vy is she doing that?" asked Krum.

"Probably trying to get rid of a Wrackspurt," said Harry, who recognized the symptoms.

Krum did not seem to know whether or not Harry was making fun of him. He drew his hand from inside his robe and tapped it menacingly on his thighs; sparks flew out of the end.

"Gregorovitch!" said Harry loudly, and Krum started, but Harry was too excited to care; the memory had come back to him at the sight of Krum's wand: Ollivander taking it and examining it carefully before the Triwizard Tournament.

"Vot about him?" asked Krum suspiciously.

"He's a wandmaker!"

"I know that," said Krum.

"He made your wand! That's why I thought – Quidditch – "

Krum was looking more and more suspicious.

"How do you know Gregorovitch made my wand?"

"I…I read it somewhere, I think," said Harry. "In a – a fan magazine," he improvised wildly and Krum looked mollified.

"I had not realized I ever discussed my vand with fans," he said.

"So… er… where is Gregorowitch these days?"

Krum looked puzzled.

"He retired several years ago. I was one of the last to purchase a Gregorovitch vand. They are the best –although I know, of course, that your Britons set much store by Ollivander."

Harry did not answer. He pretended to watch the dancers, like Krum, but he was thinking hard. So Voldemort was looking for a celebrated wandmaker and Harry did not have to search far for a reason. It was surely because of what Harry' wand had done on the night that

Voldemort pursued him across the skies. The holly and phoenix feather wand had conquered the borrowed wand, some thing that Ollivander had not anticipated or understood. Would Gregorowitch know better? Was he truly more skilled than Ollivander, did he know secrets of wands that Ollivander did not?

“This girl is very nice-looking,” Krum said, recalling Harry to his surroundings. Krum was pointing at Ginny, who had just joined Luna. “She is also a relative of yours?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, suddenly irritated, “and she’s seeing someone. Jealous type. Big bloke. You wouldn’t want to cross him.”

Krum grunted.

“Vot,” he said, draining his goblet and getting to his feet again, “is the point of being an international Quidditch player if all the good-looking girls are taken?”

And he strode off leaving Harry to take a sandwich from a passing waiter and make his way around the edge of the crowded dance floor. He wanted to find Ron, to tell him about Gregorovitch, but he was dancing with Hermione out in the middle of the floor. Harry leaned up against one of the golden pillars and watched Ginny, who was now dancing with Fred and George’s friend Lee Jordan, trying not to feel resentful about the promise he had given Ron.

He had never been to a wedding before, so he could not judge how Wizarding celebrations differed from Muggle ones, though he was pretty sure that the latter would not involve a wedding cake topped with two model phoenixes that took flight when the cake was cut, or bottles of champagne that floated unsupported through the crowd. As the evening drew in, and moths began to swoop under the canopy, now lit with floating golden lanterns, the revelry became more and more uncontained. Fred and George had long since disappeared into the darkness with a pair of Fleur’s cousins; Charlie, Hagrid, and a

squat wizard in a purple porkpie hat were singing “Odo the Hero” in the corner.

Wandering through the crowd so as to escape a drunken uncle of Ron’s who seemed unsure whether or not Harry was his son, Harry spotted an old wizard sitting alone at a table. His cloud of white hair made him look rather like an aged dandelion clock and was topped by a moth-eaten fez. He was vaguely familiar: Racking his brains, Harry suddenly realized that this was Elphias Doge, member of the Order of the Phoenix and the writer of Dumbledore’s obituary.

Harry approached him.

“May I sit down?”

“Of course, of course,” said Doge; he had a rather high-pitched, wheezy voice.

Harry leaned in.

“Mr. Doge, I’m Harry Potter.”

Doge gasped.

“My dear boy! Arthur told me you were here, disguised…. I am so glad, so honored!”

In a flutter of nervous pleasure Doge poured Harry a goblet of champagne.

“I thought of writing to you,” he whispered, “after Dumbledore… the shock… and for you, I am sure…”

Doge’s tiny eyes filled with sudden tears.

“I saw the obituary you wrote for the Daily Prophet,” said Harry. “I didn’t realize you knew Professor Dumbledore so well.”

“As well as anyone,” said Doge, dabbing his eyes with a napkin. “Certainly I knew him longest, if you don’t count Aberforth – and somehow, people never do seem to count Aberforth.”

“Speaking of the Daily Prophet… I don’t know whether you saw, Mr. Doge -?”

“Oh, please call me Elphias, dear boy.”

“Elphias, I don’t know whether you saw the interview Rita Skeeter gave about Dumbledore?”

Doge’s face flooded with angry color.

“Oh yes, Harry, I saw it. That woman, or vulture might be a more accurate term, positively pestered me to talk to her, I am ashamed to say that I became rather rude, called her an interfering trout, which resulted, as you my have seen, in aspersions cast upon my sanity.”

“Well, in that interview,” Harry went on, “Rita Skeeter hinted that Professor Dumbledore was involved in the Dark Arts when he was young.”

“Don’t believe a word of it!” said Doge at once. “Not a word, Harry! Let nothing tarnish your memories of Albus Dumbledore!”

Harry looked into Doge’s earnest, pained face, and felt, not reassured, but frustrated. Did Doge really think it was that easy, that Harry could simply choose not to believe? Didn’t Doge understand Harry’s need to be sure, to know everything?

Perhaps Doge suspected Harry’s feelings, for he looked concerned and hurried on, “Harry, Rita Skeeter is a dreadful – ”

But he was interrupted by a shrill cackle.

“Rita Skeeter? Oh, I love her, always read her!”

Harry and Doge looked up to see Auntie Muriel standing there, the plumes dancing on her hair, a goblet of champagne in her hand. “She’s written a book about Dumbledore, you know!”

“Hello, Muriel,” said Doge, “Yes, we were just discussing – ”

“You there! Give me your chair, I’m a hundred and seven!”

Another redheaded Weasley cousin jumped off his seat, looking alarmed, and Auntie Muriel swung it around with surprising strength and plopped herself down upon it between Doge and Harry.

“Hello again, Barry or whatever your name is,” she said to Harry, “Now what were you saying about Rita Skeeter, Elphias? You know, she’s written a biography of Dumbledore? I can’t wait to read it. I must remember to place an order at Flourish and Blotts!”

Doge looked stiff and solemn at this but Auntie Muriel drained her goblet and clicked her bony fingers at a passing waiter for a replacement. She took another large gulp of champagne, belched and then said, “There’s no need to look like a pair of stuffed frogs! Before he became so respected and respectable and all that tosh, there were some mighty funny rumors about Albus!”

“Ill-informed sniping,” said Doge, turning radish-colored again.

“You would say that, Elphias,” cackled Auntie Muriel. “I noticed how you skated over the sticky patches in that obituary of yours!”

“I’m sorry you think so,” said Doge, more coldly still. “I assure you I was writing from the heart.”

“Oh, we all know you worshipped Dumbledore; I daresay you’ll still think he was a saint even if it does turn out that he did away with his Squib sister!”

“Muriel!” exclaimed Doge.

A chill that had nothing to do with the iced champagne was stealing through Harry's chest.

"What do you mean?" he asked Muriel. "Who said his sister was a Squib? I thought she was ill?"

"Thought wrong, then, didn't you, Barry!" said Auntie Muriel, looking delighted at the effect she had produced. "Anyway, how could you expect to know anything about it! It all happened years and years before you were even thought of, my dear, and the truth is that those of us who were alive then never knew what really happened. That's why I can't wait to find out what Skeeter's unearthed! Dumbledore kept that sister of his quiet for a long time!"

"Untrue!" wheezed Doge, "Absolutely untrue!"

"He never told me his sister as a Squib," said Harry, without thinking, still cold inside.

"And why on earth would he tell you?" screeched Muriel, swaying a little in her seat as she attempted to focus upon Harry.

"The reason Albus never spoke about Ariana," began Elphias in a voice stiff with emotion, "is, I should have thought, quite clear. He was so devastated by her death – "

"Why did nobody ever see her, Elphias?" squawked Muriel, "Why did half of us never even know she existed, until they carried the coffin out of the house and held a funeral for her? Where was saintly Albus while Ariana was locked in the cellar? Off being brilliant at Hogwarts, and never mind what was going on in his own house!"

"What d'you mean, locked in the cellar?" asked Harry. "What is this?"

Doge looked wretched. Auntie Muriel cackled again and answered Harry.

“Dumbledore’s mother was a terrifying woman, simply terrifying. Muggle-born, though I heard she pretended otherwise-”

“She never pretended anything of the sort! Kendra was a fine woman,” whispered Doge miserably, but Auntie Muriel ignored him.

“- proud and very domineering, the sort of witch who would have been mortified to produce a Squib-”

“Ariana was not a Squib!” wheezed Doge.

“So you say, Elphias, but explain, then, why she never attended Hogwarts!” said Auntie Muriel. She turned back to Harry. “In our day, Squibs were often hushed up, thought to take it to the extreme of actually imprisoning a little girl in the house and pretending she didn’t exist – ”

“I tell you, that’s not what happened!” said Doge, but Auntie Muriel steamrollered on, still addressing Harry.

Squibs were usually shipped off to Muggle schools and encouraged to integrate into the Muggle community… much kinder than trying to find them a place in the Wizarding world, where they must always be second class, but naturally Kendra Dumbledore wouldn’t have dreamed of letting her daughter go to a Muggle school –“Ariana was delicate!” said Doge desperately. “Her health was always too poor to permit her – ”

“- to permit her to leave the house?” cackled Muriel. “And yet she was never taken to St. Mungo’s and no Healer was ever summoned to see her!”

“Really, Muriel, how can you possibly know whether – ”

“For your information, Elphias, my cousin Lancelot was a Healer at St. Mungo’s at the time, and he told my family in strictest confidence

that Ariana had never been seen there. All most suspicious, Lancelot thought!"

Doge looked to be on the verge of tears. Auntie Muriel, who seemed to be enjoying herself hugely, snapped her fingers for more champagne. Numbly Harry thought of how the Dursleys had once shut him up, locked him away, kept him out of sight, all for the crime of being a wizard. Had Dumbledore's sister suffered the same fate in reverse: imprisoned for her lack of magic? And had Dumbledore truly left her to her fate while he went off to Hogwarts to prove himself brilliant and talented?

"Now, if Kendra hadn't died first," Muriel resumed, "I'd have said that it was she who finished off Ariana – "

"How can you, Muriel!" groaned Doge. "A mother kill her own daughter? Think what you're saying!"

"If the mother in question was capable of imprisoning her daughter for years on end, why not?" shrugged Auntie Muriel. "But as I say, it doesn't fit, because Kendra died before Ariana – of what, nobody ever seemed sure-"

"Yes, Ariana might have made a desperate bid for freedom and killed Kendra in the struggle," said Auntie Muriel thoughtfully. "Shake your head all you like, Elphias. You were at Ariana's funeral, were you not?"

"Yes I was," said Doge, through trembling lips, "and a more desperately sad occasion I cannot remember. Albus was heartbroken-"

"His heart wasn't the only thing. Didn't Aberforth break Albus' nose halfway through the service?"

If Doge had looked horrified before this, it was nothing to how he looked now. Muriel might have stabbed him. She cackled loudly and

took another swig of champagne, which dribbled down her chin.

“How do you -?” croaked Doge.

“My mother was friendly with old Bathilda Bagshot,” said Auntie Muriel happily. “Bathilda described the whole thing to mother while I was listening at the door. A coffin-side brawl. The way Bathilda told it, Aberforth shouted that it was all Albus’ fault that Ariana was dead and then punched him in the face. According to Bathilda, Albus did not even defend himself, and that’s odd enough in itself. Albus could have destroyed Aberforth in a duel with both hands tied behind his back.”

Muriel swigged yet more champagne. The recitation of those old scandals seemed to elate her as much as they horrified Doge. Harry did not know what to think, what to believe. He wanted the truth and yet all Doge did was sit there and bleat feebly that Ariana had been ill. Harry could hardly believe that Dumbledore would not have intervened if such cruelty was happening inside his own house, and yet there was undoubtedly something odd about the story.

“And I’ll tell you something else,” Muriel said, hiccupping slightly as she lowered her goblet. “I think Bathilda has spilled the beans to Rita Skeeter. All those hints in Skeeter’s interview about an important source close to the Dumbledores – goodness knows she was there all through the Ariana business, and it would fit!”

“Bathilda, would never talk to Rita Skeeter!” whispered Doge.

“Bathilda Bagshot?” Harry said. “The author of A History of Magic?”

The name was printed on the front of one of Harry’s textbooks, though admittedly not one of the ones he had read more attentively.

“Yes,” said Doge, clutching at Harry’s question like a drowning man at a life heir. “A most gifted magical historian and an old friend of Albus’s.”

“Quite gaga these days, I’ve heard,” said Auntie Muriel cheerfully.

“If that is so, it is even more dishonorable for Skeeter to have taken advantage of her,” said Doge, “and no reliance can be placed on anything Bathilda may have said!”

“Oh, there are ways of bringing back memories, and I’m sure Rita Skeeter knows them all,” said Auntie Muriel “But even if Bathilda’s completely cuckoo, I’m sure she’d still have old photographs, maybe even letters. She knew the Dumbledores for years…. Well worth a trip to Godric’s Hollow, I’d have thought.”

Harry, who had been taking a sip of butterbeer, choked. Doge banged him on the back as Harry coughed, looking at Auntie Muriel through streaming eyes. Once he had control of his voice again, he asked, “Bathilda Bagshot lives in Godric’s Hollow?”

“Oh yes, she’s been there forever! The Dumbledores moved there after Percival was imprisoned, and she was their neighbor.”

“The Dumbledores lived in Godric’s Hollows?”

“Yes, Barry, that’s what I just said,” said Auntie Muriel testily.

Harry felt drained, empty. Never once, in six years, had Dumbledore told Harry that they had both lived and lost loved ones in Godric’s Hollow. Why? Were Lily and James buried close to Dumbledore’s mother and sister? Had Dumbledore visited their graves, perhaps walked past Lily’s and James’s to do so? And he had never once told Harry … never bothered to say…And why it was so important, Harry could not explain even to himself, yet he felt it had been tantamount to a lie not to tell him that they had this place and these experiences in common. He stared ahead of him, barely noticing what was going on around him, and did not realize that Hermione had appeared out of the crowd until she drew up a chair beside him.

“I simply can’t dance anymore,” she panted, slipping of one of her shoes and rubbing the sole of her foot. “Ron’s gone looking to find more butterbeers. It’s a bit odd. I’ve just seen Viktor storming away from Luna’s father, it looked like they’d been arguing – ” She dropped her voice, staring at him. “Harry, are you okay?”

Harry did not know where to begin, but it did not matter, at that moment, something large and silver came falling through the canopy over the dance floor. Graceful and gleaming, the lynx landed lightly in the middle of the astonished dancers. Heads turned, as those nearest it froze absurdly in mid-dance. Then the Patronus’s mouth opened wide and it spoke in the loud, deep, slow voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

“The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming.”

Chapter 9 A Place To Hide

Everything seemed fuzzy, slow. Harry and Hermione jumped to their feet and drew their wands. Many people were only just realizing that something strange had happened; heads were still turning toward the silver cat as it vanished. Silence spread outward in cold ripples from the place where the Patronus had landed. Then somebody screamed.

Harry and Hermione threw themselves into the panicking crowd. Guests were sprinting in all directions; many were Disapparating; the protective enchantments around the Burrow had broken.

“Ron!” Hermione cried. “Ron, where are you?”

As they pushed their way across the dance floor, Harry saw cloaked and masked figures appearing in the crowd; then he saw Lupin and Tonks, their wands raised, and heard both of them shout, “Protego!”, a cry that was echoed on all sides –“Ron! Ron!” Hermione called, half sobbing as she and Harry were buffered by terrified guests: Harry seized her hand to make sure they weren’t separated as a streak of light whizzed over their heads, whether a protective charm or something more sinister he did not know –And then Ron was there. He caught hold of Hermione’s free arm, and Harry felt her turn on the spot; sight and sound were extinguished as darkness pressed in upon him; all he could feel was Hermione’s hand as he was squeezed through space and time, away from the Burrow, away from the descending Death Eaters, away, perhaps, from Voldemort himself….

“Where are we?” said Ron’s voice.

Harry opened his eyes. For a moment he thought they had not left the wedding after all; They still seemed to be surrounded by people.

“Tottenham Court Road,” panted Hermione. “Walk, just walk, we need to find somewhere for you to change.”

Harry did as she asked. They half walked, half ran up the wide dark street thronged with late-night revelers and lined with closed shops, stars twinkling above them. A double-decker bus rumbled by and a group of merry pub-goers ogled them as they passed; Harry and Ron were still wearing dress robes.

“Hermione, we haven’t got anything to change into,” Ron told her, as a young woman burst into raucous giggles at the sight of him.

“Why didn’t I make sure I had the Invisibility Cloak with me?” said Harry, inwardly cursing his own stupidity. “All last year I kept it on me and – ”

“It’s okay, I’ve got the Cloak, I’ve got clothes for both of you,” said Hermione, “Just try and act naturally until – this will do.”

She led them down a side street, then into the shelter of a shadowy alleyway.

“When you say you’ve got the Cloak, and clothes…” said Harry, frowning at Hermione, who was carrying nothing except her small beaded handbag, in which she was now rummaging.

“Yes, they’re here,” said Hermione, and to Harry and Ron’s utter astonishment, she pulled out a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, some maroon socks, and finally the silvery Invisibility Cloak.

“How the ruddy hell –?”

“Undetectable Extension Charm,” said Hermione. “Tricky, but I think I’ve done it okay; anyway, I managed to fit everything we need in here.” She gave the fragile-looking bag a little shake and it echoed like a cargo hold as a number of heavy objects rolled around inside it. “Oh, damn, that’ll be the books,” she said, peering into it, “and I had

them all stacked by subject…. Oh well…. Harry, you'd better take the Invisibility Cloak. Ron, hurry up and change…."

"When did you do all this?" Harry asked as Ron stripped off his robes.

"I told you at the Burrow, I've had the essentials packed for days, you know, in case we needed to make a quick getaway. I packed your rucksack this morning, Harry, after you changed, and put it in here…. I just had a feeling…."

"You're amazing, you are," said Ron, handing her his bundled-up robes.

"Thank you," said Hermione, managing a small smile as she pushed the robes into the bag. "Please, Harry, get that Cloak on!"

Harry threw his Invisibility Cloak around his shoulders and pulled it up over his head, vanishing from sight. He was only just beginning to appreciate what had happened.

"The others – everybody at the wedding – "

"We can't worry about that now," whispered Hermione. "It's you they're after, Harry, and we'll just put everyone in even more danger by going back."

"She's right," said Ron, who seemed to know that Harry was about to argue, even if he could not see his face. "Most of the Order was there, they'll look after everyone."

Harry nodded, then remembered that they could not see him, and said, "Yeah." But he thought of Ginny, and fear bubbled like acid in his stomach.

"Come on, I think we ought to keep moving," said Hermione.

They moved back up the side street and onto the main road again, where a group of men on the opposite side was singing and weaving across the pavement.

"Just as a matter of interest, why Tottenham Court Road?" Ron asked Hermione.

"I've no idea, it just popped into my head, but I'm sure we're safer out in the Muggle world, it's not where they'll expect us to be."

"True," said Ron, looking around, "but don't you feel a bit – exposed?"

"Where else is there?" asked Hermione, cringing as the men on the other side of the road started wolf-whistling at her. "We can hardly book rooms at the Leaky Cauldron, can we? And Grimmauld Place is out if Snape can get in there…. I suppose we could try my parents' home, though I think there's a chance they might check there…. Oh, I wish they'd shut up!"

"All right, darling?" the drunkest of the men on the other pavement was yelling. "Fancy a drink? Ditch ginger and come and have a pint!"

"Let's sit down somewhere," Hermione said hastily as Ron opened his mouth to shout back across the road. "Look, this will do, in here!"

It was a small and shabby all-night café. A light layer of grease lay on all the Formica-topped tables, but it was at least empty. Harry slipped into a booth first and Ron sat next to him opposite Hermione, who had her back to the entrance and did not like it: She glanced over her shoulder so frequently she appeared to have a twitch. Harry did not like being stationary; walking had given the illusion that they had a goal. Beneath the Cloak he could feel the last vestiges of Polyjuice leaving him, his hands returning to their usual length and shape. He pulled his glasses out of his pocket and put them on again.

After a minute or two, Ron said, "You know, we're not far from the Leaky Cauldron here, it's only in Charing Cross – "

"Ron, we can't!" said Hermione at once.

"Not to stay there, but to find out what's going on!"

"We know what's going on! Voldemort's taken over the Ministry, what else do we need to know?"

"Okay, okay, it was just an idea!"

They relapsed into a prickly silence. The gum-chewing waitress shuffled over and Hermione ordered two cappuccinos: As Harry was invisible, it would have looked odd to order him one. A pair of burly workmen entered the café and squeezed into the next booth. Hermione dropped her voice to a whisper.

"I say we find a quiet place to Disapparate and head for the countryside. Once we're there, we could send a message to the Order."

"Can you do that talking Patronus thing, then?" asked Ron.

"I've been practicing and I think so," said Hermione.

"Well, as long as it doesn't get them into trouble, though they might've been arrested already. God, that's revolting," Ron added after one sip of the foamy, grayish coffee. The waitress had heard; she shot Ron a nasty look as she shuffled off to take the new customers' orders. The larger of the two workmen, who was blond and quite huge, now that Harry came to look at him, waved her away. She stared, affronted.

"Let's get going, then, I don't want to drink this muck," said Ron. "Hermione, have you got Muggle money to pay for this?"

"Yes, I took out all my Building Society savings before I came to the Burrow. I'll bet all the change is at the bottom," sighed Hermione, reaching for her beaded bag.

The two workmen made identical movements, and Harry mirrored them without conscious thought: All three of them drew their wands. Ron, a few seconds late in realizing what was going on, lunged across the table, pushing Hermione sideways onto her bench. The force of the Death Eaters' spells shattered the tiled wall where Ron's head had just been, as Harry, still invisible, yelled, "Stupefy!"

The great blond Death Eater was hit in the face by a jet of red light: He slumped sideways, unconscious. His companion, unable to see who had cast the spell, fired another at Ron: Shining black ropes flew from his wand-tip and bound Ron head to foot – the waitress screamed and ran for the door – Harry sent another Stunning Spell at the Death Eater with the twisted face who had tied up Ron, but the spell missed, rebounded on the window, and hit the waitress, who collapsed in front of the door.

"Expulso!" bellowed the Death Eater, and the table behind which Harry was standing blew up: The force of the explosion slammed him into the wall and he felt his wand leave his hand as the Cloak slipped off him.

"Petrificus Totalus!" screamed Hermione from out of sight, and the Death Eater fell forward like a statue to land with a crunching thud on the mess of broken china, table, and coffee. Hermione crawled out from underneath the bench, shaking bits of glass ashtray out of her hair and trembling all over.

"D-diffindo," she said, pointing her wand at Ron, who roared in pain as she slashed open the knee of his jeans, leaving a deep cut. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Ron, my hand's shaking! Diffindo!"

The severed ropes fell away. Ron got to his feet, shaking his arms to regain feeling in them. Harry picked up his wand and climbed over all the debris to where the large blond Death Eater was sprawled across the bench.

“I should’ve recognized him, he was there the night Dumbledore died,” he said. He turned over the darker Death Eater with his foot; the man’s eyes moved rapidly between Harry, Ron and Hermione.

“That’s Dolohov,” said Ron. “I recognize him from the old wanted posters. I think the big one’s Thorfinn Rowle.”

“Never mind what they’re called!” said Hermione a little hysterically. “How did they find us? What are we going to do?”

Somehow her panic seemed to clear Harry’s head.

“Lock the door,” he told her, “and Ron, turn out the lights.”

He looked down at the paralyzed Dolohov, thinking fast as the lock clicked and Ron used the Deluminator to plunge the café into darkness. Harry could hear the men who had jeered at Hermione earlier, yelling at another girl in the distance.

“What are we going to do with them?” Ron whispered to Harry through the dark; then, even more quietly, “Kill them? They’d kill us. They had a good go just now.”

Hermione shuddered and took a step backward. Harry shook his head.

“We just need to wipe their memories,” said Harry. “It’s better like that, it’ll throw them off the scent. If we killed them it’d be obvious we were here.”

“You’re the boss,” said Ron, sounding profoundly relieved. “But I’ve never down a Memory Charm.”

“Nor have I,” said Hermione, “but I know the theory.”

She took a deep, calming breath, then pointed her wand at Dolohov’s forehead and said, “Obliviate.”

At once, Dolohov's eyes became unfocused and dreamy.

"Brilliant!" said Harry, clapping her on the back. "Take care of the other one and the waitress while Ron and I clear up."

"Clear up?" said Ron, looking around at the partly destroyed café. "Why?"

"Don't you think they might wonder what's happened if they wake up and find themselves in a place that looks like it's just been bombed?"

"Oh right, yeah…"

Ron struggled for a moment before managing to extract his wand from his pocket.

"It's no wonder I can't get it out, Hermione, you packed my old jeans, they're tight."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," hissed Hermione, and as she dragged the waitress out of sight of the windows, Harry heard her mutter a suggestion as to where Ron could stick his wand instead.

Once the café was restored to its previous condition, they heaved the Death Eaters back into their booth and propped them up facing each other. "But how did they find us?" Hermione asked, looking from one inert man to the other. "How did they know where we were?"

She turned to Harry.

"You – you don't think you've still got your Trace on you, do you, Harry?"

"He can't have," said Ron. "The Trace breaks at seventeen, that's Wizarding law, you can't put it on an adult."

"As far as you know," said Hermione. "What if the Death Eaters have found a way to put it on a seventeen-year-old?"

“But Harry hasn’t been near a Death Eater in the last twenty-four hours. Who’s supposed to have put a Trace back on him?”

Hermione did not reply. Harry felt contaminated, tainted: Was that really how the Death Eaters had found them?

“If I can’t use magic, and you can’t use magic near me, without us giving away our position – ” he began.

“We’re not splitting up!” said Hermione firmly.

“We need a safe place to hide,” said Ron. “Give us time to think things through.”

“Grimmauld Place,” said Harry.

The other two gaped.

“Don’t be silly, Harry, Snape can get in there!”

“Ron’s dad said they’ve put up jinxes against him – and even if they haven’t worked,” he pressed on as Hermione began to argue “so what? I swear, I’d like nothing better than to meet Snape!”

“But – ”

“Hermione, where else is there? It’s the best chance we’ve got. Snape’s only one Death Eater. If I’ve still got the Trace on me, we’ll have whole crowds of them on us wherever else we go.”

She could not argue, though she looked as if she would have liked to. While she unlocked the café door, Ron clicked the Deluminator to release the café’s light. Then, on Harry’s count of three, they reversed the spells upon their three victims, and before the waitress or either of the Death Eaters could do more than stir sleepily, Harry, Ron and Hermione had turned on the spot and vanished into the compressing darkness once more.

Seconds later Harry's lungs expanded gratefully and he opened his eyes: They were now standing in the middle of a familiar small and shabby square. Tall, dilapidated houses looked down on them from every side. Number twelve was visible to them, for they had been told of its existence by Dumbledore, its Secret-Keeper, and they rushed toward it, checking every few yards that they were not being followed or observed. They raced up the stone steps, and Harry tapped the front door once with his wand. They heard a series of metallic clicks and the clatter of a chain, then the door swung open with a creak and they hurried over the threshold.

As Harry closed the door behind them, the old-fashioned gas lamps sprang into life, casting flickering light along the length of the hallway. It looked just as Harry remembered it: eerie, cobwebbed, the outlines of the house-elf heads on the wall throwing odd shadows up the staircase. Long dark curtains concealed the portrait of Sirius's mother. The only thing that was out of place was the troll's leg umbrella stand, which was lying on its side as if Tonks had just knocked it over again.

"I think somebody's been in here," Hermione whispered, pointing toward it.

"That could've happened as the Order left," Ron murmured back.

"So where are these jinxes they put up against Snape?" Harry asked.

"Maybe they're only activated if he shows up?" suggested Ron.

Yet they remained close together on the doormat, backs against the door, scared to move farther into the house.

"Well, we can't stay here forever," said Harry, and he took a step forward.

"Severus Snape?"

Mad-Eye Moody's voice whispered out of the darkness, making all three of them jump back in fright. "We're not Snape!" croaked Harry, before something whooshed over him like cold air and his tongue curled backward on itself, making it impossible to speak. Before he had time to feel inside his mouth, however, his tongue had unraveled again.

The other two seemed to have experienced the same unpleasant sensation. Ron was making retching noises; Hermione stammered, "That m-must have b-been the T-Tongue-Tying Curse Mad-Eye set up for Snape!"

Gingerly Harry took another step forward. Something shifted in the shadows at the end of the hall, and before any of them could say another word, a figure had risen up out of the carpet, tall, dust-colored, and terrible; Hermione screamed and so did Mrs. Black, her curtains flying open; the gray figure was gliding toward them, faster and faster, its waist-length hair and beard streaming behind it, its face sunken, fleshless, with empty eye sockets: Horribly familiar, dreadfully altered, it raised a wasted arm, pointing at Harry.

"No!" Harry shouted, and though he had raised his wand no spell occurred to him. "No! It wasn't us! We didn't kill you – "

On the word kill, the figure exploded in a great cloud of dust: Coughing, his eyes watering, Harry looked around to see Hermione crouched on the floor by the door with her arms over her head, and Ron, who was shaking from head to foot, patting her clumsily on the shoulder and saying, "It's all r-right…. It's g-gone…."

Dust swirled around Harry like mist, catching the blue gaslight, as Mrs. Black continued to scream.

"Mudbloods, filth, stains of dishonor, taint of shame on the house of my fathers – "

“SHUT UP!” Harry bellowed, directing his wand at her, and with a bang and a burst of red sparks, the curtains swung shut again, silencing her.

“That… that was…” Hermione whimpered, as Ron helped her to her feet.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “but it wasn’t really him, was it? Just something to scare Snape.”

Had it worked, Harry wondered, or had Snape already blasted the horror-figure aside as casually as he had killed the real Dumbledore? Nerves still tingling, he led the other two up the hall, half-expecting some new terror to reveal itself, but nothing moved except for a mouse skittering along the skirting board.

“Before we go any farther, I think we’d better check,” whispered Hermione, and she raised her wand and said, “Homenum revelio.”

Nothing happened.

“Well, you’ve just had a big shock,” said Ron kindly. “What was that supposed to do?”

“It did what I meant it to do!” said Hermione rather crossly. “That was a spell to reveal human presence, and there’s nobody here except us!”

“And old Dusty,” said Ron, glancing at the patch of carpet from which the corpse-figure had risen.

“Let’s go up,” said Hermione with a frightened look at the same spot, and she led the way up the creaking stairs to the drawing room on the first floor.

Hermione waved her wand to ignite the old gas lamps, then, shivering slightly in the drafty room, she perched on the sofa, her arms

wrapped tightly around her. Ron crossed to the window and moved the heavy velvet curtains aside an inch.

“Can’t see anyone out there,” he reported. “And you’d think, if Harry still had a Trace on him, they’d have followed us here. I know they can’t get in the house, but – what’s up, Harry?”

Harry had given a cry of pain: His scar had burned against as something flashed across his mind like a bright light on water. He saw a large shadow and felt a fury that was not his own pound through his body, violent and brief as an electric shock.

“What did you see?” Ron asked, advancing on Harry. “Did you see him at my place?”

“No, I just felt anger – he’s really angry – ”

“But that could be at the Burrow,” said Ron loudly. “What else? Didn’t you see anything? Was he cursing someone?”

“No, I just felt anger – I couldn’t tell – ”

Harry felt badgered, confused, and Hermione did not help as she said in a frightened voice, “Your scar, again? But what’s going on? I thought that connection had closed!”

“It did, for a while,” muttered Harry; his scar was still painful, which made it hard to concentrate. “I – I think it’s started opening again whenever he loses control, that’s how it used to – ”

“But then you’ve got to close your mind!” said Hermione shrilly. “Harry, Dumbledore didn’t want you to use that connection, he wanted you to shut it down, that’s why you were supposed to use Occlumency! Otherwise Voldemort can plant false images in your mind, remember – ”

"Yeah, I do remember, thanks," said Harry through gritted teeth; he did not need Hermione to tell him that Voldemort had once used this selfsame connection between them to lead him into a trap, nor that it had resulted in Sirius's death. He wished that he had not told them what he had seen and felt; it made Voldemort more threatening, as though he were pressing against the window of the room, and still the pain in his scar was building and he fought it: It was like resisting the urge to be sick.

He turned his back on Ron and Hermione, pretending to examine the old tapestry of the Black family tree on the wall. Then Hermione shrieked: Harry drew his wand again and spun around to see a silver Patronus soar through the drawing room window and land upon the floor in front of them, where it solidified into the weasel that spoke with the voice of Ron's father.

"Family safe, do not reply, we are being watched."

The Patronus dissolved into nothingness. Ron let out a noise between a whimper and a groan and dropped onto the sofa: Hermione joined him, gripping his arm.

"They're all right, they're all right!" she whispered, and Ron half laughed and hugged her.

"Harry," he said over Hermione's shoulder, "I – "

"It's not a problem," said Harry, sickened by the pain in his head. "It's your family, 'course you were worried. I'd feel the same way." He thought of Ginny. "I do feel the same way."

The pain in his scar was reaching a peak, burning as it had back in the garden of the Burrow. Faintly he heard Hermione say "I don't want to be on my own. Could we use the sleeping bags I've brought and camp in here tonight?"

He heard Ron agree. He could not fight the pain much longer. He had to succumb.

“Bathroom,” he muttered, and he left the room as fast as he could without running.

He barely made it: Bolting the door behind him with trembling hands, he grasped his pounding head and fell to the floor, then in an explosion of agony, he felt the rage that did not belong to him possess his soul, saw a long room lit only by firelight, and the giant blond Death Eater on the floor, screaming and writhing, and a slighter figure standing over him, wand outstretched, while Harry spoke in a high, cold, merciless voice.

“More, Rowle, or shall we end it and feed you to Nagini? Lord Voldemort is not sure that he will forgive this time…. You called me back for this, to tell me that Harry Potter has escaped again? Draco, give Rowle another taste of our displeasure…. Do it, or feel my wrath yourself!”

A log fell in the fire: Flames reared, their light darting across a terrified, pointed white face – with a sense of emerging from deep water, Harry drew heaving breaths and opened his eyes.

He was spread-eagled on the cold black marble floor, his nose inches from one of the silver serpent tails that supported the large bathtub. He sat up. Malfoy’s gaunt, petrified face seemed burned on the inside of his eyes. Harry felt sickened by what he had seen, by the use to which Draco was now being put by Voldemort.

There was a sharp rap on the door, and Harry jumped as Hermione’s voice rang out.

“Harry, do you want your toothbrush? I’ve got it here.”

“Yeah, great, thanks,” he said, fighting to keep his voice casual as he stood up to let her in.

Chapter 10 Kreacher's Tale

Harry woke early next morning, wrapped in a sleeping bag on the drawing room floor. A chink of sky was visible between the heavy curtains. It was the cool, clear blue of watered ink, somewhere between night and dawn, and everything was quiet except for Ron and Hermione's slow, deep breathing. Harry glanced over at the dark shapes they made on the floor beside him. Ron had had a fit of gallantry and insisted that Hermione sleep on the cushions from the sofa, so that her silhouette was raised above his. Her arm curved to the floor, her fingers inches from Ron's. Harry wondered whether they had fallen asleep holding hands. The idea made him feel strangely lonely.

He looked up at the shadowy ceiling, the cobwebbed chandelier. Less than twenty-four house ago, he had been standing in the sunlight at the entrance to the marquee, waiting to show in wedding guests. It seemed a lifetime away. What was going to happen now? He lay on the floor and he thought of the Horcruxes, of the daunting complex mission Dumbledore had left him… Dumbledore…The grief that had possessed him since Dumbledore's death felt different now. The accusations he had heard from Muriel at the wedding seemed to have nested in his brain like diseased things, infecting his memories of the wizard he had idolized. Could Dumbledore have let such things happen? Had he been like Dudley, content to watch neglect and abuse as long as it did not affect him? Could he have turned his back on a sister who was being imprisoned and hidden?

Harry thought of Godric's Hollow, of graves Dumbledore had never mentioned there; he thought of mysterious objects left without explanation in Dumbledore's will, and resentment swelled in the darkness. Why hadn't Dumbledore told him? Why hadn't he explained? Had Dumbledore actually cared about Harry at all? Or had Harry been nothing more than a tool to be polished and honed, but not trusted, never confided in?

Harry could not stand lying there with nothing but bitter thoughts for company. Desperate for something to do, for distraction, he slipped out of his sleeping bad, picked up his wand, and crept out of the room. On the landing he whispered, “Lumos,” and started to climb the stairs by wandlight.

On the second landing was the bedroom in which he and Ron had slept last time they had been here; he glanced into it. The wardrobe doors stood open and the bedclothes had been ripped back. Harry remembered the overturned troll leg downstairs. Somebody had searched the house since the Order had left. Snape? Or perhaps Mundungus, who had pilfered plenty from this house both before and after Sirius died? Harry’s gaze wandered to the portrait that sometimes contained Phineas Nigellus Black, Sirius’s great-great grandfather, but it was empty, showing nothing but a stretch of muddy backdrop. Phineas Nigellus was evidently spending the night in the headmaster’s study at Hogwarts.

Harry continued up the stairs until he reached the topmost landing where there were only two doors. The one facing him bore a nameplate reading Sirius. Harry had never entered his godfather’s bedroom before. He pushed open the door, holding his wand high to cast light as widely as possible. The room was spacious and must once have been handsome. There was a large bed with a carved wooden headboard, a tall window obscured by long velvet curtains and a chandelier thickly coated in dust with candle scrubs still resting in its sockets, solid wax banging in frostlike drips. A fine film of dust covered the pictures on the walls and the bed’s headboard; a spiders web stretched between the chandelier and the top of the large wooden wardrobe, and as Harry moved deeper into the room, he head a scurrying of disturbed mice.

The teenage Sirius had plastered the walls with so many posters and pictures that little of the wall’s silvery-gray silk was visible. Harry could only assume that Sirius’s parents had been unable to remove the Permanent Sticking Charm that kept them on the wall because he

was sure they would not have appreciated their eldest son's taste in decoration. Sirius seemed to have long gone out of his way to annoy his parents. There were several large Gryffindor banners, faded scarlet and gold just to underline his difference from all the rest of the Slytherin family. There were many pictures of Muggle motorcycles, and also (Harry had to admire Sirius's nerve) several posters of bikini-clad Muggle girls. Harry could tell that they were Muggles because they remained quite stationary within their pictures, faded smiles and glazed eyes frozen on the paper. This was in contrast the only Wizarding photograph on the walls which was a picture of four Hogwarts students standing arm in arm, laughing at the camera.

With a leap of pleasure, Harry recognized his father, his untidy black hair stuck up at the back like Harry's, and he too wore glasses. Beside him was Sirius, carelessly handsome, his slightly arrogant face so much younger and happier than Harry had ever seen it alive. To Sirius's right stood Pettigrew, more than a head shorter, plump and watery-eyed, flushed with pleasure at his inclusion in this coolest of gangs, with the much-admired rebels that James and Sirius had been. On James's left was Lupin, even then a little shabby-looking, but he had the same air of delighted surprise at finding himself liked and included or was it simply because Harry knew how it had been, that he saw these things in the picture? He tried to take it from the wall; it was his now, after all, Sirius had left him everything, but it would not budge. Sirius had taken no chances in preventing his parents from redecorating his room.

Harry looked around at the floor. The sky outside was growing brightest. A shaft of light revealed bits of paper, books, and small objects scattered over the carpet. Evidently Sirius's bedroom had been reached too, although its contents seemed to have been judged mostly, if not entirely, worthless. A few of the books had been shaken roughly enough to part company with the covers and sundry pages littered the floor.

Harry bent down, picked up a few of the pieces of paper, and examined them. He recognized one as a part of an old edition of A History of Magic, by Bathilda Bagshot, and another as belonging to a motorcycle maintenance manual. The third was handwritten and crumpled. He smoothed it out.

Dear Padfoot,

Thank you, thank you, for Harry's birthday present! It was his favorite by far. One year old and already zooming along on a toy broomstick, he looked so pleased with himself. I'm enclosing a picture so you can see. You know it only rises about two feet off the ground but he nearly killed the cat and he smashed a horrible vase Petunia sent me for Christmas (no complaints there). Of course James thought it was so funny, says he's going to be a great Quidditch player but we've had to pack away all the ornaments and make sure we don't take our eyes off him when he gets going.

We had a very quiet birthday tea, just us and old Bathilda who has always been sweet to us and who dotes on Harry. We were so sorry you couldn't come, but the Order's got to come first, and Harry's not old enough to know it's his birthday anyway! James is getting a bit frustrated shut up here, he tries not to show it but I can tell – also Dumbledore's still got his Invisibility Cloak, so no chance of little excursions. If you could visit, it would cheer him up so much. Wormy was here last weekend. I thought he seemed down, but that was probably the next about the McKinnons; I cried all evening when I heard.

Bathilda drops in most days, she's a fascinating old thing with the most amazing stories about Dumbledore. I'm not sure he'd be pleased if he knew! I don't know how much to believe, actually because it seems incredible that DumbledoreHarry's extremities seemed to have gone numb. He stood quite still, holding the miraculous paper in his nerveless fingers while inside him a kind of

quiet eruptions sent joy and grief thundering its equal measure through his veins. Lurching to the bed, he sat down.

He read the letter again, but could not take in any more meaning than he had done the first time, and was reduced to staring at the handwriting itself. She had made her “g”s the same way he did. He searched through the letter for every one of them, and each felt like a friendly little wave glimpsed from behind a veil. The letter was an incredible treasure, proof that Lily Potter had lived, really lived, that her warm hand had once moved across this parchment, tracing ink into these letters, these words, words about him, Harry, her son.

Impatiently brushing away the wetness in his eyes, he reread the letter, this time concentrating on the meaning. It was like listening to a half-remembered voice.

They had a cat… perhaps it had perished, like his parents at Godric’s Hollow… or else fled when there was nobody left to feed it… Sirius had bought him his first broomstick… His parents had known Bathilda Bagshot; had Dumbledore introduced them? Dumbledore’s still got his Invisibility Cloak… there was something funny there…Harry paused, pondering his mother’s words. Why had Dumbledore taken James’s Invisibility Cloak? Harry distinctly remembered his headmaster telling him years before, “I don’t need a cloak to become invisible” Perhaps some less gifted Order member had needed its assistance, and Dumbledore had acted as a carrier? Harry passed on…Wormy was here… Pettigrew, the traitor, had seemed “down” had he? Was he aware that he was seeing James and Lily alive for the last time?

And finally Bathilda again, who told incredible stories about Dumbledore. It seems incredible that Dumbledore –That Dumbledore what? But there were any number of things that would seem incredible about Dumbledore; that he had once received bottom marks in a Transfiguration test, for instance or had taken up goat charming like Aberforth…Harry got to his feet and scanned the floor:

Perhaps the rest of the letter was here somewhere. He seized papers, treating them in his eagerness, with as little consideration as the original searcher, he pulled open drawers, shook out books, stood on a chair to run his hand over the top of the wardrobe, and crawled under the bed and armchair.

At last, lying facedown on the floor, he spotted what looked like a torn piece of paper under the chest of drawers. When he pulled it out, it proved to be most of the photograph that Lily had described in her letter. A black-haired baby was zooming in and out of the picture on a tiny broom, roaring with laughter, and a pair of legs that must have belonged to James was chasing after him. Harry tucked the photograph into his pocket with Lily's letter and continued to look for the second sheet.

After another quarter of an hour, however he was forced to conclude that the rest of his mother's letter was gone. Had it simply been lost in the sixteen years that had elapsed since it had been written, or had it been taken by whoever had searched the room? Harry read the first sheet again, this time looking for clues as to what might have made the second sheet valuable. His toy broomstick could hardly be considered interesting to the Death Eaters… The only potentially useful thing he could see her was possible information on Dumbledore. It seems incredible that Dumbledore – what?

"Harry? Harry? Harry!"

"I'm here!" he called, "What's happened?"

There was a clatter of footsteps outside the door, and Hermione burst inside.

"We woke up and didn't know where you were!" she said breathlessly. She turned and shouted over her shoulder, "Ron! I've found him"

Ron's annoyed voice echoed distantly from several floors below.

“Good! Tell him from me he’s a git!”

“Harry don’t just disappear, please, we were terrified! Why did you come up here anyway?” She gazed around the ransacked room. “What have you been doing?”

“Look what I’ve just found”

He held out his mother’s letter. Hermione took it out and read it while Harry watched her. When she reached the end of the page she looked up at him.

“Oh Harry…”

“And there’s this too”

He handed her the torn photograph, and Hermione smiled at the baby zooming in and out of sight on the toy broom.

“I’ve been looking for the rest of the letter,” Harry said, “but it’s not here.”

Hermione glanced around.

“Did you make all this mess, or was some of it done when you got here?”

“Someone had searched before me,” said Harry.

“I thought so. Every room I looked into on the way up had been disturbed. What were they after, do you think?”

“Information on the Order, if it was Snape.”

“But you’d think he’d already have all he needed. I mean was in the Order, wasn’t he?”

“Well then,” said Harry, keen to discuss his theory, “what about information on Dumbledore? The second page of the letter, for instance. You know this Bathilda my mum mentions, you know who she is?”

“Who?”

“Bathilda Bagshot, the author of – ”

“A History of Magic,” said Hermione, looking interested. “So your parents knew her? She was an incredible magic historian.”

“And she’s still alive,” said Harry, “and she lives in Godric’s Hollow. Ron’s Auntie Muriel was talking about her at the wedding. She knew Dumbledore’s family too. Be pretty interesting to talk to, wouldn’t she?” There was a little too much understanding in the smile Hermione gave him for Harry’s liking. He took back the letter and the photograph and tucked them inside the pouch around his neck, so as not to have to look at her and give himself away. “I understand why you’d love to talk to her about your mum and dad, and Dumbledore too,” said Hermione. “But that wouldn’t really help us in our search for the Horcruxes, would it?” Harry did not answer, and she rushed on, “Harry, I know you really want to go to Godric’s Hollow, but I’m scared. I’m scared at how easily those Death Eaters found us yesterday. It just makes me feel more than ever that we ought to avoid the place where your parents are buried, I’m sure they’d be expecting you to visit it.”

“It’s not just that,” Harry said, still avoiding looking at her, “Muriel said stuff about Dumbledore at the wedding. I want to know the truth…”

He told Hermione everything that Muriel had told him. When he had finished, Hermione said, “Of course, I can see why that’s upset you, Harry – ”

“I’m not upset,” he lied, “I’d just like to know whether or not it’s true or – ”

“Harry do you really think you’ll get the truth from a malicious old woman like Muriel, or from Rita Skeeter? How can you believe them? You knew Dumbledore!”

“I thought I did,” he muttered.

“But you know how much truth there was in everything Rita wrote about you! Doge is right, how can you let these people tarnish your memories of Dumbledore?”

He looked away, trying not to betray the resentment he felt. There it was again: Choose what to believe. He wanted the truth. Why was everybody so determined that he should not get it?

“Shall we go down to the kitchen?” Hermione suggested after a little pause. “Find something for breakfast?”

Do Not Enter Without the Express Permission of Regulus Arcturus BlackExcitement trickled through Harry, but he was not immediately sure why. He read the sign again. Hermione was already a flight of stairs below him.

“Hermione,” he said, and he was surprised that his voice was so calm. “Come back up here.”

“What’s the matter?”

“R.A.B. I think I’ve found him.”

There was a gasp, and then Hermione ran back up the stairs.

“In your mum’s letter? But I didn’t see – ”

Harry shook his head, pointing at Regulus’s sign. She read it, then clutched Harry’s arm so tightly that he winced.

“Sirius’s brother?” she whispered.

“He was a Death Eater,” said Harry. “Sirius told me about him, he joined up when he was really young and then got cold feet and tried to leave – so they killed him.”

“That fits!” gasped Hermione. “If he was a Death Eater he had access to Voldemort, and if he became disenchanted, then he would have wanted to bring Voldemort down!”

She released Harry, leaned over the banister, and screamed, “Ron! RON! Get up here, quick!”

Ron appeared, panting, a minute later, his wand ready in his hand.

“What’s up? If it’s massive spiders again I want breakfast before I – ”

He frowned at the sign on Regulus’s door, in which Hermione was silently pointing.

“What? That was Sirius’s brother, wasn’t it? Regulus Arcturus … Regulus … R.A.B.! The locket – you don’t reckon –?”

“Let’s find out,” said Harry. He pushed the door: It was locked. Hermione pointed her wand at the handle and said, “Alohamora.” There was a click, and the door swung open.

They moved over the threshold together, gazing around. Regulus’s bedroom was slightly smaller than Sirius’s, though it had the same sense of former grandeur. Whereas Sirius had sought to advertise his diffidence from the rest of the family, Regulus had striven to emphasize the opposite. The Slytherin colors of emerald and silver were everywhere, draping the bed, the walls, and the windows. The Black family crest was painstakingly painted over the bed, along with its motto, TOUJOURS PUR. Beneath this was a collection of yellow newspaper cuttings, all stuck together to make a ragged collage. Hermione crossed the room to examine them.

“They’re all about Voldemort,” she said. “Regulus seems to have been a fan for a few years before he joined the Death Eaters …”

A little puff of dust rose from the bedcovers as she sat down to read the clippings. Harry, meanwhile, had noticed another photograph: a Hogwarts Quidditch team was smiling and waving out of the frame. He moved closer and saw the snakes emblazoned on their chests: Slytherins. Regulus was instantly recognizable as the boy sitting in the middle of the front row: He had the same dark hair and slightly haughty look of his brother, though he was smaller, slighter, and rather less handsome than Sirius had been.

“He played Seeker,” said Harry.

“What?” said Hermione vaguely; she was still immersed in Voldemort’s press clippings.

“He’s sitting in the middle of the front row, that’s where the Seeker … Never mind,” said Harry, realizing that nobody was listening. Ron was on his hands and knees, searching under the wardrobe. Harry looked around the room for likely hiding places and approached the desk. Yet again, somebody had searched before them. The drawers’ contents had been turned over recently, the dust disturbed, but there was nothing of value there: old quills, out-of-date textbooks that bore evidence of being roughly handled, a recently smashed ink bottle, its sticky residue covering the contents of the drawer.

“There’s an easier way,” said Hermione, as Harry wiped his inky fingers on his jeans. She raised her wand and said, “Accio Locket!”

Nothing happened. Ron, who had been searching the folds of the faded curtains, looked disappointed.

“Is that it, then? It’s not here?”

“Oh, it could still be here, but under counter-enchantments,” said Hermione. “Charms to prevent it from being summoned magically,

you know."

"Like Voldemort put on the stone basin in the cave," said Harry, remembering how he had been unable to Summon the fake locket.

"How are we supposed to find it then?" asked Ron.

"We search manually," said Hermione.

"That's a good idea," said Ron, rolling his eyes, and he resumed his examination of the curtains.

They combed every inch of the room for more than an hour, but were forced, finally, to conclude that the locket was not there.

The sun had risen now; its light dazzled them even through the grimy landing windows.

"It could be somewhere else in the house, though," said Hermione in a rallying tone as they walked back downstairs. As Harry and Ron had become more discouraged, she seemed to have become more determined. "Whether he'd manage to destroy it or not, he'd want to keep it hidden from Voldemort, wouldn't he? Remember all those awful things we had to get rid of when we were here last time? That clock that shot bolts at everyone and those old robes that tried to strangle Ron; Regulus might have put them there to protect the locket's hiding place, even though we didn't realize it at … at …"

Harry and Ron looked at her. She was standing with one foot in midair, with the dumbstruck look of one who had just been Obliviated: her eyes had even drifted out of focus.

"… at the time," she finished in a whisper.

"Something wrong?" asked Ron.

"There was a locket."

“What?” said Harry and Ron together.

“In the cabinet in the drawing room. Nobody could open it. And we … we …”

Harry felt as though a brick had slid down through his chest into his stomach. He remembered. He had even handled the thing as they passed it around, each trying in turn to pry it open. It had been tossed into a sack of rubbish, along with the snuffbox of Wartcap powder and the music box that had made everyone sleepy …“Kreacher nicked loads of things back from us,” said Harry. It was the only chance, the only slender hope left to them, and he was going to cling to it until forced to let go. “He had a whole stash of stuff in his cupboard in the kitchen. C’mon.”

He ran down the stairs taking two steps at a time, the other two thundering along in his wake. They made so much noise that they woke the portrait of Sirius’s mother as they passed through the hall.

“Filth! Mudbloods! Scum!” she screamed after them as they dashed down into the basement kitchen and slammed the door behind them. Harry ran the length of the room, skidded to a halt at the door of Kreacher’s cupboard, and wrenched it open. There was the nest of dirty old blankets in which the house-elf had once slept, but they were not longer glittering with the trinkets Kreacher had salvaged. The only thing there was an old copy of Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy. Refusing to believe his eyes, Harry snatched up the blankets and shook them. A dead mouse fell out and rolled dismally across the floor. Ron groaned as he threw himself into a kitchen chair; Hermione closed her eyes.

“It’s not over yet,” said Harry, and he raised his voice and called, “Kreacher!”

There was a loud crack and the house elf that Harry had so reluctantly inherited from Sirius appeared out of nowhere in front of the cold and empty fireplace: tiny, half human-sized, his pale skin

hanging off him in folds, white hair sprouting copiously from his batlike ears. He was still wearing the filthy rag in which they had first met him, and the contemptuous look he bent upon Harry showed that his attitude to his change of ownership had altered no more than his outfit.

“Master,” croaked Kreacher in his bullfrog’s voice, and he bowed low; muttering to his knees, “back in my Mistress’s old house with the blood-traitor Weasley and the Mudblood – ”

“I forbid you to call anyone ‘blood traitor’ or ‘Mudblood,’” growled Harry. He would have found Kreacher, with his snoutlike nose and bloodshot eyes, a distinctively unlovable object even if the elf had not betrayed Sirius to Voldemort.

“I’ve got a question for you,” said Harry, his heart beating rather fast as he looked down at the elf, “and I order you to answer it truthfully. Understand?”

“Yes, Master,” said Kreacher, bowing low again. Harry saw his lips moving soundlessly, undoubtedly framing the insults he was now forbidden to utter.

“Two years ago,” said Harry, his heart now hammering against his ribs, “there was a big gold locket in the drawing room upstairs. We threw it out. Did you steal it back?”

There was a moment’s silence, during which Kreacher straightened up to look Harry full in the face. Then he said, “Yes.”

“Where is it now?” asked Harry jubilantly as Ron and Hermione looked gleeful.

Kreacher closed his eyes as though he could not bear to see their reactions to his next word.

“Gone.”

“Gone?” echoed Harry, elation floating out of him, “What do you mean, it’s gone?”

The elf shivered. He swayed.

“Kreacher,” said Harry fiercely, “I order you – ”

“Mundungus Fletcher,” croaked the elf, his eyes still tight shut. “Mundungus Fletcher stole it all; Miss Bella’s and Miss Cissy’s pictures, my Mistress’s gloves, the Order of Merlin, First Class, the goblets with the family crest, and – and – ”

Kreacher was gulping for air: His hollow chest was rising and falling rapidly, then his eyes flew open and he uttered a bloodcurdling scream.

“ – and the locket, Master Regulus’s locket. Kreacher did wrong, Kreacher failed in his orders!”

Harry reacted instinctively: As Kreacher lunged for the poker standing in the grate, he launched himself upon the elf, flattening him. Hermione’s scream mingled with Kreacher’s but Harry bellowed louder than both of them: “Kreacher, I order you to stay still!”

He felt the elf freeze and released him. Kreacher lay flat on the cold stone floor, tears gushing from his sagging eyes.

“Harry, let him up!” Hermione whispered.

“So he can beat himself up with the poker?” snorted Harry, kneeling beside the elf. “I don’t think so. Right. Kreacher, I want the truth: How do you know Mundungus Fletcher stole the locket?”

“Kreacher saw him!” gasped the elf as tears poured over his snout and into his mouth full of graying teeth. “Kreacher saw him coming out of Kreacher’s cupboard with his hands full of Kreacher’s

treasures. Kreacher told the sneak thief to stop, but Mundungus Fletcher laughed and r-ran …”

“You called the locket ‘Master Regulus’s,’” said Harry. “Why? Where did it come from? What did Regulus have to do with it? Kreacher, sit up and tell me everything you know about that locket, and everything Regulus had to do with it!”

The elf sat up, curled into a ball, placed his wet face between his knees, and began to rock backward and forward. When he spoke, his voice was muffled but quite distinct in the silent, echoing kitchen.

“Master Sirius ran away, good riddance, for he was a bad boy and broke my Mistress’s heart with his lawless ways. But Master Regulus had proper order; he knew what was due to the name of Black and the dignity of his pure blood. For years he talked of the Dark Lord, who was going to bring the wizards out of hiding to rule the Muggles and the Muggle-borns … and when he was sixteen years old, Master Regulus joined the Dark Lord. So proud, so proud, so happy to serve …And one day, a year after he joined, Master Regulus came down to the kitchen to see Kreacher. Master Regulus always liked Kreacher. And Master Regulus said … he said …“The old elf rocked faster than ever.

“… he said that the Dark Lord required an elf.”

“Voldemort needed an elf?” Harry repeated, looking around at Ron and Hermione, who looked just as puzzled as he did.

“Oh yes,” moaned Kreacher. “And Master Regulus had volunteered Kreacher. It was an honor, said Master Regulus, an honor for him and for Kreacher, who must be sure to do whatever the Dark Lord ordered him to do … and then to c-come home.”

Kreacher rocked still faster, his breath coming in sobs.

“So Kreacher went to the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord did not tell Kreacher what they were to do, but took Kreacher with him to a cave beside the sea. And beyond the cave was a cavern, and in the cavern was a great black lake …”

The hairs on the back of Harry’s neck stood up. Kreacher’s croaking voice seemed to come to him from across the dark water. He saw what had happened as clearly as though he had been present.

“… There was a boat …”

Of course there had been a boat; Harry knew the boat, ghostly green and tiny, bewitched so as to carry one wizard and one victim toward the island in the center. This, then, was how Voldemort had tested the defenses surrounding the Horcrux, by borrowing a disposable creature, a house-elf…“There was a b-basin full of potion on the island. The D-Dark Lord made Kreacher drink it …”

The elf quaked from head to foot.

“Kreacher drank, and as he drank he saw terrible thing … Kreacher’s insides burned … Kreacher cried for Master Regulus to save him, he cried for his Mistress Black, but the Dark Lord only laughed … He made Kreacher drink all the potion … He dropped a locket into the empty basin … He filled it with more potion.”

“And then the Dark Lord sailed away, leaving Kreacher on the island …”

Harry could see it happening. He watched Voldemort’s white, snakelike face vanishing into darkness, those red eyes fixed pitilessly on the thrashing elf whose death would occur within minutes, whenever he succumbed to the desperate thirst that the burning poison caused its victim … But here, Harry’s imagination could go no further, for he could not see how Kreacher had escaped.

“Kreacher needed water, he crawled to the island’s edge and he drank from the black lake … and hands, dead hands, came out of the water and dragged Kreacher under the surface …”

“How did you get away?” Harry asked, and he was not surprised to hear himself whispering.

Kreacher raised his ugly head and looked Harry with his great, bloodshot eyes.

“Master Regulus told Kreacher to come back,” he said.

“I know – but how did you escape the Inferi?”

Kreacher did not seem to understand.

“Master Regulus told Kreacher to come back,” he repeated.

“I know, but – ”

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it, Harry?” said Ron. “He Disapparated!”

“But … you couldn’t Apparate in and out of that cave,” said Harry, “otherwise Dumbledore – ”

“Elf magic isn’t like wizard’s magic, is it?” said Ron, “I mean, they can Apparate and Disapparate in and out of Hogwarts when we can’t.”

There was a silence as Harry digested this. How could Voldemort have made such a mistake? But even as he thought this, Hermione spoke, and her voice was icy.

“Of course, Voldemort would have considered the ways of house-elves far beneath his notice … It would never have occurred to him that they might have magic that he didn’t.”

“The house-elf’s highest law is his Master’s bidding,” intoned Kreacher. “Kreacher was told to come home, so Kreacher came

home …”

“Well, then, you did what you were told, didn’t you?” said Hermione kindly. “You didn’t disobey orders at all!”

Kreacher shook his head, rocking as fast as ever.

“So what happened when you got back?” Harry asked. “What did Regulus say when you told him what happened?”

“Master Regulus was very worried, very worried,” croaked Kreacher. “Master Regulus told Kreacher to stay hidden and not to leave the house. And then … it was a little while later … Master Regulus came to find Kreacher in his cupboard one night, and Master Regulus was strange, not as he usually was, disturbed in his mind, Kreacher could tell … and he asked Kreacher to take him to the cave, the cave where Kreacher had gone with the Dark Lord …”

And so they had set off. Harry could visualize them quite clearly, the frightened old elf and the thin, dark Seeker who had so resembled Sirius … Kreacher knew how to open the concealed entrance to the underground cavern, knew how to raise the tiny boat: this time it was his beloved Regulus who sailed with him to the island with its basin of poison …“And he made you drink the poison?” said Harry, disgusted.

But Kreacher shook his head and wept. Hermione’s hands leapt to her mouth: She seemed to have understood something.

“M-Master Regulus took from his pocket a locket like the one the Dark Lord had,” said Kreacher, tears pouring down either side of his snoutlike nose. “And he told Kreacher to take it and, when the basin was empty, to switch the lockets …”

Kreacher’s sobs came in great rasps now; Harry had to concentrate hard to understand him.

"And he order – Kreacher to leave – without him. And he told Kreacher – to go home – and never to tell my Mistress – what he had done – but to destroy – the first locket. And he drank – all the potion – and Kreacher swapped the lockets – and watched … as Master Regulus … was dragged beneath the water … and …"

"Oh, Kreacher!" wailed Hermione, who was crying. She dropped to her knees beside the elf and tried to hug him. At once he was on his feet, cringing away from her, quite obviously repulsed.

"The Mudblood touched Kreacher, he will not allow it, what would his Mistress say?"

"I told you not to call her 'Mudblood'!" snarled Harry, but the elf was already punishing himself. He fell to the ground and banged his forehead on the floor.

"Stop him – stop him!" Hermione cried. "Oh, don't you see now how sick it is, the way they've got to obey?"

"Kreacher – stop, stop!" shouted Harry.

The elf lay on the floor, panting and shivering, green mucus glistening around his snot, a bruise already blooming on his pallid forehead where he had struck himself, his eyes swollen and bloodshot and swimming in tears. Harry had never seen anything so pitiful.

"So you brought the locket home," he said relentlessly, for he was determined to know the full story. "And you tried to destroy it?"

"Nothing Kreacher did made any mark upon it," moaned the elf. "Kreacher tried everything, everything he knew, but nothing, nothing would work … So many powerful spells upon the casing, Kreacher was sure the way to destroy it was to get inside it, but it would not open … Kreacher punished himself, he tried again, he punished himself, he tried again. Kreacher failed to obey orders, Kreacher could not destroy the locket! And his mistress was mad with grief,

because Master Regulus had disappeared and Kreacher could not tell her what had happened, no, because Master Regulus had f-f-forbidden him to tell any of the f-f-family what happened in the c-cave …"

Kreacher began to sob so hard that there were no more coherent words. Tears flowed down Hermione's cheeks as she watched Kreacher, but she did not dare touch him again. Even Ron, who was no fan of Kreacher's, looked troubled. Harry sat back on his heels and shook his head, trying to clear it.

"I don't understand you, Kreacher," he said finally. "Voldemort tried to kill you, Regulus died to bring Voldemort down, but you were still happy to betray Sirius to Voldemort? You were happy to go to Narcissa and Bellatrix, and pass information to Voldemort through them …"

"Harry, Kreacher doesn't think like that," said Hermione, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand. "He's a slave; house-elves are used to bad, even brutal treatment; what Voldemort did to Kreacher wasn't that far out of the common way. What do wizard wars mean to an elf like Kreacher? He's loyal to people who are kind to him, and Mrs. Black must have been, and Regulus certainly was, so he served them willingly and parroted their beliefs. I know what you're going to say," she went on as Harry began to protest, "that Regulus changed his mind … but he doesn't seem to have explained that to Kreacher, does he? And I think I know why. Kreacher and Regulus's family were all safest if they kept to the old pure-blood line. Regulus was trying to protect them all."

"Sirius – "

"Sirius was horrible to Kreacher, Harry, and it's no good looking like that, you know it's true. Kreacher had been alone for such a long time when Sirius came to live here, and he was probably starving for a bit of affection. I'm sure 'Miss Cissy' and 'Miss Bella' were perfectly

lovely to Kreacher when he turned up, so he did them a favor and told them everything they wanted to know. I've said all along that wizards would pay for how they treat house-elves. Well, Voldemort did … and so did Sirius."

Harry had no retort. As he watched Kreacher sobbing on the floor, he remembered what Dumbledore had said to him, mere hours after Sirius's death: I do not think Sirius ever saw Kreacher as a being with feelings as acute as a human's …"Kreacher," said Harry after a while, "when you feel up to it, er … please sit up."

It was several minutes before Kreacher hiccupped himself into silence. Then he pushed himself into a sitting position again, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes like a small child.

"Kreacher, I am going to ask you to do something," said Harry. He glanced at Hermione for assistance. He wanted to give the order kindly, but at the same time, he could not pretend that it was not an order. However, the change in his tone seemed to have gained her approval: She smiled encouragingly.

"Kreacher, I want you, please, to go and find Mundungus Fletcher. We need to find out where the locket – where Master Regulus's locket it. It's really important. We want to finish the work Master Regulus started, we want to – er – ensure that he didn't die in vain."

Kreacher dropped his fists and looked up at Harry.

"Find Mundungus Fletcher?" he croaked.

"And bring him here, to Grimmauld Place," said Harry. "Do you think you could do that for us?"

As Kreacher nodded and got to his feet, Harry had a sudden inspiration. He pulled out Hagrid's purse and took out the fake Horcrux, the substitute locket in which Regulus had placed the note to Voldemort.

“Kreacher, I’d, er, like you to have this,” he said, pressing the locket into the elf’s hand. “This belonged to Regulus and I’m sure he’d want you to have it as a token of gratitude for what you – ”

“Overkill, mate,” said Ron as the elf took one look at the locket, let out a howl of shock and misery, and threw himself back onto the ground.

It took them nearly half an hour to calm down Kreacher, who was so overcome to be presented with a Black family heirloom for his very own that he was too weak at the knees to stand properly. When finally he was able to totter a few steps they all accompanied him to his cupboard, watched him tuck up the locket safely in his dirty blankets, and assured him that they would make its protection their first priority while he was away. He then made two low bows to Harry and Ron, and even gave a funny little spasm in Hermione’s direction that might have been an attempt at a respectful salute, before Disapparating with the usual loud crack.

Chapter 11 The Bribe

If Kreacher could escape a lake full of Inferi, Harry was confident that the capture of Mundungus would take a few hours at most, and he prowled the house all morning in a state of high anticipation. However, Kreacher did not return that morning or even that afternoon. By nightfall, Harry felt discouraged and anxious, and a supper composed largely of moldy bread, upon which Hermione had tried a variety of unsuccessful Transfigurations, did nothing to help.

Kreacher did not return the following day, nor the day after that. However, two cloaked men had appeared in the square outside number twelve, and they remained there into the night, gazing in the direction of the house that they could not see.

“Death Eaters, for sure,” said Ron, as he, Harry, and Hermione watched from the drawing room windows. “Reckon they know we’re in here?”

“I don’t think so,” said Hermione, though she looked frightened, “or they’d have sent Snape in after us, wouldn’t they?”

“D’you reckon he’s been in here and has his tongue tied by Moody’s curse?” asked Ron.

“Yes,” said Hermione, “otherwise he’d have been able to tell that lot how to get in, wouldn’t he? But they’re probably watching to see whether we turn up. They know that Harry owns the house, after all.”

“How do they –?” began Harry.

“Wizarding wills are examined by the Ministry, remember? They’ll know Sirius left you the place.”

The presence of the Death Eaters outside increased the ominous mood inside number twelve. They had not heard a word form anyone

beyond Grimmauld Place since Mr. Weasley's Patronus, and the strain was starting to tell. Restless and irritable, Ron had developed an annoying habit of playing with the Deluminator in his pocket; This particularly infuriated Hermione, who was whiling away the wait for Kreacher by studying The Tales of Beedle the Bard and did not appreciate the way the lights kept flashing on and off.

"Will you stop it!" she cried on the third evening of Kreacher's absence, as all the light was sucked from the drawing room yet again.

"Sorry, sorry!" said Ron, clicking the Deluminator and restoring the lights. "I don't know I'm doing it!"

"Well, can't you find something useful to occupy yourself?"

"What, like reading kids' stories?"

"Dumbledore left me this book, Ron – "

" – and he left me the Deluminator, maybe I'm supposed to use it!"

Unable to stand the bickering, Harry slipped out of the room unnoticed by either of them. He headed downstairs toward the kitchen, which he kept visiting because he was sure that was where Kreacher was most likely to reappear. Halfway down the flight of stairs into the hall, however, he heard a tap on the front door, then metallic clicks and the grinding of the chain.

Every nerve in his body seemed to tauten: He pulled out his wand, moved into the shadows beside the decapitated elf heads, and waited. The door opened: He saw a glimpse of the lamplit square outside, and a cloaked figure edged into the hall and closed the door behind it. The intruder took a step forward, and Moody's voice asked, "Severus Snape?" Then the dust figure rose from the end of the hall and rushed him, raising its dead hand.

"It was not I who killed you, Albus," said a quiet voice.

The jinx broke: The dust-figure exploded again, and it was impossible to make out the newcomer through the dense gray cloud it left behind.

Harry pointed the wand into the middle of it.

"Don't move!"

He had forgotten the portrait of Mrs. Black: At the sound of his yell, the curtains hiding her flew open and she began to scream, "Mudbloods and filth dishonoring my house – "

Ron and Hermione came crashing down the stairs behind Harry, wands pointing, like his, at the unknown man now standing with his arms raised in the hall below.

"Hold your fire, it's me, Remus!"

"Oh, thank goodness," said Hermione weakly, pointing her wand at Mrs. Black instead; with a bang, the curtains swished shut again and silence fell. Ron too lowered his wand, but Harry did not.

"Show yourself!" he called back.

Lupin moved forward into the lamplight, hands still held high in a gesture of surrender.

"I am Remus John Lupin, werewolf, sometimes known as Moony, one of the four creators of the Marauder's Map, married to Nymphadora, usually known as Tonks, and I taught you how to produce a Patronus, Harry, which takes the form of a stag."

"Oh, all right," said Harry, lowering his wand, "but I had to check, didn't I?"

"Speaking as your ex-Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, I quite agree that you had to check. Ron, Hermione, you shouldn't be so

quick to lower your defenses."

They ran down the stairs towards him. Wrapped in a thick black traveling cloak, he looked exhausted, but pleased to see them.

"No sign of Severus, then?" he asked.

"No," said Harry. "What's going on? Is everyone okay?"

"Yes," said Lupin, "but we're all being watched. There are a couple of Death Eaters in the square outside – "

"We know – "

"I had to Apparate very precisely onto the top step outside the front door to be sure that they would not see me. They can't know you're in here or I'm sure they'd have more people out there; they're staking out everywhere that's got any connection with you, Harry. Let's go downstairs, there's a lot to tell you, and I want to know what happened after you left the Burrow."

They descended into the kitchen, where Hermione pointed her wand at the grate. A fire sprang up instantly: It gave the illusion of coziness to the stark stone walls and glistened off the long wooden table. Lupin pulled a few butterbeers from beneath his traveling cloak and they sat down.

"I'd have been here three days ago but I needed to shake off the Death Eater tailing me," said Lupin. "So, you came straight here after the wedding?"

"No," said Harry, "only after we ran into a couple of Death Eaters in a café on Tottenham Court Road."

Lupin slopped most of his butterbeer down his front.

"What?"

They explained what had happened; when they had finished, Lupin looked aghast.

“But how did they find you so quickly? It’s impossible to track anyone who Apparates, unless you grab hold of them as they disappear.”

“And it doesn’t seem likely they were just strolling down Tottenham Court Road at the time, does it?” said Harry.

“We wondered,” said Hermione tentatively, “whether Harry could still have the Trace on him?”

“Impossible,” said Lupin. Ron looked smug, and Harry felt hugely relieved. “Apart from anything else, they’d know for sure Harry was here if he still had the Trace on him, wouldn’t they? But I can’t see how they could have tracked you to Tottenham Court Road, that’s worrying, really worrying.”

He looked disturbed, but as far as Harry was concerned, that question could wait.

“Tell us what happened after we left, we haven’t heard a thing since Ron’s dad told us the family was safe.”

“Well, Kingsley saved us,” said Lupin. “Thanks to his warning most of the wedding guests were able to Disapparate before they arrived.”

“Were they Death Eaters or Ministry people?” interjected Hermione.

“A mixture; but to all intents and purposes they’re the same thing now,” said Lupin. “There were about a dozen of them, but they didn’t know you were there, Harry. Arthur heard a rumor that they tried to torture your whereabouts out of Scrimgeour before they killed him; if it’s true, he didn’t give you away.”

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione; their expressions reflected the mingled shock and gratitude he felt. He had never liked Scrimgeour

much, but if what Lupin said was true, the man's final act had been to try to protect Harry.

"The Death Eaters searched the Burrow from top to bottom," Lupin went on. "They found the ghoul, but didn't want to get too close – and then they interrogated those of us who remained for hours. They were trying to get information on you, Harry, but of course nobody apart from the Order knew that you had been there."

"At the same time that they were smashing up the wedding, more Death Eaters were forcing their way into every Order-connected house in the country. No deaths," he added quickly, forestalling the question, "but they were rough. They burned down Dedalus Diggle's house, but as you know he wasn't there, and they used the Cruciarus Curse on Tonks's family. Again, trying to find out where you went after you visited them. They're all right – shaken, obviously, but otherwise okay."

"The Death Eaters got through all those protective charms?"

Harry asked, remembering how effective these had been on the night he had crashed in Tonks's parents' garden.

"What you've got to realize, Harry, is that the Death Eaters have got the full might of the Ministry on their side now," said Lupin. "They've got the power to perform brutal spells without fear of identification or arrest. They managed to penetrate every defensive spell we'd cast against them, and once inside, they were completely open about why they'd come."

"And are they bothering to give an excuse for torturing Harry's whereabouts out of people?" asked Hermione, an edge to her voice.

"Well," Lupin said. He hesitated, then pulled out a folded copy of the Daily Prophet.

“Here,” he said, pushing it across the table to Harry, “you’ll know sooner or later anyway. That’s their pretext for going after you.”

Harry smoothed out the paper. A huge photograph of his own face filled the front page. He read the headline over it:WANTED FOR QUESTIONING ABOUT THE DEATH OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORERon and Hermione gave roars of outrage, but Harry said nothing. He pushed the newspaper away; he did not want to read anymore: He knew what it would say. Nobody but those who had been on top of the tower when Dumbledore died knew who had really killed him and, as Rita Skeeter had already told the Wizarding world, Harry had been seen running from the place moments after Dumbledore had fallen.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Lupin said.

“So Death Eaters have taken over the Daily Prophet too?” asked Hermione furiously.

Lupin nodded.

“But surely people realize what’s going on?”

“The coup has been smooth and virtually silent,” said Lupin.

“The official version of Scrimgeour’s murder is that he resigned; he has been replaced by Pius Thicknesse, who is under the Imperius Curse.”

“Why didn’t Voldemort declare himself Minister of Magic?” asked Ron.

Lupin laughed.

“He doesn’t need to, Ron. Effectively, he is the Minister, but why should he sit behind a desk at the Ministry? His puppet, Thicknesse, is taking care of everyday business, leaving Voldemort free to extend his power beyond the Ministry.”

“Naturally many people have deduced what has happened: There has been such a dramatic change in Ministry policy in the last few days, and many are whispering that Voldemort must be behind it. However, that is the point: They whisper. They daren’t confide in each other, not knowing whom to trust; they are scared to speak out, in case their suspicions are true and their families are targeted. Yes, Voldemort is playing a very clever game. Declaring himself might have provoked open rebellion: Remaining masked has created confusion, uncertainty, and fear.”

“And this dramatic change in Ministry policy,” said Harry, “involves warning the Wizarding world against me instead of Voldemort?”

“That’s certainly a part of it,” said Lupin, “and it is a masterstroke. Now that Dumbledore is dead, you – the Boy Who Lived – were sure to be the symbol and rallying point for any resistance to Voldemort. But by suggesting that you had a hand in the old hat’s death, Voldemort has not only set a price upon your head, but sown doubt and fear amongst many who would have defended you.”

“Meanwhile, the Ministry has started moving against Muggle-borns.”

Lupin pointed at the Daily Prophet.

“Look at page two.”

Hermione turned the pages with much the same expression of distaste she had when handling Secrets of the Darkest Art.

“Muggle-born Register!” she read aloud. “‘The Ministry of Magic is undertaking a survey of so-called ”Muggle-borns“ the better to understand how they came to possess magical secrets.

“‘Recent research undertaken by the Department of Mysteries reveals that magic can only be passed from person to person when Wizards reproduce. Where no proven Wizarding ancestry exists,

therefore, the so-called Muggle-born is likely to have obtained magical power by theft or force.

"'The Ministry is determined to root out such usurpers of magical power, and to this end has issued an invitation to every so-called Muggle-born to present themselves for interview by the newly appointed Muggle-born Registration Commission.'"

"People won't let this happen," said Ron.

"It is happening, Ron," said Lupin. "Muggle-borns are being rounded up as we speak."

"But how are they supposed to have 'stolen' magic?" said Ron. "It's mental, if you could steal magic there wouldn't be any Squibs, would there?"

"I know," said Lupin. "Nevertheless, unless you can prove that you have at least one close Wizarding relative, you are now deemed to have obtained your magical power illegally and must suffer the punishment."

Ron glanced at Hermione, then said, "What if purebloods and halfbloods swear a Muggle-born's part of their family? I'll tell everyone Hermione's my cousin – "

Hermione covered Ron's hand with hers and squeezed it.

"Thank you, Ron, but I couldn't let you – "

"You won't have a choice," said Ron fiercely, gripping her hand back. "I'll teach you my family tree so you can answer questions on it."

Hermione gave a shaky laugh.

"Ron, as we're on the run with Harry Potter, the most wanted person in the country, I don't think it matters. If I was going back to school it

would be different. What's Voldemort planning for Hogwarts?" she asked Lupin.

"Attendance is now compulsory for every young witch and wizard," he replied. "That was announced yesterday. It's a change, because it was never obligatory before. Of course, nearly every witch and wizard in Britain has been educated at Hogwarts, but their parents had the right to teach them at home or send them abroad if they preferred. This way, Voldemort will have the whole Wizarding population under his eye from a young age. And it's also another way of weeding out Muggle-borns, because students must be given Blood Status – meaning that they have proven to the Ministry that they are of Wizard descent – before they are allowed to attend."

Harry felt sickened and angry: At this moment, excited eleven-year-olds would be poring over stacks of newly purchased spell-books, unaware that they would never see Hogwarts, perhaps never see their families again either.

"It's… it's…" he muttered, struggling to find words that did justice to the horror of his thoughts, but Lupin said quietly, "I know."

Lupin hesitated.

"I'll understand if you can't confirm this, Harry, but the Order is under the impression that Dumbledore left you a mission."

"He did," Harry replied, "and Ron and Hermione are in on it and they're coming with me."

"Can you confide in me what the mission is?"

Harry looked into the prematurely lined face, framed in thick but graying hair, and wished that he could return a different answer.

"I can't, Remus, I'm sorry. If Dumbledore didn't tell you I don't think I can."

“I thought you’d say that,” said Lupin, looking disappointed. “But I might still be of some use to you. You know what I am and what I can do. I could come with you to provide protection. There would be no need to tell me exactly what you were up to.”

Harry hesitated. It was a very tempting offer, though how they would be able to keep their mission secret from Lupin if he were with them all the time he could not imagine.

Hermione, however, looked puzzled.

“But what about Tonks?” she asked.

“What about her?” said Lupin.

“Well,” said Hermione, frowning, “you’re married! How does she feel about you going away with us?”

“Tonks will be perfectly safe,” said Lupin, “She’ll be at her parents’ house.”

There was something strange in Lupin’s tone, it was almost cold. There was also something odd in the idea of Tonks remaining hidden at her parents’ house; she was, after all, a member of the Order and, as far as Harry knew, was likely to want to be in the thick of the action.

“Remus,” said Hermione tentatively, “is everything all right… you know… between you and – ”

“Everything is fine, thank you,” said Lupin pointedly.

Hermione turned pink. There was another pause, an awkward and embarrassed one, and then Lupin said, with an air of forcing himself to admit something unpleasant, “Tonks is going to have a baby.”

“Oh, how wonderful!” squealed Hermione.

“Excellent!” said Ron enthusiastically.

“Congratulations,” said Harry.

Lupin gave an artificial smile that was more like a grimace, then said, “So… do you accept my offer? Will three become four? I cannot believe that Dumbledore would have disapproved, he appointed me your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, after all. And I must tell you that I believe we are facing magic many of us have never encountered or imagined.”

Ron and Hermione both looked at Harry.

“Just – just to be clear,” he said. “You want to leave Tonks at her parents’ house and come away with us?”

“She’ll be perfectly safe there, they’ll look after her,” said Lupin. He spoke with a finality bordering on indifference: “Harry, I’m sure James would have wanted me to stick with you.”

“Well,” said Harry slowly, “I’m not. I’m pretty sure my father would have wanted to know why you aren’t sticking with your own kid, actually.”

Lupin’s face drained of color. The temperature in the kitchen might have dropped ten degrees. Ron stared around the room as though he had been bidden to memorize it, while Hermione’s eyes swiveled backward and forward from Harry to Lupin.

“You don’t understand,” said Lupin at last.

“Explain, then,” said Harry.

Lupin swallowed.

“I – I made a grave mistake in marrying Tonks. I did it against my better judgment and have regretted it very much every since.”

“I see,” said Harry, “so you’re just going to dump her and the kid and run off with us?”

Lupin sprang to his feet: His chair toppled over backward, and he glared at them so fiercely that Harry saw, for the first time ever, she shadow of the wolf upon his human face.

“Don’t you understand what I’ve done to my wife and my unborn child? I should never have married her, I’ve made her an outcast!”

Lupin kicked aside the chair he had overturned.

“You have only ever seen me amongst the Order, or under Dumbledore’s protection at Hogwarts! You don’t know how most of the Wizarding world sees creatures like me! When they know of my affliction, they can barely talk to me! Don’t you see what I’ve done?

Even her own family is disgusted by our marriage, what parents want their only daughter to marry a werewolf? And the child – the child – “Lupin actually seized handfuls of his own hair; he looked quite deranged.

“My kind don’t usually breed! It will be like me, I am convinced of it – how can I forgive myself, when I knowingly risked passing on my own condition to an innocent child? And if, by some miracle, it is not like me, then it will be better off, a hundred times so, without a father of whom it must always be ashamed!”

“Remus!” whispered Hermione, tears in her eyes. “Don’t say that – how could any child be ashamed of you?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Hermione,” said Harry. “I’d be pretty ashamed of him.”

Harry did not know where his rage was coming from, but it had propelled him to his feet too. Lupin looked as though Harry had hit him.

“If the new regime thinks Muggle-borns are bad,” Harry said, “what will they do to a half-werewolf whose father’s in the Order? My father died trying to protect my mother and me, and you reckon he’d tell you to abandon your kid to go on an adventure with us?”

“How – how dare you?” said Lupin. “This is not about a desire for – for danger or personal glory – how dare you suggest such a – ”

“I think you’re feeling a bit of a daredevil,” Harry said, “You fancy stepping into Sirius’s shoes – ”

“Harry, no!” Hermione begged him, but he continued to glare into Lupin’s livid face.

“I’d never have believed this,” Harry said. “The man who taught me to fight dementors – a coward.”

Lupin drew his wand so fast that Harry had barely reached for his own; there was a loud bang and he felt himself flying backward as if punched; as he slammed into the kitchen wall and slid to the floor, he glimpsed the tail of Lupin’s cloak disappearing around the door.

“Remus, Remus, come back!” Hermione cried, but Lupin did not respond. A moment later they heard the front door slam.

“Harry!” wailed Hermione. “How could you?”

“It was easy,” said Harry. He stood up, he could feel a lump swelling where his head had hit the wall. He was still so full of anger he was shaking.

“Don’t look at me like that!” he snapped at Hermione.

“Don’t you start on her!” snarled Ron.

“No – no – we mustn’t fight!” said Hermione, launching herself between them.

“You shouldn’t have said that stuff to Lupin,” Ron told Harry.

“He had it coming to him,” said Harry. Broken images were racing each other through his mind: Sirius falling through the veil; Dumbledore suspended, broken, in midair; a flash of green light and his mother’s voice, begging for mercy…“Parents,” said Harry, “shouldn’t leave their kids unless – unless they’ve got to.”

“Harry – ” said Hermione, stretching out a consoling hand, but he shrugged it off and walked away, his eyes on the fire Hermione had conjured. He had once spoken to Lupin out of that fireplace, seeking reassurance about James, and Lupin had consoled him. Now Lupin’s tortured white face seemed to swim in the air before him. He felt a sickening surge of remorse. Neither Ron nor Hermione spoke, but Harry felt sure that they were looking at each other behind his back, communicating silently.

He turned around and caught them turning hurriedly away form each other.

“I know I shouldn’t have called him a coward.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” said Ron at once.

“But he’s acting like one.”

“All the same…” said Hermione.

“I know,” said Harry. “But if it makes him go back to Tonks, it’ll be worth it, won’t it?”

He could not keep the plea out of his voice. Hermione looked sympathetic, Ron uncertain. Harry looked down at his feet, thinking of his father. Would James have backed Harry in what he had said to Lupin, or would he have been angry at how his son had treated his old friend?

The silent kitchen seemed to hum with the shock of the recent scene and with Ron and Hermione's unspoken reproaches. The Daily Prophet Lupin had brought was still lying on the table, Harry's own face staring up at the ceiling from the front page. He walked over to it and sat down, opened the paper at random, and pretended to read. He could not take in the words; his mind was still too full of the encounter with Lupin. He was sure that Ron and Hermione had resumed their silent communications on the other side of the Prophet. He turned a page loudly, and Dumbledore's name leapt out at him. It was a moment or two before he took in the meaning of the photograph, which showed a family group. Beneath the photograph were the words: The Dumbledore family, left to right: Albus; Percival, holding newborn Ariana; Kendra, and Aberforth.

His attention caught, Harry examined the picture more carefully. Dumbledore's father, Percival, was a good-looking man with eyes that seemed to twinkle even in this faded old photograph. The baby, Ariana, was a little longer than a loaf of bread and no more distinctive-looking. The mother, Kendra, had jet black hair pulled into a high bun. Her face had a carved quality about it. Harry thought of photos of Native Americans he'd seen as he studied her dark eyes, high cheekbones, and straight nose, formally composed above a high-necked silk gown. Albus and Aberforth wore matching lacy collared jackets and had identical, shoulder-length hairstyles. Albus looked several years older, but otherwise the two boys looked very alike, for this was before Albus's nose had been broken and before he started wearing glasses.

The family looked quite happy and normal, smiling serenely up out of the newspaper. Baby Ariana's arm waved vaguely out of her shawl. Harry looked above the picture and saw the headline:EXCLUSIVE EXTRACT FROM UPCOMINGBIOGRAPHY OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

by Rita Skeeter

Thinking it could hardly make him feel any worse than he already did, Harry began to read:Proud and haughty, Kendra Dumbledore could not bear to remain in Mould-on-the-Wold after her husband Percival's well-publicized arrest and imprisonment in Azkaban. She therefore decided to uproot the family and relocate to Godric's Hollow, the village that was later to gain fame as the scene of Harry Potter's strange escape from You-Know-Who.

Like Mould-on-the-Wold, Godric's Hollow was home to a number of Wizarding families, but as Kendra knew none of them, she would be spared the curiosity about her husband's crime she had faced in her former village. By repeatedly rebuffing the friendly advances of her new Wizarding neighbors, she soon ensured that her family was left well alone.

"Slammed the door in my face when I went around to welcome her with a batch of homemade Cauldron Cakes," says Bathilda Bagshot. "The first year they were there I only ever saw the two boys. Wouldn't have known there was a daughter if I hadn't been picking Plangentines by moonlight the winter after they moved in, and saw Kendra leading Ariana out into the back garden. Walked her round the lawn once, keeping a firm grip on her, then took her back inside. Didn't know what to make of it."

It seems that Kendra thought the move to Godric's Hollow was the perfect opportunity to hide Ariana once and for all, something she had probably been planning for years. The timing was significant. Ariana was barely seven years old when she vanished from sight, and seven is the age by which most experts agree that magic will have revealed itself, if present. Nobody now alive remembers Ariana ever demonstrating even the slightest sign of magical ability. It seems clear, therefore, that Kendra made a decision to hide her daughter's existence rather than suffer the shame of admitting that she had produced a Squib. Moving away from the friends and neighbors who knew Ariana would, of course, make imprisoning her all the easier. The tiny number of people who henceforth knew of Ariana's

existence could be counted upon to keep the secret, including her two brothers, who had deflected awkward questions with the answer their mother had taught them. “My sister is too frail for school.”

Next week: Albus Dumbledore at Hogwarts – the Prizes and the Pretense.

Harry had been wrong: What he had read had indeed made him feel worse. He looked back at the photograph of the apparently happy family. Was it true? How could he find out? He wanted to go to Godric’s Hollow, even if Bathilda was in no fit state to talk to him: he wanted to visit the place where he and Dumbledore had both lost loved ones. He was in the process of lowering the newspaper, to ask Ron’s and Hermione’s opinions, when a deafening crack echoed around the kitchen.

For the first time in three days Harry had forgotten all about Kreacher. His immediate thought was that Lupin had burst back into the room, and for a split second, he did not take in the mass of struggling limbs that had appeared out of thin air right beside his chair. He hurried to his feet as Kreacher disentangled himself and, bowing low to Harry, croaked, “Kreacher has returned with the thief Mundungus Fletcher, Master.”

Mundungus scrambled up and pulled out his wand; Hermione, however, was too quick for him.

“Expelliarmus!”

Mundungus’s wand soared into the air, and Hermione caught it. Wild-eyed, Mundungus dived for the stairs. Ron rugby-tackled him and Mundungus hit the stone floor with a muffled crunch.

“What?” he bellowed, writhing in his attempts to free himself from Ron’s grip. “Wha’ve I done? Setting a bleedin’ ‘house-elf on me, what are you playing at, wha’ve I done, lemme go, lemme go, of – ”

“You’re not in much of a position to make threats,” said Harry. He threw aside the newspaper, crossed the kitchen in a few strides, and dropped to his knees beside Mundungus, who stopped struggling and looked terrified. Ron got up, panting, and watched as Harry pointed his wand deliberately at Mundungus’s nose. Mundungus stank of stale sweat and tobacco smoke. His hair was matted and his robes stained.

“Kreacher apologizes for the delay in bringing the thief, Master,” croaked the elf. “Fletcher knows how to avoid capture, has many hidey-holes and accomplices. Nevertheless, Kreacher cornered the thief in the end.”

“You’ve done really well, Kreacher,” said Harry, and the elf bowed low.

“Right, we’ve got a few questions for you,” Harry told Mundungus, who shouted at once.

“I panicked, okay? I never wanted to come along, no offense, mate, but I never volunteered to die for you, an’ that was bleedin’ You-Know-Who come flying at me, anyone woulda got outta there. I said all along I didn’t wanna do it – ”

“For your information, none of the rest of us Disapparated,” said Hermione.

“Well, you’re a bunch of bleedin’ ‘eroes then, aren’t you, but I never pretended I was up for killing meself – ”

“We’re not interested in why you ran out on Mad-Eye,” said Harry, moving his wand a little closer to Mundungus’s baggy, bloodshot eyes. “We already knew you were an unreliable bit of scum.”

“Well then, why the ‘ell am I being ‘unted down by ‘ouse-elves? Or is this about them goblets again? I ain’t got none of ‘em left, or you could ‘ave ‘em – ”

“It’s not about the goblets either, although you’re getting warmer,” said Harry. “Shut up and listen.”

It felt wonderful to have something to do, someone of whom he could demand some small portion of truth. Harry’s wand was now so close to the bridge of Mundungus’s nose that Mundungus had gone cross-eyed trying to keep it in view.

“When you cleaned out this house of anything valuable,” Harry began, but Mundungus interrupted him again.

“Sirius never cared about any of the junk – ”

There was the sound of pattering fee, a blaze of shining copper, an echoing clang, and a shriek of agony; Kreacher had taken a run at Mundungus and hit him over the head with a saucepan.

“Call ‘im off, call ‘im off, ‘e should be locked up!” screamed Mundungus, cowering as Kreacher raised the heavy-bottomed pan again.

“Kreacher, no!” shouted Harry.

Kreacher’s thin arms trembled with the weight of the pan, still held aloft.

“Perhaps just one more, Master Harry, for luck?”

Ron laughed.

“We need him conscious, Kreacher, but if he needs persuading, you can do the honors,” said Harry.

“Thank you very much, Master,” said Kreacher with a bow, and he retreated a short distance, his great pale eyes still fixed upon Mundungus with loathing.

“When you stripped this house of all the valuables you could find,” Harry began again, “you took a bunch of stuff from the kitchen cupboard. There was a locket there.” Harry’s mouth was suddenly dry: He could sense Ron and Hermione’s tension and excitement too. “What did you do with it?”

“Why?” asked Mundungus. “Is it valuable?”

“You’ve still got it!” cried Hermione.

“No, he hasn’t,” said Ron shrewdly. “He’s wondering whether he should have asked more money for it.”

“More?” said Mundungus. “That wouldn’t have been effing difficult… bleedin’ gave it away, di’n’ I? No choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was selling in Diagon Alley and she come up to me and asks if I’ve got a license for trading in magical artifacts. Bleedin’ snoop. She was gonna fine me, but she took a fancy to the locket an’ told me she’d take it and let me off that time, and to fink meself lucky.”

“Who was this woman?” asked Harry.

“I dunno, some Ministry hag.”

Mundungus considered for a moment, brow wrinkled.

“Little woman. Bow on top of ‘er head.”

He frowned and then added, “Looked like a toad.”

Harry dropped his wand: It hit Mundungus on the nose and shot red sparks into his eyebrows, which ignited.

“Aquamenti!” screamed Hermione, and a jet of water streamed from her wand, engulfing a spluttering and choking Mundungus.

Harry looked up and saw his own shock reflected in Ron's and Hermione's faces. The scars on the back of his right hand seemed to be tingling again.

Chapter 12 Magic Is Might

As August wore on, the square of unkempt grass in the middle of Grimmauld Place shriveled in the sun until it was brittle and brown. The inhabitants of number twelve were never seen by anyone in the surrounding houses, and nor was number twelve itself. The muggles who lived in Grimmauld Place had long since accepted the amusing mistake in the numbering that had caused number eleven to sit beside number thirteen.

And yet the square was now attracting a trickle of visitors who seemed to find the anomaly most intriguing. Barely a day passed without one or two people arriving in Grimmauld Place with no other purpose, or so it seemed, than to lean against the railings facing numbers eleven and thirteen, watching the join between the two houses. The lurkers were never the same two days running, although they all seemed to share a dislike for normal clothing. Most of the Londoners who passed them were used to eccentric dressers and took little notice, though occasionally one of them might glance back, wondering why anyone would wear cloaks in this heat.

The watchers seemed to be gleaning little satisfaction from their vigil. Occasionally one of them started forward excitedly, as if they had seen something interesting at last, only to fall back looking disappointed.

On the first day of September there were more people lurking in the square than ever before. Half a dozen men in long cloaks stood silent and watchful, gazing as ever at houses eleven and thirteen, but the thing for which they were waiting still appeared elusive. As evening drew in, bringing with it an unexpected gust of chilly rain for the first time in weeks, there occurred one of those inexplicable moments when they appeared to have seen something interesting. The man with the twisted face pointed and his closest companion, a podgy,

pallid man, started forward, but a moment later they had relaxed into their previous state of inactivity, looking frustrated and disappointed.

Meanwhile, inside number twelve, Harry had just entered the hall. He had nearly lost his balance as he Apparated onto the top step just outside the front door, and thought that the Death Eaters might have caught a glimpse of his momentarily exposed elbow. Shutting the front door carefully behind him, he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, draped it over his arm, and hurried along the gloomy hallway toward the door that led to the basement, a stolen copy of the Daily Prophet clutched in his hand.

The usual low whisper of "Severus Snape" greeted him, the chill wind swept him, and his tongue rolled up for a moment.

"I didn't kill you," he said, once it had unrolled, then held his breath as the dusty jinx-figure exploded. He waited until he was halfway down the stairs to the kitchen, out of earshot of Mrs. Black and clear of the dust cloud, before calling, "I've got news, and you won't like it."

The kitchen was almost unrecognizable. Every surface now shone; Copper pots and pans had been burnished to a rosy glow; the wooden tabletop gleamed; the goblets and plates already laid for dinner glinted in the light from a merrily blazing fire, on which a cauldron was simmering. Nothing in the room, however, was more dramatically different than the house-elf who now came hurrying toward Harry, dressed in a snowy-white towel, his ear hair as clean and fluffy as cotton wool, Regulus's locket bouncing on his thin chest.

"Shoes off, if you please, Master Harry, and hands washed before dinner," croaked Kreacher, seizing the Invisibility Cloak and slouching off to hang it on a hook on the wall, beside a number of old-fashioned robes that had been freshly laundered.

"What's happened?" Ron asked apprehensively. He are Hermione had been pouring over a sheaf of scribbled notes and hand drawn maps that littered the end of the long kitchen table, but now they

watched Harry as he strode toward them and threw down the newspaper on top of their scattered parchment.

A large picture of a familiar, hook-nosed, black-haired man stared up at them all, beneath a headline that read:SEVERUS SNAPE CONFIRMED

AS HOGWARTS HEADMASTER

“No!“ said Ron and Hermione loudly.

Hermione was quickest; she snatched up the newspaper and began to read the accompanying story out loud.

“Severus Snape, long-standing Potions master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and wizardry, was today appointed headmaster in the most important of several staffing changes at the ancient school. Following the resignation of the previous Muggle Studies teacher, Alecto Carrow will take over the post while her brother, Amycus, fills the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.““ ‘I welcome the opportunity to uphold our finest Wizarding traditions and values –’ Like committing murder and cutting off people’s ears, I suppose! Snape, headmaster! Snape in Dumbledore’s study – Merlin’s pants!“ she shrieked, making both Harry and Ron jump. She leapt up from the table and hurtled from the room, shouting as she went, ”I’ll be back in a minute!“”‘Merlin’s pants’?” repeated Ron, looking amused. “She must be upset.” He pulled the newspaper toward him and perused the article about Snape.

“The other teachers won’t stand for this, McGonagall and Flitwick and Sprout all know the truth, they know how Dumbledore died. They won’t accept Snape as headmaster. And who are these Carrows?““Death Eaters,” said Harry. “There are pictures of them inside. They were at the top of the tower when Snape killed Dumbledore, so it’s all friends together. And,” Harry went on bitterly, drawing up a chair, “I can’t see that the other teachers have got any choice but to stay. If the Ministry and Voldemort are behind Snape, it’ll

be a choice between staying and teaching, or a nice few years in Azkaban – and that's if they're lucky. I reckon they'll stay to try and protect the students."

Kreacher came bustling to the table with a large curcen in his hands, and ladled out soup into pristine bowls, whistling between his teeth as he did so.

"Thanks, Kreacher," said Harry, flipping over the Prophet so as not to have to look at Snape's face. "Well, at least we know exactly where Snape is now."He began to spoon soup into his mouth. The quality of Kreacher's cooking had improved dramatically ever since he had been given Regulus's locket: Today's French onion was as good as Harry had ever tasted.

"There are still a load of Death Eaters watching this house," he told Ron as he ate, "more than usual. It's like they're hoping we'll march out carrying our school trunks and head off for the Hogwarts Express."

Ron glanced at his watch.

"I've been thinking about that all day. It left nearly six hours ago. Weird, not being on it, isn't it?"

In his mind's eye Harry seemed to see the scarlet steam engine as he and Ron had once followed it by air, shimmering between fields and hills, a rippling scarlet caterpillar. He was sure Ginny, Neville, and Luna were sitting together at this moment, perhaps wondering where he, Ron, and Hermione were, or debating how best to undermine Snape's new regime.

"They nearly saw me coming back in just now," Harry said, "I landed badly on the top step, and the Cloak slipped."

"I do that every time. Oh, here she is," Ron added, craning around in his seat to watch Hermione reentering the kitchen. "And what in the

name of Merlin's most baggy Y Fronts was that about?"

"I remembered this," Hermione panted.

She was carrying a large, framed picture, which she now lowered to the floor before seizing her small, beaded bag from the kitchen sideboard. Opening it, she proceeded to force the painting inside and despite the fact that it was patently too large to fit inside the tiny bag, within a few seconds it had vanished, like so much ease, into the bag's capacious depths.

"Phineas Nigellus," Hermione explained as she threw the bag onto the kitchen table with the usual sonorous, clanking crash.

"Sorry?" said Ron, but Harry understood. The painted image of Phineas Nigellus Black was able to travel between his portrait in Grimmauld Place and the one that hung in the headmaster's office at Hogwarts: the circular cower-top room where Snape was no doubt sitting right now, in triumphant possession of Dumbledore's collection of delicate, silver magical instruments, the stone Pensieve, the Sorting Hat and, unless it ad been moved elsewhere, the sword of Gryffindor.

"Snape could send Phineas Nigellus to look inside this house for him," Hermione explained to Ron as she resumed her seat. "But let him try it now, all Phineas Nigellus will be able to see is the inside of my handbag."

"Good thinking!" said Ron, looking impressed.

"Thank you," smiled Hermione, pulling her soup toward her. "So, Harry, what else happened today?"

"Nothing," said Harry. "Watched the Ministry entrance for seven hours. No sign of her. Saw your dad though, Ron. He looks fine."

Ron nodded his appreciation of this news. The had agreed that it was far too dangerous to try and communicate with Mr. Weasley while he walked in and out of the Ministry, because he was always surrounded by other Ministry workers. It was, however, reassuring to catch these glimpses of him, even if he did look very strained and anxious.

"Dad always told us most Ministry people use the Floo Network to get to work," Ron said. "That's why we haven't seen Umbridge, she'd never walk, she'd think she's too important."

"And what about that funny old witch and that little wizard in the navy robes?" Hermione asked.

"Oh yeah, the bloke from Magical Maintenance," said Ron.

"How do you know he works for Magical Maintenance?" Hermione asked, her soupspoon suspended in midair.

"Dad said everyone from Magical Maintenance wears navy blue robes."

"But you never told us that!"

Hermione dropped her spoon and pulled toward her the sheaf of notes and maps that she and Ron had been examining when Harry had entered the kitchen.

"There's nothing in here about navy blue robes, nothing!" she said, flipping feverishly through the pages.

"Well, does it really matter?"

"Ron, it all matters! If we're going to get into the Ministry and not give ourselves away when they're bound to be on the lookout for intruders, every little detail matters! We've been over and over this, I mean, what's the point of all these reconnaissance trips if you aren't even bothering to tell us – ""Blimey, Hermione, I forget one little thing – "

“You do realize, don’t you, that there’s probably no more dangerous place in the whole world for us to be right now than the Ministry of – ““I think we should do it tomorrow,” said Harry.

Hermione stopped dead, her jaw hanging; Ron choked a little over his soup.

“Tomorrow?” repeated Hermione. “You aren’t serious, Harry?”

“I am,“ said Harry. ”I don’t think we’re going to be much better prepared than we are now even if we skulk around the Ministry entrance for another month. The longer we put it off, the farther away that locket could be. There’s already a good chance Umbridge has chucked it away; the thing doesn’t open.““Unless,” said Ron, “she’s found a way of opening it and she’s now possessed.”

“Wouldn’t make any difference to her, she was so evil in the first place,” Harry shrugged.

Hermione was biting her lip, deep in thought.

“We know everything important,“ Harry went on, addressing Hermione. ”We know they’ve stopped Apparition in and out of the Ministry; We know only the most senior Ministry members are allowed to connect their homes to the Floo Network now, because Ron heard those two Unspeakables complaining about it. And we know roughly where Umbridge’s office is, because of what you heard the bearded bloke saying to his mate – “““I’ll be up on level one, Dolores wants to see me,”“ Hermione recited immediately.

“Exactly,” said Harry. “And we know you get in using those funny coins, or tokens, or whatever they are, because I saw that witch borrowing one from her friend – ”

“But we haven’t got any!”

“If the plan works, we will have,” Harry continued calmly.

“I don’t know, Harry, I don’t know … There are an awful lot of things that could go wrong, so much relies on chance …”

“That’ll be true even if we spend another three months preparing,“ said Harry. ”It’s time to act.“He could tell from Ron’s and Hermione’s faces that they were scared; he was not particularly confident himself, and yet he was sure the time had come to put their plan into operation.

They had spent the previous four weeks taking it in turns to don the Invisibility Cloak and spy on the official entrance to the Ministry, which Ron, thanks to Mr. Weasley, had known since childhood. They had tailed Ministry workers on their way in, eavesdropped on their conversations, and learned by careful observation which of them could be relied upon to appear, alone, at the same time every day. Occasionally there had been a chance to sneak a Daily Prophet out of somebody’s briefcase. Slowly they had built up the sketchy maps and notes now stacked in front of Hermione.

“All right,” said Ron slowly, “let’s say we go for it tomorrow … I think it should just be me and Harry.”

“Oh, don’t start that again!” sighed Hermione. “I thought we’d settled this.”

“It’s one thing hanging around the entrances under the Cloak, but this is different. Hermione,“ Ron jabbed a finger at a copy of the Daily Prophet dated ten days previously. ”You’re on the list of Muggle-borns who didn’t present themselves for interrogation!““And you’re supposed to be dying of spattergroit at the Burrow! If anyone shouldn’t go, it’s Harry, he’s got a ten-thousand-Galleon price on his head – ”

“Fine, I’ll stay here,“ said Harry. ”Let me know if you ever defeat Voldemort, won’t you?“As Ron and Hermione laughed, pain shot through the scar on Harry’s forehead. His hand jumped to it. He saw

Hermione's eyes narrow, and he tried to pass off the movement by brushing his hair out of his eyes.

"Well, if all three of us go we'll have to Disapparate separately," Ron was saying. "We can't all fit under the Cloak anymore."

Harry's scar was becoming more and more painful. He stood up. At once, Kreacher hurried forward.

"Master has not finished his soup, would master prefer the savory stew, or else the treacle tart to which Master is so partial?"

"Thanks, Kreacher, but I'll be back in a minute – er – bathroom."

Aware that Hermione was watching him suspiciously, Harry hurried up the stairs to the hall and then to the first landing, where he dashed into the bathroom and bolted the door again. Grunting with pain, he slumped over the black basin with its taps in the form of open-mouthed serpents and closed his eyes ….

He was gliding along a twilit street. The buildings on either side of him had high, timbered gables; they looked like gingerbread houses. He approached one of them, then saw the whiteness of his own long-fingered hand against the door. He knocked. He felt a mounting excitement …The door opened: A laughing woman stood there. Her face fell as she looked into Harry's face: humor gone, terror replacing it ….

"Gregorovitch?" said a high, cold voice.

She shook her head: She was trying to close the door. A white hand held it steady, prevented her shutting him out …"I want Gregorovitch."

"Er wohnt hier nicht mehr!" she cried, shaking her head. "He no live here! He no live here! I know him not!"Abandoning the attempt to close the door, she began to back away down the dark hall, and

Harry followed, gliding toward her, and his long-fingered hand had drawn his wand.

“Where is he?”

“Das wei? ich nicht! He move! I know not, I know not!“He raised his hand. She screamed. Two young children came running into the hall. She tried to shield them with her arms. There was a flash of green light –“Harry! HARRY!”

He opened his eyes; he had sunk to the floor. Hermione was pounding on the door again.

“Harry, open up!”

He had shouted out, he knew it. He got up and unbolted the door; Hermione toppled inside at once, regained her balance, and looked around suspiciously. Ron was right behind her, looking unnerved as he pointed his wand into the corners of the chilly bathroom.

“What were you doing?” asked Hermione sternly.

“What d’you think I was doing?“ asked Harry with feeble bravado.

“You were yelling your head off!” said Ron.

“Oh yeah … I must’ve dozed off or – ”

“Harry, please don’t insult our intelligence,“ said Hermione, taking deep breaths. ”We know your scar hurt downstairs, and you’re white as a sheet.“Harry sat down on the edge of the bath.

“Fine. I’ve just seen Voldemort murdering a woman. By now he’s probably killed her whole family. And he didn’t need to. It was Cedric all over again, they were just there …““Harry, you aren’t supposed to let this happen anymore!“ Hermione cried, her voice echoing through the bathroom. ”Dumbledore wanted you to use Occlumency! HE

thought the connection was dangerous – Voldemort can use it, Harry! What good is it to watch him kill and torture, how can it help?““Because it means I know what he’s doing,” said Harry.

“So you’re not even going to try to shut him out?““Hermione, I can’t. You know I’m lousy at Occlumency. I never got the hang of it.”

“You never really tried!“ she said hotly. ”I don’t get it, Harry – do you like having this special connection or relationship or what – whatever – “She faltered under the look he gave her as he stood up.

“Like it?“ he said quietly. ”Would you like it?““I – no – I’m sorry, Harry. I just didn’t mean – ”

“I hate it, I hate the fact that he can get inside me, that I have to watch him when he’s most dangerous. But I’m going to use it.”

“Dumbledore – ”

“Forget Dumbledore. This is my choice, nobody else’s. I want to know why he’s after Gregorovitch.”

“Who?”

“He’s a foreign wandmaker,” said Harry. “He made Krum’s wand and Krum reckons he’s brilliant.”

“But according to you,” said Ron, “Voldemort’s got Ollivander locked up somewhere. If he’s already got a wandmaker, what does he need another one for?”

“Maybe he agrees with Krum, maybe he thinks Gregorovitch is better … or else he thinks Gregorovitch will be able to explain what my wand did when he was chasing me, because Ollivander didn’t know.”

Harry glanced into the cracked, dusty mirror and saw Ron and Hermione exchanging skeptical looks behind his back.

“Harry, you keep talking about what your wand did,“ said Hermione, ”but you made it happen! Why are you so determined not to take responsibility for your own power?““Because I know it wasn’t me! And so does Voldemort, Hermione! We both know what really happened!”

They glared at each other; Harry knew that he had not convinced Hermione and that she was marshaling counterarguments, against both his theory on his wand and the fact that he was permitting himself to see into Voldemort’s mind. To his relief, Ron intervened.

“Drop it,” he advised her. “It’s up to him. And if we’re going to the Ministry tomorrow, don’t you reckon we should go over the plan?”

Reluctantly, as the other two could tell, Hermione let the matter rest, though Harry was quite sure she would attack again at the first opportunity. In the meantime, they returned to the basement kitchen, where Kreacher served them all stew and treacle tart.

They did not get to bed until late that night, after spending hours going over and over their plan until they could recite it, word perfect, to each other. Harry, who was now sleeping in Sirius’s room, lay in bed with his wandlight trained on the old photograph of his father, Sirius, Lupin, and Pettigrew, and muttered the plan to himself for another ten minutes. As he extinguished his wand, however, he was thinking not of Polyjuice Potion, Puking Pastilles, or the navy blue robes of Magical Maintenance; he thought of Gregorovitch the wandmaker, and how long he could hope to remain hidden while Voldemort sought him so determinedly.

Dawn seemed to follow midnight with indecent haste.

“You look terrible,” was Ron’s greeting as he entered the room to wake Harry.

“Not for long,” said Harry, yawning.

They found Hermione downstairs in the kitchen. She was being served coffee and hot rolls by Kreacher and wearing the slightly manic expression that Harry associated with exam review.

“Robes,” she said under her breath, acknowledging their presence with a nervous nod and continuing to poke around in her beaded bag, “Polyjuice Potion … Invisibility Cloak … Decoy Detonators … You should each take a couple just in case … Puking Pastilles, Nosebleed Norgat, Extendable Ears …”

They gulped down their breakfast, then set off upstairs, Kreacher bowing them out and promising to have a steak-and-kidney pie ready for them when they returned.

“Bless him,“ said Ron fondly, ”and when you think I used to fantasize about cutting off his head and sticking it on the wall.“They made their way onto the front step with immense caution. They could see a couple of puffy-eyed Death Eaters watching the house from across the misty square.

Hermione Disapparated with Ron first, then came back for Harry.

After the usual brief spell of darkness and near suffocation, Harry found himself in the tiny alleyway where the first phase of their plan was scheduled to take place. It was as yet deserted, except for a couple of large bins; the first Ministry workers did not usually appear here until at least eight o’clock.

“Right then,” said Hermione, checking her watch. “she ought to be here in about five minutes. When I’ve Stunned her – ”

“Hermione, we know,” said Ron sternly. “And I thought we were supposed to open the door before she got here?”

Hermione squealed.

“I nearly forgot! Stand back – ”

She pointed her wand at the padlocked and heavily graffitied fire door beside them, which burst open with a crash. The dark corridor behind it led, as they knew from their careful scouting trips, into an empty theater. Hermione pulled the door back toward her, to make it look as thought it was still closed.

“And now,“ she said, turning, back to face the other two in the alleyway, ”we put on the Cloak again – ““ – and we wait,” Ron finished, throwing it over Hermione’s head like a blanket over a birdcage and rolling his eyes at Harry.

Little more than a minute later, there was a tiny pop and a little Ministry witch with flyaway gray hair Apparated feet from them, blinking a little in the sudden brightness: the sun had just come out from behind a cloud. She barely had time to enjoy the unexpected warmth, however, before Hermione’s silent Stunning Spell hit her in the chest and she toppled over.

“Nicely done, Hermione,“ said Ron, emerging behind a bin beside the theater door as Harry took off the Invisibility Cloak. Together they carried the little witch into the dark passageway that led backstage. Hermione plucked a few hairs from the witch’s head and added them to a flask of muddy Polyjuice Potion she had taken from the beaded bag. Ron was rummaging through the little witch’s handbag.

“She’s Mafalda Hopkirk,“ he said, reading a small card that identified their victim as an assistant in the Improper Use of Magic Office. ”You’d better take this, Hermione, and here are the tokens.“He passed her several small golden coins, all embossed with the letters M.O.M. which he had taken from the witch’s purse.

Hermione drank the Polyjuice Potion, which was now a pleasant heliotrope color, and within seconds stood before them, the double of Mafalda Hopkirk. As she removed Mafalda’s spectacles and put them on, Harry checked his watch.

“We’re running late, Mr. Magical Maintenance will be here any second.”

They hurried to close the door on the real Mafalda; Harry and Ron threw the Invisibility Cloak over themselves but Hermione remained in view, waiting. Seconds later there was another pop, and a small, ferrety looking wizard appeared before them.

“Oh, hello, Mafalda.”

“Hello!“ said Hermione in a quavery voice, “How are you today?”

“Not so good, actually,” replied the little wizard, who looked thoroughly downcast.

As Hermione and the wizard headed for the main road, Harry and Ron crept along behind them.

“I’m sorry to hear you’re under the weather,” said Hermione, talking firmly over the little wizard and he tried to expound upon his problems; it was essential to stop him from reaching the street. “Here, have a sweet.”

“Eh? Oh, no thanks – ”

“I insist!“ said Hermione aggressively, shaking the bag of pastilles in his face. Looking rather alarmed, the little wizard took one.

The effect was instantaneous. The moment the pastille touched his tongue, the little wizard started vomiting so hard that he did not even notice as Hermione yanked a handful of hairs from the top of his head.

“Oh dear!” she said, as he splattered the alley with sick. “Perhaps you’d better take the day off!”

“No – no!” He choked and retched, trying to continue on his way despite being unable to walk straight. “I must – today – must go – ”

“But that’s just silly!” said Hermione, alarmed. “You can’t go to work in this state – I think you ought to go to St. Mungo’s and get them to sort you out.”

The wizard had collapsed, heaving, onto all fours, still trying to crawl toward the main street.

“You simply can’t go to work like this!” cried Hermione.

At last he seemed to accept the truth of her words. Using a reposed Hermione to claw his way back into a standing position, he turned on the spot and vanished, leaving nothing behind but the bag Ron had snatched from his hand as he went and some flying chunks of vomit.

“Urgh,” said Hermione, holding up the skirt of her robe to avoid the puddles of sick. “It would have made much less mess to Stun him too.”

“Yeah,” said Ron, emerging from under the cloak holding the wizard’s bag, “but I still think a whole pile of unconscious bodies would have drawn more attention. Keen on his job, though, isn’t he? Chuck us the hair and the potion, then.”

Within two minutes, Ron stood before them, as small and ferrety as the sick wizard, and wearing the navy blue robes that had been folded in his bag.

“Weird he wasn’t wearing them today, wasn’t it, seeing how much he wanted to go? Anyway, I’m Reg Cattermole, according to the label in the back.”

“Now wait here,” Hermione told Harry, who was still under the Invisibility Cloak, “and we’ll be back with some hairs for you.”

He had to wait ten minutes, but it seemed much longer to Harry, skulking alone in the sick-splattered alleyway beside the door concealing the Stunned Mafalda. Finally Ron and Hermione reappeared.

“We don’t know who he is,“ Hermione said, passing Harry several curly black hairs, ”but he’s gone home with a dreadful nosebleed! Here, he’s pretty tall, you’ll need bigger robes …“She pulled out a set of the old robes Kreacher had laundered for them, and Harry retired to take the potion and change.

Once the painful transformation was complete he was more than six feet tall and, from what he could tell from his well-muscled arms, powerfully built. He also had a beard. Stowing the Invisibility Cloak and his glasses inside his new robes, he rejoined the other two.

“Blimey, that’s scary,” said Ron, looking up at Harry, who now towered over him.

“Take one of Mafalda’s tokens,” Hermione told Harry, “and let’s go, it’s nearly nine.”

They stepped out of the alleyway together. Fifty yards along the crowded pavement there were spiked black railings flanking two flights of stairs, one labeled GENTLEMEN, the other LADIES.

“See you in a moment, then,” said Hermione nervously, and she tottered off down the steps to LADIES. Harry and Ron joined a number of oddly dressed men descending into what appeared to be an ordinary underground public toilet, tiled in grimy black and white.

“Morning, Reg!” called another wizard in navy blue robes as he let himself into a cubicle by inserting his golden token into a slot in the door. “Blooming pain in the bum, this, eh? Forcing us all to get to work this way! Who are they expecting to turn up, Harry Potter?”

The wizard roared with laughter at his own wit. Ron gave a forced chuckle.

“Yeah,” he said, “stupid, isn’t it?”

And he and Harry let themselves into adjoining cubicles.

To Harry’s left and right came the sound of flushing. He crouched down and peered through the gap at the bottom of the cubicle, just in time to see a pair of booted feet climbing into the toilet next door. He looked left and saw Ron blinking at him.

“We have to flush ourselves in?” he whispered.

“Looks like it,” Harry whispered back; his voice came out deep and gravelly.

They both stood up. Feeling exceptionally foolish, Harry clambered into the toilet.

He knew at once that he had done the right thing; thought he appeared to be standing in water, his shoes, feet, and robes remained quite dry. He reached up, pulled the chain, and next moment had zoomed down a short chute, emerging out of a fireplace into the Ministry of Magic.

He got up clumsily; there was a lot more of his body than he was accustomed to. The great Atrium seemed darker than Harry remembered it. Previously a golden fountain had filled the center of the hall, casting shimmering spots of light over the polished wooden floor and walls. Now a gigantic statue of black stone dominated the scene. It was rather frightening, this vast sculpture of a witch and a wizard sitting on ornately carved thrones, looking down at the Ministry workers toppling out of fireplaces below them. Engraved in foot-high letters at the base of the statue were the words MAGIC IS MIGHT.

Harry received a heavy blow on the back of the legs. Another wizard had just flown out of the fireplace behind him.

"Out of the way, can't y – oh, sorry, Runcorn."

Clearly frightened, the balding wizard hurried away. Apparently the man who Harry was impersonating, Runcorn, was intimidating.

"Psst!" said a voice, and he looked around to see a whispy little witch and the ferrety wizard from Magical Maintenance gesturing to him from over beside the statue. Harry hastened to join them.

"You got in all right, then?" Hermione whispered to Harry.

"No, he's still stuck in the hog," said Ron.

"Oh, very funny … It's horrible, isn't it?" she said to Harry, who was staring up at the statue. "Have you seen what they're sitting on?"

Harry looked more closely and realized that what he had thought were decoratively carved thrones were actually mounds of carved humans: hundreds and hundreds of naked bodies, men, women, and children, all with rather stupid, ugly faces, twisted and pressed together to support the weight of the handsomely robed wizards.

"Muggles," whispered Hermione, "In their rightful place. Come on, let's get going."

They joined the stream of witches and wizards moving toward the golden gates at the end of the hall, looking around as surreptitiously as possible, but there was no sign of the distinctive figure of Dolores Umbridge. They passed through the gates and into a smaller hall, where queues were forming in front of twenty golden grilles housing as many lifts. They had barely joined the nearest one when a voice said, "Cattermole!"

They looked around: Harry's stomach turned over. One of the Death Eaters who had witnessed Dumbledore's death was striding toward them. The Ministry workers beside them fell silent, their eyes downcast; Harry could feel fear rippling through them.

The man's scowling, slightly brutish face was somehow at odds with his magnificent, sweeping robes, which were embroidered with much gold thread. Someone in the crowd around the lifts called sycophantically, "Morning, Yaxley!" Yaxley ignored them.

"I requested somebody from Magical Maintenance to sort out my office, Cattermole. It's still raining in there."

Ron looked around as though hoping somebody else would intervene, but nobody spoke.

"Raining … in your office? That's – that's not good, is it?"

Ron gave a nervous laugh. Yaxley's eyes widened.

"You think it's funny, Cattermole, do you?"

A pair of witches broke away from the queue for the lift and bustled off.

"No," said Ron, "no, of course – "

"You realize that I am on my way downstairs to interrogate your wife, Cattermole? In fact, I'm quite surprised you're not down there holding her hand while she waits. Already given her up as a bad job, have you? Probably wise. Be sure and marry a pureblood next time."

Hermione had let out a little squeak of horror. Yaxley looked at her. She cough feebly and turned away.

"I – I – " stammered Ron.

“But if my wife were accused of being a Mudblood,“ said Yaxley, ” – not that any woman I married would ever be mistaken for such filth – and the Head of Department of Magical Law Enforcement needed a job doing, I would make it my priority to do this job, Cattermole. Do you understand me?““Yes,” whispered Ron.

“Then attend to it, Cattermole, and if my office is not completely dry within an hour, your wife’s Blood Status will be in even greater doubt than it is now.”

The golden grille before them clattered open. With a nod and unpleasant smile to Harry, who was evidently expected to appreciate this treatment of Cattermole, Yaxley swept away toward another lift. Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered theirs, but nobody followed them: It was as if they were infectious. The grilles shut with a clang and the lift began to move upward.

“What am I going to do?” Ron asked the other two at once; he looked stricken. “If I don’t turn up, my wife … I mean, Cattermole’s wife – ”

“We’ll come with you, we should stick together – ” began Harry, but Ron shook his head feverishly.

“That’s mental, we haven’t got much time. You two find Umbridge, I’ll go and sort out Yaxley’s office – but how do I stop a raining?”

“Try Finite Incantatem,” said Hermione at once, “that should stop the rain if it’s a hex or curse; if it doesn’t something’s gone wrong with an Atmospheric Charm, which will be more difficult to fix, so as an interim measure try Impervius to protect his belongings – ”

“Say it again, slowly – “ said Ron, searching his pockets desperately for a quill, but at that moment the lift juddered to a halt. A disembodied female voice said, ”Level four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being, and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office, and Pest Advisory Bureau,“ and the grilles slid open again, admitting a couple of wizards

and several pale violet paper airplanes that fluttered around the lamp in the ceiling of the lift.

“Morning, Albert,“ said a bushily whiskered man, smiling at Harry. He glanced over at Ron and Hermione as the lift creaked upward once more; Hermione was now whispering frantic instructions to Ron. The wizard leaned toward Harry, leering, and muttering ”Dirk Cresswell, eh? From Goblin Liaison? Nice one, Albert. I’m pretty confident I’ll get his job now!“He winked. Harry smiled back, hoping that this would suffice. The lift stopped; the grilles opened once more.

“Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services,“ said the disembodied witch’s voice.

Harry saw Hermione give Ron a little push and he hurried out of the lift, followed by the other wizards, leaving Harry and Hermione alone. The moment the golden door had closed Hermione said, very fast, “Actually, Harry, I think I’d better go after him, I don’t think he knows what he’s doing and if he gets caught the whole thing – ”

“Level one, Minister of Magic and Support Staff.”

The golden grilles slid apart again and Hermione gasped. Four people stood before them, two of them deep in conversation: a long-haired wizard wearing magnificent robes of black and gold, and a squat, toadlike witch wearing a velvet bow in her short hair and clutching a clipboard to her chest.

Chapter 13 The Muggle-born Registration Commission

Ah, Mafalda!" said Umbridge, looking at Hermione. "Travers sent you, did he?"

"Y-yes," squeaked Hermione.

"God, you'll do perfectly well." Umbridge spoke to the wizard in black and gold. "That's that problem solved. Minister, if Mafalda can be spared for record-keeping we shall be able to start straightaway." She consulted her clipboard. "Ten people today and one of them the wife of a Ministry employee! Tut, tut… even here, in the heart of the Ministry!" She stepped into the lift besides Hermione, as did the two wizards who had been listening to Umbridge's conversation with the Minister. "We'll go straight down, Mafalda, you'll find everything you need in the courtroom. Good morning, Albert, aren't you getting out?"

"Yes, of course," said Harry in Runcorn's deep voice.

Harry stepped out of the life. The golden grilles clanged shut behind him. Glancing over his shoulder, Harry saw Hermione's anxious face sinking back out of sight, a tall wizard on either side of her, Umbridge's velvet hair-bow level with her shoulder.

"What brings you here, Runcorn?" asked the new Minister of Magic. His long black hair and beard were streaked with silver and a great overhanging forehead shadowed his glinting eyes, putting Harry in the mind of a crab looking out from beneath a rock.

"Needed a quick word with," Harry hesitated for a fraction of a second, "Arthur Weasley. Someone said he was up on level one."

"Ah," said Plum Thicknesse. "Has he been caught having contact with an Undesirable?"

“No,” said Harry, his throat dry. “No, nothing like that.”

“Ah, well. It’s only a matter of time,” said Thicknesse. “If you ask me, the blood traitors are as bad as the Mudbloods. Good day, Runcorn.”

“Good day, Minister.”

Harry watched Thicknesse march away along the thickly carpeted corridor. The moment the Minister had passed out of sight, Harry tugged the Invisibility Cloak out from under his heavy black cloak, threw it over himself, and set off along the corridor in the opposite direction. Runcorn was so tall that Harry was forced to stoop to make sure his big feet were hidden.

Panic pulsed in the pit of his stomach. As he passed gleaming wooden door after gleaming wooden door, each bearing a small plaque with the owner’s name and occupation upon it, the might of the Ministry, its complexity, its impenetrability, seemed to force itself upon him so that the plan he had been carefully concocting with Ron and Hermione over the past four weeks seemed laughably childish. They had concentrated all their efforts on getting inside without being detected: They had not given a moment’s thought to what they would do if they were forced to separate. Now Hermione was stuck in court proceedings, which would undoubtedly last hours; Ron was struggling to do magic that Harry was sure was beyond him, a woman’s liberty possibly depending on the outcome, and he, Harry, was wandering around on the top floor when he knew perfectly well that his quarry had just gone down in the lift.

He stopped walking, leaned against a wall, and tried to decide what to do. The silence pressed upon him: There was no bustling or talk or swift footsteps here the purple-carpeted corridors were as hushed as though the Muffliato charm had been cast over the place.

Her office must be up here, Harry thought.

It seemed most unlikely that Umbridge would keep her jewelry in her office, but on the other hand it seemed foolish not to search it to make sure. He therefore set off along the corridor again, passing nobody but a frowning wizard who was murmuring instructions to a quill that floated in front of him, scribbling on a trail of parchment.

Now paying attention to the names on the doors, Harry turned a corner. Halfway along the next corridor he emerged into a wide, open space where a dozen witches and wizards sat in rows at small desks not unlike school desks, though much more highly polished and free from graffiti. Harry paused to watch them, for the effect was quite mesmerizing. They were all waving and twiddling their wands in unison, and squares of colored paper were flying in every direction like little pink kites. After a few seconds, Harry realized that there was a rhythm to the proceedings, that the papers all formed the same pattern and after a few more seconds he realized what he was watching was the creation of pamphlets – that the paper squares were pages, which, when assembled, folded and magicked into place, fell into neat stacks beside each witch or wizard.

Harry crept closer, although the workers were so intent on what they were doing that he doubted they would notice a carpet-muffled footstep, and he slid a completed pamphlet from the pile beside a young witch. He examined it beneath the Invisibility Cloak. Its pink cover was emblazoned with a golden title:Mudbloods

and the Dangers They Pose to a Peaceful Pure-Blood SocietyBeneath the title was a picture of a red rose with a simpering face in the middle of its petals, being strangled by a green weed with fangs and a scowl. There was no author's name upon the pamphlet, but again, the scars on the back of his right hand seemed to tingle as he examined it. Then the young witch beside him confirmed his suspicion as she said, still waving and twirling her wand, "Will the old hag be interrogating Mudbloods all day, does anyone know?"

“Careful,” said the wizard beside her, glancing around nervously; one of his pages slipped and fell to the floor.

“What, has she got magic ears as well as an eye, now?”

The witch glanced toward the shining mahogany door facing the space full of pamphlet-makers; Harry looked too, and the rage reared in him like a snake. Where there might have been a peephole on a Muggle front door, a large, round eye with a bright blue iris had been set into the wood – an eye that was shockingly familiar to anybody who had known Alastor Moody.

For a split second Harry forgot where he was and what he was doing there: He even forgot that he was invisible. He strode straight over to the door to examine the eye. It was not moving. It gazed blindly upward, frozen. The plaque beneath it read:Dolores Umbridge

Senior Undersecretary to the MinisterBelow that a slightly shinier new plaque read:Head of the Muggle-Born Registration CommissionHarry looked back at the dozen pamphlet-makers: Though they were intent upon their work, he could hardly suppose that they would not notice if the door of an empty office opened in front of them. He therefore withdrew from an inner pocket an odd object with little waving legs and a rubber-bulbed horn for a body. Crouching down beneath the Cloak, he placed the Decoy Detonator on the ground.

It scuttled away at once through the legs of the witches and wizards in front of him. A few moments later, during which Harry waited with his hand upon the doorknob, there came a loud bang and a great deal of acrid smoke billowed from a corner. The young witch in the front row shrieked: Pink pages flew everywhere as she and her fellows jumped up, looking around for the source of the commotion. Harry turned the doorknob, stepped into Umbridge’s office, and closed the door behind him.

He felt he had stepped back in time. The room was exactly like Umbridge’s office at Hogwarts: Lace draperies, doilies and dried

flowers covered every surface. The walls bore the same ornamental plates, each featuring a highly colored, beribboned kitten, gamboling and frisking with sickening cuteness. The desk was covered with a flouncy, flowered cloth. Behind Mad-eye's eye, a telescopic attachment enabled Umbridge to spy on the workers on the other side of the door. Harry took a look through it and saw that they were all still gathered around the Decoy Detonator. He wrenched the telescope out of the door, leaving a hole behind, pulled the magical eyeball out of it, and placed it in his pocket. The he turned to face the room again, raised his wand, and murmured, "Accio Locker."

Nothing happened, but he had not expected it to; no doubt Umbridge knew all about protective charms and spells. He therefore hurried behind her desk and began pulling open all the drawers. He saw quills and notebooks and Spellotape; enchanted paper clips that coiled snakelike from their drawer and had be beaten back; a fussy little lace box full of spare hair bows and clips; but no sign of a locket.

There was a filing cabinet behind the desk: Harry set to searching it. Like Filch's filing cabinet at Hogwarts, it was full of folders, each labeled with a name. It was not until Harry reached the bottommost drawer that he saw something to distract him from the search: Mr. Weasley's file.

He pulled it out and opened it.

Arthur Weasley

Blood Status:

Pureblood, but with unacceptable pro-Muggle leanings. Known member of the Order of the Phoenix.

Family:

Wife (pureblood), seven children, two youngest at Hogwarts. NB: Youngest son currently at home, seriously ill, Ministry inspectors have

confirmed.

Security Status:

TRACKED. All movements are being monitored. Strong likelihood Undesirable No. 1 will contact (has stayed with Weasley family previously)“Undesirable Number One,“ Harry muttered under his breath as he replaced Mr. Weasley’s folder and shut the drawer. He had an idea he knew who that was, and sure enough, as he straightened up and glanced around the office for fresh hiding places he saw a poster of himself on the wall, with the words UNDESIRABLE NO. 1 emblazoned across his chest. A little pink note was stuck to it with a picture of a kitten in the corner. Harry moved across to read it and saw that Umbridge had written, ”To be punished.“Angrier than ever, he proceeded to grope in the bottoms of the vases and baskets of dried flowers, but was not at all surprised that the locket was not there. He gave the office one last sweeping look, and his heart skipped a beat. Dumbledore was staring at him from a small rectangular mirror, propped up on a bookcase beside the desk.

Harry crossed the room at a run and snatched it up, but realized that the moment he touched it that it was not a mirror at all. Dumbledore was smiling wistfully out of the front cover of a glossy book. Harry had not immediately noticed the curly green writing across his hat – The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore – nor the slightly smaller writing across his chest: “by Rita Skeeter, bestselling author of Armando Dippet: Master or Moron?”

Harry opened the book at random and saw a full-page photograph of two teenage boys, both laughing immoderately with their arms around each other’s shoulders. Dumbledore, now with elbow-length hair, had grown a tiny wispy beard that recalled the one on Krum’s chin that had so annoyed Ron. The boy who roared in silent amusement beside Dumbledore had a gleeful, wild look about him. His golden hair fell in curls to his shoulders. Harry wondered whether

it was a young Doge, but before he could check the caption, the door of the office opened.

If Thicknesse had not been looking over his shoulder as he entered, Harry would not have had time to pull the Invisibility Cloak over himself. As it was, he thought Thicknesse might have caught a glimpse of movement, because for a moment or two he remained quite still, staring curiously at the place where Harry had just vanished. Perhaps deciding that that all he had seen was Dumbledore scratching his nose on the front of the book, for Harry had hastily replaced it upon the shelf. Thicknesse finally walked to the desk and pointed his wand at the quill standing ready in the ink pot. It sprang out and began scribbling a note to Umbridge. Very slowly, hardly daring to breathe, Harry backed out of the office into the open area beyond.

The pamphlet-makers were still clustered around the remains of the Decoy Detonator, which continued to hoot feebly as it smoked. Harry hurried off up the corridor as the young witch said, “I bet it sneaked up here from Experimental Charms, they’re so careless, remember that poisonous duck?”

Speeding back toward the lifts, Harry reviewed his options. It had never been likely that the locket was here at the Ministry, and there was no hope of bewitching its whereabouts out of Umbridge while she was sitting in a crowded court. Their priority now had to be to leave the Ministry before they were exposed, and try again another day. The first thing to do was to find Ron, and then they could work out a way of extracting Hermione from the courtroom.

The lift was empty when it arrived. Harry jumped in and pulled off the Invisibility Cloak as it started its descent. To his enormous relief, when it rattled to a halt at level two, a soaking-wet and wild-eyed Ron got in.

“M-morning,” he stammered to Harry as the lift set off again.

"Ron, it's me, Harry!"

"Harry! Blimey, I forgot what you looked like – why isn't Hermione with you?"

"She had to go down to the courtrooms with Umbridge, she couldn't refuse, and – "

But before Harry could finish the lift had stopped again. The doors opened and Mr. Weasley walked inside, talking to an elderly witch whose blonde hair was teased so high it resembled an anthill.

"… I quite understand what you're saying, Wakanda, but I'm afraid I cannot be party to – "

Mr. Weasley broke off; he had noticed Harry. It was very strange to have Mr. Weasley glare at him with that much dislike. The lift doors closed and the four of them trundled downward once more.

"Oh hello, Reg," said Mr. Weasley, looking around at the sound of steady dripping from Ron's robes. "Isn't your wife in for questioning today? Er – what's happened to you? Why are you so wet?"

"Yaxley's office is raining," said Ron. He addressed Mr. Weasley's shoulder, and Harry felt sure he was scared that his father might recognize him if they looked directly into each other's eyes. "I couldn't stop it, so they've sent me to get Bernie – Pillsworth, I think they said – "

"Yes, a lot of offices have been raining lately," said Mr. Weasley. "Did you try Meterolojinx Recanto? It worked for Bletchley."

"Meteolojinx Recanto?" whispered Ron. "No, I didn't. Thanks, D – I mean, thanks, Arthur."

The lift doors opened; the old witch with the anthill hair left, and Ron darted past her out of sight. Harry made to follow him, but found his

path blocked as Percy Weasley strode into the lift, his nose buried in some papers he was reading.

Not until the doors had clanged shut again did Percy realize he was in a lit with his father. He glanced up, saw Mr. Weasley, turned radish red, and left the lift the moment the doors opened again. For the second time, Harry tried to get out, but this time found his way blocked by Mr. Weasley's arm.

"One moment, Runcorn."

The lift doors closed and as they clanked down another floor, Mr. Weasley said, "I hear you had information about Dirk Cresswell."

Harry had the impression that Mr. Weasley's anger was no less because of the brush with Percy. He decided his best chance was to act stupid.

"Sorry?" he said.

"Don't pretend, Runcorn," said Mr. Weasley fiercely. "You tracked down the wizard who faked his family tree, didn't you?"

"I – so what if I did?" said Harry.

"So Dirk Cresswell is ten times the wizard you are," said Mr. Weasley quietly, as the lift sank ever lower. "And if he survives Azkaban, you'll have to answer to him, not to mention his wife, his sons, and his friends – "

"Arthur," Harry interrupted, "you know you're being tracked, don't you?"

"Is that a threat, Runcorn?" said Mr. Weasley loudly.

"No," said Harry, "it's a fact! They're watching your every move – "

The lift doors opened. They had reached the Atrium. Mr. Weasley gave Harry a scathing look and swept from the lift. Harry stood there, shaken. He wished he was impersonating somebody other than Runcorn…. The lift doors clanged shut.

Harry pulled out the Invisibility Cloak and put it back on. He would try to extricate Hermione on his own while Ron was dealing with the raining office. When the doors opened, he stepped out into a torch-lit stone passageway quite different from the wood-paneled and carpeted corridors above. As the left rattled away again, Harry shivered slightly, looking toward the distant black door that marked the entrance to the Department of Mysteries.

He set off, his destination not the black door, but the doorway he remembered on the left hand side, which opened onto the flight of stairs down to the court chambers. His mind grappled with possibilities as he crept down them: He still had a couple of Decoy Detonators, but perhaps it would be better to simply knock on the courtroom door, enter as Runcorn, and ask for a quick word with Mafalda? Of course, he did not know whether Runcorn was sufficiently important to get away with this, and even if he managed it, Hermione's non-reappearance might trigger a search before they were clear of the Ministry….

Lost in thought, he did not immediately register the unnatural chill that was creeping over him, as if he were descending into fog. It was becoming colder and colder with every step he took; a cold that reached right down his throat and tore at his lungs. And then he felt that stealing sense of despair, or hopelessness, filling him, expanding inside him….

Dementors, he thought.

And as he reached the foot of the stairs and turned to his right he saw a dreadful scene. The dark passage outside the courtrooms was packed with tall, black-hooded figures, their faces completely hidden,

their ragged breathing the only sound in the place. The petrified Muggle-borns brought in for questioning sat huddled and shivering on hard wooden benches. Most of them were hiding their faces in their hands, perhaps in an instinctive attempt to shield themselves from the dementors' greedy mouths. Some were accompanied by families, others sat alone. The dementors were gliding up and down in front of them, and the cold, and the hopelessness, and the despair of the place laid themselves upon Harry like a curse….

Fight it, he told himself, but he knew that he could not conjure a Patronus here without revealing himself instantly. So he moved forward as silently as he could, and with every step he took numbness seemed to steal over his brain, but he forced himself to think of Hermione and of Ron, who needed him.

Moving through the towering black figures was terrifying: The eyeless faces hidden beneath their hoods turned as he passed, and he felt sure that they sensed him, sensed, perhaps, a human presence that still had some hope, some resilience….

And then, abruptly and shockingly amid the frozen silence, one of the dungeon doors on the left of the corridor was flung open and screams echoed out of it.

"No, no, I'm half-blood, I'm half-blood, I tell you! My father was a wizard, he was, look him up, Arkie Alderton, he's a well known broomstick designer, look him up, I tell you – get your hands off me, get your hands off – "

"This is your final warning," said Umbridge's soft voice, magically magnified so that it sounded clearly over the man's desperate screams. "If you struggle, you will be subjected to the Dementor's Kiss."

The man's screams subsided, but dry sobs echoed through the corridor.

“Take him away,” said Umbridge.

Two dementors appeared in the doorway of the courtroom, their rotting, scabbed hands clutching the upper arms of a wizard who appeared to be fainting. They glided away down the corridor with him, and the darkness they trailed behind them swallowed him from sight.

“Next – Mary Cattermole,” called Umbridge.

A small woman stood up; she was trembling from head to foot. Her dark hair was smoothed back into a bun and she wore long plain robes. Her face was completely bloodless. As she passed the dementors, Harry saw her shudder.

He did it instinctively, without any sort of plan, because he hated the sight of her walking alone into the dungeon: As the door began to swing closed, he slipped into the courtroom behind her.

It was not the same room in which he had once been interrogated for improper use of magic. This one was much smaller, though the ceiling was quite as high it gave the claustrophobic sense of being stuck at the bottom of a deep well.

There were more dementors in here, casting their freezing aura over the place; they stood like faceless sentinels in the corners farthest from the high, raised platform. Here, behind a balustrade, sat Umbridge, with Yaxley on one side of her, and Hermione, quite as white-faced as Mrs. Cattermole, on the other. At the foot of the platform, a bight-silver, long-haired cat prowled up and down, up and down, and Harry realized that it was there to protect the prosecutors from the despair that emanated from the dementors: That was for the accused to feel, not the accusers.

“Sit down,” said Umbridge in her soft, silky voice.

Mrs. Cattermole stumbled to the single seat in the middle of the floor beneath the raised platform. The moment she had sat down, chains

clinked out of the arms of the chair and bound her there.

"You are Mary Elizabeth Cattermole?" asked Umbridge.

Mrs. Cattermole gave a single, shaky nod.

"Married to Reginald Cattermole of the Magical Maintenance Department?"

Mrs. Cattermole burst into tears.

"I don't know where he is, he was supposed to meet me here!"

Umbridge ignored her.

"Mother to Maisie, Ellie and Alfred Cattermole?"

Mrs. Cattermole sobbed harder than ever.

"They're frightened, they think that I might not come home – "

"Spare us," spat Yaxley. "The brats of Mudbloods do not stir our sympathies."

Mrs. Cattermole's sobs masked Harry's footsteps as he made his way carefully toward the steps that led up to the raised platform. The moment he had passed the place where the Patronus cat patrolled, he felt the change in temperature: It was warm and comfortable here. The Patronus, he was sure, was Umbridge's, and it glowed brightly because she was so happy here, in her element, upholding the twisted laws she had helped to write. Slowly and very carefully he edged his way along the platform behind Umbridge, Yaxley, and Hermione, taking a seat behind the latter. He was worried about making Hermione jump. He thought of casting the Muffliato charm upon Umbridge and Yaxley, but even murmuring the word might cause Hermione alarm. Then Umbridge raised her voice to address Mrs. Cattermole, and Harry seized his chance.

"I'm behind you," he whispered into Hermione's ear.

As he had expected, she jumped so violently she nearly overturned the bottle of ink with which she was supposed to be recording the interview, but both Umbridge and Yaxley were concentrating upon Mrs. Cattermole, and this went unnoticed.

"A wand was taken from you upon your arrival at the Ministry today, Mrs. Cattermole," Umbridge was saying. "Eight-and-three-quarter inches, cherry, unicorn-hair core. Do you recognize the description?"

Mrs. Cattermole nodded, mopping her eyes on her sleeve.

"Could you please tell us from which witch or wizard you took that wand?"

"T-took?" sobbed Mrs. Cattermole. "I didn't t-take it from anybody. I b-bought it when I was eleven years old. It – it – it – chose me."

She cried harder than ever.

Umbridge laughed a soft girlish laugh that made Harry want to attack her. She leaned forward over the barrier, the better to observe her victim, and something gold swung forward too, and dangled over the void: the locket.

Hermione had seen it; she let out a little squeak, but Umbridge and Yaxley, still intent upon their prey, were deaf to everything else.

"No," said Umbridge, "no, I don't think so, Mrs. Cattermole. Wands only choose witches or wizards. You are not a witch. I have your responses to the questionnaire that was sent to you here – Mafalda, pass them to me."

Umbridge held out a small hand: She looked so toadlike at that moment that Harry was quite surprised not to see webs between the stubby fingers. Hermione's hands were shaking with shock. She

fumbled in a pile of documents balanced on the chair beside her, finally withdrawing a sheaf of parchment with Mrs. Cattermole's name on it.

"That's – that's pretty, Dolores," she said, pointing at the pendant gleaming in the ruffled folds of Umbridge's blouse.

"What?" snapped Umbridge, glancing down. "Oh yes – an old family heirloom," she said, patting the locket lying on her large bosom. "The S stands for Selwyn…. I am related to the Selwyns…. Indeed, there are few pure-blood families to whom I am not related. …A pity," she continued in a louder voice, flicking through Mrs. Cattermole's questionnaire, "that the same cannot be said for you. 'Parents professions: greengrocers'."

Yaxley laughed jeeringly. Below, the fluffy silver cat patrolled up and down, and the dementors stood waiting in the corners.

It was Umbridge's lie that brought the blood surging into Harry's brain and obliterated his sense of caution – that the locket she had taken as a bribe from a petty criminal was being used to bolster her own pure-blood credentials. He raised his wand, not even troubling to keep it concealed beneath the Invisibility Cloak, and said, "Stupefy!"

There was a flash of red light; Umbridge crumpled and her forehead hit the edge of the balustrade: Mrs. Cattermole's papers slid off her lap onto the floor and, down below, the prowling silver cat vanished. Ice-cold air hit them like an oncoming wind: Yaxley, confused, looked around for the source of the trouble and saw Harry's disembodied hand and wand pointing at him. He tried to draw his own wand, but too late: "Stupefy!"

Yaxley slid to the ground to lie curled on the floor.

"Harry!"

"Hermione, if you think I was going to sit here and let her pretend – "

“Harry, Mrs. Cattermole!”

Harry whirled around, throwing off the Invisibility Cloak; down below, the dementors had moved out of their corners; they were gliding toward the woman chained to the chair: Whether because the Patronus had vanished or because they sensed that their masters were no longer in control, they seemed to have abandoned restraint. Mrs. Cattermole let out a terrible scream of fear as a slimy, scabbed hand grasped her chin and forced her face back.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

The silver stag soared from the tip of Harry’s wand and leaped toward the dementors, which fell back and melted into the dark shadows again. The stag’s light, more powerful and more warming than the cat’s protection, filled the whole dungeon as it cantered around the room.

“Get the Horcrux,” Harry told Hermione.

He ran back down the steps, stuffing the Invisibility Cloak into his back, and approached Mrs. Cattermole.

“You?” she whispered, gazing into his face. “But – but Reg said you were the one who submitted my name for questioning!”

“Did I?” muttered Harry, tugging at the chains binding her arms, “Well, I’ve had a change of heart. Diffindo!” Nothing happened. “Hermione, how do I get rid of these chains?”

“Wait, I’m trying something up here – ”

“Hermione, we’re surrounded by dementors!”

“I know that, Harry, but if she wakes up and the locket’s gone – I need to duplicate it – Geminio! There… That should fool her….”

Hermione came running downstairs.

"Let's see…. Relashio!"

The chains clinked and withdrew into the arms of the chair. Mrs. Cattermole looked just as frightened as ever before.

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"You're going to leave here with us," said Harry, pulling her to her feet. "Go home, grab your children, and get out, get out of the country if you've got to. Disguise yourselves and run. You've seen how it is, you won't get anything like a fair hearing here."

"Harry," said Hermione, "how are we going to get out of here with all those dementors outside the door?"

"Patronuses," said Harry, pointing his wand at his own. The stag slowed and walked, still gleaming brightly, toward the door. "As many as we can muster; do yours, Hermione."

"Expec – Expecto patronum," said Hermione. Nothing happened.

"It's the only spell she ever has trouble with," Harry told a completely bemused Mrs. Cattermole. "Bit unfortunate, really… Come on Hermione…."

"Expecto patronum!"

A silver otter burst from the end of Hermione's wand and swam gracefully through the air to join the stag.

"C'mon," said Harry, and he led Hermione and Mrs. Cattermole to the door.

When the Patronuses glided out of the dungeon there were cries of shock from the people waiting outside. Harry looked around; the

dementors were falling back on both sides of them, melding into the darkness, scattering before the silver creatures.

“It’s been decided that you should all go home and go into hiding with your families,“ Harry told the waiting Muggle-born, who were dazzled by the light of the Patronuses and still cowering slightly. ”Go abroad if you can. Just get well away from the Ministry. That’s the – er – new official position. Now, if you’ll just follow the Patronuses, you’ll be able to leave the Atrium.“They managed to get up the stone stops without being intercepted, but as they approached the lifts Harry started to have misgivings. If they emerged into the Atrium with a silver stag, and otter soaring alongside it, and twenty or so people, half of them accused Muggle-borns, he could not help feeling that they would attract unwanted attention. He had just reached this unwelcome conclusion when the lift clanged to a halt in front of them.

“Reg!” screamed Mrs. Cattermole, and she threw herself into Ron’s arms. “Runcorn let me out, he attacked Umbridge and Yaxley, and he’s told all of us to leave the country. I think we’d better do it, Reg, I really do, let’s hurry home and fetch the children and – why are you so wet?”

“Water,” muttered Ron, disengaging himself. “Harry, they know there are intruders inside the Ministry, something about a hole in Umbridge’s office door. I reckon we’ve got five minutes if that – ”

Hermione’s Patronus vanished with a pop as she turned a horror struck face to Harry.

“Harry, if we’re trapped here –!”

“We won’t be if we move fast,“ said Harry. He addressed the silent group behind them, who were all gawping at him.

“Who’s got wands?”

About half of them raised their hands.

“Okay, all of you who haven’t got wands need to attach yourself to somebody who has. We’ll need to be fast before they stop us. Come on.”

They managed to cram themselves into two lifts. Harry’s Patronus stood sentinel before the golden grilles as they shut and the lifts began to rise.

“Level eight,” said the witch’s cool voice, “Atrium.”

Harry knew at once that they were in trouble. The Atrium was full of people moving from fireplace to fireplace, sealing them off.

“Harry!” squeaked Hermione. “What are we going to –?”

“STOP!” Harry thundered, and the powerful voice of Runcorn echoed through the Atrium: The wizards sealing the fireplaces froze. “Follow me,” he whispered to the group of terrified Muggle-borns, who moved forward in a huddle, shepherded by Ron and Hermione.

“What’s up, Albert?“ said the same balding wizard who had followed Harry out of the fireplace earlier. He looked nervous.

“This lot need to leave before you seal the exits,” said Harry with all the authority he could muster.

The group of wizards in front of him looked at one another.

“We’ve been told to seal all exits and not let anyone – ”

“Are you contradicting me?“ Harry blustered. ”Would you like me to have your family tree examined, like I had Dirk Cresswell’s?““Sorry!” gasped the balding wizard, backing away. “I didn’t mean nothing, Albert, but I thought… I thought they were in for questioning and…”

“Their blood is pure,“ said Harry, and his deep voice echoed impressively through the hall. ”Purer than many of yours, I daresay.

Off you go,“ he boomed to the Muggle-borns, who scurried forward into the fireplaces and began to vanish in pairs. The Ministry wizards hung back, some looking confused, others scared and fearful. Then:“Mary!”

Mrs. Cattermole looked over her shoulder. The real Reg Cattermole, no longer vomiting but pale and wan, had just come running out of a lift.

“R- Reg?”

She looked from her husband to Ron, who swore loudly.

The balding wizard gaped, his head turning ludicrously from one Reg Cattermole to the other.

“Hey – what’s going on? What is this?”

“Seal the exit! SEAL IT!”

Yaxley had burst out of another lift and was running toward the group beside the fireplaces, into which all of the Muggle-borns but Mrs. Cattermole had now vanished. As the balding wizard lifted his wand, Harry raised an enormous fist and punched him, sending him flying through the air.

“He’s been helping Muggle-borns escape, Yaxley!” Harry shouted.

The balding wizard’s colleagues set up and uproar, under cover of which Ron grabbed Mrs. Cattermole, pulled her into the still-open fireplace, and disappeared. Confused, Yaxley looked from Harry to the punched wizard, while the real Reg Cattermole screamed, “My wife! Who was that with my wife? What’s going on?”

Harry saw Yaxley’s head turn, saw an inkling of truth dawn on that brutish face.

“Come on!” Harry shouted at Hermione; he seized her hand and they jumped into the fireplace together as Yaxley’s curse sailed over Harry’s head. They spun for a few seconds before shooting up out of a toilet into a cubicle. Harry flung open the door: Ron was standing there beside the sinks, still wrestling with Mrs. Cattermole.

“Reg, I don’t understand – ““Let go, I’m not your husband, you’ve got to go home!”

There was a noise in the cubicle behind them; Harry looked around; Yaxley had just appeared.

“LET’S GO!” Harry yelled. He seized Hermione by the hand and Ron by the arm and turned on the stop.

Darkness engulfed them, along with the sensation of compressing hands, but something was wrong…. Hermione’s hand seemed to be sliding out of his grip….

He wondered whether he was going to suffocate; he could not breathe or see and the only solid things in the world were Ron’s arm and Hermione’s fingers, which were slowly slipping away….

And then he saw the door to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, with its serpent door knocker, but before he could draw breath, there was a scream and a flash of purple light: Hermione’s hand was suddenly vicelike upon his and everything went dark again.

Chapter 14 The Thief

Harry opened his eyes and was dazzled by gold and green; he had no idea what had happened, he only knew that he was lying on what seemed to be leaves and twigs. Struggling to draw breath into lungs that felt flattened, he blinked and realized that the gaudy glare was sunlight streaming through a canopy of leaves far above him. Then an object twitched close to his face. He pushed himself onto his hands and knees, ready to face some small, fierce creature, but saw that the object was Ron's foot. Looking around, Harry saw that they and Hermione were lying on a forest floor, apparently alone.

Harry's first thought was of the Forbidden Forest, and for a moment, even though he knew how foolish and dangerous it would be for them to appear in the grounds of Hogwarts, his heart leapt at the thought of sneaking through the trees to Hagrid's hut. However, in the few moments it took for Ron to give a low groan and Harry to start crawling toward him, he realized that this was not the Forbidden Forest; The trees looked younger, they were more widely spaced, the ground clearer.

He met Hermione, also on her hands and knees, at Ron's head. The moment his eyes fell upon Ron, all other concerns fled Harry's mind, for blood drenched the whole of Ron's left side and his face stood out, grayish-white, against the leaf-strewn earth. The Polyjuice Potion was wearing off now: Ron was halfway between Cattermole and himself in appearance, his hair turning redder and redder as his face drained of the little color it had left.

"What's happened to him?"

"Splinched," said Hermione, her fingers already busy at Ron's sleeve, where the blood was wettest and darkest.

Harry watched, horrified, as she tore open Ron's short. He had always thought of Splinching as something comical, but this… His insides crawled unpleasantly as Hermione laid bare Ron's upper arm, where a great chunk of flesh was missing, scooped cleanly away as though by a knife.

"Harry, quickly, in my bag, there's a small bottle labeled 'Essence of Dittany'– ""Bag – right – "

Harry sped to the place where Hermione had landed, seized the tiny beaded bag, and thrust his hand inside it. At once, object after object began presenting itself to his touch: He felt the leather spines of books, woolly sleeves of jumpers, heels of shoes –"Quickly!"

He grabbed his wand from the ground and pointed it into the depths of the magical bag.

"Accio Dittany!"

A small brown bottle zoomed out of the bag; he caught it and hastened back to Hermione and Ron, whose eyes were now half-closed, strips of white eyeball all that were visible between his lids.

"He's fainted," said Hermione, who was also rather pale; she no longer looked like Mafalda, though her hair was still gray in places. "Unstopper it for me, Harry, my hands are shaking."

Harry wrenched the stopper off the little bottle, Hermione took it and poured three drops of the potion onto the bleeding wound. Greenish smoke billowed upward and when it had cleared, Harry saw that the bleeding had stopped. The wound now looked several days old; new skin stretched over what had just been open flesh.

"Wow," said Harry.

"It's all I feel safe doing," said Hermione shakily. "There are spells that would put him completely right, but I daren't try in case I do them

wrong and cause more damage…. He's lost so much blood already…."

"How did he get hurt? I mean" – Harry shook his head, trying to clear it, to make sense of whatever had just taken place – "why are we here? I thought we were going back to Grimmauld Place?"

Hermione took a deep breath. She looked close to tears.

"Harry, I don't think we're going to be able to go back there."

"What d'you –?"

"As we Disapparated, Yaxley caught hold of me and I couldn't get rid of him, he was too strong, and he was still holding on when we arrived at Grimmauld Place, and then – well, I think he must have seen the door, and thought we were stopping there, so he slackened his grip and I managed to sake him off and I brought us here instead!""But then, where's he? Hang on…. You don't mean he's at Grimmauld Place? He can't get in there?"

Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears as she nodded.

"Harry, I think he can. I – I forced him to let go with a Revulsion Jinx, but I'd already taken him inside the Fidelius Charm's protection. Since Dumbledore died, we're Secret-Keepers, so I've given him the secret, haven't I?"There was no pretending; Harry was sure she was right. It was a serious blow. If Yaxley could now get inside the house, there was no way that they could return. Even now, he could be bringing other Death Eaters in there by Apparition. Gloomy and oppressive though the house was, it had been their one safe refuge; even, now that Kreacher was so much happier and friendlier, a kind of home. With a twinge of regret that had nothing to do with food, Harry imagined the house-elf busying himself over the steak-and-kidney pie that Harry, Ron, and Hermione would never eat.

"Harry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

“Don’t be stupid, it wasn’t your fault! If anything, it was mine….”

Harry put his hand in his pocket and drew out Mad-Eye’s eye. Hermione recoiled, looking horrified.

“Umbridge had stuck it to her office door, to spy on people. I couldn’t leave it there… but that’s how they knew there were intruders.“Before Hermione could answer, Ron groaned and opened his eyes. He was still gray and his face glistened with sweat.

“How d’you feel?” Hermione whispered.

“Lousy,” croaked Ron, wincing as he felt his injured arm. “Where are we?”

“In the woods where they held the Quidditch World Cup,” said Hermione. “I wanted somewhere enclosed, undercover, and this was – ”

“– the first place you thought of,“ Harry finished for her, glancing around at the apparently deserted glade. He could not help remembering what had happened the last time they had Apparated to the first place Hermione had thought of – how Death Eaters had found them within minutes. Had it been Legilimency? Did Voldemort or his henchmen know, even now, where Hermione had taken them?

“D’you reckon we should move on?” Ron asked Harry, and Harry could tell by the look on Ron’s face that he was thinking the same.

“I dunno.”

Ron still looked pale and clammy. He had made no attempt to sit up and it looked as though he was too weak to do so. The prospect of moving him was daunting.

“Let’s stay here for now,” Harry said.

Looking relieved, Hermione sprang to her feet.

“Where are you going?” asked Ron.

“If we’re staying, we should put some protective enchantments around the place,” she replied, and raising her wand, she began to walk in a wide circle around Harry and Ron, murmuring incantations as she went. Harry saw little disturbances in the surrounding air: It was as if Hermione had cast a heat haze upon their clearing.

“Salvio Hexia… Protego Totalum… Repello Muggletum… Muffliato… You could get out the tent, Harry….““Tent?”

“In the bag!”

“In the… of course,” said Harry.

He did not bother to grope inside it this time, but used another Summoning Charm. The tent emerged in a lumpy mass of canvas, ropes, and poles. Harry recognized it, partly because of the smell of cats, as the same tent in which they had slept on the night of the Quidditch World Cup.

“I thought this belonged to that bloke Perkins at the Ministry?” he asked, starting to disentangle the pent pegs.

“Apparently he didn’t want it back, his lumbago’s so bad,“ said Hermione, now performing complicated figure-of-eight movements with her wand. ”so Ron’s dad said I could borrow it. Erecto!“ she added, pointing her wand at the misshapen canvas, which in one fluid motion rose into the air and settled, fully constructed, onto the ground before Harry, out of whose startled hands a tent peg soared, to land with a final thud at the end of a guy rope.

“Cave Inimicum,“ Hermione finished with a skyward flourish. ”That’s as much as I can do. At the very least, we should know they’re

coming; I can't guarantee it will keep out Vol – ""Don't say the name!" Ron cut across her, his voice harsh.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other.

"I'm sorry," Ron said, moaning a little as he raised himself to look at them, "but it feels like a – a jinx or something. Can't we call him You-Know-Who – please?"

"Dumbledore said fear of a name – " began Harry.

"In case you hadn't noticed, mate, calling You-Know-Who by his name didn't do Dumbledore much good in the end," Ron snapped back. "Just – just show You-Know-Who some respect, will you?"

"Respect?" Harry repeated, but Hermione shot him a warning look; apparently he was not to argue with Ron while the latter was in such a weakened condition.

Harry and Hermione half carried, half dragged Ron through the entrance of the tent. The interior was exactly as Harry remembered it; a small flat, complete with bathroom and tiny kitchen. He shoved aside an old armchair and lowered Ron carefully onto the lower berth of a bunk bed. Even this very short journey had turned Ron whiter still, and once they had settled him on the mattress he closed his eyes again and did not speak for a while.

"I'll make some tea," said Hermione breathlessly, pulling kettle and mugs from the depths of her bag and heading toward the kitchen.

Harry found the hot drink as welcome as the firewhisky had been on the night that Mad-Eye had died; it seemed to burn away a little of the fear fluttering in his chest. After a minute or two, Ron broke the silence.

"What d'you reckon happened to the Cattermoles?"

“With any luck, they’ll have got away,” said Hermione, clutching her hot mug for comfort. “As long as Mr. Cattermole had his wits about him, he’ll have transported Mrs. Cattermole by Side-Along-Apparition and they’ll be fleeing the country right now with their children. That’s what Harry told her to do.”

“Blimey, I hope they escaped,“ said Ron, leaning back on his pillows. The tea seemed to be doing him good; a little of his color had returned. ”I didn’t get the feeling Reg Cattermole was all that quick-witted, though, the way everyone was talking to me when I was him. God, I hope they made it…. If they both end up in Azkaban because of us…“Harry looked over at Hermione and the question he had been about to ask – about whether Mrs. Cattermole’s lack of a wand would prevent her Apparating alongside her husband – died in his throat. Hermione was watching Ron fret over the fate of the Cattermoles, and there was such tenderness in her expression that Harry felt almost as if he had surprised her in the act of kissing him.

“So, have you got it?” Harry asked her, partly to remind her that he was there.

“Got – got what?” she said with a little start.

“What did we just go through all that for? The locket! Where’s the locket?”

“You got it?“ shouted Ron, raising himself a little higher on his pillows. ”No one tells me anything! Blimey, you could have mentioned it!““Well, we were running for our lives from the Death Eaters, weren’t we?” said Hermione. “Here.”

And she pulled the locket out of the pocket of her robes and handed it to Ron.

It was as large as a chicken’s egg. An ornate letter S, inlaid with many small green stones, glinted dully in the diffused light shining through the tent’s canvas roof.

“There isn’t any chance someone’s destroyed it since Kreacher had it?“ asked Ron hopefully. ”I mean, are we sure it’s still a Horcrux?““I think so,“ said Hermione, taking it back from him and looking at it closely. ”There’d be some sign of damage if it had been magically destroyed.“She passed it to Harry, who turned it over in his fingers. The thing looked perfect, pristine. He remembered the mangled remains of the diary, and how the stone in the Horcrux ring had been cracked open when Dumbledore destroyed it.

“I reckon Kreacher’s right,” said Harry. “We’re going to have to work out how to open this thing before we can destroy it.”

Sudden awareness of what he was holding, of what lived behind the little golden doors, hit Harry as he spoke. Even after all their efforts to find it, he felt a violent urge to fling the locket from him. Mastering himself again, he tried to pry the locket apart with his fingers, then attempted the charm Hermione had used to open Regulus’s bedroom door. Neither worked. He handed the locket back to Ron and Hermione, each of whom did their best, but were no more successful at opening it than he had been.

“Can you feel it, though?” Ron asked in a hushed voice, as he held it tight in his clenched fist.

“What d’you mean?”

Ron passed the Horcrux to Harry. After a moment or two, Harry thought he knew what Ron meant. Was it his own blood pulsing through his veins that he could feel, or was it something beating inside the locket, like a tiny metal heart?

“What are we going to do with it?” Hermione asked.

“Keep it safe till we work out how to destroy it.” Harry replied, and, little though he wanted to, he hung the chain around his own neck, dropping the locket out of sight beneath his robes, where it rested against his chest beside the pouch Hagrid had given him.

“I think we should take it in turns to keep watch outside the tent,” he added to Hermione, standing up and stretching. “And we’ll need to think about some food as well. You stay there,” he added sharply, as Ron attempted to sit up and turned a nasty shade of green.

With the Sneakoscope Hermione had given Harry for his birthday set carefully upon the table in the tent, Harry and Hermione spent the rest of the day sharing the role of lookout. However, the Sneakoscope remained silent and still upon its point all day, and whether because of the protective enchantments and Muggle-repelling charms Hermione had spread around them, or because people rarely ventured this way, their patch of wood remained deserted, apart from occasional birds and squirrels. Evening brought no change; Harry lit his wand as he swapped places with Hermione at ten o’clock, and looked out upon a deserted scene, noting the bats fluttering high above him across the single patch of starry sky visible from their protected clearing.

He felt hungry now, and a little light-headed. Hermione had not packed any food in her magical bag, as she had assumed that they would be returning to Grimmauld Place that night, so they had had nothing to eat except some wild mushrooms that Hermione had collected from amongst the nearest trees and stewed in a Billycan. After a couple of mouthfuls Ron had pushed his portion away, looking queasy; Harry had only persevered so as to not hurt Hermione’s feelings.

The surrounding silence was broken by odd rustlings and what sounded like crackings of twigs: Harry thought that they were caused by animals rather than people, yet he kept his wand held tight at the ready. His insides, already uncomfortable due to their inadequate helping of rubbery mushrooms, tingled with unease.

He had though that he would feel elated if they managed to steal back the Horcrux, but somehow he did not; all he felt as he sat looking out at the darkness, of which his wand lit only a tiny part, was

worry about what would happen next. It was as though he had been hurtling toward this point for weeks, months, maybe even years, but how he had come to an abrupt halt, run out of road.

There were other Horcruxes out there somewhere, but he did not have the faintest idea where they could be. He did not even know what all of them were. Meanwhile he was at a loss to know how to destroy the only one that they had found, the Horcrux that currently lay against the bare flesh of his chest. Curiously, it had not taken heat from his body, but lay so cold against his skin it might just have emerged from icy water. From time to time Harry thought, or perhaps imagined, that he could feel the tiny heartbeat ticking irregularly alongside his own. Nameless forebodings crept upon him as he sat there in the dark. He tried to resist them, push them away, yet they came at him relentlessly. Neither can live while the other survives. Ron and Hermione, now talking softly behind him in the tent, could walk away if they wanted to: He could not. And it seemed to Harry as he sat there trying to master his own fear and exhaustion, that the Horcrux against his chest was ticking away the time he had left…. Stupid idea, he told himself, don't think that….

His scar was starting to prickle again. He was afraid that he was making it happen by having these thoughts, and tried to direct them into another channel. He thought of poor Kreacher, who had expected them home and had received Yaxley instead. Would the elf keep silent or would he tell the Death Eater everything he knew? Harry wanted to believe that Kreacher had changed towards him in the past month, that he would be loyal now, but who knew what would happen? What if the Death Eaters tortured the elf? Sick images swarmed into Harry's head and he tried to push these away too, for there was nothing he could do for Kreacher: He and Hermione had already decided against trying to summon him; what if someone from the Ministry came too? They could not count on elfish Apparition being free from the same flaw that had taken Yaxley to Grimmauld Place on the hem of Hermione's sleeve.

Harry’s scar was burning now. He thought that there was so much they did not know: Lupin had been right about magic they had never encountered or imagined. Why hadn’t Dumbledore explained more? Had he thought that there would be time; that he would live for years, for centuries perhaps, like his friend Nicolas Flamel? If so, he had been wrong…. Snape had seen to that…. Snape, the sleeping snake, who had struck at the top of the tower…And Dumbledore had fallen… fallen…“Give it to me, Gregorovitch.“Harry’s voice was high, clear, and cold, his wand held in front of him by a long-fingered white hand. The man at whom he was pointing was suspended upside down in midair, though there were no ropes holding him; he swung there, invisibly and eerily bound, his limbs wrapped about him, his terrified face, on a level with Harry’s ruddy due to the blood that had rushed to his head. He had pure-white hair and a thick, bushy beard: a trussed-up Father Christmas.

“I have it not, I have it no more! It was, many years ago, stolen from me!”

“Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, Gregorovitch. He knows…. He always knows.”

The hanging man’s pupils were wide, dilated with fear, and they seemed to swell, bigger and bigger until their blackness swallowed Harry whole –And how Harry was hurrying along a dark corridor in stout little Gregorovitch’s wake as he held a lantern aloft: Gregorovitch burst into the room at the end of the passage and his lantern illuminated what looked like a workshop; wood shavings and gold gleamed in the swinging pool of light, and there on the window ledge sat perched, like a giant bird, a young man with golden hair. In the split second that the lantern’s light illuminated him, Harry saw the delight upon his handsome face, then the intruder shot a Stunning Spell from his wand and jumped neatly backward out of the window with a crow of laughter.

And Harry was hurtling back out of those wide, tunnellike pupils and Gregorovitch's face was stricken with terror.

"Who was the thief, Gregorovitch?" said the high cold voice.

"I do not know, I never knew, a young man – no – please – PLEASE!"A scream that went on and on and then a burst of green light –"Harry!"

He opened his eyes, panting, his forehead throbbing. He had passed out against the side of the tent, had slid sideways down the canvas, and was sprawled on the ground. He looked up at Hermione, whose bushy hair obscured the tiny patch of sky visible through the dark branches high above them.

"Dream," he said, sitting up quickly and attempting to meet Hermione's glower with a look of innocence. "Must've dozed off, sorry."

"I know it was your scar! I can tell by the look on your face! You were looking into Vol – "

"Don't say his name!" came Ron's angry voice from the depths of the tent.

"Fine," retorted Hermione, "You-Know-Who's mind, then!"

"I didn't mean it to happen!" Harry said. "It was a dream! Can you control what you dream about, Hermione?""If you just learned to apply Occlumency – "

But Harry was not interested in being told off; he wanted to discuss what he had just seen.

"He's found Gregorovitch, Hermione, and I think he's killed him, but before he killed him he read Gregorovitch's mind and I saw – "

“I think I’d better take over the watch if you’re so tired you’re falling sleep,” said Hermione coldly.

“I can finish the watch!”

“No, you’re obviously exhausted. Go and lie down.”

She dropped down in the mouth of the tent, looking stubborn. Angry, but wishing to avoid a row, Harry ducked back inside.

Ron’s still-pale face was poking out from the lower bunk; Harry climbed into the one above him, lay down, and looked up at the dark canvas ceiling. After several moments, Ron spoke in a voice so low that it would not carry to Hermione, huddle in the entrance.

“What’s You-Know-Who doing?”

Harry screwed up his eyes in the effort to remember every detail, then whispered into the darkness.

“He found Gregorovitch. He had him tied up, he was torturing him.”

“How’s Gregorovitch supposed to make him a new wand if he’s tied up?”

“I dunno…. It’s weird, isn’t it?”

Harry closed his eyes, thinking of all that he had seen and heard. The more he recalled, the less sense it made…. Voldemort had said nothing about Harry’s wand, nothing about the twin cores, nothing about Gregorovitch making a new and more powerful wand to beat Harry’s….

“He wanted something from Gregorovitch,” Harry said, eyes still closed tight. “He asked him to hand it over, but Gregorovitch said it had been stolen from him… and then… then…”

He remembered how he, as Voldemort, had seemed to hurtle through Gregorovitch's eyes, into his memories….

"He read Gregorovitch's mind, and I saw this young bloke perched on a windowsill, and he fired a curse at Gregorovitch and jumped out of sight. He stole it, he stole whatever You-Know-Who's after. And I… I think I've seen him somewhere…."

Harry wished he could have another glimpse of the laughing boy's face. The theft had happened many years ago, according to Gregorovitch. Why did the young thief look familiar?

The noises of the surrounding woods were muffled inside the tent; all Harry could hear was Ron's breathing. After a while, Ron whispered, "Couldn't you see what the thief was holding?"

"No… it must've been something small."

"Harry?"

The wooden slats of Ron's bunk creaked as he repositioned himself in bed.

"Harry, you don't reckon You-Know-Who's after something else to turn into a Horcrux?"

"I don't know," said Harry slowly. "Maybe. But wouldn't it be dangerous for him to make another one? Didn't Hermione say he had pushed his soul to the limit already?"

"Yeah, but maybe he doesn't know that."

"Yeah…maybe," said Harry.

He had been sure that Voldemort had been looking for a way around the problem of the twin cores, sure that Voldemort sought a solution

from the old wandmaker… and yet he had killed him, apparently without asking him a single question about wandlore.

What was Voldemort trying to find? Why, with the Ministry of Magic and the Wizarding world at his feet, was he far away, intent on the pursuit of an object that Gregorovitch had once owned, and which had been stolen by the unknown thief?

Harry could still see the blond-haired youth's face; it was merry, wild; there was a Fred and George-ish air of triumphant trickery about him. He had soared from the windowsill like a bird, and Harry had seen him before, but he could not think where….

With Gregorovitch dead, it was the merry-faced thief who was in danger now, and it was on him that Harry's thoughts dwelled, as Ron's snores began to rumble from the lower bunk and as he himself drifted slowly into sleep once more.

Chapter 15 The Goblin's Revenge

Early next morning, before the other two were awake, Harry left the tent to search the woods around them for the oldest, most gnarled, and resilient-looking tree he could find. There in its shadows he buried Mad-Eye Moody's eye and marked the spot by gouging a small cross in the bark with his wand. It was not much, but Harry felt that Mad-Eye would have much preferred this to being stuck on Dolores Umbridge's door. Then he returned to the tent to wait for the others to wake, and discuss what they were going to do next.

Harry and Hermione felt that it was best not to stay anywhere too long, and Ron agreed, with the sole proviso that their next move took them within reach of a bacon sandwich. Hermione therefore removed the enchantments she had placed around the clearing, while Harry and Ron obliterated all the marks and impressions on the ground that might show they had camped there. Then they Disapparated to the outskirts of a small market town.

Once they had pitched the tent in the shelter of a small copse of trees and surrounded it with freshly cast defensive enchantments. Harry ventured out under the Invisibility Cloak to find sustenance. This, however, did not go as planned. He had barely entered the town when an unnatural chill, a descending mist, and a sudden darkening of the skies made him freeze where he stood.

"But you can make a brilliant Patronus!" protested Ron, when Harry arrived back at the tent empty handed, out of breath, and mouthing the single word, dementors.

"I couldn't… make one." he panted, clutching the stitch in his side. "Wouldn't… come."

Their expressions of consternation and disappointment made Harry feel ashamed. It had been a nightmarish experience, seeing the

dementors gliding out of the must in the distance and realizing, as the paralyzing cold choked his lungs and a distant screaming filled his ears, that he was not going to be able to protect himself. It had taken all Harry's willpower to uproot himself from the spot and run, leaving the eyeless dementors to glide amongst the Muggles who might not be able to see them, but would assuredly feel the despair they cast wherever they went.

"So we still haven't got any food."

"Shut up, Ron," snapped Hermione. "Harry, what happened? Why do you think you couldn't make your Patronus? You managed perfectly yesterday!"

"I don't know."

He sat low in one of Perkins's old armchairs, feeling more humiliated by the moment. He was afraid that something had gone wrong inside him. Yesterday seemed a long time ago: Today me might have been thirteen years old again, the only one who collapsed on the Hogwarts Express.

Ron kicked a chair leg.

"What?" he snarled at Hermione. "I'm starving! All I've had since I bled half to death is a couple of toadstools!"

"You go and fight your way through the dementors, then," said Harry, stung.

"I would, but my arm's in a sling, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"That's convenient."

"And what's that supposed to –?"

“Of course!” cried Hermione, clapping a hand to her forehead and startling both of them into silence. “Harry, give me the locket! Come on,” she said impatiently, clicking her fingers at him when he did not react, “the Horcrux, Harry, you’re still wearing it!”

She held out her hands, and Harry lifted the golden chain over his head. The moment it parted contact with Harry’s skin he felt oddly light. He had not even realized that he was clammy or that there was a heavy weight pressing on his stomach until both sensations lifted.

“Better?” asked Hermione.

“Yeah, loads better!”

“Harry,” she said, crouching down in front of him and using the kind of voice he associated with visiting the very sick, “you don’t think you’ve been possessed, do you?”

“What? No!” he said defensively, “I remember everything we’ve done while I’ve bee wearing it. I wouldn’t know what I’d done if I’d been possessed, would I? Ginny told me there were times when she couldn’t remember anything.”

“Hmm,” said Hermione, looking down at the heavy locket. “Well, maybe we ought not to wear it. We can just keep it in the tent.”

“We are not leaving that Horcrux lying around,” Harry stated firmly. “If we lose it, if it gets stolen – ”

“Oh, all right, all right,” said Hermione, and she placed it around her own neck and tucked it out of sight down the front of her shirt. “But we’ll take turns wearing it, so nobody keeps it on too long.”

“Great,” said Ron irritably, “and now we’ve sorted that out, can we please get some food?”

“Fine, but we’ll go somewhere else to find it,” said Hermione with half a glance at Harry. “There’s no point staying where we know dementors are swooping around.”

In the end they settled down for the night in a far flung field belonging to a lonely farm, from which they had managed to obtain eggs and bread.

“It’s not stealing, is it?” asked Hermione in a troubled voice, as they devoured scrambled eggs on toast. “Not if I left some money under the chicken coo?”

Ron rolled his eyes and said, with his cheeks bulging, “Er-my-nee, ‘oo worry ‘oo much. ‘Elax!”

And, indeed, it was much easier to relax when they were comfortably well fed. The argument about the dementors was forgotten in laughter that night, and Harry felt cheerful, even hopeful, as he took the first of the three night watches.

This was their first encounter with the fact that a full stomach meant good spirits, an empty one, bickering and gloom. Harry was least surprised by this, because be had suffered periods of near starvation at the Dursleys’. Hermione bore up reasonably well on those nights when they managed to scavenge nothing but berries or stale biscuits, her temper perhaps a little shorter than usual and her silences dour. Ron, however, had always been used to three delicious meals a day, courtesy of his mother or of the Hogwarts house-elves, and hunger made him both unreasonable and irascible. Whenever lack of food coincided with Ron’s turn to wear the Horcrux, he became downright unpleasant.

“So where next?” was his constant refrain. He did not seem to have any ideas himself, but expected Harry and Hermione to come up with plans while he sat and brooded over the low food supplies. Accordingly Harry and Hermione spent fruitless hours trying to decide where they might find the other Horcruxes, and how to destroy the

one they already got, their conversations becoming increasingly repetitive as they got no new information.

As Dumbledore had told Harry that he believed Voldemort had hidden the Horcruxes in places important to him, they kept reciting, in a sort of dreary litany, those locations they knew that Voldemort had lived or visited. The orphanage where he had been born and raised: Hogwarts, where he had been educated; Borgin and Burks, where he had worked after completing school; then Albania, where he had spent his years of exile: These formed the basis of their speculations.

“Yeah, let’s go to Albania. Shouldn’t take more than an afternoon to search an entire country,” said Ron sarcastically.

“There can’t be anything there. He’d already made five of his Horcruxes before he went into exile, and Dumbledore was certain the snake is the sixth,” said Hermione. “We know the snake’s not in Albania, it’s usually with Vol – ”

“Didn’t I ask you to stop say that?”

“Fine! The snake is usually with You-Know-Who – happy?”

“Not particularly.”

“I can’t see him hiding anything at Borgin and Burkes.” said Harry, who had made this point many times before, but said it again simply to break the nasty silence. “Borgin and Burke were experts at Dark objects, they would’ve recognized a Horcrux straightaway.”

Ron yawned pointedly. Repressing a strong urge to throw something at him, Harry plowed on, “I still reckon he might have hidden something at Hogwarts.”

Hermione sighed.

“But Dumbledore would have found it, Harry!”

Harry repeated the argument he kept bringing out in favor of this theory.

“Dumbledore said in front of me that he never assumed he knew all of Hogwart’s secrets. I’m telling you, if there was one place Vol – ”

“Oi!”

“YOU-KNOW-WHO, then!” Harry shouted, goaded past endurance. “If there was one place that was really important to You-Know-Who, it was Hogwarts!”

“Oh, come on,” scoffed Ron. “His school?”

“Yeah, his school! It was his first real home, the place that meant he was special: it meant everything to him, and even after he left – ”

“This is You-Know-Who we’re talking about, right? Not you?” inquired Ron. He was tugging at the chain of the Horcrux around his neck; Harry was visited by a desire to seize it and throttle him.

“You told us that You-Know-Who asked Dumbledore to give him a job after he left,” said Hermione.

“That’s right,” said Harry.

“And Dumbledore thought he only wanted to come back to try and find something, probably another founder’s object, to make into another Horcrux?”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“But he didn’t get the job, did he?” said Hermione. “So he never got the chance to find a founder’s object there and hide it in the school!”

“Okay, then,” said Harry, defeated. “Forget Hogwarts.”

Without any other leads, they traveled into London and, hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, searching for the orphanage in which Voldemort had been raised. Hermione stole into a library and discovered from their records that the place had been demolished many years before. They visited its site and found a tower block of offices.

“We could try digging in to foundations?” Hermione suggested halfheartedly.

“He wouldn’t have hidden a Horcrux here,” Harry said. He had known it all along. The orphanage had been the place Voldemort had been determined to escape; he would never have hidden a part of his soul there. Dumbledore had shown Harry that Voldemort sought grandeur or mystique in his hiding places; this dismal gray corner of London was as far removed as you could imagine from Hogwarts of the Ministry or a building like Gringotts, the Wizarding banks, with its gilded doors and marble floors.

Even without any new idea, they continued to move through the countryside, pitching the tent in a different place each night for security. Every morning they made sure that they had removed all clues to their presence, then set off to find another lonely and secluded spot, traveling by Apparition to more woods, to the shadowy crevices of cliffs, to purple moors, gorse-covered mountainsides, and once a sheltered and pebbly cove. Every twelve hours or so they passed the Horcrux between them as though they were playing some perverse, slow-motion game of pass-the-parcel, where they dreaded the music stopping because the reward was twelve hours of increased fear and anxiety.

Harry’s scar kept prickling. It happened most often, he noticed, when he was wearing the Horcrux. Sometimes he could not stop himself reacting to the pain.

“What? What did you see?” demanded Ron, whenever he noticed Harry wince.

“A face,” muttered Harry, every time. “The same face. The thief who stole from Gregorovitch.”

And Ron would turn away, making no effort to hide his disappointment. Harry knew that Ron was hoping to bear news of his family or the rest of the Order of the Phoenix, but after all, he, Harry, was not a television aerial; he could only see what Voldemort was thinking at the time, not tune in to whatever took his fancy. Apparently Voldemort was dwelling endlessly on the unknown youth with the gleeful face, whose name and whereabouts, Harry felt sure, Voldemort knew no better than he did. As Harry’s scar continued to burn and the merry, blond-haired boy swam tantalizingly in his memory, he learned to suppress any sign of pain or discomfort, for the other two showed nothing but impatience at the mention of the thief. He could not entirely blame them, when they were so desperate for a lead on the Horcruxes.

As the days stretched into weeks, Harry began to suspect that Ron and Hermione were having conversations without, and about, him. Several times they stopped talking abruptly when Harry entered the tent, and twice he came accidentally upon them, huddled a little distance away, heads together and talking fast; both times they fell silent when they realized he was approaching them and hastened to appear busy collecting wood or water.

Harry could not help wondering whether they had only agreed to come on what now felt like a pointless and rambling journey because they thought he had some secret plan that they would learn in due course. Ron was making no effort to hide his bad mood, and Harry was starting to fear that Hermione too was disappointed by his poor leadership. In desperation he tried to think of further Horcrux locations, but the only one that continued to occur to him was

Hogwarts, and as neither of the others thought this at all likely, he stopped suggesting it.

Autumn rolled over the countryside as they moved through it. They were now pitching the tent on mulches of fallen leaves. Natural mists joined those cast by the dementors; wind and rain added to their troubles. The fact that Hermione was getting better at identifying edible fungi could not altogether compensate for their continuing isolation, the lack of other people's company, or their total ignorance of what was going on in the war against Voldemort.

"My mother," said Ron on night, as they sat in the tent on a riverbank in Wales, "can make good food appear out of thin air."

He prodded moodily at the lumps of charred gray fish on his plate. Harry glanced automatically at Ron's neck and saw, as he has expected, the golden chain of the Horcrux glinting there. He managed to fight down the impulse to swear at Ron, whose attitude would, he knew, improve slightly when the time came to take off the locket.

"Your mother can't produce food out of thin air," said Hermione. "no one can. Food is the first of the five Principal Exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfigura – "

"Oh, speak English, can't you?" Ron said, prying a fish out from between his teeth.

"It's impossible to make good food out of nothing! You can Summon it if you know where it is, you can transform it, you can increase the quantity if you've already got some – "

"Well, don't bother increasing this, it's disgusting," said Ron.

"Harry caught the fish and I did my best with it! I notice I'm always the one who ends up sorting out the food, because I'm a girl, I suppose!"

"No, it's because you're supposed to be the best at magic!" shot back Ron.

Hermione jumped up and bits of roast pike slid off her tin plate onto the floor.

"You can do the cooking tomorrow, Ron, you can find the ingredients and try and charm them into something worth eating, and I'll sit here and pull faces and moan and you can see you – "

"Shut up!," said Harry, leaping to his feet and holding up both hands. "Shut up now!"

Hermione looked outraged.

"How can you side with him, he hardly ever does the cook – "

"Hermione, be quiet, I can hear someone!"

He was listening hard, his hands still raised, warning them not to talk. Then, over the rush and gush of the dark river beside them, he heard voices again. He looked around at the Sneakoscope. It was not moving.

"You cast the Muffliato charm over us, right?" he whispered to Hermione.

"I did everything," she whispered back, "Muffliato, Muggle-Repelling and Disillusionment Charms, all of it. They shouldn't be able to hear of see us, whoever they are."

Heavy scuffing and scraping noises, plus the sound of dislodged stones and twigs, told them that several people were clambering down the steep, wooded slope that descended to the narrow bank where they had pitched the tent. They drew their wands, waiting. The enchantments they had cast around themselves ought to be sufficient, in the near total darkness, to shield them from the notice of

Muggles and normal witches and wizards. If these were Death Eaters, then perhaps their defenses were about to be tested by Dark Magic for the first time.

The voices became louder but no more intelligible as the group of men reached the bank. Harry estimated that their owners were fewer than twenty feet away, but the cascading river made it impossible to tell for sure. Hermione snatched up the beaded bag and started to rummage; after a moment she drew out three Extendible Ears and threw one each to Harry and Ron, who hastily inserted the ends of the flesh-colored strings into their ears and fed the other ends out of the tent entrance.

Within seconds Harry heard a weary male voice.

“There ought to be a few salmon in here, or d’you reckon it’s too early in the season? Accio Salmon!”

There were several distinct splashes and then the slapping sounds of fish against flesh. Somebody grunted appreciatively. Harry pressed the Extendable ear deeper into his own: Over the murmur of the river he could make out more voices, but they were not speaking English or any human language he had ever heard. It was a rough and unmelodious tongue, a string of rattling, guttural noises, and there seemed to be two speakers, one with a slightly lower, slower voice than the other.

A fire danced into life on the other side of the canvas, large shadows passed between tent and flames. The delicious smell of baking salmon wafted tantalizingly in their direction. Then came the clinking of cutlery on plates, and the first man spoke again.

“Here, Griphook, Gornuk.”

Goblins! Hermione mouthed at Harry, who nodded.

“Thank you,” said the goblins together in English.

“So, you three have been on the run how long?” asked a new, mellow, and pleasant voice; it was vaguely familiar to Harry, who pictured a round-bellied, cheerful-faced man.

“Six weeks… Seven… I forget,” said the tired man. “Met up with Griphook in the first couple of days and joined forces with Gornuk not long after. Nice to have a but of company.” There was a pause, while knives scraped plates and tin mugs were picked up and replaced on the ground. “What made you leave, Ted?” continued the man.

“Knew they were coming for me,” replied mellow-voiced Ted, and Harry suddenly knew who he was: Tonks’s father. “Heard Death Eaters were in the area last week and decided I’d better run for it. Refused to register as a Muggle-born on principle, see, so I knew it was a matter of time, knew I’d have to leave in the end. My wife should be okay, she’s pure-blood. And then I met Dean here, what, a few days ago, son?”

“Yeah,” said another voice, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at each other, silent but besides themselves with excitement, sure they recognized the voice of Dean Thomas, their fellow Gryffindor.

“Muggle-born, eh?” asked the first man.

“Not sure ,” said Dean. “My dad left my mum when I was a kid. I’ve got no proof he was a wizard, though.”

There was silence for a while, except for the sounds of munching; then Ted spoke again.

“I’ve got to say, Dirk, I’m surprised to run into you. Pleased, but surprised. Word was that you’d been caught.”

“I was,” said Dirk. “I was halfway to Azkaban when I made a break for it. Stunned Dawlish, and nicked his broom. It was easier than you’d think; I don’t reckon he’s quite right at the moment. Might be

Confunded. If so, I'd like to shake the hand of the witch or wizard who did it, probably saved my life."

There was another pause in which the fire crackled and the river rushed on. The Ted said, "And where do you two fit in? I, er, had the impression the goblins were for You-Know-Who, on the whole."

"You had a false impression," said the higher-voiced of the goblins. "We take no sides. This is a wizards' war."

"How come you're in hiding, then?"

"I deemed in prudent," said the deeper-voiced goblin. "Having refused what I considered an impertinent request, I could see that my person safety was in jeopardy."

"What did they ask you to do?" asked Ted.

"Duties ill-befitting the dignity of my race," replied the goblin, his voice rougher and less human as he said it. "I am not a house-elf."

"What about you, Griphook?"

"Similar reasons," said the higher voiced goblin. "Gringotts is no longer under the sole control of my race. I recognize no Wizarding master."

He added something under his breath in Gobbledegook, and Gornuk laughed.

"What's the joke?" asked Dean.

"He said," replied Dirk, "that there are things wizards don't recognize, either."

There was a short pause.

"I don't get it," said Dean.

"I had my small revenge before I left," said Griphook in English.

"Good man – goblin, I should say," amended Ted hastily. "Didn't manage to lock a Death Eater up in one of the old high-security vaults, I suppose?"

"If I had, the sword would not have helped him break out," replied Griphook. Gornuk laughed again and even Dirk gave a dry chuckle.

"Dean and I are still missing something here," said Ted.

"So is Severus Snape, though he does not know it," said Griphook, and the two goblins roared with malicious laughter. Inside the tent Harry's breathing was shallow with excitement: He and Hermione stared at each other, listening as hard as they could.

"Didn't you hear about that, Ted?" asked Dirk. "About the kids who tried to steal Gryffindor's sword out of Snape's office at Hogwarts?"

An electric current seemed to course through Harry, jangling his every nerve as he stood rooted to the spot.

"Never heard a word," said Ted, "Not in the Prophet, was it?"

"Hardly," chortled Dirk. "Griphook here told me, he heard about it from Bill Weasley who works for the bank. One of the kids who tried to take the sword was Bill's younger sister."

Harry glanced toward Hermione and Ron, both of whom were clutching the Extendable Ears as tightly as lifelines.

"She and a couple of friends got into Snape's office and smashed open the glass case where he was apparently keeping the sword. Snape caught them as they were trying to smuggle it down the staircase."

"Ah, God bless 'em," said Ted. "What did they think, that they'd be able to use the sword on You-Know-Who? Or on Snape himself?"

"Well, whatever they thought they were going to do with it, Snape decided the sword wasn't safe where it was," said Dirk. "Couple of days later, once he'd got the say-so from You-Know-Who, I imagine, he sent it down to London to be kept in Gringotts instead."

The goblins started to laugh again.

"I'm still not seeing the joke," said Ted.

"It's a fake," rasped Griphook.

"The sword of Gryffindor!"

"Oh yes. It is a copy – an excellent copy, it is true – but it was Wizard-made. The original was forged centuries ago by goblins and had certain properties only goblin-made armor possesses. Wherever the genuine sword of Gryffindor is, it is not in a vault at Gringotts bank."

"I see," said Ted. "And I take it you didn't bother telling the Death Eaters this."

"I saw no reason to trouble them with the information," said Griphook smugly, and now Ted and Dean joined in Gornuk and Dirk's laughter.

Inside the tent, Harry closed his eyes, willing someone to ask the question he needed answered, and after a minute that seemed ten, Dean obliged: he was (Harry remembered with a jolt) an ex-boyfriend of Ginny's too.

"What happened to Ginny and all the others? The ones who tried to steal it?"

"Oh, they were punished, and cruelly," said Griphook indifferently.

“They’re okay, though?” asked Ted quickly, “I mean, the Weasleys don’t need any more of their kids injured, do they?”

“They suffered no serious injury, as far as I am aware,” said Griphook.

“Lucky for them,” said Ted. “With Snape’s track record I suppose we should just be glad they’re still alive.”

“You believe that story, then, do you, Ted?” asked Dirk. “You believe Snape killed Dumbledore?

“Course I do,” said Ted. “You’re not going to sit there and tell me you think Potter had anything to do with it?”

“Hard to know what to believe these days,” muttered Dirk.

“I know Harry Potter,” said Dean. “And I reckon he’s the real thing – the Chosen One, or whatever you want to call it.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot would like to believe he’s that, son,” said Dirk, “me included. But where is he? Run for it, by the looks of things. You’d think if he knew anything we don’t, or had anything special going for him, he’d be out there now fighting, rallying resistance, instead of hiding. And you know, the Prophet made a pretty good case against him – ”

“The Prophet?” scoffed Ted. “You deserve to be lied to if you’re still reading that much, Dirk. You want the facts, try the Quibbler.”

There was a sudden explosion of choking and retching, plus a good deal of thumping, by the sound of it. Dirk had swallowed a fish bone. At last he sputtered, “The Quibbler? That lunatic rag of Xeno Lovegood’s?”

“It’s not so lunatic these days,” said Ted. “You want to give it a look, Xeno is printing all the stuff the Prophet’s ignoring, not a single mention of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks in the last issue. How long

they'll let him get with it, mind, I don't know. But Xeno says, front page of every issue, that any wizard who's against You-Know-Who ought to make helping Harry Potter their number-one priority."

"Hard to help a boy who's vanished off the face of the earth," said Dirk.

"Listen, the fact that they haven't caught him yet's one hell of an achievement," said Ted. "I'd take tips from him gladly; it's what we're trying to do, stay free, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well, you've got a point there," said Dirk heavily. "With the whole of the Ministry and all their informers looking for him, I'd have expected him to be caught by now. Mind, who's to say they haven't already caught and killed him without publicizing it?"

"Ah, don't say that, Dirk," murmured Ted.

There was a long pause filled with more clattering of knives and forks. When they spoke again it was to discuss whether they ought to sleep on the back or retreat back up the wooded slope. Deciding the trees would give better cover, they extinguished their fire, then clambered back up the incline, their voices fading away.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione reeled in the Extendable Ears. Harry, who had found the need to remain silent increasingly difficult the longer they eavesdropped, now found himself unable to say more then, "Ginny – the sword – "

"I know!" said Hermione.

She lunged for the tiny beaded bag, this time sinking her arm in it right up to the armpit.

"Here… we… are…" she said between gritted teeth, and she pulled at something that was evidently in the depths of the bag. Slowly the edge of an ornate picture frame came into sight. Harry hurried to help

her. As they lifted the empty portrait of Phineas Nigellus free of Hermione's bag, she kept her wand pointing at it, ready to cast a spell at any moment.

"If somebody swapped the real sword for the face while it was in Dumbledore's office," she panted, as they propped the painting against the side of the tent, "Phineas Nigellus would have seen it happen, he hangs right beside the case!"

"Unless he was asleep," said Harry, but he still held his breath as Hermione knelt down in front of the empty canvas, her wand directed at its center, cleared her throat, then said:"Er – Phineas? Phineas Nigellus?"Nothing happened.

"Phineas Nigellus?" said Hermione again. "Professor Black? Please could we talk to you? Please?"

"'Please' always helps," said a cold, snide voice, and Phineas Nigellus slid into his portrait. At one, Hermione cried:"Obscura!"

A black blindfold appeared over Phineas Nigellus's clever, dark eyes, causing him to bump into the frame and shriek with pain.

"What – how dare – what are you –?"

"I'm very sorry, Professor Black," said Hermione, "but it's a necessary precaution!"

"Remove this foul addition at once! Remove it, I say! You are ruining a great work of art! Where am I? What is going on?""Never mind where we are," said Harry, and Phineas Nigellus froze, abandoning his attempts to peel off the painted blindfold.

"Can that possible be the voice of the elusive Mr. Potter?"

"Maybe," said Harry, knowing that this would keep Phineas Nigellus's interest. "We've got a couple of questions to ask you – about the

sword of Gryffindor.”

“Ah,” said Phineas Nigellus, now turning his head this way and that in an effort to catch sight of Harry, “Yes. That silly girl acted most unwisely there – ”

“Shut up about my sister,” said Ron roughly, Phineas Nigellus raised supercilious eyebrows.

“Who else is here?” he asked, turning his head from side to side. “Your tone displeases me! The girl and her friends were foolhardily in the extreme. Thieving from the headmaster.”

“They weren’t thieving,” said Harry. “That sword isn’t Snape’s.”

“It belongs to Professor Snape’s school,“ said Phineas Nigellus. ”Exactly what claim did the Weasley girl have upon it? She deserved her punishment, as did the idiot Longbottom and the Lovegood oddity!““Neville is not an idiot and Luna is not an oddity!” said Hermione.

“Where am I?” repeated Phineas Nigellus, starting to wrestle with the blindfold again. “Where have you brought me? Why have you removed me from the house of my forebears?”

“Never mind that! How did Snape punish Ginny, Neville, and Luna?” asked Harry urgently.

“Professor Snape sent them into the Forbidden Forest, to do some work for the oaf, Hagrid.”

“Hagrid’s not an oaf!” said Hermione shrilly.

“And Snape might’ve though that was a punishment,” said Harry, “but Ginny, Neville, and Luna probably had a good laugh with Hagrid. The Forbidden Forest… they’ve faced plenty worse than the Forbidden Forest, big deal!”

He felt relieved; he had been imagining horrors, the Cruciatus Curse at the very least.

“What we really wanted to know, Professor Black, is whether anyone else has, um, taken out the sword at all? Maybe it’s been taken away for cleaning – or something!”

Phineas Nigellus paused again in his struggles to free his eyes and sniggered.

“Muggle-born,” he said, “Goblin-made armor does not require cleaning, simple girl. Goblin’s silver repels mundane dirt, imbibing only that which strengthens it.”

“Don’t call Hermione simple,” said Harry.

“I grow weary of contradiction,” said Phineas Nigellus. “perhaps it is time for me to return to the headmaster’s office.?”

Still blindfolded, he began groping the side of his frame, trying to feel his way out of his picture and back into the one at Hogwarts. Harry had a sudden inspiration.

“Dumbledore! Can’t you bring us Dumbledore?”

“I beg your pardon?” asked Phineas Nigellus.

“Professor Dumbledore’s portrait – couldn’t you bring him along, here, into yours?”

Phineas Nigellus turned his face in the direction of Harry’s voice.

“Evidently it is not only Muggle-borns who are ignorant, Potter. The portraits of Hogwarts may commune with each other, but they cannot travel outside of the castle except to visit a painting of themselves elsewhere. Dumbledore cannot come here with me, and after the treatment I have received at your hands, I can assure you that I will

not be making a return visit!“Slightly crestfallen, Harry watched Phineas redouble his attempts to leave his frame.

“Professor Black,” said Hermione, “couldn’t you just tell us, please, when was the last time the sword was taken out of its case? Before Ginny took it out, I mean?”

Phineas snorted impatiently.

“I believe that the last time I saw the sword of Gryffindor leave its case was when Professor Dumbledore used it to break open a ring.”

Hermione whipped around to look at Harry. Neither of them dared say more in front of Phineas Nigellus, who had at least managed to locate the exit.

“Well, good night to you,“ he said a little waspishly, and he began to move out of sight again. Only the edge of his hat brim remained in view when Harry gave a sudden shout.

“Wait! Have you told Snape you saw this?”

Phineas Nigellus stuck his blindfolded head back into the picture.

“Professor Snape has more important things on his mind that the many eccentricities of Albus Dumbledore. Good-bye, Potter!”

And with that, he vanished completely, leaving behind him nothing but his murky backdrop.

“Harry!” Hermione cried.

“I know!” Harry shouted. Unable to contain himself, he punched the air; it was more than he had dared to hope for. He strode up and down the tent, feeling that he could have run a mile; he did not even feel hungry anymore. Hermione was squashing Phineas Nigellus’s

back into the beaded bag; when she had fastened the clasp she threw the bag aside and raised a shining face to Harry.

“The sword can destroy Horcruxes! Goblin-made blades imbibe only that which strengthens them – Harry, that sword’s impregnated with basilisk venom!”

“And Dumbledore didn’t give it to me because he still needed it, he wanted to use it on the locket – ”

“ – and he must have realized they wouldn’t let you have it if he put it in his will – ”

“ – so he made a copy – ”

“ – and put a fake in the glass case – ”

“ – and he left the real one – where?”

They gazed at east other Harry felt that the answer was dangling invisibly in the air above them, tantalizingly close. Why hadn’t Dumbledore told him? Or had he, in fact, told Harry, but Harry had not realized it at the time?

“Think!” whispered Hermione. “Think! Where would he have left it?”

“Not at Hogwarts,” said Harry, resuming his pacing.

“Somewhere in Hogsmeade?” suggested Hermione.

“The Shrieking Shack?” said Harry. “Nobody ever goes in there.”

“But Snape knows how to get in, wouldn’t that be a bit risky?”

“Dumbledore trusted Snape,” Harry reminded her.

“Not enough to tell him that he had swapped the swords,” said Hermione.

"Yeah, you're right!" said Harry, and he felt even more cheered at the thought that Dumbledore had had some reservations, however faint, about Snape's trustworthiness. "So, would he have hidden the sword well away from Hogsmeade, then? What d'you reckon, Ron? Ron?"

Harry looked around. For one bewildered moment he thought that Ron had left the tent, then realized that Ron was lying in the shadow of a bunk, looking stony.

"Oh, remembered me, have you?" he said.

"What?"

Ron snorted as he stared up at the underside of the upper bunk.

"You two carry on. Don't let me spoil your fun."

Perplexed, Harry looked to Hermione for help, but she shook her head, apparently as nonplussed as he was.

"What's the problem?" asked Harry.

"Problem? There's no problem," said Ron, still refusing to look at Harry. "Not according to you, anyways."

There were several plunks on the canvas over their heads. It had started to rain.

"Well, you've obviously got a problem," said Harry. "Spit it out, will you?"

Ron swung his long legs off the bed and sat up. He looked mean, unlike himself.

"All right, I'll spit it out. Don't expect me to skip up and down the tent because there's some other damn thing we've got to find. Just add it to the list of stuff you don't know."

“I don’t know?” repeated Harry. “I don’t know?”

Plunk, plunk, plunk. The rain was falling harder and heavier; it pattered on the leaf-strewn bank all around them and into the river chattering through the dark. Dread doused Harry’s jubilation; Ron was saying exactly what he had suspected and feared him to be thinking.

“It’s not like I’m not having the time of my life here,” said Ron, “you know, with my arm mangled and nothing to eat and freezing my backside off every night. I just hoped, you know, after we’d been running round a few weeks, we’d have achieved something.”

“Ron,” Hermione said, but in such a quiet voice that Ron could pretend not to have heard it over the loud tattoo the rain was beating on the tent.

“I thought you knew what you’d signed up for.” said Harry.

“Yeah, I thought I did too.”

“So what part of it isn’t living up to your expectations?” asked Harry. Anger was coming to his defense now. “Did you think we’d be staying in five-star hotels? Finding a Horcrux every other day? Did you think you’d be back to Mummy by Christmas?”

“We thought you knew what you were doing!” shouted Ron, standing up, and his words Harry like scalding knives. “We thought Dumbledore had told you what to do, we thought you had a real plan!”

“Ron!” said Hermione, this time clearly audible over the rain thundering on the tent roof, but again, he ignored her.

“Well, sorry to let you down,” said Harry, his voice quite calm even though he felt hollow, inadequate. “I’ve been straight with you from

the start. I told you everything Dumbledore told me. And in the case you haven't noticed, we've found one Horcrux – "

"Yeah, and we're about as near getting rid of it as we are to finding the rest of them – nowhere effing near in other words.""Take off the locket, Ron," Hermione said, her voice unusually high. "Please take it off. You wouldn't be talking like this if you hadn't been wearing it all day."

"Yeah, he would," said Harry, who did not want excuses made for Ron. "D'you think I haven't noticed the two of you whispering behind my back? D'you think I didn't guess you were thinking this stuff?"

"Harry, we weren't – "

"Don't lie!" Ron hurled at her. "You said it too, you said you were disappointed, you said you'd thought he had a bit more to go on than – "

"I didn't say it like that – Harry, I didn't!" she cried.

The rain was pounding the tent, tears were pouring down Hermione's face, and the excitement of a few minutes before had vanished as if it had never been, a short-lived firework that had flared and died, leaving everything dark, wet, and cold. The sword of Gryffindor was hidden they knew not where, and their were three teenagers in a tent whose only achievement was not, yet, to be dead.

"So why are you still here?" Harry asked Ron.

"Search me," said Ron.

"Go home then," said Harry.

"Yeah, maybe I will!" shouted Ron, and he took several steps toward Harry, who did not back away. "Didn't you hear what they said about my sister? But you don't give a rat's fart, do you, it's only the

Forbidden Forest, Harry I've-Faced-Worse Potter doesn't care what happened to her in there – well, I do, all right, giant spiders and mental stuff – "

"I was only saying – she was with the others, they were with Hagrid – "

"Yeah, I get it, you don't care! And what about the rest of my family, 'the Weasleys don't need another kid injured,' did you hear that?"

"Yeah, I – "

"Not bothered what it meant, though?"

"Ron!" said Hermione, forcing her way between them. "I don't think it means anything new has happened, anything we don't know about; think, Ron, Bill's already scared, plenty of people must have seen that George has lost an ear by now, and you're supposed to be on your deathbed with spattergroit, I'm sure that's all he meant – "

"Oh, you're sure, are you? Right then, well, I won't bother myself about them. It's all right for you, isn't it, with your parents safely out of the way – ""My parents are dead!" Harry bellowed.

"And mine could be going the same way!" yelled Ron.

"Then GO!" roared Harry. "Go back to them, pretend you're got over your spattergroit and Mummy'll be able to feed you up and – "

Ron made a sudden movement: Harry reacted, but before either wand was clear of its owner's pocket, Hermione had raised her own.

"Prestego!" she cried, and an invisible shield expanded between her and Harry on the one side and Ron on the other; all of them were forced backward a few steps by the strength of the spell, and Harry and Ron glared from either side of the transparent barrier as though

they were seeing each other clearly for the first time. Harry felt a corrosive hatred toward Ron: Something had broken between them.

“Leave the Horcrux,” Harry said.

Ron wrenched the chain from over his head and cast the locket into a nearby chair. He turned to Hermione.

“What are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you staying, or what?”

“I…” She looked anguished. “Yes – yes, I’m staying. Ron, we said we’d go with Harry, we said we’d help – ”

“I get it. You choose him.”

“Ron, no – please – come back, come back!”

She was impeded by her own Shield Charm; by the time she had removed it he had already stormed into the night. Harry stood quite still and silent, listening to her sobbing and calling Ron’s name amongst the trees.

After a few minutes she returned, her sopping hair plastered to her face.

“He’s g-g-gone! Disapparated!”

She threw herself into a chair, curled up, and started to cry.

Harry felt dazed. He stooped, picked up the Horcrux, and placed it around his own neck. He dragged blankets off Ron’s bunk and threw them over Hermione. Then he climbed onto his own bed and stared up at the dark canvas roof, listening to the pounding of the rain.

Chapter 16 Godric's Hollow

When Harry woke the following day it was several seconds before he remembered what had happened. Then he hoped childishly, that it had been a dream, that Ron was still there and had never left. Yet by turning his head on his pillow he could see Ron's deserted bunk. It was like a dead body in the way it seems to draw his eyes. Harry jumped down from his own bed, keeping his eyes averted from Ron's. Hermione, who was already busy in the kitchen, did not wish Harry good morning, but turned her face away quickly as he went by. He's gone, Harry told himself. He's gone. He had to keep thinking it as he washed and dressed as though repetition would dull the shock of it. He's gone and he's not coming back. And that was the simple truth of it, Harry knew, because their protective enchantments meant that it would be impossible, once they vacated this spot, for Ron to find them again. He and Hermione ate breakfast in silence. Hermione's eyes were puffy and red; she looked as if she had not slept. They packed up their things, Hermione dawdling. Harry knew why she wanted to spin out their time on the riverbank; several times he saw her look up eagerly, and he was sure she had deluded herself into thinking that she heard footsteps through the heavy rain, but no red-haired figure appeared between the trees. Every time Harry imitated her, looked around (for he could not help hoping a little, himself) and saw nothing but rain-swept woods, another little parcel of fury exploded inside him. He could hear Ron saying, "We thought you knew what you were doing!", and he resumed packing with a hard knot in the pit of his stomach.

The muddy river beside them was rising rapidly and would soon spill over onto their bank. They had lingered a good hour after they would usually have departed their campsite. Finally having entirely repacked the beaded bag three times, Hermione seemed unable to find any more reasons to delay: She and Harry grasped hands and Disapparated, reappearing on a windswept heather-covered hillside. The instant they arrived, Hermione dropped Harry's hand and walked

away from him, finally sitting down on a large rock, her face on her knees, shaking with what he knew were sobs. He watched her, supposing that he ought to go and comfort her, but something kept him rooted to the spot. Everything inside him felt cold and tight: Again he saw the contemptuous expression on Ron's face. Harry strode off through the heather, walking in a large circle with the distraught Hermione at its center, casting the spell she usually performed to ensure their protection.

They did not discuss Ron at all over the next few days. Harry was determined never to mention his name again and Hermione seemed to know that it was no use forcing the issue, although sometimes at night when she thought he was sleeping, he would hear her crying. Meanwhile Harry had started bringing out the Marauder's map and examining it by wandlight. He was waiting for the moment when Ron's labeled dot would reappear in the corridors of Hogwarts, proving that he had returned to the comfortable castle, protected by his status of pureblood. However, Ron did not appear on the map and after a while Harry found himself taking it out simply to stare at Ginny's name in the girl's dormitory, wondering whether the intensity with which he gazed at it might break into her sleep, that she would somehow know he was thinking about her, hoping that she was all right.

By day, they devoted themselves to trying to determine the possible locations of Gryffindor's sword, but the more they talked about the places in which Dumbledore might have hidden it, the more desperate and far-fetched their speculation became. Cudgel his brains though he might, Harry could not remember Dumbledore ever mentioning a place in which he might hide something. There were moments when he did not know whether he was angrier with Ron or with Dumbledore. We thought you knew what you were doing…We thought Dumbledore had told you what to do… We thought you had a real plan!

He could not hide it from himself: Ron had been right. Dumbledore had left him with virtually nothing. They had discovered one Horcrux, but they had no means of destroying it: The others were as unattainable as they had ever been. Hopelessness threatened to engulf him. He was staggered now to think of his own presumption in accepting his friends' offers to accompany him on this meandering, pointless journey. he knew nothing, he had no ideas, and he was constantly, painfully on the alert for any indications that Hermione too was about to tell him that she had had enough. That she was leaving.

They were spending many evenings in near silence and Hermione took to bringing out Phineas Nigellus's portrait and propping it up in a chair, as though he might fill part of the gaping hole left by Ron's departure. Despite his previous assertion that he would never visit them again, Phineas Nigellus did not seem able to resist the chance to find out more about what Harry was up to and consented to reappear, blindfolded, every few days of so. Harry was even glad to see him, because he was company, albeit of a snide and taunting kind. They relished any news about what was happening at Hogwarts, though Phineas Nigellus was not an ideal informer. He venerated Snape, the first Slytherin headmaster since he himself had controlled the school, and they had to be careful not to criticize or ask impertinent questions about Snape, or Phineas Nigellus would instantly leave his painting.

However, he did let drop certain snippets. Snape seemed to be facing a constant, low level of mutiny from a hard core of students. Ginny had been banned from going into Hogsmeade. Snape had reinstated Umbridge's old decree forbidding gatherings of three or more students or any unofficial student societies. From all of these things, Harry deduced that Ginny, and probably Neville and Luna along with her, had been doing their best to continue Dumbledore's Army. This scant news made Harry want to see Ginny so badly it felt like a stomachache; but it also made him think of Ron again, and of Dumbledore, and of Hogwarts itself, which he missed nearly as much as his ex-girlfriend. Indeed, as Phineas Niggellus talked about

Snape's crackdown, Harry experienced a split second of madness when he imagined simply going back to school to join the destabilization of Snape's regime: Being fed and having a soft bad, and other people being in charge, seemed the most wonderful prospect in the world at this moment. But then he remembered that he was Undesirable Number One, that there was a ten-thousand Galleon price on his head, and that to walk into Hogwarts these days was just as dangerous as walking into the Ministry of Magic. Indeed, Phineas Nigellus inadvertently emphasized this fact by slipping in leading questions about Harry and Hermione's whereabouts. Hermione shoved him back inside the beaded bag every time he did this, and Phineas Nigellus invariably refused to reappear for several days after these unceremonious good-byes.

The weather grew colder and colder. They did not dare remain in any area too long, so rather than staying in the south of England, where a hard ground frost was the worst of their worries, they continued to meander up and down the country, braving a mountainside, where sleet pounded the tent; a wide, flat marsh, where the tent was flooded with chill water; and a tiny island in the middle of a Scottish loch, where snow half buried the tent in the night. They had already spotted Christmas Trees twinkling from several sitting room windows before there came an evening when Harry resolved to suggest again, what seemed to him the only unexplored avenue left to them. They had just eaten an unusually good meal: Hermione had been to a supermarket under the Invisibility Cloak (scrupulously dropping the money into an open till as she left), and Harry thought that she might be more persuadable than usual on a stomach full of spaghetti Bolognese and tinned pears.

He had also had the foresight to suggest that they take a few hours' break from wearing the Horcrux, which was hanging over the end of the bunk beside him.

"Hermione?"

“Hmm?“ She was curled up in one of the sagging armchairs with The Tales of Beedle the Bard. He could not imagine how much more she could get out of the book, which was not, after all, very long, but evidently she was still deciphering something in it, because Spellman’s Syllabary lay open on the arm of the chair.

Harry cleared his throat. He felt exactly as he had done on the occasion, several years previously, when he had asked Professor McGonagall whether he could go into Hogsmeade, despite the fact that he had not persuaded the Dursleys to sign his permission slip.

“Hermione, I’ve been thinking, and – ”

“Harry, could you help me with something?”

Apparently she had not been listening to him. She leaned forward and held out The Tales of Beedle the Bard.

“Look at that symbol,” she said, pointing to the top of a page. Above what Harry assumed was the title of the story (being unable to read runes, he could not be sure), there was a picture of what looked like a triangular eye, its pupil crossed with a vertical line.

“I never took Ancient Runes, Hermione.”

“I know that; but it isn’t a rune and it’s not in the syllabary, either. All along I thought it was a picture of an eye, but I don’t think it is! It’s been inked in, look, somebody’s drawn it there, it isn’t really part of the book. Think, have you ever seen it before?““No… No, wait a moment.” Harry looked closer. “Isn’t it the same symbol Luna’s dad was wearing round his neck?”

“Well, that’s what I thought too!”

“Then it’s Grindelwald’s mark.“She stared at him, openmouthed.

“What?“

“Krum told me…”

He recounted the story that Viktor Krum had told him at the wedding. Hermione looked astonished.

“Grindelwald’s mark?“

She looked from Harry to the weird symbol and back again. “I’ve never heard that Grindelwald had a mark. There’s no mention of it in anything I’ve ever read about him.”

“Well, like I say, Krum reckoned that symbol was carved on a wall at Durmstrang, and Grindelwald put it there.”

She fell back into the old armchair, frowning.

“That’s very odd. If it’s a symbol of Dark Magic, what’s it doing in a book of children’s stories?”

“Yeah, it is weird,” said Harry. “And you’d think Scrimgeour would have recognized it. He was Minister, he ought to have been expert on Dark stuff.”

“I know…. Perhaps he thought it was an eye, just like I did. All the other stories have little pictures over the titles.”

She did not speak, but continued to pore over the strange mark. Harry tried again.

“Hermione?”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve been thinking. I – I want to go to Godric’s Hollow.”

She looked up at him, but her eyes were unfocused, and he was sure she was still thinking about the mysterious mark on the book.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I’ve been wondering that too. I really think we’ll have to.”

“Did you hear me right?” he asked.

“Of course I did. You want to go to Godric’s Hollow. I agree. I think we should. I mean, I can’t think of anywhere else it could be either. It’ll be dangerous, but the more I think about it, the more likely it seems it’s there.”

“Er – what’s there?“ asked Harry.

At that, she looked just as bewildered as he felt.

“Well, the sword, Harry! Dumbledore must have known you’d want to go back there, and I mean, Godric’s Hollow is Godric Gryffindor’s birthplace – ““Really? Gryffindor came from Godric’s Hollow?”

“Harry, did you ever even open A History of Magic?““Erm,” he said, smiling for what felt like the first time in months: The muscles in his face felt oddly stiff. “I might’ve opened it, you know, when I bought it… just the once….”

“Well, as the village is named after him I’d have thought you might have made the connection,“ said Hermione. She sounded much more like her old self than she had done of late; Harry half expected her to announce that she was off to the library. ”There’s a bit about the village in A History of Magic, wait…“She opened the beaded bag and rummaged for a while, finally extracting her copy of their old school textbook, A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot, which she thumbed through until finding the page she wanted.

“‘Upon the signature of the International Statute of Secrecy in 1689, wizards went into hiding for good. It was natural, perhaps, that they formed their own small communities within a community. Many small villages and hamlets attracted several magical families, who banded together for mutual support and protection. The villages of Tinworsh

in Cornwall, Upper Flagley in Yorkshire, and Ottery St. Catchpole on the south coast of England were notable homes to knots of Wizarding families who lived alongside tolerant and sometimes Confunded Muggles. Most celebrated of these half-magical dwelling places is, perhaps, Godric's Hollow, the West Country village where the great wizard Godric Gryffindor was born, and where Bowman Wright, Wizarding smith, forged the first Golden Snitch. The graveyard is full of the names of ancient magical families, and this accounts, no doubt, for the stories of hauntings that have dogged the little church beside it for many centuries.'""You and your parents aren't mentioned." Hermione said, closing the book, "because Professor Bagshot doesn't cover anything later than the end of the nineteenth century. But you see? Godric's Hollow, Godric Gryffindor, Gryffindor's sword; don't you think Dumbledore would have expected you to make the connection?""Oh yeah…"

Harry did not want to admit that he had not been thinking about the sword at all when he suggested they go to Godric's Hollow. For him, the lore of the village lay in his parents' graves, the house where he had narrowly escaped death, and in the person of Bathilda Bagshot.

"Remember what Muriel said?" he asked eventually.

"Who?"

"You know," he hesitated. He did not want to say Ron's name. "Ginny's great-aunt. At the wedding. The one who said you had skinny ankles."

"Oh," said Hermione. It was a sticky moment: Harry knew that she had sensed Ron's name in the offing. He rushed on:"She said Bathilda Bagshot still lived in Godric's Hollow."

"Bathilda Bagshot," murmured Hermione, running her index finger over Bathilda's embossed name on the front cover of A History of Magic. "Well, I suppose – "

She gasped so dramatically that Harry's insides turned over; he drew his wand, looking around at the entrance, half expecting to see a hand forcing its way through the entrance flap, but there was nothing there.

"What?" he said, half angry, half relieved. "What did you do that for? I thought you'd seen a Death Eater unzipping the tent, at least – "

"Harry, what if Bathilda's got the sword? What if Dumbledore entrusted it to her?"

Harry considered this possibility. Bathilda would be an extremely old woman by now, and according to Muriel, she was "gaga." Was it likely that Dumbledore would have hidden the sword of Gryffindor with her? If so, Harry felt that Dumbledore had left a great deal to chance: Dumbledore had never revealed that he had replaced the sword with a fake, nor had he so much as mentioned a friendship with Bathilda. Now, however, was not the moment to cast doubt on Hermione's theory, not when she was so surprisingly willing to fall in with Harry's dearest wish.

"Yeah, he might have done! So, are we going to go to Godric's Hollow?"

"Yes, but we'll have to think it through carefully, Harry." She was sitting up now, and Harry could tell that the prospect of having a plan again had lifted her mood as much as his. "We'll need to practice Disapparating together under the Invisibility Cloak for a start, and perhaps Disillusionment Charms would be sensible too, unless you think we should go the whole hog and use Polyjuice Potion? In that case we'll need to collect hair from somebody. I actually think we'd better do that, Harry, the thicker our disguises the better…."

Harry let her talk, nodding and agreeing whenever there was a pause, but his mind had left the conversation. For the first time since he had discovered that the sword in Gringotts was a fake, he felt excited.

He was about to go home, about to return to the place where he had had a family. It was in Godric's Hollow that, but for Voldemort, he would have grown up and spent every school holiday. He could have invited friends to his house…. He might even have had brothers and sisters…. It would have been his mother who had made his seventeenth birthday cake. The life he had lost had hardly ever seemed so real to him as at this moment, when he knew he was about to see the place where it had been taken from him. After Hermione had gone to bed that night, Harry quietly extracted his rucksack from Hermione's beaded bag, and from inside it, the photograph album Hagrid had given him so long ago. For the first time in months, he perused the old pictures of his parents, smiling and waving up at him from the images, which were all he had left of them now.

Harry would gladly have set out for Godric's Hollow the following day, but Hermione had other ideas. Convinced as she was that Voldemort would expect Harry to return to the scene of his parents' deaths, she was determined that they would set off only after they had ensured that they had the best disguises possible. It was therefore a full week later – once they had surreptitiously obtained hairs from innocent Muggles who were Christmas shopping, and had practiced Apparating and Disapparating while underneath the Invisibility Cloak together – that Hermione agreed to make the journey.

They were to Apparate to the village under cover of darkness, so it was late afternoon when they finally swallowed Polyjuice Potion, Harry transforming into a balding, middle-aged Muggle man, Hermione into his small and rather mousy wife. The beaded bag containing all of their possessions (apart from the Horcrux, which Harry was wearing around his neck) was tucked into an inside pocket of Hermione's buttoned-up coat. Harry lowered the Invisibility Cloak over them, then they turned into the suffocating darkness once again.

Heart beating in his throat, Harry opened his eyes. They were standing hand in hand in a snowy lane under a dark blue sky, in

which the night's first stars were already glimmering feebly. Cottages stood on either side of the narrow road, Christmas decorations twinkling in their windows. A short way ahead of them, a glow of golden streetlights indicated the center of the village.

"All this snow!" Hermione whispered beneath the cloak. "Why didn't we think of snow? After all our precautions, we'll leave prints! We'll just have to get rid of them – you go in front, I'll do it – "

Harry did not want to enter the village like a pantomime horse, trying to keep themselves concealed while magically covering their traces.

"Let's take off the Cloak," said Harry, and when she looked frightened, "Oh, come on, we don't look like us and there's no one around."

He stowed the Cloak under his jacket and they made their way forward unhampered, the icy air stinging their faces as they passed more cottages. Any one of them might have been the one in which James and Lily had once lived or where Bathilda lived now. Harry gazed at the front doors, their snow-burdened roofs, and their front porches, wondering whether he remembered any of them, knowing deep inside that it was impossible, that he had been little more than a year old when he had left this place forever. He was not even sure whether he would be able to see the cottage at all; he did not know what happened when the subjects of a Fidelius Charm died. Then the little lane along which they were walking curved to the left and the heart of the village, a small square, was revealed to them.

Strung all around with colored lights, there was what looked like a war memorial in the middle, partly obscured by a windblown Christmas tree. There were several shops, a post office, a pub, and a little church whose stained-glass windows were glowing jewel-bright across the square.

The snow here had become impacted: It was hard and slippery where people had trodden on it all day. Villagers were crisscrossing

in front of them, their figures briefly illuminated by streetlamps. They heard a snatch of laughter and pop music as the pub door opened and closed; then they heard a carol start up inside the little church.

“Harry, I think it’s Christmas Eve!” said Hermione.

“Is it?”

He had lost track of the date; they had not seen a newspaper for weeks.

“I’m sure it is,” said Hermione, her eyes upon the church. “They… they’ll be in there, won’t they? Your mum and dad? I can see the graveyard behind it.”

Harry felt a thrill of something that was beyond excitement, more like fear. Now that he was so near, he wondered whether he wanted to see after all. Perhaps Hermione knew how he was feeling, because she reached for his hand and took the lead for the first time, pulling him forward. Halfway across the square, however, she stopped dead.

“Harry, look!”

She was pointing at the war memorial. As they had passed it, it had transformed. Instead of an obelisk covered in names, there was a statue of three people: a man with untidy hair and glasses, a woman with long hair and a kind, pretty face, and a baby boy sitting in his mother’s arms. Snow lay upon all their heads, like fluffy white caps.

Harry drew closer, gazing up into his parents’ faces. He had never imagined that there would be a statue…. How strange it was to see himself represented in stone, a happy baby without a scar on his forehead….

“C’mon,” said Harry, when he had looked his fill, and they turned again toward the church. As they crossed the road, he glanced over his shoulder; the statue had turned back into the war memorial.

The singing grew louder as they approached the church. It made Harry's throat constrict, it reminded him so forcefully of Hogwarts, of Peeves bellowing rude versions of carols from inside suits of armor, of the Great Hall's twelve Christmas trees, of Dumbledore wearing a bonnet he had won in a cracker, of Ron in a hand-knitted sweater….

There was a kissing gate at the entrance to the graveyard. Hermione pushed it open as quietly as possible and they edged through it. On either side of the slippery path to the church doors, the snow lay deep and untouched. They moved off through the snow, carving deep trenches behind them as they walked around the building, keeping to the shadows beneath the brilliant windows.

Behind the church, row upon row of snowy tombstones protruded from a blanket of pale blue that was flecked with dazzling red, gold, and green wherever the reflections from the stained glass hit the snow. Keeping his hand closed tightly on the wand in his jacket pocket, Harry moved toward the nearest grave.

"Look at this, it's an Abbott, could be some long-lost relation of Hannah's!"

"Keep your voice down," Hermione begged him.

They waded deeper and deeper into the graveyard, gouging dark tracks into the snow behind them, stooping to peer at the words on old headstones, every now and then squinting into the surrounding darkness to make absolutely sure that they were unaccompanied.

"Harry, here!"

Hermione was two rows of tombstones away; he had to wade back to her, his heart positively banging in his chest.

"Is it –?"

"No, but look!"

She pointed to the dark stone. Harry stooped down and saw, upon the frozen, lichen-spotted granite, the words Kendra Dumbledore and, a short way down her dates of birth and death, and Her Daughter Ariana. There was also a quotation:Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

So Rita Skeeter and Muriel had got some of their facts right. The Dumbledore family had indeed lived here, and part of it had died here.

Seeing the grave was worse than hearing about it. Harry could not help thinking that he and Dumbledore both had deep roots in this graveyard, and that Dumbledore ought to have told him so, yet he had never thought to share the connection. They could have visited the place together; for a moment Harry imagined coming here with Dumbledore, of what a bond that would have been, of how much it would have meant to him. But it seemed that to Dumbledore, the fact that their families lay side by side in the same graveyard had been an unimportant coincidence, irrelevant, perhaps, to the job he wanted Harry to do.

Hermione was looking at Harry, and he was glad that his face was hidden in shadow. He read the words on the tombstone again. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. He did not understand what these words meant. Surely Dumbledore had chosen them, as the eldest member of the family once his mother had died.

“Are you sure he never mentioned –?” Hermione began.

“No,” said Harry curtly, then, “let’s keep looking,” and he turned away, wishing he had not seen the stone: He did not want his excited trepidation tainted with resentment.

“Here!” cried Hermione again a few moments later from out of the darkness. “Oh no, sorry! I thought it said Potter.”

She was rubbing at a crumbling, mossy stone, gazing down at it, a little frown on her face.

"Harry, come back a moment."

He did not want to be sidetracked again, and only grudgingly made his way back through the snow toward her.

"What?"

"Look at this!"

The grave was extremely old, weathered so that Harry could hardly make out the name. Hermione showed him the symbol beneath it.

"Harry, that's the mark in the book!"

He peered at the place she indicated: The stone was so worn that it was hard to make out what was engraved there, though there did seem to be a triangular mark beneath the nearly illegible name.

"Yeah… it could be…."

Hermione lit her wand and pointed it at the name on the headstone.

"It says Ig – Ignotus, I think…."

"I'm going to keep looking for my parents, all right?" Harry told her, a slight edge to his voice, and he set off again, leaving her crouched beside the old grave.

Every now and then he recognized a surname that, like Abbott, he had met at Hogwarts. Sometimes there were several generations of the same Wizarding family represented in the graveyard: Harry could tell from the dates that it had either died out, or the current members had moved away from Godric's Hollow. Deeper and deeper amongst the graves he went, and every time he reached a new headstone he felt a little lurch of apprehension and anticipation.

The darkness and the silence seemed to become, all of a sudden, much deeper. Harry looked around, worried, thinking of dementors, then realized that the carols had finished, that the chatter and flurry of churchgoers were fading away as they made their way back into the square. Somebody inside the church had just turned off the lights.

Then Hermione's voice came out of the blackness for the third time, sharp and clear from a few yards away.

"Harry, they're here… right here."

And he knew by her tone that it was his mother and father this time: He moved toward her, feeling as if something heavy were pressing on his chest, the same sensation he had had right after Dumbledore had died, a grief that had actually weighed on his heart and lungs.

The headstone was only two rows behind Kendra and Ariana's. It was made of white marble, just like Dumbledore's tomb, and this made it easy to read, as it seemed to shine in the dark. Harry did not need to kneel or even approach very close to it to make out the words engraved upon it.

JAMES POTTER LILY POTTER

BORN 27 MARCH 1960 BORN 30 JANUARY 1960DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981 DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

Harry read the words slowly, as though he would have only one chance to take in their meaning, and he read the last of them aloud.

"'The last enemy that shall be defeated is death'…" A horrible thought came to him, and with a kind of panic. "Isn't that a Death Eater idea? Why is that there?"

"It doesn't mean defeating death in the way the Death Eaters mean it, Harry," said Hermione, her voice gentle. "It means… you know…

living beyond death. Living after death."

But they were not living, thought Harry. They were gone. The empty words could not disguise the fact that his parents' moldering remains lay beneath snow and stone, indifferent, unknowing. And tears came before he could stop them, boiling hot then instantly freezing on his face, and what was the point in wiping them off or pretending? He let them fall, his lips pressed hard together, looking down at the thick snow hiding from his eyes the place where the last of Lily and James lay, bones now, surely, or dust, not knowing or caring that their living son stood so near, his heart still beating, alive because of their sacrifice and close to wishing, at this moment, that he was sleeping under the snow with them.

Hermione had taken his hand again and was gripping it tightly. He could not look at her, but returned the pressure, now taking deep, sharp gulps of the night air, trying to steady himself, trying to regain control. He should have brought something o give them, and he had not thought of it, and every plant in the graveyard was leafless and frozen. But Hermione raised her wand, moved it in a circle through the air, and a wreath of Christmas roses blossomed before them. Harry caught it and laid it on his parents' grave.

As soon as he stood up he wanted to leave: He did not think he could stand another moment there. He put his arm around Hermione's shoulders, and she put hers around his waist, and they turned in silence and walked away through the snow, past Dumbledore's mother and sister, back toward the dark church and the out-of-sight kissing gate.

Chapter 17 Bathilda's Secret

“Harry, stop.”

“What’s wrong?”

They had only just reached the grave of the unknown Abbott.

“There’s someone there. Someone watching us. I can tell. There, over by the bushes.”

They stood quite still, holding on to each other, gazing at the dense black boundary of the graveyard. Harry could not see anything.

“Are you sure?”

“I saw something move. I could have sworn I did…”

She broke from him to free her wand arm.

“We look like Muggles,” Harry pointed out.

“Muggles who’ve just been laying flowers on your parents’ grave? Harry, I’m sure there’s someone over there!”

Harry thought of A History of Magic; the graveyard was supposed to be haunted; what if –? But then he heard a rustle and saw a little eddy of dislodged snow in the bush to which Hermione had pointed. Ghosts could not move snow.

“It’s a cat,” said Harry, after a second or two, “or a bird. If it was a Death Eater we’d be dead by now. But let’s get out of here, and we can put the Cloak back on.”

They glanced back repeatedly as they made their way out of the graveyard. Harry, who did not feel as sanguine as he had pretended when reassuring Hermione, was glad to reach the gate and the

slippery pavement. They pulled the Invisibility Cloak back over themselves. The pub was fuller than before. Many voices inside it were now singing the carol that they had heard as they approached the church. For a moment, Harry considered suggesting they take refuge inside it, but before he could say anything Hermione murmured, “Let’s go this way,” and pulled him down the dark street leading out of the village in the opposite direction from which they had entered. Harry could make out the point where the cottages ended and the lane turned into open country again. They walked as quickly as they dared, past more windows sparkling with multicolored lights, the outlines of Christmas trees dark through the curtains.

“How are we going to find Bathilda’s house?” asked Hermione, who was shivering a little and kept glancing back over her shoulder. “Harry? What do you think? Harry?”

She tugged at this arm, but Harry was not paying attention. He was looking toward the dark mass that stood at the very end of this row of houses. Next moment he sped up, dragging Hermione along with him, she slipped a little on the ice.

“Harry –”

“Look… Look at it, Hermione…”

“I don’t… oh!”

He could see it; the Fidelius Charm must have died with James and Lily. The hedge had grown wild in the sixteen years since Hagrid had taken Harry from the rubble that lay scattered amongst the waist-high grass. Most of the cottage was still standing, though entirely covered in the dark ivy and snow, but the right side of the top floor had been blown apart; that, Harry was sure, was where the curse had backfired. He and Hermione stood at the gate, gazing up at the wreck of what must once have been a cottage just like those that flanked it.

“I wonder why nobody’s ever rebuilt it?” whispered Hermione.

“Maybe you can’t rebuild it?” Harry replied. “Maybe it’s like the injuries from Dark Magic and you can’t repair the damage?”

He slipped a hand from beneath the Cloak and grasped the snowy and thickly rusted gate, not wishing to open it, but simply so he’d some part of the house.

“You’re not going to go inside? It looks unsafe, it might – oh, Harry, look!”

His touch on the gate seemed to have done it. A sign had risen out of the ground in front of them, up thorough the tangles of nettles and weeds, like some bizarre, fast-growing flower, and in golden letters upon the wood it said:On this spot, on this night of 31 October 1981, Lily and James Potter lost their lives. Their son, Harry, remains the only wizard ever to have survived the Killing Curse. This house, invisible to Muggles, has been left in its ruined state as a monument to the Potters and as a reminder of the violence that tore apart their family.

And all around these neatly lettered words, scribbles had been added by other witches and wizards who had come to see the place where the Boy Who Lived had escaped. Some had merely signed their names in Everlasting Ink; others had carved their initials into the wood, still others had left messages. The most recent of these, shining brightly over sixteen years’ worth of magical graffiti, all said similar things.

Good luck, Harry, wherever you are.

If you read this, Harry, we’re all behind you!

Long live Harry Potter.

“They shouldn’t have written on the sign!“ said Hermione, indignant.

But Harry beamed at her.

“It’s brilliant. I’m glad they did. I…”

He broke off. A heavily muffled figure was hobbling up the lane toward them, silhouetted by the bright lights in the distant square. Harry thought, though it was hard to judge, that the figure was a woman. She was moving slowly, possibly frightened of slipping on the snowy ground. Her stoop, her stoutness, her shuffling gait all gave an impression of extreme age. They watched in silence as she drew nearer. Harry was waiting to see whether she would turn into any of the cottages she was passing, but he knew instinctively that she would not. At last she came to a halt a few yards from them and simply stood there in the middle of the frozen road, facing them.

He did not need Hermione’s pinch to his arm. There was next to no chance that this woman was a Muggle: She was standing there gazing at a house that ought to have been completely invisible to her, if she was not a witch. Even assuming that she was a witch, however, it was odd behavior to come out on a night this cold, simply to look at an old ruin. By all the rules of normal magic, meanwhile, she ought not to be able to see Hermione and him at all. Nevertheless, Harry had the strangest feeling that she knew that they were there, and also who they were. Just as he had reached this uneasy conclusion, she raised a gloved hand and beckoned.

Hermione moved closer to him under the Cloak, her arm pressed against his.

“How does she know?”

He shook his head. The woman beckoned again, more vigorously. Harry could think of many reasons not to obey the summons, and yet his suspicions about her identity were growing stronger every moment that they stood facing each other in the deserted street.

Was it possible that she had been waiting for them all these long months? That Dumbledore had told her to wait, and that Harry would come in the end? Was it not likely that it was she who had moved in

the shadows in the graveyard and had followed them to this spot? Even her ability to sense them suggested some Dumbledore-ish power that he had never encountered before.

Finally Harry spoke, causing Hermione to gasp and jump.

“Are you Bathilda?”

The muffled figure nodded and beckoned again.

Beneath the Cloak Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Harry raised his eyebrows; Hermione gave a tiny, nervous nod.

They stepped toward the woman and , at once, she turned and hobbled off back the way they had come. Leading them past several houses, she turned in at a gate. They followed her up the front path through a garden nearly as overgrown as the one they had just left. She fumbled for a moment with a key at the front door, then opened it and stepped back to let them pass.

She smelled bad, or perhaps it was her house; Harry wrinkled his nose as they sidled past her and pulled off the Cloak. Now that he was beside her, he realized how tiny she was; bowed down with age, she came barely level with his chest. She closed the door behind them, her knuckles blue and mottled against the peeling paint, then turned and peered into Harry’s face. Her eyes were thick with cataracts and sunken into folds of transparent skin, and her whole face was dotted with broken veins and liver spots. He wondered whether she could make him out at all; even if she could, it was the balding Muggle whose identity he had stolen that she would see.

The odor of old age, of dust, of unwashed clothes and stale food intensified as the unwound a moth-eaten black shawl, revealing a head of scant white hair through which the scalp showed clearly.

“Bathilda?” Harry repeated.

She nodded again. Harry became aware of the locket against his skin; the thing inside it that sometimes ticked or beat had woken; he could feel it pulsing through the cold gold. Did it know, could it sense, that the thing that would destroy it was near?

Bathilda shuffled past them, pushing Hermione aside as though she had not seen her, and vanished into what seemed to be a sitting room.

"Harry, I'm not sure about this," breathed Hermione.

"Look at the size of her, I think we could overpower her if we had to," said Harry. "Listen, I should have told you, I knew she wasn't all there. Muriel called her 'gaga.'"

"Come!" called Bathilda from the next room.

Hermione jumped and clutched Harry's arm.

"It's okay," said Harry reassuringly, and he led the way into the sitting room.

Bathilda was tottering around the place lighting candles, but it was still very dark, not to mention extremely dirty. Thick dust crunched beneath their feet, and Harry's nose detected, underneath the dank and mildewed smell, something worse, like meat gone bad. He wondered when was the last time anyone had been inside Bathilda's house to check whether she was coping. She seemed to have forgotten that she could do magic, too, for she lit the candles clumsily by hand, her trailing lace cuff in constant danger of catching fire.

"Let me do that," offered Harry, and he took the matches from her. She stood watching him as he finished lighting the candle stubs that stood on saucers around the room, perched precariously on stacks of books and on side tables crammed with cracked and moldy cups.

The last surface on which Harry spotted a candle was a bow-fronted chest of drawers on which there stood a large number of photographs. When the flame danced into life, its reflection wavered on their dusty glass and silver. He saw a few tiny movements from the pictures. As Bathilda fumbled with logs for the fire, he muttered "Tergeo": The dust vanished from the photographs, and he saw at once that half a dozen were missing from the largest and most ornate frames. He wondered whether Bathilda or somebody else had removed them. Then the sight of a photograph near the back of the collection caught his eye, and he snatched it up.

It was the golden-haired, merry-faced thief, the young man who had perched on Gregorovitch's windowsill, smiling lazily up at Harry out of the silver frame. And it came to Harry instantly where he had seen the boy before: in The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore, arm in arm with the teenage Dumbledore, and that must be where all the missing photographs were: in Rita's book.

"Mrs. – Miss – Bagshot?" he said, and his voice shook slightly. "Who is this?"

Bathilda was standing in the middle of the room watching Hermione light the fire for her.

"Miss Bagshot?" Harry repeated, and he advanced with the picture in his hands as the flames burst into life in the fireplace. Bathilda looked up at his voice, and the Horcrux beat faster upon his chest.

"Who is this person?" Harry asked her, pushing the picture forward.

She peered at it solemnly, then up at Harry.

"Do you know who this is?" he repeated in a much slower and louder voice than usual. "This man? Do you know him? What's he called?"

Bathilda merely looked vague. Harry felt an awful frustration. How had Rita Skeeter unlocked Bathilda's memories?

"Who is this man?" he repeated loudly.

"Harry, what area you doing?" asked Hermione.

"This picture. Hermione, it's the thief, the thief who stole from Gregorovitch! Please!" he said to Bathilda. "Who is this?"

But she only stared at him.

"Why did you ask us to come with you, Mrs. – Miss – Bagshot?" asked Hermione, raising her own voice. "Was there something you wanted to tell us?"

Giving no sign that she had heard Hermione, Bathilda now shuffled a few steps closer to Harry. With a little jerk of her head she looked back into the hall.

"You want us to leave?" he asked.

She repeated the gesture, this time pointing firstly at him, then at herself, then at the ceiling.

"Oh, right… Hermione, I think she wants me to go upstairs with her."

"All right," said Hermione, "let's go."

But when Hermione moved, Bathilda shook her head with surprising vigor, once more pointing first at Harry, then to herself.

"She wants me to go with her, alone."

"Why?" asked Hermione, and her voice rang out sharp and clear in the candlelit room, the old lady shook her head a little at the loud noise.

"Maybe Dumbledore told her to give the sword to me, and only to me?"

“Do you really think she knows who you are?”

“Yes,” said Harry, looking down into the milky eyes fixed upon his own. “I think she does.”

“Well, okay then, but be quick, Harry.”

“Lead the way,” Harry told Bathilda.

She seemed to understand, because she shuffled around him toward the door. Harry glanced back at Hermione with a reassuring smile, but he was not sure she had seen it; she stood hugging herself in the midst of the candlelit squalor, looking toward the bookcase. As Harry walked out of the room, unseen by both Hermione and Bathilda, he slipped the silver-framed photograph of the unknown thief inside his jacket.

The stairs were steep and narrow; Harry was half tempted to place his hands on stout Bathilda’s backside to ensure that she did not topple over backward on top of him, which seemed only too likely. Slowly, wheezing a little, she climbed to the upper landing, turned immediately right, and led him into a low-ceilinged bedroom.

It was pitch-black and smelled horrible: Harry had just made out a chamber pot protruding from under the bed before Bathilda closed the door and even that was swallowed by the darkness.

“Lumos,” said Harry, and his wand ignited. He gave a start: Bathilda had moved close to him in those few seconds of darkness, and he had not heard her approach.

“You are Potter?” she whispered.

“Yes, I am.”

She nodded slowly, solemnly. Harry felt the Horcrux beating fast, faster than his own heart; It was an unpleasant, agitating sensation.

“Have you got anything for me?” Harry asked, but she seemed distracted by his lit wand-tip.

“Have you got anything for me?” he repeated.

Then she closed her eyes and several things happened at once: Harry’s scar prickled painfully; the Horcrux twitched so that the front of his sweater actually moved; the dark, fetid room dissolved momentarily. He felt a leap of joy and spoke in a high, cold voice: Hold him!

Harry swayed where he stood: The dark, foul-smelling room seemed to close around him again; he did not know what had just happened.

“Have you got anything for me?” he asked for a third time, much louder.

“Over here,” she whispered, pointing to the corner. Harry raised his wand and saw the outline of a cluttered dressing table beneath the curtained window.

This time she did not lead him. Harry edged between her and the unmade bed, his wand raised. He did not want to look away from her.

“What is it?” he asked as he reached the dressing table, which was heaped high with what looked and smelled like dirty laundry.

“There,” she said, pointing at the shapeless mass.

And in the instant that he looked away, his eyes taking the tangled mess for a sword hilt, a ruby, she moved weirdly: He saw it out of the corner of his eye; panic made him turn and horror paralyzed him as he saw the old body collapsing and the great snake pouring from the place where her neck had been.

The snake struck as he raised his wand: The force of the bite to his forearm sent the wand spinning up toward the ceiling; its light swung

dizzyingly around the room and was extinguished; Then a powerful blow from the tail to his midriff knocked the breath out of him: He fell backward onto the dressing table, into the mound of filthy clothing – He rolled sideways, narrowly avoiding the snake's tail, which thrashed down upon the table where he had been a second earlier. Fragments of the glass surface rained upon him as he hit the floor. From below he heard Hermione call, "Harry?"

He could not get enough breath into his lungs to call back: Then a heavy smooth mass smashed him to the floor and he felt it slide over him, powerful, muscular –"No!" he gasped, pinned to the floor.

"Yes," whispered the voice. "Yesss… hold you… hold you…"

"Accio… Accio Wand…"

But nothing happened and he needed his hands to try to force the snake from him as it coiled itself around his torso, squeezing the air from him, pressing the Horcrux hard into his chest, a circle of ice that throbbed with life, inches from his own frantic heart, and his brain was flooding with cold, white light, all thought obliterated, his own breath drowned, distant footsteps, everything going…A metal heart was banging outside his chest, and now he was flying, flying with triumph in his heart, without need of broomstick or thestral…He was abruptly awake in the sour-smelling darkness; Nagini had released him. He scrambled up and saw the snake outlined against the landing light: It struck, and Hermione dived aside with a shriek; her deflected curse hit the curtained window, which shattered. Frozen air filled the room as Harry ducked to avoid another shower of broken glass and his foot slipped on a pencil-like something – his wand –He bent and snatched it up, but now the room was full of the snake, its tail thrashing; Hermione was nowhere to be seen and for a moment Harry thought the worst, but then there was a loud bang and a flash of red light, and the snake flew into the air, smacking Harry hard in the face as it went, coil after heavy coil rising up to the ceiling. Harry raised his wand, but

as he did so, his scar seared more painfully, more powerfully than it had done in years.

“He’s coming! Hermione, he’s coming!”

As he yelled the snake fell, hissing wildly. Everything was chaos: It smashed shelves from the wall, and splintered china flew everywhere as Harry jumped over the bed and seized the dark shape he knew to be Hermione –She shrieked with pain as he pulled her back across the bed: The snake reared again, but Harry knew that worse than the snake was coming, was perhaps already at the gate, his head was going to split open with the pain from his scar –The snake lunged as he took a running leap, dragging Hermione with him; as it struck, Hermione screamed, “Confringo!” and her spell flew around the room, exploding the wardrobe mirror and ricocheting back at them, bouncing from floor to ceiling; Harry felt the heat of it sear the back of his hand. Glass cut his cheek as, pulling Hermione with him, he leapt from bed to broken dressing table and then straight out of the smashed window into nothingness, her scream reverberating through the night as they twisted in midair…And then his scar burst open and he was Voldemort and he was running across the fetid bedroom, his long white hands clutching at the windowsill as he glimpsed the bald man and the little woman twist and vanish, and he screamed with rage, a scream that mingled with the girl’s, that echoed across the dark gardens over the church bells ringing in Christmas Day…And his scream was Harry’s scream, his pain was Harry’s pain… that it could happen here, where it had happened before… here, within sight of that house where he had come so close to knowing what it was to die… to die… the pain was so terrible… ripped from his body… But if he had no body, why did his head hurt so badly; if he was dead, how cold he feel so unbearably, didn’t pain cease with death, didn’t it go…The night wet and windy, two children dressed as pumpkins waddling across the square and the shop windows covered in paper spiders, all the tawdry Muggle trappings of a world in which they did not believe… And he was gliding along, that sense of purpose and power and rightness in him that he always knew on

these occasions… Not anger… that was for weaker souls than he… but triumph, yes… He had waited for this, he had hoped for it…“Nice costume, mister!”

He saw the small boy’s smile falter as he ran near enough to see beneath the hood of the cloak, saw the fear cloud his pained face: Then the child turned and ran away… Beneath the robe he fingered the handle of his wand… One simple movement and the child would never reach his mother… but unnecessary, quite unnecessary…And along a new and darker street he moved, and now his destination was in sight at last, the Fidelius Charm broken, though they did not know it yet… And he made less noise than the dead leaves slithering along the pavement as he drew level with the dark hedge, and steered over it…They had not drawn the curtains; he saw them quite clearly in their little sitting room, the tall black-haired man in his glasses, making puffs of colored smoke erupt from his wand for the amusement of the small black-haired boy in his blue pajamas. The child was laughing and trying to catch the smoke, to grab it in his small fist…A door opened and the mother entered, saying words he cold not hear, her long dark-red hair falling over her face. Now the father scooped up the son and handed him to the mother. He threw his wand down upon the sofa and stretched, yawning…The gate creaked a little as he pushed it open, but James Potter did not hear. His white hand pulled out the wand beneath his cloak and pointed it at the door, which burst open…He was over the threshold as James came sprinting into the hall. It was easy, too easy, he had not even picked up his wand…“Lily, take Harry and go! It’s him! Go! Run! I’ll hold him off!”

Hold him off, without a wand in his hand!… He laughed before casting the curse…“Avada Kedavra!”

The green light filled the cramped hallway, it lit the pram pushed against the wall, it made the banisters glow like lighting rods, and James Potter fell like a marionette whose strings were cut…He could hear her screaming from the upper floor, trapped, but as long as she

was sensible, she, at least, had nothing to fear… He climbed the steps, listening with faint amusement to her attempts to barricade herself in… She had no wand upon her either… How stupid they were, and how trusting, thinking that their safety lay in friends, that weapons could be discarded even for moments…He forced the door open, cast aside the chair and boxes hastily piled against it with one lazy wave of his wand… and there she stood, the child in her arms. At the sight of him, she dropped her son into the crib behind her and threw her arms wide, as if this would help, as if in shielding him from sight she hoped to be chosen instead…"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl… stand aside, now."

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead –"

"This is my last warning –"

"Not Harry! Please… have mercy… have mercy… Not Harry! Not Harry! Please – I'll do anything…"

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

He could have forced her away from the crib, but it seemed more prudent to finish them all…The green light flashed around the room and she dropped like her husband. The child had not cried all this time. He could stand, clutching the bars of his crib, and he looked up into the intruder's face with a kind of bright interest, perhaps thinking that it was his father who hid beneath the cloak, making more pretty lights, and his mother would pop up any moment, laughing –He pointed the wand very carefully into the boy's face: He wanted to see it happen, the destruction of this one, inexplicable danger. The child began to cry: It had seen that he was not James. He did not like it crying, he had never been able to stomach the small ones whining in the orphanage –"Avada Kedavra!"

And then he broke. He was nothing, nothing but pain and terror, and he must hide himself, not here in the rubble of the ruined house, where the child was trapped screaming, but far away… far away…“No,” he moaned.

The snake rustled on the filthy, cluttered floor, and he had killed the boy, and yet he was the boy…“No…”

And now he stood at the broken window of Bathilda’s house, immersed in memories of his greatest loss, and at his feet the great snake slithered over broken china and glass… He looked down and saw something… something incredible…“No…”

“Harry, it’s all right, you’re all right!”

He stooped down and picked up the smashed photograph. There he was, the unknown thief, the thief he was seeking…“No… I dropped it… I dropped it…”

“Harry, it’s okay, wake up, wake up!”

He was Harry… Harry, not Voldemort… and the thing that was rustling was not a snake… He opened his eyes.

“Harry,” Hermione whispered. “Do you feel all – all right?”

“Yes,” he lied.

He was in the tent, lying on one of the lower bunks beneath a heap of blankets. He could tell that it was almost dawn by the stillness and quality of the cold, flat light beyond the canvas ceiling. He was drenched in sweat; he could feel it on the sheets and blankets.

“We got away.”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “I had to use a Hover Charm to get you into your bunk. I couldn’t lift you. You’ve been… Well, you haven’t been

quite…”

There were purple shadows under her brown eyes and he noticed a small sponge in her hand: She had been wiping his face.

“You’ve been ill,” she finished. “Quite ill.”

“How long ago did we leave?”

“Hours ago. It’s nearly morning.”

“And I’ve been… what, unconscious?”

“Not exactly,“ said Hermione uncomfortably. ”You’ve been shouting and moaning and… things,“ she added in a tone that made Harry feel uneasy. What had he done? Screamed curses like Voldemort, cried like the baby in the crib?

“I couldn’t get the Horcrux off you,” Hermione said, and he knew she wanted to change the subject. “It was stuck, stuck to your chest. You’ve got a mark; I’m sorry, I had to use a Severing Charm to get it away. The snake hit you too, but I’ve cleaned the wound and put some dittany on it…”

He pulled the sweaty T-shirt he was wearing away from himself and looked down. There was a scarlet oval over his heart where the locket had burned him. He could also see the half healed puncture marks to his forearm.

“Where’ve you put the Horcrux?”

“In my bag. I think we should keep it off for a while.”

He lay back on his pillows and looked into her pinched gray face.

“We shouldn’t have gone to Godric’s Hollow. It’s my fault, it’s all my fault. Hermione, I’m sorry.““It’s not you fault. I wanted to go too; I

really thought Dumbledore might have left the sword there for you.““Yeah, well… we got that wrong, didn’t we?”

“What happened, Harry? What happened when she took you upstairs? Was the snake hiding somewhere? Did it just come out and kill her and attack you?““No.” he said. “She was the snake… or the snake was her… all along.”

“W-what?”

He closed his eyes. He could still smell Bathilda’s house on him; it made the whole thing horribly vivid.

“Bathilda must’ve been dead a while. The snake was… was inside her. You-Know-Who put it there in Godric’s Hollow, to wait. You were right. He knew I’d go back.““The snake was inside her?”

He opened his eyes again. Hermione looked revolted, nauseated.

“Lupin said there would be magic we’d never imagined.“ Harry said. ”She didn’t want to talk in front of you, because it was Parseltongue, all Parseltongue, and I didn’t realize, but of course I could understand her. Once we were up in the room, the snake sent a message to You-Know-Who, I heard it happen inside my head, I felt him get excited, he said to keep me there… and then…“He remembered the snake coming out of Bathilda’s neck: Hermione did not need to know the details.

“…she changed, changed into the snake, and attacked.”

He looked down at the puncture marks.

“It wasn’t supposed to kill me, just keep me there till You-Know-Who came.”

If he had only managed to kill the snake, it would have been worth it, all of it… Sick at heart, he sat up and threw back the covers.

“Harry, no, I’m sure you ought to rest!”

“You’re the one who needs sleep. No offense, but you look terrible. I’m fine. I’ll keep watch for a while. Where’s my wand?“She did not answer, she merely looked at him.

“Where’s my wand, Hermione?”

She was biting her lip, and tears swam in her eyes.

“Harry…”

“Where’s my wand?”

She reached down beside the bed and held it out to him.

The holly and phoenix wand was nearly severed in two. One fragile strand of phoenix feather kept both pieces hanging together. The wood had splintered apart completely. Harry took it into his hands as though it was a living thing that had suffered a terrible injury. He could not think properly: Everything was a blur of panic and fear. Then he held out the want to Hermione.

“Mend it. Please.”

“Harry, I don’t think, when it’s broken like this –”

“Please, Hermione, try!”

“R-Reparo.”

The dangling half of the wand resealed itself. Harry held it up.

“Lumos!”

The wand sparked feebly, then went out. Harry pointed it at Hermione.

“Expelliarmus!”

Hermione’s wand gave a little jerk, but did not leave her hand. The feeble attempt at magic was too much for Harry’s wand, which split into two again. He stared at it, aghast, unable to take in what he was seeing… the wand that had survived so much…“Harry.” Hermione whispered so quietly he could hardly hear her. “I’m so, so sorry. I think it was me. As we were leaving, you know, the snake was coming for us, and so I cast a Blasting Curse, and it rebounded everywhere, and it must have – must have hit –”

“It was an accident.” said Harry mechanically. He felt empty, stunned. “We’ll – we’ll find a way to repair it.”

“Harry, I don’t think we’re going to be able to,” said Hermione, the ears trickling down her face. “Remember… remember Ron? When he broke his wand, crashing the car? It was never the same again, he had to get a new one.”

Harry thought of Ollivander, kidnapped and held hostage by Voldemort; of Gregorovitch, who was dead. How was he supposed to find himself a new wand?

“Well,” he said, in a falsely matter-of-fact voice, “well, I’ll just borrow yours for now, then. While I keep watch.”

Her face glazed with tears, Hermione handed over her wand, and he left her sitting beside his bed, desiring nothing more than to get away from her.

Chapter 18 The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore

The sun was coming up: The pure, colorless vastness of the sky stretched over him, indifferent to him and his suffering. Harry sat down in the tent entrance and took a deep breath of clean air. Simply to be alive to watch the sun rise over the sparkling snowy hillside ought to have been the greatest treasure on earth, yet he could not appreciate it: His senses had been spiked by the calamity of losing his want. He looked out over a valley blanketed in snow, distant church bells chiming through the glittering silence.

Without realizing it, he was digging his fingers into his arms as if he were trying to resist physical pain. He had spilled his own blood more times than he could count; he had lost all bones in his right arm once; this journey had already given him scars to his chest and forearm to join those on his hand and forehead, but never, until this moment, had he felt himself to be fatally weakened, vulnerable, and naked, as though the best part of his magical power had been torn from him. He knew exactly what Hermione would say if he expressed any of this: The wand is only as good as the wizard. But she was wrong, his case was different. She had not felt the wand spin like the needle of a compass and shoot golden flames at his enemy. He had lost the protection of the twin cores, and only now that it was gone did he realize how much he had been counting on it.

He pulled the pieces of the broken wand out of his pocket and, without looking at them, tucked them away in Hagrid's pouch around his neck. The pouch was now too full of broken and useless objects to take any more. Harry's hand brushed the old Snitch through the moleskin and for a moment he had to fight the temptation to pull it out and throw it away. Impenetrable, unhelpful, useless, like everything else Dumbledore had left behind –And his fury at Dumbledore broke over him now like lava, scorching him inside, wiping out every other feeling. Out of sheer desperation they had talked themselves into

believing that Godric's Hollow held answers, convinced themselves that they were supposed to go back, that it was all part of some secret path laid out for them by Dumbledore: but there was no map, no plan. Dumbledore had left them to grope in the darkness, to wrestle with unknown and undreamed-of terrors, alone and unaided: Nothing was explained, nothing was given freely, they had no sword, and now, Harry had no wand. And he had dropped the photograph of the thief, and it would surely be easy now for Voldemort to find out who he was…Voldemort had all the information now…"Harry?"

Hermione looked frightened that he might curse her with her own wand. Her face streaked with tears, she crouched down beside him, two cups of tea trembling in her hands and something bulky under her arm.

"Thanks," he said, taking one of the cups.

"Do you mind if I talk to you?"

"No," he said because he did not want to hurt her feelings.

"Harry, you wanted to know who that man in the picture was. Well… I've got the book."

Timidly she pushed it onto his lap, a pristine copy of The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore.

"Where – how –?"

"It was in Bathilda's sitting room, just lying there…. This note was sticking out of the top of it."

Hermione read the few lines of spiky, acid-green writing aloud.

"'Dear Bally, Thanks for your help. Here's a copy of the book, hope you like it. You said everything, even if you don't remember it. Rita.'I think it must have arrived while the real Bathilda was alive, but

perhaps she wasn't in any fit state to read it?""No, she probably wasn't."

Harry looked down upon Dumbledore's face and experienced a surge of savage pleasure: Now he would know if all the things that Dumbledore had never thought it worth telling him, whether Dumbledore wanted him to or not.

"You're still really angry at me, aren't you?" said Hermione; he looked up to see fresh tears leaking out of her eyes, and knew that his anger must have shown in his face.

"No," he said quietly. "No, Hermione, I know it was an accident. You were trying to get us out of there alive, and you were incredible. I'd be dead if you hadn't been there to help me."

He tried to return her watery smile, then turned his attention to the book. Its spine was stiff; it had clearly never been opened before. He riffled through the pages, looking for photographs. He came across the one he sought almost at once, the young Dumbledore and his handsome companion, roaring with laughter at some long-forgotten joke. Harry dropped his eyes to the caption.

Albus Dumbledore, shortly after his mother's death, With his friend Gellert Grindelwald.

Harry gaped at the last word for several long moments. Grindelwald. His friend Grindelwald. He looked sideways at Hermione, who was still contemplating the name as though she could not believe her eyes. Slowly she looked up at Harry.

"Grindelwald!"

Ignoring the remainder of the photographs, Harry searched the pages around them for a recurrence of that fatal name. He soon discovered it and read greedily, but became lost: It was necessary to go farther back to make sense of it all, and eventually he found himself at the

start of a chapter entitled “The Greater Good.” Together, he and Hermione started to read:Now approaching his eighteenth birthday, Dumbledore left Hogwarts in a blaze of glory – Head Boy, Prefect, Winner of the Barnabus Finkley Prize for Exceptional Spell-Casting, British Youth Representative to the Wizengamot, Gold Medal-Winner for Ground-Breaking Contribution to the International Alchemical Conference in Cairo. Dumbledore intended, next, to take a Grand Tour with Elphias “Dogbreath” Doge, the dim-witted but devoted sidekick he had picked up at school.

The two young men were staying at the Leaky Cauldron in London, preparing to depart for Greece the following morning, when an owl arrived bearing news of Dumbledore’s mother’s death. “Dogbreath” Doge, who refused to be interviewed for this book, has given the public his own sentimental version of what happened next. He represents Kendra’s death as a tragic blow, and Dumbledore’s decision to give up his expedition as an act of noble self-sacrifice.

Certainly Dumbledore returned to Godric’s Hollow at once, supposedly to “care” for his younger brother and sister. But how much care did he actually give them?

“He were a head case, that Aberforth,” said Enid Smeek, whose family lived on the outskirts of Godric’s Hollow at that time. “Ran wild. ‘Course, with his mum and dad gone you’d have felt sorry for him, only he kept chucking goat dung at my head. I don’t think Albus was fussed about him. I never saw them together, anyway.”

So what was Albus doing, if not comforting his wild young brother? The answer, it seems, is ensuring the continued imprisonment of his sister. For though her first jailer had died, there was no change in the pitiful condition of Ariana Dumbledore. Her very existence continued to be known only to those few outsiders who, like “Dogbreath” Doge, could be counted upon to believe in the story of her “ill health.”

Another such easily satisfied friend of the family was Bathilda Bagshot, the celebrated magical historian who has lived in Godric's Hollow for many years. Kendra, of course, had rebuffed Bathilda when she first attempted to welcome the family to the village. Several years later, however, the author sent an owl to Albus at Hogwarts, having been favorably impressed by his paper on trans-species transformation in Transfiguration Today. This initial contract led to acquaintance with the entire Dumbledore family. At the time of Kendra's death, Bathilda was the only person in Godric's Hollow who was on speaking terms with Dumbledore's mother.

Unfortunately, the brilliance that Bathilda exhibited earlier in her life has now dimmed. "The fire's lit, but the cauldron's empty," as Ivor Dillonsby put it to me, or, in Enid Smeek's slightly earthier phrase, "She's nutty as squirrel poo." Nevertheless, a combination of tried-and-tested reporting techniques enabled me to extract enough nuggets of hard fact to string together the whole scandalous story.

Like the rest of the Wizarding world, Bathilda puts Kendra's premature death down to a backfiring charm, a story repeated by Albus and Aberforth in later years. Bathilda also parrots the family line on Ariana, calling her "frail" and "delicate." On one subject, however, Bathilda is well worth the effort I put into procuring Veritaserum, for she, and she alone, knows the full story of the best-kept secret of Albus Dumbledore's life. Now revealed for the first time, it calls into question everything that his admirers believed of Dumbledore: his supposed hatred of the Dark Arts, his opposition into the oppression of Muggles, even his devotion to his own family.

The very same summer that Dumbledore went home to Godric's Hollow, now an orphan and head of the family, Bathilda Bagshot agreed to accept into her home her great-nephew, Gellert Grindelwald.

The name of Grindelwald is justly famous: In a list of Most Dangerous Dark Wizards of All Time, he would miss out on the top spot only

because You- Know-Who arrived, a generation later, to steal his crown. As Grindelwald never extended his campaign of terror to Britain, however, the details of his rise to power are not widely known here.

Educated at Durmstrang, a school famous even then for its unfortunate tolerance of the Dark Arts, Grindelwald showed himself quite as precociously brilliant as Dumbledore. Rather than channel his abilities into the attainment of awards and prizes, however, Gellert Grindelwald devoted himself to other pursuits. At sixteen years old, even Durmstrang felt it could no longer turn a blind eye to the twisted experiments of Gellert Grindelwald, and he was expelled.

Hitherto, all that has been known of Grindelwald's next movements is that he "traveled around for some months." It can now be revealed that Grindelwald chose to visit his great-aunt in Godric's Hollow, and that there, intensely shocking though it will be for many to hear it, he struck up a close friendship with none other than Albus Dumbledore.

"He seemed a charming boy to me," babbles Bathilda, "whatever he became later. Naturally I introduced him to poor Albus, who was missing the company of lads his own age. The boys took to each other at once."

They certainly did. Bathilda shows me a letter, kept by her that Albus Dumbledore sent Gellert Grindelwald in the dead of night.

"Yes, even after they'd spent all day in discussion – both such brilliant young boys, they got on like a cauldron on fire – I'd sometimes hear an owl tapping at Gellert's bedroom window, delivering a letter from Albus! An idea would have struck him and he had to let Gellert know immediately!"

And what ideas they were. Profoundly shocking though Albus Dumbledore's fans will find it, here are the thoughts of their seventeen-year-old hero, as relayed to his new best friend. (A copy of the original letter may be seen on page 463.)Gellert –

Your point about Wizard dominance being FOR THE MUGGLES' OWN GOOD – this, I think, is the crucial point. Yes, we have been given power and yes, that power gives us the right to rule, but it also gives us responsibilities over the ruled. We must stress this point, it will be the foundation stone upon which we build. Where we are opposed, as we surely will be, this must be the basis of all our counterarguments. We seize control FOR THE GREATER GOOD. And from this it follows that where we meet resistance, we must use only the force that is necessary and no more. (This was your mistake at Durmstrang! But I do not complain, because if you had not been expelled, we would never have met.)Albus

Astonished and appalled though his many admirers will be, this letter constitutes the Statute of Secrecy and establishing Wizard rule over Muggles. What a blow for those who have always portrayed Dumbledore as the Muggle-borns' greatest champion! How hollow those speeches promoting Muggle rights seem in the light of this damning new evidence! How despicable does Albus Dumbledore appear, busy plotting his rise to power when he should have been mourning his mother and caring for his sister!

No doubt those determined to keep Dumbledore on his crumbling pedestal will bleat that he did not, after all, put his plans into action, that he must have suffered a change of heart, that he came to his senses. However, the truth seems altogether more shocking.

Barely two months into their great new friendship, Dumbledore and Grindelwald parted, never to see each other again until they met for their legendary duel (for more, see chapter 22). What caused this abrupt rupture? Had Dumbledore come to his senses? Had he told Grindelwald he wanted no more part in his plans? Alas, no.

"It was poor little Ariana dying, I think, that did it," says Bathilda. "It came as an awful shock. Gellert was there in the house when it happened, and he came back to my house all of a dither, told me he

wanted to go home the next day. Terribly distressed, you know. So I arranged a Portkey and that was the last I saw of him."

"Albus was beside himself at Ariana's death. It was so dreadful for those two brothers. They had lost everybody except for each other. No wonder tempers ran a little high. Aberforth blamed Albus, you know, as people will under these dreadful circumstances. But Aberforth always talked a little madly, poor boy. All the same, breaking Albus's nose at the funeral was not decent. It would have destroyed Kendra to see her sons fighting like that, across her daughter's body. A shame Gellert could not have stayed for the funeral…. He would have been a comfort to Albus, at least….

This dreadful coffin-side brawl, known only to those few who attended Ariana Dumbledore's funeral, raises several questions. Why exactly did Aberforth Dumbledore blame Albus for his sister's death? Was it, as "Batty" pretends, a mere effusion of grief? Or could there have been some more concrete reason for his fury? Grindelwald, expelled from Durmstrang for the near-fatal attacks upon fellow students, fled the country hours after the girl's death, and Albus (out of shame or fear?) never saw him again, not until forced to do so by the pleas of the Wizarding world.

Neither Dumbledore nor Grindelwald ever seems to have referred to this brief boyhood friendship in later life. However, there can be no doubt that Dumbledore delayed, for some five years of turmoil, fatalities, and disappearances, his attack upon Gellert Grindelwald. Was it lingering affection for the man or fear of exposure as his once best friend that caused Dumbledore to hesitate? Was it only reluctantly that Dumbledore set out to capture the man he was once so delighted he had met?

And how did the mysterious Ariana die? Was she the inadvertent victim of some Dark rite? Did she stumble across something she ought not to have done, as the two young men sat practicing for their

attempt at glory and domination? Is it possible that Ariana Dumbledore was the first person to die "for the greater good"?

The chapter ended here and Harry looked up. Hermione had reached the bottom of the page before him. She tugged the book out of Harry's hands, looking a little alarmed by his expression, and closed it without looking at it, as though hiding something indecent.

"Harry –"

But he shook his head. Some inner certainty had crashed down inside him; it was exactly as he had felt after Ron left. He had trusted Dumbledore, believed him the embodiment of goodness and wisdom. All was ashes: How much more could he lose? Ron, Dumbledore, the phoenix wand…"Harry." She seemed to have heard his thoughts. "Listen to me. It – it doesn't make a very nice reading –"

"Yeah, you could say that –"

"– but don't forget, Harry, this is Rita Skeeter writing."

"You did read that letter to Grindelwald, didn't you?"

"Yes, I – I did." She hesitated, looking upset, cradling her tea in her cold hands. "I think that's the worst bit. I know Bathilda thought it was all just talk, but 'For the Greater Good' became Grindelwald's slogan, his justification for all the atrocities he committed later. And… from that… it looks like Dumbledore gave him the idea. They say 'For the Greater Good' was even carved over the entrance to Nurmengard."

"What's Nurmengard?"

"The prison Grindelwald had built to hold his opponents. He ended up in there himself, once Dumbledore had caught him. Anyway, it's – it's an awful thought that Dumbledore's ideas helped Grindelwald rise to power. But on the other hand, even Rita can't pretend that they knew

each other for more than a few months one summer when they were both really young, and –"

"I thought you'd say that," said Harry. He did not want to let his anger spill out at her, but it was hard to keep his voice steady. "I thought you'd say 'They were young.' They were the same age as we are now. And here we are, risking our lives to fight the Dark Arts, and there he was, in a huddle with his new best friend, plotting their rise to power over the Muggles."

His temper would not remain in check much longer: He stood up and walked around, trying to work some of it off.

"I'm not trying to defend what Dumbledore wrote," said Hermione. "All that 'right to rule' rubbish, it's 'Magic Is Might' all over again. But Harry, his mother had just died, he was stuck alone in the house –"

"Alone? He wasn't alone! He had his brother and sister for company, his Squib sister he was keeping locked up –"

"I don't believe it," said Hermione. She stood up too. "Whatever was wrong with that girl, I don't think she was a Squib. The Dumbledore we knew would never, ever have allowed–"

"The Dumbledore we thought we knew didn't want to conquer Muggles by force!" Harry shouted, his voice echoing across the empty hilltop, and several blackbirds rose into the air, squawking and spiraling against the pearly sky.

"He changed, Harry, he changed! It's as simple as that! Maybe he did believe these things when he was seventeen, but the whole of the rest of his life was devoted to fighting the Dark Arts! Dumbledore was the one who stopped Grindelwald, the one who always voted for Muggle protection and Muggle born rights, who fought You-Know-Who from the start, and who died trying to bring him down!"

Rita's book lay on the ground between them, so that the face of Albus Dumbledore smiled dolefully at both.

"Harry, I'm sorry, but I think the real reason you're so angry is that Dumbledore never told you any of this himself."

"Maybe I am!" Harry bellowed, and he flung his arms over his head, hardly knowing whether he was trying to hold in his anger or protect himself from the weight of his own disillusionment. "Look what he asked from me, Hermione! Risk your life, Harry! And again! And again! And don't expect me to explain everything, just trust me blindly, trust that I know what I'm doing, trust me even though I don't trust you! Never the whole truth! Never!"

His voice cracked with the strain, and they stood looking at each other in the whiteness and emptiness, and Harry felt they were as insignificant as insects beneath that wide sky.

"He loved you," Hermione whispered. "I know he loved you."

Harry dropped his arms.

"I don't know who he loved, Hermione, but it was never me. This isn't love, the mess he's left me in. He shared a damn sight more of what he was really thinking with Gellert Grindelwald than he ever shared with me."

Harry picked up Hermione's wand, which he had dropped in the snow, and sat back down in the entrance of the tent.

"Thanks for the tea. I'll finish the watch. You get back in the warm." She hesitated, but recognized the dismissal. She picked up the book and then walked back past him into the tent, but as she did so, she brushed the top of his head lightly with her hand. He closed his eyes at her touch, and hated himself for wishing that what she said was true: that Dumbledore had really cared.

Chapter 19 The Silver Doe

It was snowing by the time Hermione took over the watch at midnight. Harry's dreams were confused and disturbing: Nagini wove in and out of them, first through a wreath of Christmas roses. He woke repeatedly, panicky, convinced that somebody had called out to him in the distance, imagining that the wind whipping around the tent was footsteps or voices.

Finally he got up in the darkness and joined Hermione, who was huddled in the entrance to the tent reading A History of Magic by the light of her wand. The snow was falling thickly, and she greeted with relief his suggestion of packing up early and moving on.

"We'll move somewhere more sheltered," she agreed, shivering as she pulled on a sweatshirt over her pajamas. "I kept thinking I could hear people moving outside. I even though I saw somebody one or twice."

Harry paused in the act of pulling on a jumper and glanced at the silent, motionless Sneakoscope on the table.

"I'm sure I imagined it," said Hermione, looking nervous. "The snow the dark, it plays tricks on your eyes…. But perhaps we ought to Disapparate under the Invisibility Cloak, just in case?"

Half an hour later, with the tent packed, Harry wearing the Horcrux, and Hermione clutching the beaded bag, they Disapparated. The usual tightness engulfed them; Harry's feet parted company with the snowy ground, then slammed hard onto what felt like frozen earth covered in leaves.

"Where are we?" he asked, peering around at the fresh mass of trees as Hermione opened the beaded bag and began tugging out the tent poles.

“The Forest of Dean,” she said, “I came camping here once with my mum and dad.”

Here too snow lay on the trees all around and it was bitterly cold, but they were at least protected from the wind. They spent most of the day inside the tent, huddled for warmth around the useful bright blue flames that Hermione was adept at producing, and which could be scooped up and carried in a jar. Harry felt as though he was recuperating from some brief but severe, an impression reinforced by Hermione’s solicitousness. That afternoon fresh flakes drifted down upon them, so that even their sheltered clearing had a fresh dusting of powdery snow.

After two nights of little sleep, Harry’s senses seemed more alert than usual. Their escape from Godric’s Hollow had been so narrow that Voldemort seemed somehow closer than before, more threatening. As darkness drove in again Harry refused Hermione’s offer to keep watch and told her to go to bed.

Harry moved an old cushion into the tent mouth and sat down, wearing all the sweaters he owned but even so, still shivery. The darkness deepened with the passing hours until it was virtually impenetrable. He was on the point of taking out the Marauder’s Map, so as to watch Ginny’s dot for a while, before he remembered that it was the Christmas holidays and that she would be back at the Burrow.

Every tiny movement seemed magnified in the vastness of the forest. Harry knew that it must be full of living creatures, but he wished they would all remain still and silent so that he could separate their innocent scurryings and prowlings from noises that might proclaim other, sinister movements. He remembered the sound of a cloak slithering over dead leaves many years ago, and at once thought he heard it again before mentally shaking himself. Their protective enchantments had worked for weeks; why should they break now?

And yet he could no throw off the feeling that something was different tonight.

Several times he jerked upright, his neck aching because he had fallen asleep, slumped at an awkward angle against the side of the tent. The night reached such a depth of velvety blackness that he might have been suspended in limbo between Disapparation and Apparation. He had just held a hand in front of his face to see whether he could make out his fingers when it happened.

A bright silver light appeared right ahead of him, moving through the trees. Whatever the source, it was moving soundlessly. The light seemed simply to drift toward him.

He jumped to his feet, his voice frozen in his throat, and raised Hermione's wand. He screwed up his eyes as the light became blinding, the trees in front of it pitch black in silhouette, and still the thing came closer….

And then the source of the light stepped out from behind an oak. It was a silver white doe, moon-bright and dazzling, picking her way over the ground, still silent, and leaving no hoofprints in the fine powdering of snow. She stepped toward him, her beautiful head with its wide, long-lashed eyes held high.

Harry stared at the creature, filled with wonder, not at her strangeness, but her inexplicable familiarity. He felt that he had been waiting for her to come, but that he had forgotten, until this moment, that they had arranged to meet. His impulse to shout for Hermione, which had been so strong a moment ago, had gone. He knew, he would have staked his life on it, that she had come for him, and him alone.

They gazed at each other for several long moments and then she turned and walked away.

“No,” he said, and his voice was cracked with lack of use. “Come back!”

She continued to step deliberately through the trees, and soon he brightness was striped by their thick black trunks. For one trembling second he hesitated. Caution murmured it could be a trick, a lure, a trap. But instinct, overwhelming instinct, told him that this was not Dark Magic. He set off in pursuit.

Snow crunched beneath his feet, but the doe made no noise as she passed through the trees, for she was nothing but light. Deeper and deeper into the forest she led him, and Harry walked quickly, sure that when she stopped, she would allow him to approach her properly. And then she would speak and the voice would tell him what he needed to know.

At last she came to a halt. She turned her beautiful head toward him once more, and he broke into a run, a question burning in him, but as he opened his lips to ask it, she vanished.

Though the darkness had swallowed her whole, her burnished image was still imprinted on his retinas; it obscured his vision, brightening when he lowered his eyelids, disorienting him. Now fear came: Her presence had meant safety.

“Lumos!” he whispered, and the wand-tip ignited.

The imprint of the doe faded away with every blink of his eyes as he stood there, listening to the sounds of the forest, to distant crackles of twigs, soft swishes of snow. Was he about to be attacked? Had she enticed him into an ambush? Was he imagining that somebody stood beyond the reach of the wandlight, watching him?

He held the wand higher. Nobody ran out at him, no flash of green light burst from behind a tree. Why, then, had she led him to this spot?

Something gleamed in the light of the wand, and Harry spun about, but all that was there was a small, frozen pool, its black, cracked surface glittering as he raised his wand higher to examine it.

He moved forward rather cautiously and looked down. The ice reflected his distorted shadow and the beam of wandlight, but deep below the thick, misty gray carapace, something else glinted. A great silver cross…His heart skipped into his mouth: He dropped to his knees at the pool's edge and angled the wand so as to flood the bottom of the pool with as much light as possible. A glint of deep red…It was a sword with glittering rubies in its hilt….The sword of Gryffindor was lying at the bottom of the forest pool.

Barely breathing, he stared down at it. How was this possible? How could it have come to be lying in a forest pool, this close to the place where they were camping? Had some unknown magic drawn Hermione to this spot, or was the doe, which he had taken to be a Patronus, some kind of guardian of the pool? Or had the sword been put into the pool after they had arrived, precisely because they were here? In which case, where was the person who wanted to pass it to Harry? Again he directed the wand at the surrounding trees and bushes, searching for a human outline, for the glint of an eye, but he could not see anyone there. All the same, a little more fear leavened his exhilaration as he returned his attention to the sword reposing upon the bottom of the frozen pool.

He pointed the wand at the silvery shape and murmured, "Accio Sword."

It did not stir. He had not expected it to. If it had been that easy the sword would have lain on the ground for him to pick up, not in the depths of a frozen pool. He set off around the circle of ice, thinking hard about the last time the sword had delivered itself to him. He had been in terrible danger then, and had asked for help.

“Help,” he murmured, but the sword remained upon the pool bottom, indifferent, motionless.

What was it, Harry asked himself (walking again), that Dumbledore had told him the last time he had retrieved the sword? Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that out of the hat. And what were the qualities that defined a Gryffindor? A small voice inside Harry’s head answered him: Their daring nerve and chivalry set Gryffindor apart.

Harry stopped walking and let out a long sigh, his smoky breath dispersing rapidly upon the frozen air. He knew what he had to do. If he was honest with himself, he had thought it might come to this from the moment he had spotted the sword through the ice.

He glanced around at the surrounding trees again, but was convinced now that nobody was going to attack him. They had had their chance as he walked alone through the forest, had had plenty of opportunity as he examined the pool. The only reason to delay at this point was because the immediate prospect was so deeply uninviting.

With fumbling fingers Harry started to remove his many layers of clothing. Where “chivalry” entered into this, he thought ruefully, he was not entirely sure, unless it counted as chivalrous that he was not calling for Hermione to do it in his stead.

An owl hooted somewhere as he stripped off, and he thought with a pang of Hedwig. He was shivering now, his teeth chattering horribly, and yet he continued to strip off until at last he stood there in his underwear, barefooted in the snow. He placed the pouch containing his wand, his mother’s letter, the shard of Sirius’s mirror, and the old Snitch on top of his clothes, then he pointed Hermione’s wand at the ice.

“Diffindo.”

It cracked with a sound like a bullet in the silence. The surface of the pool broke and chunks of dark ice rocked on the ruffled water. As far

as Harry could judge, it was not deep, but to retrieve the sword he would have to submerge himself completely.

Contemplating the task ahead would not make it easier or the water warmer. He stepped to the pool's edge and placed Hermione's wand on the ground still lit. Then, trying not to imagine how much colder he was about to become or how violently he would soon be shivering, he jumped.

Every pore of his body screamed in protest. The very air in his lungs seemed to freeze solid as he was submerged to his shoulders in the frozen water. He could hardly breathe: trembling so violently the water lapped over the edges of the pool, he felt for the blade with his numb feet. He only wanted to dive once.

Harry put off the moment of total submersion from second to second, gasping and shaking, until he told himself that it must be done, gathered all his courage, and dived.

The cold was agony: It attacked him like fire. His brain itself seemed to have frozen as he pushed through the dark water to the bottom and reached out, groping for the sword. His fingers closed around the hilt; he pulled it upward.

Then something closed tight around his neck. He thought of water weeds, though nothing had brushed him as he dived, and raised his hand to free himself. It was not weed: The chain of the Horcrux had tightened and was slowly constricting his windpipe.

Harry kicked out wildly, trying to push himself back to the surface, but merely propelled himself into the rocky side of the pool. Thrashing, suffocating, he scrabbled at the strangling chain, his frozen fingers unable to loosen it, and now little lights were popping inside his head, and he was going to drown, there was nothing left, nothing he could do, and the arms that closed around his chest were surely Death's….

Choking and retching, soaking and colder than he had ever been in his life, he came to facedown in the snow. Somewhere, close by, another person was panting and coughing and staggering around, as she had come when the snake attacked….Yet it did not sound like her, not with those deep coughs, no judging by the weight of the footsteps….

Harry had no strength to lift his head and see his savior's identity. All he could do was raise a shaking hand to his throat and feel the place where the locket had cut tightly into his flesh. It was gone. Someone had cut him free. Then a panting voice spoke from over his head.

"Are – you – mental?"

Nothing but the shock of hearing that voice could have given Harry the strength to get up. Shivering violently, he staggered to his feet. There before him stood Ron, fully dressed but drenched to the skin, his hair plastered to his face, the sword of Gryffindor in one hand and the Horcrux dangling from its broken chain in the other.

"Why the hell," panted Ron, holding up the Horcrux, which swung backward and forward on its shortened chain in some parody of hypnosis, "didn't you take the thing off before you dived?"

Harry could not answer. The silver doe was nothing, nothing compared with Ron's reappearance; he could not believe it. Shuddering with cold, he caught up the pile of clothes still lying at the water's edge and began to pull them on. As he dragged sweater after sweater over his head, Harry stared at Ron, half expecting him to have disappeared every time he lost sight of him, and yet he had to be real: He had just dived into the pool, he had saved Harry's life.

"It was y-you?" Harry said at last, his teeth chattering, his voice weaker than usual due to his near-strangulation.

"Well, yeah," said Ron, looking slightly confused.

"Y-you cast that doe?"

"What? No, of course not! I thought it was you doing it!"

"My Patronus is a stag."

"Oh yeah. I thought it looked different. No antlers."

Harry put Hagrid's pouch back around his neck, pulled on a final sweater, stooped to pick up Hermione's wand, and faced Ron again.

"How come you're here?"

Apparently Ron had hoped that this point would come up later, if at all.

"Well, I've – you know – I've come back. If –" He cleared his throat. "You know. You still want me."

There was a pause, in which the subject of Ron's departure seemed to rise like a wall between them. Yet he was here. He had returned. He had just saved Harry's life.

Ron looked down at his hands. He seemed momentarily surprised to see the things he was holding.

"Oh yeah, I got it out," he said, rather unnecessarily, holding up the sword for Harry's inspection. "That's why you jumped in, right?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "But I don't understand. How did you get here? How did you find us?"

"Long story," said Ron. "I've been looking for you for hours, it's a big forest, isn't it? And I was just thinking I'd have to go kip under a tree and wait for morning when I saw that dear coming and you following."

"You didn't see anyone else?"

"No," said Ron. "I –"

But he hesitated, glancing at two trees growing close together some yards away.

"I did think I saw something move over there, but I was running to the pool at the time, because you'd gone in and you hadn't come up, so I wasn't going to make a detour to – hey!"

Harry was already hurrying to the place that Ron had indicated. The two oaks grew close together; there was a gap of only a few inches between the trunks at eye level, an ideal place to see but not be seen. The ground around the roots, however, was free of snow, and Harry could see no sign of footprints. He walked back to where Ron stood waiting, still holding the sword and the Horcrux.

"Anything there?" Ron asked.

"No," said Harry.

"So how did the sword get in that pool?"

"Whoever cast the Patronus must have put it there."

They both looked at the ornate silver sword, its rubied hilt glinting a little in the light from Hermione's wand.

"You reckon this is the real one?" asked Ron.

"One way to find out, isn't there?" said Harry.

The Horcrux was still swinging from Ron's hand. The locket was twitching slightly. Harry knew that the thing inside it was agitated again. It had sensed the presence of the sword and had tried to kill Harry rather than let him possess it. Now was not the time for long discussions; now was the moment to destroy once and for all. Harry

looked around, holding Hermione's wand high, and saw the place: a flattish rock lying in the shadow of a sycamore tree.

"Come here." he said and he led the way, brushed snow from the rock's surface, and held out his hand for the Horcrux. When Ron offered the sword, however, Harry shook his head.

"No you should do it."

"Me?" said Ron, looking shocked. "Why?"

"Because you got the sword out of the pool. I think it's supposed to be you."

He was not being kind or generous. As certainly as he had known that the doe was benign, he knew that Ron had to be the one to wield the sword. Dumbledore had at least taught Harry something about certain kinds of magic, of the incalculable power of certain acts.

"I'm going to open it," said Harry, "and you will stab it. Straightaway okay? Because whatever's in there will put up a fight. The bit of Riddle in the Diary tried to kill me."

"How are you going to open it?" asked Ron. He looked terrified "I'm going to ask it to open, using Parseltongue," said Harry. The answer came so readily to his lips that thought that he had always known it deep down: Perhaps it had taken his recent encounter with Nagini to make him realize it. He looked at the serpentine S, inlaid with glittering green stones: It was easy to visualize it as a miniscule snake, curled upon the cold rock.

"No!" said Ron. "Don't open it! I'm serious!"

"Why not?" asked Harry. "Let's get rid of the damn thing, it's been months –"

"I can't, Harry, I'm serious – you do it –"

"But why?"

"Because that thing's bad for me!" said Ron, backing away from the locket on the rock. "I can't handle it! I'm not making excuses, for what I was like, but it affects me worse than it affects you and Hermione, it made me think stuff – stuff that I was thinking anyway, but it made everything worse. I can't explain it, and then I'd take it off and I'd get my head straight again, and then I'd have to put the effing thing back on – I can't do it Harry!"

He had backed away, the sword dragging at his side, shaking his head.

"You can do it," said Harry, "you can! You've just got the sword, I know it's supposed to be you who uses it. Please just get rid of it Ron."

The sound of his name seemed to act like a stimulant. Ron swallowed, then still breathing hard through his long nose, moved back toward the rock.

"Tell me when," he croaked.

"On three," said Harry, looking back down at the locket and narrowing his eyes, concentrating on the letter S, imagining a serpent, while the contents of the locket rattled like a trapped cockroach. It would have been easy to pity it, except that the cut around Harry's neck still burned.

"One… two… three…open."

The last word came as a hiss and a snarl and the golden doors of the locket swung wide open with a little click.

Behind both of the glass windows within blinked a living eye, dark and handsome as Tom Riddle's eyes had been before he turned them

scarlet and slit-pupiled “Stab,” said Harry, holding the locket steady on the rock.

Ron raised the sword in his shaking hands: The point dangled over the frantically swiveling eyes, and Harry gripped the locket tightly, bracing himself, already imagining blood pouring from the empty windows.

Then a voice hissed from out the Horcrux.

“I have seen your heart, and it is mine.”

“Don’t listen to it!” Harry said harshly. “Stab it!”

“I have seen your dreams, Ronald Weasley, and I have seen your fears. All you desire is possible, but all that you dread is also possible….”

“Stab!” shouted Harry, his voice echoed off the surrounding trees, the sword point trembled, and Ron gazed down into Riddle’s eyes.

“Least loved, always, by the mother who craved a daughter… Least loved, now, by the girl who prefers your friend… Second best, always, eternally overshadowed…”

“Ron, stab it now!” Harry bellowed: He could feel the locket quivering in the grip and was scared of what was coming. Ron raised the sword still higher, and as he did so, Riddle’s eyes gleamed scarlet.

Out of the locket’s two windows, out of the eyes, there bloomed like two grotesque bubbles, the heads of Harry and Hermione, weirdly distorted.

Ron yelled in shock and backed away as the figures blossomed out of the locket, first chests, then waists, then legs, until they stood in the locket, side by side like trees with a common root, swaying over Ron

and the real Harry, who had snatched his fingers away from the locket as it burned, suddenly, white-hot.

“Ron!” he shouted, but the Riddle-Harry was now speaking with Voldemort’s voice and Ron was gazing, mesmerized, into its face.

“Why return? We were better without you, happier without you, glad of your absence…. We laughed at your stupidity, your cowardice, your presumption–”

“Presumption!” echoed the Riddle-Hermione, who was more beautiful and yet more terrible than the real Hermione: She swayed, cackling, before Ron, who looked horrified, yet transfixed, the sword hanging pointlessly at his side. “Who could look at you, who would ever look at you, beside Harry Potter? What have you ever done, compared with the Chosen One? What are you, compared with the Boy Who Lived?”

“Ron, stab it, STAB IT!” Harry yelled, but Ron did not move. His eyes were wide, and the Riddle-Harry and the Riddle-Hermione were reflected in them, their hair swirling like flames, their eyes shining red, their voices lifted in an evil duet.

“Your mother confessed,” sneered Riddle-Harry, while Riddle-Hermione jeered, “that she would have preferred me as a son, would be glad to exchange…”

“Who wouldn’t prefer him, what woman would take you, you are nothing, nothing, nothing to him,” crooned Riddle-Hermione, and she stretched like a snake and entwined herself around Riddle-Harry, wrapping him in a close embrace: Their lips met.

On the ground in front of them, Ron’s face filled with anguish. he raised the sword high, his arms shaking.

“Do it, Ron!” Harry yelled.

Ron looked toward him, and Harry thought he saw a trace of scarlet in his eyes.

"Ron –?"

The sword flashed, plunged: Harry threw himself out of the way, there as a clang of metal and a long, drawn-out scream. Harry whirled around, slipping in the snow, wand held ready to defend himself, but there was nothing to fight.

The monstrous versions of himself and Hermione were gone: There was only Ron, standing there with the sword held slackly in his hand, looking down at the shattered remains of the locket on the flat rock.

Slowly, Harry walked back to him, hardly knowing what to say or do. Ron was breathing heavily: His eyes were no longer red at all, but their normal blue: they were also wet.

Harry stooped, pretending he had not seen, and picked up the broken Horcrux. Ron had pierced the glass in both windows: Riddle's eyes were gone, and the stained silk lining of the locket was smoking slightly. The thing that had lived in the Horcrux had vanished; torturing Ron had been its final act. The sword clanged as Ron dropped it. He had sunk to his knees, his head in his arms. He was shaking, but not, Harry realized, from cold. Harry crammed the broken locket into his pocket, knelt down beside Ron, and placed a hand cautiously on his shoulder. He took it as a good sign that Ron did not throw it off.

"After you left," he said in a low voice, grateful for the fact that Ron's face was hidden, "she cried for a week. Probably longer, only she didn't want me to see. There were loads of nights when we never even spoke to each other. With you gone…"

He could not finish; it was now that Ron was here again that Harry fully realized how much his absence had cost them.

“She’s like my sister,” he went on. “I love her like a sister and I reckon that she feels the same way about me. It’s always been like that. I thought you knew.”

Ron did not respond, but turned his face away from Harry and wiped his nose noisily on his sleeve. Harry got to his feet again and walked to where Ron’s enormous rucksack lay yards away, discarded as Ron had run toward the pool to save Harry from drowning. He hoisted it onto his own back and walked back to Ron, who clambered to his feet as Harry approached, eyes bloodshot but otherwise composed.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a thick voice. “I’m sorry I left. I know I was a – a –”

He looked around at the darkness, as if hoping a bad enough word would swoop down upon him and claim him.

“You’ve sort of made up for it tonight,” said Harry. “Getting the sword. Finishing off the Horcrux. Saving my life.”

“That makes me sound a lot cooler than I was,” Ron mumbled.

“Stuff like that always sounds cooler than it really was” said Harry. “I’ve been trying to tell you that for years.”

Simultaneously they walked forward and hugged, Harry gripping the still-sopping back of Ron’s jacket.

“And now,” said Harry as they broke apart, “all we’ve got to do is find that tent again.”

But it was not difficult. Though the walk through the dark forest with the doe had seemed lengthy, with Ron by his side, the journey back seemed to take a surprisingly short time. Harry could not wait to wake Hermione, and it was with quickening excitement that he entered the tent, Ron lagging a little behind him.

It was gloriously warm after the pool and the forest, the only illumination the bluebell flames still shimmering in a bowl on the floor. Hermione was fast asleep, curled up under her blankets, and did not move until Harry had said her name several times.

“Hermione!”

She stirred, then sat up quickly, pushing her hair out of her face.

“What’s wrong? Harry? Are you all right?”

“It’s okay, everything’s fine. More than fine, I’m great. There’s someone here.”

“What do you mean? Who –?”

She saw Ron, who stood there holding the sword and dripping onto the threadbare carpet. Harry backed into a shadowy corner, slipped off Ron’s rucksack, and attempted to blend in with the canvas.

Hermione slid out of her bunk and moved like a sleepwalker toward Ron, her eyes upon his pale face. She stopped right in front of him, her lips slightly parted, her eyes wide. Ron gave a weak hopeful smile and half raised his arms.

Hermione launched herself forward and started punching every inch of him that she could reach.

“Ouch – ow – gerroff! What the –? Hermione – OW!”

“You – complete – arse – Ronald – Weasley!”

She punctuated every word with a blow: Ron backed away, shielding his head as Hermione advanced.

“You – crawl – back – here – after – weeks – and – weeks – oh, where’s my wand?”

She looked as though ready to wrestle it out of Harry's hands and he reacted instinctively.

"Protego!"

The invisible shield erupted between Ron and Hermione. The force of it knocked her backward onto the floor. Spitting hair out of her mouth, she lept up again.

"Hermione!" said Harry. "Calm –"

"I will not calm down!" she screamed. Never before had he seen her lose control like this; she looked quite demented. "Give me back my wand! Give it back to me!"

"Hermione, will you please –"

"Don't you tell me what do, Harry Potter!" she screeched. "Don't you dare! Give it back now! And YOU!"

She was pointing at Ron in dire accusation: It was like a malediction, and Harry could not blame Ron for retreating several steps.

"I cam running after you! I called you! I begged you to come back"

"I know," Ron said, "Hermione, I'm sorry, I'm really –"

"Oh, you're sorry!"

She laughed a high-pitched, out-of-control sound; Ron looked at Harry for help, but Harry merely grimaced his helplessness.

"You came back after weeks – weeks – and you think it's all going to be all right if you just say sorry?"

"Well, what else can I say?" Ron shouted, and Harry was glad that Ron was fighting back.

“Oh, I don’t know!” yelled Hermione with awful sarcasm. “Rack your brains, Ron, that should only take a couple of seconds –”

“Hermione,” interjected Harry, who considered this a low blow, “he just saved my –”

“I don’t care!” she screamed. “I don’t care what he’s done! Weeks and weeks, we could have been dead for all he knew –”

“I knew you weren’t dead!” bellowed Ron, drowning her voice for the first time, and approaching as close as he could with the Shield Charm between them. “Harry’s all over the Prophet, all over the radio, they’re looking for you everywhere, all these rumors and mental stories, I knew I’d hear straight off if you were dead, you don’t know what it’s been like –”

“What it’s been like for you?”

Her voice was not so shrill only bats would be able to hear it soon, but she had reached a level of indignation that rendered her temporarily speechless, and Ron seized his opportunity.

“I wanted to come back the minute I’d Disapparated, but I walked straight into a gang of Snatchers, Hermione, and I couldn’t go anywhere!”

“A gang of what?” asked Harry, as Hermione threw herself down into a chair with her arms and legs crossed so tightly it seemed unlikely that she would unravel them for several years.

“Snatchers,” said Ron. “They’re everywhere – gangs trying to earn gold by rounding up Muggle-borns and blood traitors, there’s a reward from the Ministry for everyone captured. I was on my own and I look like I might be school age; they got really excited, thought I was a Muggle-born in hiding. I had to talk fast to get out of being dragged to the Ministry.”

“What did you say to them?”

“Told them I was Stan Shunpike. First person I could think of.”

“And they believed that?”

“They weren’t the brightest. One of them was definitely part troll, the smell of him….”

Ron glanced at Hermione, clearly hopeful she might soften at this small instance of humor, but her expression remained stony above her tightly knotted limbs.

“Anyway, they had a row about whether I was Stan or not. It was a bit pathetic to be honest, but there were still five of them and only one of me, and they’d taken my wand. Then two of them got into a fight and while the others were distracted I managed to hit the one holding me in the stomach, grabbed his wand, Disarmed the bloke holding mine, and Disapparated. I didn’t do it so well. Splinched myself again” – Ron held up his right hand to show two missing fingernails: Hermione raised her eyebrows coldly – “and I came out miles from where you were. By the time I got back to that bit of riverbank where we’d been… you were gone.”

“Gosh, what a gripping story,” Hermione said in the lofty voice she adopted when wishing to wound. “You must have been simply terrified. Meanwhile we went to Godric’s Hollow and, let’s think, what happened there, Harry? Oh yes, You-Know-Who’s snake turned up, it nearly killed both of us, and then You-Know-Who himself arrived and missed us by about a second.”

“What?” Ron said, gaping from her to Harry, but Hermione ignored him.

“Imagine losing fingernails, Harry! That really puts our sufferings into perspective, doesn’t it?”

“Hermione,” said Harry quietly, “Ron just saved my life.”

She appeared not to have heard him.

“One thing I would like to know, though,” she said, fixing her eyes on a spot a foot over Ron’s head. “How exactly did you find us tonight? That’s important. Once we know, we’ll be able to make sure we’re not visited by anyone else we don’t want to see.”

Ron glared at her, then pulled a small silver object from his jeans pocket.

“This.”

She had to look at Ron to see what he was showing them.

“The Deluminator?” she asked, so surprised she forgot to look cold and fierce.

“It doesn’t just turn the lights on and off,” said Ron. “I don’t know how it works or why it happened then and not any other time, because I’ve been wanting to come back ever since I left. But I was listening to the radio really early on Christmas morning and I heard… I heard you.”

He was looking at Hermione.

“You heard me on the radio?” she asked incredulously.

“No, I heard you coming out of my pocket. Your voice,” he held up the Deluminator again, “came out of this.”

“And what exactly did I say?” asked Hermione, her tone somewhere between skepticism and curiosity.

“My name. ‘Ron.’ And you said… something about a wand….”

Hermione turned a fiery shade of scarlet. Harry remembered: it had been the first time Ron’s name had been said aloud by either of them

since the day he had left; Hermione had mentioned it when talking about repairing Harry's wand.

"So I took it out," Ron went on, looking at the Deluminator, "and it didn't seem different or anything, but I was sure I'd heard you. So I clicked it. And the light went out in my room, but another light appeared right outside the window."

Ron raised his empty hand and pointed in front of him, his eyes focused on something neither Harry nor Hermione could see.

"It was a ball of light, kind of pulsing, and bluish, like that light you get around a Portkey, you know?"

"Yeah," said Harry and Hermione together automatically.

"I knew this was it," said Ron. "I grabbed my stuff and packed it, then I put on my rucksack and went out into the garden."

"The little ball of light was hovering there, waiting for me, and when I came out it bobbed along a bit and I followed it behind the shed and then it… well, it went inside me."

"Sorry?" said Harry, sure he had not heard correctly.

"It sort of floated toward me," said Ron, illustrating the movement with his free index finger, "right to my chest, and then – it just went straight through. It was here," he touched a point close to his heard, "I could feel it, it was hot. And once it was inside me, I knew what I was supposed to do. I knew it would take me where I needed to go. So I Disapparated and came out on the side of a hill. There was snow everywhere…."

"We were there," said Harry. "We spent two nights there, and the second night I kept thinking I could hear someone moving around in the dark and calling out!"

"Yeah, well, that would've been me," said Ron. "Your protective spells work, anyway, because I couldn't see you and I couldn't hear you. I was sure you were around, though, so in the end I got in my sleeping bag and waited for one of you to appear. I thought you'd have to show yourselves when you packed up the tent."

"No, actually," said Hermione. "We've been Disapparating under the Invisibility Cloak as an extra precaution. And we left really early, because as Harry says, we'd heard somebody blundering around."

"Well, I stayed on that hill all day," said Ron. "I kept hoping you'd appear. But when it started to get dark I knew I must have missed you, so I clicked the Deluminator again, the blue light came out and went inside me, and I Disapparated and arrived here in these woods. I still couldn't see you, so I just had to hope one of you would show yourselves in the end – and Harry did. Well, I saw the doe first, obviously."

"You saw the what?" said Hermione sharply.

They explained what had happened and as the story of the silver doe and the sword in the pool unfolded, Hermione frowned form one to the other of them, concentrating so hard she forgot to keep her limbs locked together.

"But it must have been a Patronus!" she said. "Couldn't you see who was casting it? Didn't you see anyone? And it led you to the sword! I can't believe this! Then what happened?"

Ron explained how he had watched Harry jump into the pool, and had waited for him to resurface; how he had realized that something was wrong, dived in, and saved Harry, then returned for the sword. He got as far as the opening of the locket, then hesitated, and Harry cut in.

"– and Ron stabbed it with the sword."

"And… and it went? Just like that?" she whispered.

"Well, it – it screamed," said Harry with half a glance at Ron. "Here."

He threw the locket into her lap; gingerly she picked it up and examined its punctured windows.

Deciding that it was at last safe to do so, Harry removed the Shield Charm with a wave of Hermione's wand and turned to Ron.

"Did you just say now that you got away from the snatchers with a spare wand?"

"What?" said Ron, who had been watching Hermione examining the locket. "Oh – oh yeah."

He tugged open a buckle on his rucksack and pulled a short dark wand out of his pocket. "Here, I figured it's always handy to have a backup."

"You were right," said Harry, holding out his hand. "Mine's broken."

"You're kidding?" Ron said, but at that moment Hermione got to her feet, and he looked apprehensive again.

Hermione put the vanquished Horcrux into the beaded bag, then climbed back into her bed and settled down without another word.

Ron passed Harry the new wand.

"About the best you could hope for, I think," murmured Harry.

"Yeah," said Ron. "Could've been worse. Remember those birds she set on me?"

"I still haven't ruled it out," came Hermione's muffled voice from beneath her blankets, but Harry saw Ron smiling slightly as he pulled his maroon pajamas out of his rucksack.

Chapter 20 Xenophilius Lovegood

Harry had not expected Hermione's anger to abate over night and was therefore unsurprised that she communicated mainly by dirty looks and pointed silences the next morning. Ron responded by maintaining an unnaturally somber demeanor in her presence as an outward sign of continuing remorse. In fact, when all three of them were together Harry felt like the only non-mourner at a poorly attended funeral. During those few moments he spent alone with Harry, however (collecting water and searching the undergrowth for mushrooms). Ron became shamelessly cheery.

"Someone helped us," he kept saying, "Someone sent that doe, Someone's on our side, One Horcrux down, mate!"

Bolstered by the destruction of the locket they set to debating the possible locations of the other Horcruxes and even though they had discussed the matter so often before. Harry felt optimistic, certain that more breakthroughs would succeed the first. Hermione's sulkiness could not mar his buoyant spirits; The sudden upswing in their fortunes, the appearance of the mysterious due, the recovery of Gryffindor's sword, and above all, Ron's return made Harry so happy that it was quite difficult to maintain a straight face.

Late in the afternoon he and Ron escaped Hermione's baleful presence again and under the pretense of scouring the bare hedges for nonexistent blackberries, they continued their ongoing exchange of news. Harry had finally managed to tell Ron the whole story of his and Hermione's various wanderings, right up to the full story of what had happened at Godric's Hollow; Ron was now filling Harry in on everything he had discovered about the wider Wizarding world during his weeks away.

"… and how did you find out about the Taboo?" he asked Harry after explaining the many desperate attempts of Muggle-borns to evade

the Ministry.

“The what?”

“You and Hermione have stopped saying You-Know-Who’s name!”

“Oh, yeah, Well, it’s just a bad habit we’ve slipped into,” said Harry. “But I haven’t got a problem calling him V –”

“NO!“ roared Ron, causing Harry to jump into the hedge and Hermione (nose buried in a book at the tent entrance) to scowl over at them. “Sorry,” said Ron, wrenching Harry back out of the brambles, “but the name’s been jinxed, Harry, that’s how they track people! Using his name breaks protective enchantments, it causes some kind of magical disturbance – it’s how they found us in Tottenham Court Road!”

“Because we used his *name*?”

“Exactly! You’ve got to give them credit, it makes sense. It was only people who were serious about standing up to him, like Dumbledore, who even dared use it. Now they’ve put a Taboo on it, anyone who says it is trackable – quick-and-easy way to find Order members! They nearly got Kingsley –““You’re kidding?”

“Yeah, a bunch of Death Eaters cornered him, Bill said but he fought his way out. He’s on the run now just like us.” Ron scratched his chin thoughtfully with the end of his wand. “You don’t reckon Kingsley could have sent that doe?”

“His Patronus is a lynx, we saw it at the wedding, remember?”

“Oh yeah…”

They moved farther along the hedge, away from the tent and Hermione.

“Harry… you don’t reckon it could’ve been Dumbledore?”

“Dumbledore what?”

Ron looked a little embarrassed, but said in a low voice, “Dumbledore… the doe? I mean,” Ron was watching Harry out of the corners of his eyes, “he had the real sword last, didn’t he?”

Harry did not laugh at Ron, because he understood too well the longing behind the question. The idea that Dumbledore had managed to come back to them, that he was watching over them, would have inexpressibly comforting. He shook his head.

“Dumbledore’s dead,” he said. “I saw it happen, I saw the body. He’s definitely gone. Anyway his Patronus was a phoenix, not a doe”

“Patronuses can change, though can’t they?” said Ron, “Tonks’s changed didn’t it?”

“Yeah, but if Dumbledore was alive, why wouldn’t he show himself? Why wouldn’t he just hand us the sword?““Search me,” said Ron. “Same reason he didn’t give it to you while he was alive? Same reason he left you an old Snitch and Hermione a book of kid’s stories?”

“Which is what?” asked Harry, turning to look Ron full in the face desperate for the answer.

“I dunno,“ said Ron. ”Sometimes I’ve thought, when I’ve been a bit hacked off, he was having a laugh or – or he just wanted to make it more difficult, But I don’t think so, not anymore. He knew what he was doing when he gave me the Deluminator, didn’t he? He – well,“ Ron’s ears turned bright red and he became engrossed in a tuft of grass at his feet, which he prodded with his toe, ”he must’ve known I’d run out on you.““No,” Harry corrected him. “He must’ve known you’d always want to come back.”

Ron looked grateful, but still awkward. Partly to change the subject, Harry said, “Speaking of Dumbledore, have you heard what Skeeter wrote about him?”

“Oh yeah,” said Ron at once, “people are talking about it quite a lot. ‘Course, if things were different it’d be huge news, Dumbledore being pals with Grindelwald, but now it’s just something to laugh about for people who didn’t like Dumbledore, and a bit of a slap in the face for everyone who thought he was such a good bloke. I don’t know that it’s such a big deal, though. He was really young when they –”

“Our age,” said Harry, just as he had retorted to Hermione, and something in his face seemed to decide Ron against pursuing the subject.

A large spider sat in the middle of a frosted web in the brambles. Harry took aim at it with the wand Ron had given him the previous night, which Hermione had since condescended to examine, and had decided was made of blackthorn.

“*Engorgio*”

The spider gave a little shiver, bouncing slightly in the web. Harry tried again. This time the spider grew slightly larger.

“Stop that,” said Ron sharply, “ I’m sorry I said Dumbledore was young, okay?”

Harry had forgotten Ron’s hatred of spiders.

“Sorry – *Reducio*”

The spider did not shrink. Harry looked down at the blackthorn wand. Every minor spell he had cast with it so far that day had seemed less powerful than those he had produced with his phoenix wand. The new one felt intrusively unfamiliar, like having somebody else’s hand sewn to the end of his arm.

“You just need to practice,” said Hermione, who had approached them noiselessly from behind and had stood watching anxiously as Harry tried to enlarge and reduce the spider. “It’s all a matter of confidence Harry.”

He knew why she wanted it to be all right; She still felt guilty about breaking his wand. He bit back the retort that sprung to his lips, that she could take the blackthorn wand if she thought it made no difference, and he would have hers instead. Keen for them all to be friends again, however, he agreed; but when Ron gave Hermione a tentative smile, she stalked off and vanished behind her book once more.

All three of them returned to the tent when darkness fell, and Harry took first watch. Sitting in the entrance, he tried to make the blackthorn wand levitate small stones at his feet; but his magic still seemed clumsier and less powerful than it had done before. Hermione was lying on her bunk reading, while Ron, after many nervous glances up at her, had taken a small wooden wireless out of his rucksack and started to try to tune it.

“There’s this one program,” he told Harry in a low voice, “that tells the news like it really is. All the others are on You-Know-Who’s side and are following the Ministry line, but this one… you wait till you hear it, it’s great. Only they can’t do it every night, they have to keep changing locations in case they’re raided and you need a password to tune in… Trouble is, I missed the last one…”

He drummed lightly on the top of the radio with his wand muttering random words under his breath. He threw Hermione many covert glances, plainly fearing an angry outburst, but for all the notice she took of him he might not have been there. For ten minutes or so Ron tapped and muttered, Hermione turned the pages of her book, and Harry continued to practice with the blackthorn wand.

Finally Hermione climbed down from her bunk. Ron ceased his tapping at once.

“If it’s annoying you, I’ll stop!” he told Hermione nervously.

Hermione did not deign to respond, but approached Harry.

“We need to talk,” she said.

He looked at the book still clutched in her hand. It was * The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore.*“What?” he said apprehensively. It flew through his mind that there was a chapter on him in there; he was not sure he felt up to hearing Rita’s version of his relationship with Dumbledore. Hermione’s answer however, was completely unexpected.

“I want to go and see Xenophilius Lovegood.”

He stared at her.

“Sorry?”

“Xenophilius Lovegood, Luna’s father. I want to go and talk to him!”

“Er – why?”

She took a deep breath, as though bracing herself, and said, “It’s that mark, the mark in Beedle the Bard. Look at this!”

She thrust The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore under Harry’s unwilling eyes and saw a photograph of the original letter that Dumbledore had written Grindelwald, with Dumbledore’s familiar thin, slanting handwriting. He hated seeing absolute proof that Dumbledore really had written those words, that they had not been Rita’s invention.

“The signature,” said Hermione. “Look at the signature, Harry!”

He obeyed. For a moment he had no idea what she was talking about, but, looking more closely with the aid of his lit wand, he saw that Dumbledore had replaced the A of Albus with a tiny version of the same triangular mark inscribed upon The Tales of Beedle the Bard.

“Er – what are you –?” said Ron tentatively, but Hermione quelled him with a look and turned back to Harry.

“It keeps cropping up, doesn’t it?“ she said. ”I know Viktor said it was Grindelwald’s mark, but it was definitely on that old grave in Godric’s Hollow, and the dates on the headstone were long before Grindelwald came along! And now this! Well, we can’t ask Dumbledore or Grindelwald what it means – I don’t even know whether Grindelwald’s still alive – but we can ask Mr. Lovegood. He was wearing the symbol at the wedding. I’m sure this is important, Harry!“Harry did not answer immediately. He looked into her intense, eager face and then out into the surrounding darkness, thinking. After a long pause he said, “Hermione, we don’t need another Godric’s Hollow. We talked ourselves into going there, and – ”

“But it keeps appearing, Harry! Dumbledore left me The Tales of Beedle the Bard, how do you know we’re not supposed to find out about the sign?““Here we go again!” Harry felt slightly exasperated. “We keep trying to convince ourselves Dumbledore left us secret signs and clues – ”

“The Deluminator turned out to be pretty useful,” piped up Ron. “I think Hermione’s right, I think we ought to go and see Lovegood.”

Harry threw him a dark look. He was quite sure that Ron’s support of Hermione had little to do with a desire to know the meaning of the triangular rune.

“It won’t be like Godric’s Hollow,“ Ron added, ”Lovegood’s on your side, Harry, The Quibbler’s been for you all along, it keeps telling

everyone they've got to help you!""I'm sure this is important!" said Hermione earnestly.

"But don't you think if it was, Dumbledore would have told me about it before he died?"

"Maybe… maybe it's something you need to find out for yourself," said Hermione with a faint air of clutching at straws.

"Yeah," said Ron sycophantically, "that makes sense."

"No, it doesn't," snapped Hermione, "but I still think we ought to talk to Mr. Lovegood. A symbol that links Dumbledore, Grindelwald, and Godric's Hollow? Harry, I'm sure we ought to know about this!""I think we should vote on it," said Ron. "Those in favor of going to see Love good – "

His hand flew into the air before Hermione's. Her lips quivered suspiciously as she raised her own.

"Outvoted, Harry, sorry," said Ron, clapping him on the back.

"Fine," said Harry, half amused, half irritated. "Only, once we've seen Lovegood, let's try and look for some more Horcruxes, shall we? Where do the Lovegood's live, anyway? Do either of you know?"

"Yeah, they're not far from my place," said Ron. "I dunno exactly where, but Mum and Dad always point toward the hills whenever they mention them. Shouldn't be hard to find."When Hermione had returned to her bunk, Harry lowered his voice.

"You only agreed to try and get back in her good books."

"All's fair in love and war," said Ron brightly, "and this is a bit of both. Cheer up, it's the Christmas holidays, Luna'll be home!"

They had an excellent view of the village of Ottery St. Catchopole from the breezy hillside to which they Disapparated next morning. From their high vantage point the village looked like a collection of toy houses in the great slanting shafts of sunlight stretching to earth in the breaks between clouds. They stood for a minute or two looking toward the Burrow, their hands shadowing their eyes, but all they could make out were the high hedges and trees of the orchard, which afforded the crooked little house protection from Muggle eyes.

"It's weird, being this near, but not going to visit," said Ron.

"Well, it's not like you haven't just seen them. You were there for Christmas," said Hermione coldly.

"I wasn't at the Burrow!" said Ron with an incredulous laugh. "Do you think I was going to go back there and tell them all I'd walked out on you? Yeah, Fred and George would've been great about it. And Ginny, she'd have been really understanding."

"But where have you been, then?" asked Hermione, surprised.

"Bill and Fleur's new place. Shell cottage. Bill's always been decent to me. He – he wasn't impressed when he heard what I'd done, but he didn't go on about it. He knew I was really sorry. None of the rest of the family know I was there. Bill told Mum he and Fleur weren't going home for Christmas because they wanted to spend it alone. You know, first holiday after they were married. I don't think Fleur minded. You know how much she hates Celestina Warbeck."Ron turned his back on the Burrow.

"Let's try up here," he said, leading the way over the top of the hill.

They walked for a few hours, Harry, at Hermione's insistence, hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak. The cluster of low hills appeared to be uninhabited apart from one small cottage, which seemed deserted.

“Do you think it’s theirs, and they’ve gone away for Christmas?” said Hermione, peering through the window at a neat little kitchen with geraniums on the windowsill. Ron snorted.

“Listen, I’ve got a feeling you’d be able to tell who lived there if you looked through the Lovegoods’ window. Let’s try the next lot of hills.”

So they Disapparated a few miles farther north.

“Aha!” shouted Ron, as the wind whipped their hair and clothes. Ron was pointing upward, toward the top of the hill on which they had appeared, where a most strange-looking house rose vertically against the sky, a great black cylinder with a ghostly moon hanging behind it in the afternoon sky. “That’s got to be Luna’s house, who else would live in a place like that? It looks like a giant rook!”

“It’s nothing like a bird,” said Hermione, frowning at the tower.

“I was talking about a chess rook,” said Ron. “A castle to you.”

Ron’s legs were the longest and he reached the top of the hill first. When Harry and Hermione caught up with him, panting and clutching stitches in their sides, they found him grinning broadly.

“It’s theirs,” said Ron. “Look.”

Three hand-painted signs had been tacked to a broke-down gate. The first read,THE QUIBBLER. EDITOR, X. LOVEGOODthe second,

PICK YOUR OWN MISTLETOE

the third,

KEEP OFF THE DIRIGIBLE PLUMS

The gate creaked as they opened it. The zigzagging path leading to the front door was overgrown with a variety of odd plants, including a bush covered in orange radishlike fruit Luna sometimes wore as

earrings. Harry thought he recognized a Snargaluff and gave the wizened stump a wide berth. Two aged crab apple trees, bent with the wind, stripped of leaves but still heavy with berry-sized red fruits and bushy crowns of white beaded mistletoe, stood sentinel on either side of the front door. A little owl with a slightly flattened hawklike head peered down at them from one of the branches.

“You’d better take off the Invisibility Cloak, Harry,” said Hermione. “It’s you Mr. Lovegood wants to help, not us.”

He did as she suggested, handing her the Cloak to stow in the beaded bag. She then rapped three times on the thick black door, which was studded with iron nails and bore a knocker shaped like an eagle.

Barely ten seconds passed, then the door was flung open and there stood Xenophilius Lovegood, barefoot and wearing what appeared to be a stained nightshirt. His long white candyfloss hair was dirty and unkempt. Xenophilius had been positively dapper at Bill and Fleur’s wedding by comparison.

“What? What is it? Who are you? What do you want?“ he cried in a high-pitched, querulous voice, looking first at Hermione, then at Ron, and finally at Harry, upon which his mouth fell open in a perfect, comical O.

“Hello, Mr. Lovegood,” said Harry, holding out his hand, “I’m Harry, Harry Potter.”

Xenophilius did not take Harry’s hand, although the eye that was not pointing inward at his nose slid straight to the scar on Harry’s forehead.

“Would it be okay if we came in?“ asked Harry. ”There’s something we’d like to ask you.““I… I’m not sure that’s advisable,” whispered Xenophilius, He swallowed and cast a quick look around the garden.

“Rather a shock… My word… I… I’m afraid I don’t really think I ought to –”

“It wont take long” said Harry, slightly disappointed by this less-than-warm welcome.

“I – oh, all right then. Come in, quickly, Quickly!“They were barely over the threshold when Xenophilius slammed the door shut behind them, They were standing in the most peculiar kitchen Harry had ever seen. The room was perfectly circular, so that he felt like being inside a giant pepper pot. Everything was curved to fit the walls – the stove, the sink, and the cupboards – and all of it had been painted with flowers, insects, and birds in bright primary colors. Harry thought he recognized Luna’s styles. The effect in such and enclosed space, was slightly overwhelming.

In the middle of the floor, a wrought-iron spiral staircase led to the upper levels. There was a great deal of clattering and banging coming from overhead: Harry wondered what Luna could be doing.

“You’d better come up.“ said Xenophilius, still looking extremely uncomfortable, and he led the way.

The room above seemed to be a combination of living room and workplace, and as such, was even more cluttered than the kitchen. Though much smaller and entirely round, the room somewhat resembled the Room of Requirement on the unforgettable occasion that it had transformed itself into a gigantic labyrinth comprised of centuries of hidden objects. There were piles upon piles of books and papers on every surface. Delicately made models of creatures Harry did not recognize, all flapping wings or snapping jaws, hung from the ceiling.

Luna was not there: The thing that was making such a racket was a wooden object covered in magically turning cogs and wheels, It looked like the bizarre offspring of a workbench and a set of shelves,

but after a moment Harry deduced that it was an old-fashioned printing press, due to the fact that it was churning out Quibblers.

“Excuse me,“ said Xenophilius, and he strode over to the machine, seized grubbily tablecloth from beneath an immense number of books and papers, which all tumbled onto the floor, and threw it over the press, somewhat muffling the loud bangs and clatters. He then faced Harry.

“Why have you come here?” Before Harry could speak, however, Hermione let out a small cry of shock.

“Mr. Lovegood – what’s that?”

See was pointing at an enormous, gray spiral horn, not unlike that of a unicorn, which had been mounted on the wall, protruding several feet into the room.

“It is the horn of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack,” said Xenophilius.

“No it isn’t!” said Hermione.

“Hermione,“ muttered Harry, embarrassed, “now’s not the moment – ”

“But Harry, it’s an Erumpent horn! It’s a Class B Tradeable Material and it’s an extraordinary dangerous thing to have in a house!““How’d you know it’s an Erumpent horn?” asked Ron, edging away from the horn as fast as he could, given the extreme clutter of the room.

“There’s a description in Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them! Mr. Lovegood, you need to get rid of it straightaway, don’t you know it can explode at the slightest touch?”

“The Crumple Horned Snorkack” said Xenophilius very clearly, a mulish look upon his face, “is a shy and highly magical creature, and it’s horn – ”

“Mr. Lovegood. I recognize the grooved markings around the base, that’s an Erumpent horn and it’s incredibly dangerous – I don’t know where you got it-”

“I bought it,“ said Xenophilius dogmatically. ”Two weeks ago, from a delightful young wizard who knew my interest in the exquisite Snorkack. A Christmas surprise for my Luna. Now,“ he said, turning to Harry, ”why exactly have you come here, Mr. Potter?““We need some help,” said Harry, before Hermione could start again.

“Ah,” said Xenophilius, “Help, Hmm.”

His good eye moved again to Harry’s scar. He seemed simultaneously terrified and mesmerized.

“Yes. The thing is… helping Harry Potter… rather dangerous…”

“Aren’t you the one who keeps telling everyone it’s their first duty to help Harry?” said Ron. “In that magazine of yours?”

Xenophilius glanced behind him at the concealed printing press, still banging and clattering beneath the tablecloth.

“Er – yes, I have expressed that view. however – ”

“That’s for everyone else to do, not you personally?” said Ron.

Xenophilius did not answer. He kept swallowing, his eyes darting between the three of them. Harry had the impression that he was undergoing some painful internal struggle.

“Where’s Luna?” asked Hermione. “Let’s see what she thinks.”

Xenophilius gulped. He seemed to be steeling himself. Finally he said in a shaky voice difficult to hear over the noise of the printing press, “Luna is down at the stream, fishing for Freshwater Plimpies. She…

she will like to see you. I'll go and call her and then – yes, very well. I shall try to help you."

He disappeared down the spiral staircase and they heard the front open and close. They looked at each other.

"Cowardly old wart," said Ron. "Luna's got ten times his guts."

"He's probably worried about what'll happen to them if the Death Eaters find out I was here" said Harry.

"Well, I agree with Ron," said Hermione, "Awful old hypocrite, telling everyone else to help you and trying to worm our of it himself. And for heaven's sake keep away from that horn."Harry crossed to the window on the far side of the room. He could see a stream, a thin, glittering ribbon lying far below them at the base of the hill. They were very high up; a bird fluttered past the window as he stared in the direction of the Burrow, now invisible beyond another line of hills. Ginny was over there somewhere. They were closer to each other today than they had been since Bill and Fleur's wedding, but she could have no idea he was gazing toward her now, thinking of her. He suppose he ought to be glad of it; anyone he came into contact with was in danger, Xenophilius's attitude proved that. he turned away from the windows and his gaze fell upon another peculiar object standing upon the cluttered, curved slide board; a stone but of a beautiful but austere-looking witch wearing a most bizarre-looking headdress. Two objects that resembled golden ear trumpets curved out from the sides. A tiny pair of glittering blue wing was stuck to a leather strap that ran over the top of her head, while one of the orange radishes had been stuck to a second strap around her forehead.

"Look at this," said Harry.

"Fetching," said Ron. "Surprised he didn't wear that to the wedding."

They heard the front door close, and a moment later Xenophilius climbed back up the spiral staircase into the room, his thin legs now encase in Wellington boots, bearing a tray of ill-assorted teacups and a steaming teapot.

“Ah, you have spotted my pet invention,” he said, shoving the tray into Hermione’s arms and joining Harry at the statue’s side.

“Modeled, fittingly enough, upon the head of the beautiful Rowens Ravenclaw, ‘Wit beyond measure is a man’s greatest treasure!’“He indicated the objects like ear trumpets.

“These are the Wrackpurt siphons – to remove all sources of distraction from the thinker’s immediate area. Here,“ he pointed out the tiny wings, ”a billywig propeller, to induce an elevated frame of mind. Finally,“ he pointed to the orange radish, ”the dirigible Plum, so as to enhance the ability to accept the extraordinary.“Xenophilius strode back to the tea tray, which Hermione had managed to balance precariously on one of the cluttered side tables.

“May I offer you all an infusion of Gurdyroots?“ said Xenophilius. ”We make it ourselves.“ As he started to pour out the drink, which was as deeply purple as beetroot juice, he added, ”Luna is down beyond Bottom Bridge, she is most excited that you are here She ought not to be too long, she has caught nearly enough Plumpies to make soup for all of us. Do sit down and help yourselves to sugar.““Now,” he remove a tottering pile of papers from an armchair and sat down, his Wellingtoned legs crossed, “how may I help you, Mr. Potter?”

“Well,“ said Harry, glancing at Hermione, who nodded encouragingly, “it’s about that symbol you were wearing around your neck at Bill and Fleur’s wedding, Mr. Lovegood. We wondered what it meant.”

Xenophilius raised his eyebrows.

“Are you referring to the sign of the Deathly Hallows?”

Chapter 21 The Tale of The Three Brothers

Harry turned to look at Ron and Hermione. Neither of them seemed to have understood what Xenophilius had said either.

“The Deathly Hallows?”

“That’s right,” said Xenophilius. “You haven’t heard of them? I’m not surprised. Very, very few wizards believe. Witness that knuckle-headed young man at your brother’s wedding,” he nodded at Ron, “who attacked me for sporting the symbol of a well-known Dark wizard! Such ignorance. There is nothing Dark about the Hallows – at least not in that crude sense. One simply uses the symbol to reveal oneself to other believers, in the hope that they might help one with the Quest.”

He stirred several lumps of sugar into his Gurdyroot infusion and drank some.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry, “I still don’t really understand.”

To be polite, he took a sip from his cup too, and almost gagged: The stuff was quite disgusting, as though someone had liquidized bogey-flavored Every Flavor Beans.

“Well, you see, believers seek the Deathly Hallows,” said Xenophilius, smacking his lips in apparent appreciation of the Gurdyroot infusion.

“But what are the Deathly Hallows?” asked Hermione.

Xenophilius set aside his empty teacup.

“I assume that you are familiar with ‘The Tale of the Three Brothers’?”

Harry said, “No,” but Ron and Hermione both said, “Yes.” Xenophilius nodded gravely.

"Well, well, Mr. Potter, the whole thing starts with 'The Tale of the Three Brothers'… I have a copy somewhere…"

He glanced vaguely around the room, at the piles of parchment and books, but Hermione said, "I've got a copy, Mr. Lovegood, I've got it right here."

And she pulled out The Tales of Beedle the Bard from the small, beaded bag.

"The original?" inquired Xenophilius sharply, and when she nodded, he said, "Well then, why don't you read it out aloud? Much the best way to make sure we all understand."

"Er… all right," said Hermione nervously. She opened the book, and Harry saw that the symbol they were investigating headed the top of the page as she gave a little cough, and began to read.

"'There were once three brothers who were traveling along a lonely, winding road at twilight –'""Midnight, our mum always told us," said Ron, who had stretched out, arms behind his head, to listen. Hermione shot him a look of annoyance.

"Sorry, I just think it's a bit spookier if it's midnight!" said Ron.

"Yeah, because we really need a bit more fear in our lives," said Harry before he could stop himself. Xenophilius did not seem to be paying much attention, but was staring out of the window at the sky. "Go on, Hermione."

"In time, the brothers reached a river too deep to wade through and too dangerous to swim across. However, these brothers were learned in the magical arts, and so they simply waved their wands and made a bridge appear across the treacherous water. They were halfway across it when they found their path blocked by a hooded figure.""'And Death spoke to them –'"

“Sorry,“ interjected Harry, “but Death spoke to them?”

“It’s a fairy tale, Harry!”

“Right, sorry. Go on.”

“‘And Death spoke to them. He was angry that he had been cheated out of the three new victims, for travelers usually drowned in the river. But Death was cunning. He pretended to congratulate the three brothers upon their magic, and said that each had earned a prize for having been clever enough to evade him.““‘So the oldest brother, who was a combative man, asked for a wand more powerful than any in existence: a wand that must always win duels for its owner, a wand worthy of a wizard who had conquered Death! So Death crossed to an elder tree on the banks of the river, fashioned a wand from a branch that hung there, and gave it to the oldest brother.”

“‘Then the second brother, who was an arrogant man, decided that he wanted to humiliate Death still further, and asked for the power to recall others from Death. So Death picked up a stone from the riverbank and gave it to the second brother, and told him that the stone would have the power to bring back the dead.”

“‘And then Death asked the third and youngest brother what he would like. The youngest brother was the humblest and also the wisest of the brothers, and he did not trust Death. So he asked for something that would enable him to go forth from that place without being followed by Death. And Death, most unwillingly, handed over his own Cloak of Invisibility.’”

“Death’s got an Invisibility Cloak?“ Harry interrupted again.

“So he can sneak up on people,” said Ron. “Sometimes he gets bored of running at them, flapping his arms and shrieking… sorry, Hermione.”

"'Then Death stood aside and allowed the three brothers to continue on their way, and they did so talking with wonder of the adventure they had had and admiring Death's gifts."'"'In due course the brothers separated, each for his own destination."

"'The first brother traveled on for a week more, and reaching a distant village, sought out a fellow wizard with whom he had a quarrel. Naturally, with the Elder Wand as his weapon, he could not fail to win the duel that followed. Leaving his enemy dead upon the floor the oldest brother proceeded to an inn, where he boasted loudly of the powerful wand he had snatched from Death himself, and of how it made him invincible."

"'That very night, another wizard crept upon the oldest brother as he lay, wine-sodden upon his bed. The thief took the wand and for good measure, slit the oldest brother's throat."

"'And so Death took the first brother for his own."

"'Meanwhile, the second brother journeyed to his own home, where he lived alone. Here he took out the stone that had the power to recall the dead, and turned it thrice in his hand. To his amazement and his delight, the figure of the girl he had once hoped to marry, before her untimely death, appeared at once before him."

"'Yet she was sad and cold, separated from him as by a veil. Though she had returned to the mortal world, she did not truly belong there and suffered. Finally the second brother, driven mad with hopeless longing, killed himself so as to truly join her."

"'And so Death took the second brother from his own."

"'But though Death searched for the third brother for many years, he was never able to find him. It was only when he had attained a great age that the youngest brother finally took off the Cloak of Invisibility and gave it to his son. And the he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life.'"

Hermione closed the book. It was a moment or two before Xenophilius seemed to realize that she had stopped reading; then he withdrew his gaze from the window and said: “Well, there you are.”

“Sorry?” said Hermione, sounding confused.

“Those are the Deathly Hallows,” said Xenophilius.

He picked up a quill from a packed table at his elbow, and pulled a torn piece of parchment from between more books.

“The Elder Wand,” he said, and drew a straight vertical line upon the parchment. “The Resurrection Stone,” he said, and added a circle on top of the line. “The Cloak of Invisibility,” he finished, enclosing both line and circle in a triangle, to make the symbols that so intrigued Hermione. “Together,” he said, “the Deathly Hallows.”

“But there’s no mention of the words ‘Deathly Hallows’ in the story,” said Hermione.

“Well, of course not,” said Xenophilius, maddeningly smug. “That is a children’s tale, told to amuse rather than to instruct. Those of us who understand these matters, however, recognize that the ancient story refers to three objects, or Hallows, which, if united, will make the possessor master of Death.”

There was a short silence in which Xenophilius glanced out of the window. Already the sun was low in the sky.

“Luna ought to have enough Plimpies soon,” he said quietly.

“When you say ‘master of Death’ – ”said Ron.

“Master,” said Xenophilius, waving an airy hand. “Conqueror. Vanquisher. Whichever term you prefer.”

“But then… do you mean…” said Hermione slowly, and Harry could tell that she was trying to keep any trace of skepticism out of her voice, “that you believe these objects – these Hallows – really exist?”

Xenophilius raised his eyebrows again.

“Well, of course.”

“But,” said Hermione, and Harry could hear her restraint starting to crack, “Mr. Lovegood, how can you possibly believe –?”

“Luna has told me all about you, young lady,” said Xenophilius. “You are, I gather, not unintelligent, but painfully limited. Narrow. Close-minded.”

“Perhaps you ought to try on the hat, Hermione,” said Ron, nodding toward the ludicrous headdress. His voice shook with the strain of not laughing.

“Mr. Lovegood,” Hermione began again, “We all know that there are such things as Invisibility Cloaks. They are rare, but they exist. But – ”

“Ah, but the Third Hallow is a true Cloak of Invisibility, Miss Granger! I mean to say, it is not a traveling cloak imbued with a Disillusionment Charm, or carrying a Bedazzling Hex, or else woven from Demiguise hair, which will hide one initially but fade with the years until it turns opaque. We are talking about a cloak that really and truly renders the wearer completely invisible, and endures eternally, giving constant and impenetrable concealment, no matter what spells are cast at it. How many cloaks have you ever seen like that, Miss Granger?”

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, then closed it again, looking more confused than ever. She, Harry and Ron glanced at one another, and Harry knew that they were all thinking the same thing. It so happened that a cloak exactly like the one Xenophilius had just described was in the room with them at that very moment.

“Exactly,” said Xenophilius, as if he had defeated them all in reasoned argument. “None of you have ever seen such a thing. The possessor would be immeasurably rich, would he not?”

He glanced out of the window again. The sky was now tinged with the faintest trace of pink.

“All right,” said Hermione, disconcerted. “Say the Cloak existed… what about that stone, Mr. Lovegood? The thing you call the Resurrection Stone?”

“What of it?”

“Well, how can that be real?”

“Prove that is not,” said Xenophilius.

Hermione looked outraged.

“But that’s – I’m sorry, but that’s completely ridiculous! How can I possibly prove it doesn’t exist? Do you expect me to get hold of – of all the pebbles in the world and test them? I mean, you could claim that anything’s real if the only basis for believing in it is that nobody’s proved it doesn’t exist!”

“Yes, you could,” said Xenophilius. “I am glad to see that you are opening your mind a little.”

“So the Elder Wand,” said Harry quickly, before Hermione could retort, “you think that exists too?”

“Oh, well, in that case there is endless evidence,” said Xenophilius. “The Elder Wand is the Hallow that is most easily traced, because of the way in which it passes from hand to hand.”

“Which is what?” asked Harry.

“Which is that the possessor of the wand must capture it from its previous owner, if he is to be truly master of it,” said Xenophilius. “Surely you have heard of the way the wand came to Egbert the Egregious, after his slaughter of Emeric the Evil? Of how Godelot died in his own cellar after his son, Hereward, took the wand from him? Of the dreadful Loxias, who took the wand from Baraabas Deverill, whom he had killed? The bloody trail of the Elder Wand is splattered across the pages of Wizarding history.”

Harry glanced at Hermione. She was frowning at Xenophilius, but she did not contradict him.

“So where do you think the Elder Wand is now?” asked Ron.

“Alas, who knows?” said Xenophilius, as he gazed out of the window. “Who knows where the Elder Wand lies hidden? The trail goes cold with Arcus and Livius. Who can say which of them really defeated Loxias, and which took the wand? And who can say who may have defeated them? History, alas, does not tell us.”

There was a pause. Finally Hermione asked stiffly, “Mr. Lovegood, does the Peverell family have anything to do with the Deathly Hallows?”

Xenophilius looked taken aback as something shifted in Harry’s memory, but he could not locate it. Peverell… he had heard that name before…“But you have been misleading me, young woman!” said Xenophilius, now sitting up much straighter in his chair and goggling at Hermione. “I thought you were new to the Hallows Quest! Many of us Questers believe that the Peverells have everything – everything! – to do with the Hallows!”

“Who are the Peverells?” asked Ron.

“That was the name on the grave with the mark on it, in Godric’s Hollow,” said Hermione, still watching Xenophilius. “Ignotus Peverell.”

“Exactly!” said Xenophilius, his forefinger raised pedantically. “The sign of the Death Hallows on Ignotus’s grave is conclusive proof!”

“Of what?” asked Ron.

“Why, that the three brothers in the story were actually the three Peverell brothers, Antioch, Cadmus and Ignotus! That they were the original owners of the Hallows!”

With another glance at the window he got to his feet, picked up the tray, and headed for the spiral staircase.

“You will stay for dinner?” he called, as he vanished downstairs again. “Everybody always requests our recipe for Freshwater Plimply soup.”

“Probably to show the Poisoning Department at St. Mungo’s,” said Ron under his breath.

Harry waited until they could hear Xenophilius moving about in the kitchen downstairs before speaking.

“What do you think?” he asked Hermione.

“Oh, Harry,” she said wearily, “it’s a pile of utter rubbish. This can’t be what the sign really means. This must just be his weird take on it. What a waste of time.”

“I s’pose this is the man who brought us Crumple-Horned Snorkacks,” said Ron.

“You didn’t believe it either?” Harry asked him.

“Nah, that story’s just one of those things you tell kids to teach them lessons, isn’t it? ‘Don’t go looking for trouble, don’t go pick fights, don’t go messing around with stuff that’s best left alone! Just keep your head down, mind your own business, and you’ll be okay. Come

to think of it," Ron added, "maybe that story's why elder wands are supposed to be unlucky."

"What are you talking about?"

"One of those superstitions, isn't it? 'May-born witches will marry Muggles.' 'Jinx by twilight, undone by midnight.' 'Wand of cider, never prosper.' You must have heard them. My mum's full of them."

"Harry and I were raised by Muggles," Hermione reminded him. "We were taught different superstitions." She sighed deeply as a rather pungent smell drifted up from the kitchen. The one good thing about her exasperation with Xenophilius was that it seemed to have made her forget that she was annoyed at Ron. "I think you're right," she told him. "It's just a morality tale, it's obvious which gift is best, which one you'd choose – "

The three of them spoke at the same time: Hermione said, "the Cloak," Ron said, "the wand," and Harry said, "the stone."

They looked at each other, half surprised, half amused.

"You're supposed to say the Cloak," Ron told Hermione, "but you wouldn't need to be invisible if you had the wand. An unbeatable wand, Hermione, come on!"

"We've already got an Invisibility Cloak," said Harry, "And it's helped us rather a lot, in case you hadn't noticed!" said Hermione. "Whereas the wand would be bound to attract trouble–"

"Only if you shouted about it," argued Ron. "Only if you were prat enough to go dancing around waving it over your head, and singing, 'I've got an unbeatable want, come and have a go if you think you're hard enough.' As long as you kept your trap shut –"

"Yes, but could you keep your trap shut?" said Hermione, looking skeptical. "You know the only true thing he said to us was that there

have been stories about extra-powerful wands for hundreds of years."

"There have?" asked Harry.

Hermione looked exasperated: The expression was so endearingly familiar that Harry and Ron grinned at each other.

"The Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny, they crop up under different names through the centuries, usually in the possession of some Dark wizard who's boasting about them.

Professor Binns mentioned some of them, but – oh it's all nonsense. Wands are only as powerful as the wizards who use them. Some wizards just like to boast that theirs are bigger and better than other people's""But how do you know," said Harry, "that those wants – the Deathstick, and the Wand of Destiny – aren't the same want, surfacing over the centuries under different names?"

"What if they're all really the Elder Wand, made by Death?" said Ron. Harry laughed: The strange idea that had occurred to him was after all, ridiculous. His wand, he reminded himself, had been of holly, not elder, and it had been made by Ollivander, whatever it had done that night Voldemort had pursued him across the skies and if it had been unbeatable, how could it have been broken? "So why would you take the stone?" Ron asked him. "Well, if you could bring people back, we could have Sirius…Mad-Eye…Dumbledore…my parents…" Neither Ron nor Hermione smiled.

"But according to Beedle the Bard, they wouldn't want to come back, would they?" said Harry, thinking about the tail they had just heard. "I don't suppose there have been loads of other stories about a stone that can raise the dead, have there?" he asked Hermione. "No," she replied sadly. "I don't think anyone except Mr. Lovegood could kid themselves that's possible. Beedle probably took the idea from the Sorcerer's Stone; you know, instead of a stone to make you immortal, a stone to reverse death." The smell from the kitchen was getting stronger. It was something like burning underpants. Harry wondered

whether it would be possible to eat enough of whatever Xenophilius was cooking to spare his feelings.

“What about the Cloak, though?” said Ron slowly. “Don’t you realize, he’s right? I’ve got so used to Harry’s Cloak and how good it is, I never stopped to think. I’ve never heard of one like Harry’s. It’s infallible. We’ve never been spotted under it –”

“Of course not – we’re invisible when we’re under it, Ron!”

“But all the stuff he said about other cloaks, and they’re not exactly ten a Kanut, you know, is true! It’s never occurred to me before but I’ve heard stuff about charms wearing off cloaks when they get old, or them being ripped apart by spells so they’ve got holes, Harry’s was owned by his dad, so it’s not exactly new, is it, but it’s just… perfect!”

“Yes, all right, but Ron, the stone…”

As they argued in whispers, Harry moved around the room, only half listening. Reaching the spiral stair, he raised his eyes absently to the next level and was distracted at once. His own face was looking back at him from the ceiling of the room above. After a moment’s bewilderment, he realized that it was not a mirror, but a painting. Curious, he began to clime the stairs.

“Harry, what are you doing? I don’t think you should look around when he’s not here!” But Harry had already reached the next level. Luna had decorated her bedroom ceiling with five beautifully painted faces: Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville. They were not moving as the portraits at Hogwarts moved, but there was a certain magic about them all the same. Harry thought they breathed. What appeared to be a fine golden chains wove around the pictures linking them together, but after examining them for a minute or so, Harry realized that the chains were actually one work repeated a thousand times in golden ink: friends… friends… friends…Harry felt a great rush of affection for Luna. He looked around the room. There was a large photograph beside the bed, of a young Luna and a woman who

looked very like her. They were hugging. Luna looked rather better-groomed in this picture than Harry had ever seen her in life. The picture was dusty. This struck Harry as slightly odd. He stared around. Something was wrong. The pale blue carpet was also thick with dust. There were no clothes in the wardrobe, whose doors stood ajar. The bed had a cold, unfriendly look, as though it had not been slept in for weeks. A single cobweb stretched over the nearest window across the blood red sky.

“What’s wrong?” Hermione asked as Harry descended the staircase, but before he could respond, Xenophilius reached the top of the stairs from the kitchen, now holding a tray laden with bowls.

“Mr. Lovegood,” said Harry. “Where’s Luna?”

“Excuse me?”

“Where’s Luna?”

Xenophilius halted on the top step.

“I – I’ve already told you. She is down at the Botions Bridge fishing for Plimpies.”

“So why have you only laid that tray for four?”

Xenophilius tried to speak, but no sound came out. The only noise was the continued chugging of the printing press, and a slight rattle from the tray as Xenophilius’s hands shook.

“I don’t think Luna’s been here for weeks.” said Harry. “Her clothes are gone, her bed hasn’t been slept in. Where is she? and why do you keep looking out of the window?”

Xenophilius dropped the tray. The bowls bounced and smashed Harry, Ron, and Hermione drew their wands. Xenophilius froze his hand about to enter his pocket. At that moment the printing press

have a huge bank and numerous Quibblers came streaming across the floor from underneath the tablecloth, the press fell silent at last. Hermione stooped down and picked up one of the magazines, her wand still pointing at Mr. Lovegood.

“Harry, look at this” He strode over to her as quickly as he could through all the clutter.

The front of the Quibbler carried his own picture, emblazoned with the words “Undesirable Number One” and captioned with the reward money.

“The Quibbler’s going for a new angle, then?” Harry asked coldly, his mind working very fast. “Is that what you were doing when you went into the garden, Mr. Lovegood?

Sending an owl to the Ministry?“Xenophilius licked his lips “They took my Luna,” he whispered, “Because of what I’ve been writing. They took my Luna and I don’t know where she is, what they’ve done to her. But they might give her back to me if I – If I–”

“Hand over Harry?” Hermione finished for him.

“No deal.” said Ron flatly. “Get out of the way, we’re leaving.”

Xenophilius looked ghastly, a century old, his lips drawn back into a dreadful leer.

“They will be here any moment. I must save Luna. I cannot lose Luna. You must not leave.”

He spread his arms in front of the staircase, and Harry had a sudden vision of his mother doing the same thing in front of his crib.

“Don’t make us hurt you,” Harry said. “Get out of the way, Mr. Lovegood.”

"HARRY!" Hermione screamed.

Figures on broomsticks were flying past the windows. As the three of them looked away from him. Xenophilius drew his wand. Harry realized their mistake just in time. He launched himself sideways, shoving Ron and Hermione out of harm's way as Xenophilius's Stunning Spell soared across the room and hit the Erumpent horn.

There was a colossal explosion. The sound of it seemed to blow the room apart.

Fragments of wood and paper and rubble flew in all directions, along with an impenetrable cloud of thick white dust. Harry flew through the air, then crashed to the floor, unable to see as debris rained upon him, his arms over his head. He heard Hermione's scream, Ron's yell, and a series of sickening metallic thuds which told him that Xenophilius had been blasted off his feet and fallen backward down the spiral stairs.

Half buried in rubble, Harry tried to raise himself. He could barely breathe or see for dust.

Half of the ceiling had fall in and the end of Luna's bead was hanging through the hole.

The bust of Rowena Ravenclaw lay beside him with half its face missing fragments of torn parchment were floating through the air, and most of the printing press lay on its side, blocking the top of the staircase to the kitchen. Then another white shape moved close by, and Hermione, coated in dust like a second statue, pressed his finger to her lips.

The door downstairs crashed open.

"Didn't I tell you there was no need to hurry, Travers?" said a rough voice. "Didn't I tell you this nutter was just raving as usual?" There was a bang and a scream of pain from Xenophilius.

“No…no…upstairs…Potter!”

“I told you last week Lovegood, we weren’t coming back for anything less than some solid information! Remember last week? When you wanted to swap your daughter for that stupid bleeding headdress? And the week before” – Another bang, another squeal – “When you thought we’d give her back if you offered us proof there are Cumple” – Bang – “Headed”–bang– “Snorkacks?”

“No – no – I beg of you!” sobbed Xenophilius. “It really is Potter, Really!”

“And now it turns out you only called us here to try and blow us up!” roared the Death Eater, and there was a volley of bangs interspersed with squeals of agony from Xenophilius.

“The place looks like it’s about to fall in, Selwyn,” said a cool second voice, echoing up the mangled staircase. “The stairs are completely blocked. Could try clearing it? Might bring the place down.”

“You lying piece of filth.” shouted the wizard named Selwyn.

“You have never seen Potter in your life, have you? Thought you’d lure us here to kill us, did you? And you think you’ll get your girl back like this?”

“I swear…I swear…Potter’s upstairs!”

“Homenum revelio.” said the voice at the foot of the stairs. Harry heard Hermione gasp, and he had the odd sensation something was swooping low over him, immersing his body in its shadow.

“There’s someone up there all right, Selwyn,” said the second man sharply.

“It’s Potter, I tell you, it’s Potter!” sobbed Xenophilius. “Please…please…give me Luna, just let me have Luna…”

“You can have your little girl, Lovegood,” said Selwyn, “if you get up those stairs and bring me down Harry Potter. But if this is a plot, if it’s a trick, if you’ve got an accomplice waiting up there to ambush us, we’ll see if we can spare a bit of your daughter for you to bury.”

Xenophilius gave a wail of fear and despair. There were scurryings and scrapings.

Xenophilius was trying to get through the debris on the stairs.

“Come on,” Harry whispered, “we’ve got to get out of here.”

He started to dig himself out under cover of all the noise Xenophilius was making on the staircase. Ron was buried the deepest. Harry and Hermione climbed, as quietly as they could, over all the wreckage to where he lay, trying to prise a heavy chest of drawers off his legs. While Xenophilius banging and scraping drew nearer and nearer, Hermione managed to free Ron with the use of a Hover Charm.

“All right.” breathed Hermione, as the broken printing press blocking the top of the stairs begin to tremble. Xenophilius was feet away from them. She was still white with dust.

“Do you trust me Harry?”

Harry nodded.

“Okay then.” Hermione whispered. “give me the invisibility Cloak. Ron, you’re going to put it on.”

“Me? But Harry –”

“Please, Ron! Harry, hold on tight to my hand, Ron grab my shoulder.”

Harry held out his left hand. Ron vanished beneath the Cloak. The printing press blocking the stairs was vibrating. Xenophilius was

trying to shift it using a Hover Charm. Harry did not know what Hermione was waiting for.

“Hold tight” she whispered. “Hold tight…any second…”

Xenophilius’s paper-white face appeared over the top of the sideboard.

“Obliviate!” cried Hermione, pointing her want first into his face then at the floor beneath them. “Deprimo!”

She had blasted a hole in the sitting room floor. They fell like boulders. Harry still holding onto her hand for dear life, there was a scream from below, and he glimpsed two men trying to get out of the way as vast quantities of rubble and broken furniture rained all around them from the shattered ceiling. Hermione twisted in midair and thundering of the collapsing house rang in Harry’s ears as she dragged him once more into darkness.

Chapter 22 The Deathly Hallows

Harry fell, panting, onto grass and scrambled up at once. They seemed to have landed in the corner of a field at dusk; Hermione was already running in a circle around them, waving her wand.

“Protego Totalum…Salvio Hexia…”

“That treacherous old bleeder.” Ron panted, emerging from beneath the Invisibility Cloak and throwing it to Harry. “Hermione you’re a genius, a total genius. I can’t believe we got out of that.”

“Cave Inimicum…Didn’t I say it was a Frumpent horn, didn’t I tell him? And now his house has been blown apart!”

“Serves him right,” said Ron, examining his torn jeans and the cuts to his legs, “What’d you reckon they’ll do to him?”

“Oh I hope they don’t kill him!” groaned Hermione, “That’s why I wanted the Death Eaters to get a glimpse of Harry before we left, so they knew Xenophilius hadn’t been lying!”

“Why hide me though?” asked Ron.

“You’re supposed to be in bed with spattergrolt, Ron! They’ve kidnapped Luna because her father supported Harry! What would happen to your family if they knew you’re with him?”

“But what about your mum and dad?”

“They’re in Australia,” said Hermione, “They should be all right. They don’t know anything.”

“You’re a genius,” Ron repeated, looking awed.

“Yeah, you are, Hermione,” agreed Harry fervently. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

She beamed, but became solemn at once.

“What about Luna?”

“Well, if they’re telling the truth and she’s still alive –” began Ron.

“Don’t say that, don’t say it!” squealed Hermione. “She must be alive, she must!”

“Then she’ll be in Azkaban, I expect,” said Ron. “Whether she survives the place, though…Loads don’t…”

“She will,” said Harry. He could not bear to contemplate the alternative. “She’s tough, Luna, much tougher than you’d think. She’s probably teaching all the inmates about Wrackspurts and Nargles.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Hermione. She passed a hand over her eyes. “I’d feel so sorry for Xenophilius if –”

“– if he hadn’t just tried to sell us to the Death Eaters, yeah,” said Ron.

They put up the tent and retreated inside it, where Ron made them tea. After their narrow escape, the chilly, musty old place felt like home: safe, familiar, and friendly.

“Oh, why did we go there?” groaned Hermione after a few minutes’ silence. “Harry, you were right, it was Godric’s Hollow all over again, a complete waste of time! The Deathly Hallows…such rubbish…although actually,” a sudden thought seemed to have struck her, “he might have made it all up, mightn’t he? He probably doesn’t believe in the Deathly Hallows at all, he just wanted to keep us talking until the Death Eaters arrived!”

"I don't think so," said Ron. "It's a damn sight harder making stuff up when you're under stress than you'd think. I found that out when the Snatchers caught me. It was much easier pretending to be Stan, because I knew a bit about him, than inventing a whole new person. Old Lovegood was under loads of pressure, trying to make sure we stayed put. I reckon he told us the truth, or what he thinks is the truth, just to keep us talking."

"Well, I don't suppose it matters," sighed Hermione. "Even if he was being honest, I never heard such a lot of nonsense in all my life."

"Hang on, though," said Ron. "The Chamber of Secrets was supposed to be a myth, wasn't it?"

"But the Deathly Hallows can't exist, Ron!"

"You keep saying that, but one of them can," said Ron. "Harry's Invisibility Cloak –"

"The Tale of the Three Brothers' is a story," said Hermione firmly. "A story about how humans are frightened of death. If surviving was as simple as hiding under the Invisibility Cloak, we'd have everything we need already!"

"I don't know. We could do with an unbeatable wand," said Harry, turning the blackthorn wand he so disliked over in his fingers.

"There's no such thing, Harry!"

"You said there have been loads of wands – the Deathstick and whatever they were called –"

"All right, even if you want to kid yourself the Elder Wand's real, what about the Resurrection Stone?" Her fingers sketched quotation marks around the name, and her tone dripped sarcasm. "No magic can raise the dead, and that's that!"

"When my wand connected with You-Know-Who's, it made my mum and dad appear…and Cedric…"

"But they weren't really back from the dead, were they?" said Hermione. "Those kind of –of pale imitations aren't the same as truly bringing someone back to life."

"But she, the girl in the tale, didn't really come back, did she? The story says that once people are dead, they belong with the dead. But the second brother still got to see her and talk to her, didn't he? He even lived with her for a while…"

He saw concern and something less easily definable in Hermione's expression. Then, as she glanced at Ron, Harry realized that it was fear: He had scared her with his talk of living with dead people.

"So that Peverell bloke who's buried in Godric's Hollow," he said hastily, trying to sound robustly sane, "you don't know anything about him, then?"

"No," she replied, looking relieved at the change of subject. "I looked him up after I saw the mark on his grave; if he'd been anyone famous or done anything important, I'm sure he'd be in one of our books. The only place I've managed to find the name 'Peverell' Is Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy. I borrowed it from Kreacher," she explained as Ron raised his eyebrows. "It lists the pure-blood families that are now extinct in the male line. Apparently the Peverells were one of the earliest families to vanish."

"Extinct in the male line?" repeated Ron.

"It means the name died out," said Hermione, "centuries ago, in the case of the Peverells. They could still have descendents, though, they'd just be called something different."

And then it came to Harry in one shining piece, the memory that had stirred at the sound of the name "Peverell": a filthy old man

brandishing an ugly ring in the face of a Ministry official, and he cried aloud, “Marvolo Gaunt!”

“Sorry” said Ron and Hermione together.

“Marvolo Gaunt! You-Know-Who’s grandfather! In the Pensieve! With Dumbledore! Marvolo Gaunt said he was descended from the Peverells!”

Ron and Hermione looked bewildered.

“The ring, the ring that became the Horcrux, Marvolo Gaunt said it had the Peverell coat of arms on it! I saw him waving it in the bloke from the Ministry’s face, he nearly shoved it up his nose!”

“The Peverell coat of arms?” said Hermione sharply. “Could you see what it looked like?”

“Not really,” said Harry, trying to remember. “There was nothing fancy on there, as far as I could see; maybe a few scratches. I only ever saw it really close up after it had been cracked open.”

Harry saw Hermione’s comprehension in the sudden widening of her eyes. Ron was looking from one to the other, astonished.

“Blimey…You reckon it was this sign again? The sign of the Hallows?”

“Why not?” said Harry excitedly, “Marvolo Gaunt was an ignorant old git who lived like a pig, all he cared about was his ancestry. If that ring had been passed down through the centuries, he might not have known what it really was. There were no books in that house, and trust me, he wasn’t the type to read fairy tales to his kids. He’d have loved to think the scratches on the stone were a coat of arms, because as far as he was concerned, having pure blood made you practically royal.”

“Yes…and that’s all very interesting,” said Hermione cautiously, “but Harry, if you’re thinking what I think you’re think –”

“Well, why not? Why not?” said Harry, abandoning caution. “It was a stone, wasn’t it?” He looked at Ron for support. “What if it was the Resurrection Stone?”

Ron’s mouth fell open.

“Blimey – but would it still work if Dumbledore broke –?”

“Work? Work? Ron, it never worked! There’s no such thing as a Resurrection Stone!”

Hermione leapt to her feet, looking exasperated and angry. “Harry you’re trying to fit everything into the Hallows story –”

“Fit everything in?” he repeated. “Hermione, it fits of its own accord! I know the sign of the Deathly Hallows was on that stone! Gaunt said he was descended from the Peverells!”

“A minute ago you told us you never saw the mark on the stone properly!”

“Where’d you reckon the ring is now?” Ron asked Harry. “What did Dumbledore do with it after he broke it open?”

But Harry’s imagination was racing ahead, far beyond Ron and Hermione’s…Three objects, or Hallows, which, if united, will make the possessor master of Death…Master…Conqueror…Vanquisher…The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death…And he saw himself, possessor of the Hallows, facing Voldemort, whose Horcruxes were no match…Neither can live while the other survives…Was this the answer? Hallows versus Horcruxes? Was there a way after all, to ensure that he was the one who triumphed? If he were the master of the Deathly Hallows, would he be safe?

“Harry?”

But he scarcely heard Hermione: He had pulled out his Invisibility Cloak and was running it through his fingers, the cloth supple as water, light as air. He had never seen anything to equal it in his nearly seven years in the Wizarding world. The Cloak was exactly what Xenophilius had described: A cloak that really and truly renders the wearer completely invisible, and endures eternally, giving constant and impenetrable concealment, no matter what spells are cast at it… And then, with a gasp, he remembered –“Dumbledore had my Cloak the night my parents died!”

His voice shook and he could feel the color in his face, but he did not care.

“My mum told Sirius that Dumbledore borrowed the Cloak! This is why! He wanted to examine it, because he thought it was the third Hallow! Ignotus Peverell is buried in Godric’s Hollow…” Harry was walking blindly around the tent, feeling as though great new vistas of truth were opening all around him. “He’s my ancestor. I’m descended from the third brother! It all makes sense!”

“He felt armed in certainty, in his belief in the Hallows, as if the mere idea of possessing them was giving him protection, and he felt joyous as he turned back to the other two.”

“Harry,” said Hermione again, but he was busy undoing the pouch around his neck, his fingers shaking hard.

“Read it,” he told her, pushing his mother’s letter into her hand. “Read it! Dumbledore had the Cloak, Hermione! Why else would he want it? He didn’t need a Cloak, he could perform a Disillusionment Charm so powerful that he made himself completely invisible without one!”

Something fell to the floor and rolled, glittering, under a chair: He had dislodged the Snitch when he pulled out the letter. He stooped to pick it up, and then the newly tapped spring of fabulous discoveries threw

him another gift, and shock and wonder erupted inside him so that he shouted out.

"IT'S IN HERE! He left me the ring – it's in the Snitch!"

"You – you reckon?"

He could not understand why Ron looked taken aback. It was so obvious, so clear to Harry. Everything fit, everything…His Cloak was the third Hallow, and when he discovered how to open the Snitch he would have the second, and then all he needed to do was find the first Hallow, the Elder Wand, and then –But it was as though a curtain fell on a lit stage: All his excitement, all his hope and happiness were extinguished at a stroke, and he stood alone in the darkness, and the glorious spell was broken.

"That's what he's after."

The change in his voice made Ron and Hermione look even more scared.

"You-Know-Who's after the Elder Wand."

He turned his back on their strained, incredulous faces. He knew it was the truth. It all made sense, Voldemort was not seeking a new wand; he was seeking an old wand, a very old wand indeed. Harry walked to the entrance of the tent, forgetting about Ron and Hermione as he looked out into the night, thinking…Voldemort had been raised in a Muggle orphanage. Nobody could have told him The Tales of Beedle the Bard when he was a child, any more than Harry had heard them. Hardly any wizards believed in the Deathly Hallows. Was it likely that Voldemort knew about them?

Harry gazed into the darkness…If Voldemort had known about the Deathly Hallows, surely he would have sought them, done anything to possess them: three objects that made the possessor master of Death? If he had known about the Deathly Hallows, he might not have

needed Horcruxes in the first place. Didn't the simple fact that he had taken a Hallow, and turned it into a Horcrux, demonstrate that he did not know this last great Wizarding secret?

Which meant that Voldemort sought the Elder Wand without realizing its full power, without understanding that it was one of three…for the wand was the Hallow that could not be hidden, whose existence was best known…The bloody trail of the Elder Wand is splattered across the pages of Wizarding history…Harry watched the cloudy sky, curves of smoke-gray and silver sliding over the face of the white moon. He felt lightheaded with amazement at his discoveries.

He turned back into the tent. It was a shock to see Ron and Hermione standing exactly where he had left them, Hermione still holding Lily's letter, Ron at her side looking slightly anxious. Didn't they realize how far they had traveled in the last few minutes?

"This is it?" Harry said, trying to bring them inside the glow of his own astonished certainty, "This explains everything. The Deathly Hallows are real and I've got one – maybe two –"

He held up the Snitch.

"– and You-Know-Who's chasing the third, but he doesn't realize…he just thinks it's a powerful wand –"

"Harry," said Hermione, moving across to him and handing him back Lily's letter, "I'm sorry, but I think you've got this wrong, all wrong."

"But don't you see? It all fits –"

"Not, it doesn't," she said. "It doesn't. Harry, you're just getting carried away. Please," she said as she started to speak, "please just answer me this: If the Deathly Hallows really existed, and Dumbledore knew about them, knew that the person who possessed all of them would be master of Death – Harry, why wouldn't he have told you? Why?"

He had his answer ready.

“But you said it, Hermione! You’ve got to find out about them for yourself! It’s a Quest!”

“But I only said that to try and persuade you to come to the Lovegoods’!” cried Hermione in exasperation. “I didn’t really believe it!”

Harry took no notice.

“Dumbledore usually let me find out stuff for myself. He let me try my strength, take risks. This feels like the kind of thing he’d do.”

“Harry, this isn’t a game, this isn’t practice! This is the real thing, and Dumbledore left you very clear instructions: Find and destroy the Horcruxes! That symbol doesn’t mean anything, forget the Deathly Hallows, we can’t afford to get sidetracked –”

Harry was barely listening to her. He was turning the Snitch over and over in his hands, half expecting it to break open, to reveal the Resurrection Stone, to prove to Hermione that he was right, that the Deathly Hallows were real.

She appealed to Ron.

“You don’t believe in this, do you?”

Harry looked up, Ron hesitated.

“I dunno…I mean…bits of it sort of fit together,” said Ron awkwardly, “But when you look at the whole thing…” He took a deep breath. “I think we’re supposed to get rid of Horcruxes, Harry. That’s what Dumbledore told us to do. Maybe…maybe we should forget about this Hallows business.”

“Thank you, Ron,” said Hermione. “I’ll take first watch.”

And she strode past Harry and sat down in the tent entrance bringing the action to a fierce full stop.

But Harry hardly slept that night. The idea of the Deathly Hallows had taken possession of him, and he could not rest while agitating thoughts whirled through his mind: the wand, the stone, and the Cloak, if he could just possess them all…I open at the close…But what was the close? Why couldn't he have the stone now? If only he had the stone, he could ask Dumbledore these questions in person… and Harry murmured words to the Snitch in the darkness, trying everything, even Parseltongue, but the golden ball would not open… And the wand, the Elder Wand, where was that hidden? Where was Voldemort searching now? Harry wished his scar would burn and show him Voldemort's thoughts, because for the first time ever, he and Voldemort were united in wanting the very same thing… Hermione would not like that idea, of course…But then, she did not believe….Xenophilius had been right, in a way…Limited, Narrow, Close-minded. The truth was that she was scared of the idea of the Deathly Hallows, especially of the Resurrection Stone…and Harry pressed his mouth again to the Snitch, kissing it, nearly swallowing it, but the cold medal did not yield…It was nearly dawn when he remembered Luna, alone in a cell in Azkaban, surrounded by dementors, and he suddenly felt ashamed of himself. He had forgotten all about her in his feverish contemplation of the Hallows. If only they could rescue her, but dementors in those numbers would be virtually unassailable. Now he came to think about it, he had not tried casting a Patronus with the blackthorn wand…He must try that in the morning…If only there was a way of getting a better wand…And desire for the Elder Wand, the Deathstick, unbeatable, invincible, swallowed him once more…They packed up the tent next morning and moved on through a dreary shower of rain. The downpour pursued them to the coast, where they pitched the tent that night, and persisted through the whole week, through sodden landscapes that Harry found bleak and depressing. He could think only of the Deathly Hallows. It was as though a flame had been lit inside him that nothing, not Hermione's flat disbelief nor Ron's persistent doubts, could

extinguish. And yet the fiercer the longing for the Hallows burned inside him, the less joyful it made him. He blamed Ron and Hermione: Their determined indifference was as bad as the relentless rain for dampening his spirits, but neither could erode his certainty, which remained absolute. Harry's belief in and longing for the Hallows consumed him so much that he felt isolated from the other two and their obsession with the Horcruxes.

"Obsession?" said Hermione in a low fierce voice, when Harry was careless enough to use the word one evening, after Hermione had told him off for his lack of interest in locating more Horcruxes. "We're not the one with an obsession, Harry! We're the ones trying to do what Dumbledore wanted us to do!"

But he was impervious to the veiled criticism. Dumbledore had left the sign of the Hallows for Hermione to decipher, and he had also, Harry remained convinced of it, left the Resurrection Stone hidden in the golden Snitch. Neither can live while the other survives…master of Death…Why didn't Ron and Hermione understand?

"'The last enemy shall be destroyed is death,'" Harry quoted calmly.

"I thought it was You-Know-Who we were supposed to be fighting?" Hermione retorted, and Harry gave up on her.

Even the mystery of the silver doe, which the other two insisted on discussing, seemed less important to Harry now, a vaguely interesting sideshow. The only other thing that mattered to him was that his scar had begun to prickle again, although he did all he could to hide this fact from the other two. He sought solitude whenever it happened, but was disappointed by what he saw. The visions he and Voldemort were sharing had changed in quality; they had become blurred, shifting as though they were moving in and out of focus. Harry was just able to make out the indistinct features of an object that looked like a skull, and something like a mountain that was more shadow than substance. Used to images sharp as reality, Harry was

disconcerted by the change. He was worried that the connection between himself and Voldemort had been damaged, a connection that he both feared and, whatever he had told Hermione, prized. Somehow Harry connected these unsatisfying, vague images with the destruction of his wand, as if it was the blackthorn wand's fault that he could no longer see into Voldemort's mind as well as before.

As the weeks crept on, Harry could not help but notice, even through his new self-absorption, that Ron seemed to be taking charge. Perhaps because he was determined to make up for having walked out on them, perhaps because Harry's descent into listlessness galvanized his dormant leadership qualities, Ron was the one now encouraging and exhorting the other two into action.

"Three Horcruxes left," he kept saying. "We need a plan of action, come on! Where haven't we looked? Let's go through it again. The orphanage…"

Diagon Alley, Hogwarts, the Riddle House, Borgin and Burkes, Albania, every place that they knew Tom Riddle had ever lived or worked, visited or murdered, Ron and Hermione raked over them again, Harry joining in only to stop Hermione pestering him. He would have been happy to sit alone in silence, trying to read Voldemort's thoughts, to find out more about the Elder Wand, but Ron insisted on journeying to ever more unlikely places simply, Harry was aware, to keep them moving.

"You never know," was Ron's constant refrain. "Upper Flagley is a Wizarding village, he might've wanted to live there. Let's go and have a poke around."

These frequent forays into Wizarding territory brought them within occasional sight of Snatchers.

"Some of them are supposed to be as bad as Death Eaters," said Ron. "The lot that got me were a bit pathetic, but Bill recons some of them are really dangerous. They said on Potterwatch –"

“On what?” said Harry.

“Potterwatch, didn’t I tell you that’s what it was called? The program I keep trying to get on the radio, the only one that tells the truth about what’s going on! Nearly all of the programs are following You-Know-Who’s line, all except Potterwatch, I really want you to hear it, but it’s tricky tuning in…”

Ron spent evening after evening using his wand to beat out various rhythms on top of the wireless while the dials whirled. Occasionally they would catch snatches of advice on how to treat dragonpox, and once a few bars of “A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love.” While he taped, Ron continued to try to hit on the correct password, muttering strings of random words under his breath.

“They’re normally something to do with the Order,” he told them. “Bill had a real knack for guessing them. I’m bound to get one in the end…”

But not until March did luck favor Ron at last. Harry was sitting in the tent entrance, on guard duty, staring idly at a clump of grape hyacinths that had forced their way through the chilly ground, when Ron shouted excitedly from inside the tent. “I’ve got it, I’ve got it! Password was ‘Albus’! Get in here, Harry.”

Roused for the first time in days from his contemplation of the Deathly Hallows, Harry hurried back inside the tent to find Ron and Hermione kneeling on the floor beside the little radio. Hermione, who had been polishing the sword of Gryffindor just for something to do, was sitting open-mouthed, staring at the tiny speaker, from which a most familiar voice was issuing.

“…apologize for our temporary absence from the airwaves, which was due to a number of house calls in our area by those charming Death Eaters.”

“But that’s Lee Jordan!” said Hermione.

“I know!” beamed Ron. “Cool, eh?”

“…now found ourselves another secure location,” Lee was saying, “and I’m pleased to tell you that two of our regular contributors have joined me here this evening. Evening, boys!”

“Hi.”

“Evening, River.”

“‘River’ that’s Lee,” Ron explained. “They’ve all got code names, but you can usually tell –”

“Shh!” said Hermione.

“But before we hear from Royal and Romulus,” Lee went on, “let’s take a moment to report those deaths that the Wizarding Wireless Network News and Daily Prophet don’t think important enough to mention. It is with great regret that we inform our listeners of the murders of Ted Tonks and Dirk Cresswell.”

Harry felt a sick, swooping in his belly. He, Ron, and Hermione gazed at one another in horror.

“A goblin by the name of Gornuk was also killed. It is believed that Muggle-born Dean Thomas and a second goblin, both believed to have been traveling with Tonks, Cresswell, and Gornuk, may have escaped. If Dean is listening, or if anyone has any knowledge of his whereabouts, his parents and sisters are desperate for news.”

“Meanwhile, in Gaddley, a Muggle family of five has been found dead in their home. Muggle authorities are attributing their deaths to a gas leak, but members of the Order of the Phoenix inform me that it was the Killing Curse – more evidence, as if it were needed, of the fact that Muggle slaughter is becoming little more than a recreational sport under the new regime.”

“Finally, we regret to inform our listeners that the remains of Bathilda Bagshot have been discovered in Godric’s Hollow. The evidence is that she died several months ago. The Order of the Phoenix informs us that her body showed unmistakable signs of injuries inflicted by Dark Magic.”

“Listeners, I’d like to invite you now to join us in a minute’s silence in memory of Ted Tonks, Dirk Cresswell, Bathilda Bagshot, Gornuk, and the unnamed, but no less regretted, Muggles murdered by the Death Eaters.”

Silence fell, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione did not speak. Half of Harry yearned to hear more, half of him was afraid of what might come next. It was the first time he had felt fully connected to the outside world for a long time.

“Thank you,” said Lee’s voice. “And now we can return to regular contributor Royal, for an update on how the new Wizarding order is affecting the Muggle world.”

“Thanks, River,” said an unmistakable voice, deep, measured, reassuring.

“Kingsley!” burst out Ron.

“We know!” said Hermione, hushing him.

“Muggles remain ignorant of the source of their suffering as they continue to sustain heavy casualties,” said Kingsley. “However, we continue to hear truly inspirational stories of wizards and witches risking their own safety to protect Muggle friends and neighbors, often without the Muggles’ knowledge. I’d like to appeal to all our listeners to emulate their example, perhaps by casting a protective charm over any Muggle dwellings in your street. Many lives could be saved if such simple measures are taken.”

“And what would you say, Royal, to those listeners who reply that in these dangerous times, it should be ‘Wizards first’? asked Lee.”

“I’d say that it’s one short step from ‘Wizards first’ to ‘Purebloods first,’ and then to ‘Death Eaters,’” replied Kingsley. “We’re all human, aren’t we? Every human life is worth the same, and worth saving.”

“Excellently put, Royal, and you’ve got my vote for Minister of Magic if we ever get out of this mess,” said Lee. “And now, over to Romulus for our popular feature ‘Pals of Potter.’”

“Thanks, River,” said another very familiar voice. Ron started to speak, but Hermione forestalled him in a whisper.

“We know it’s Lupin!”

“Romulus, do you maintain, as you have every time you’ve appeared on our program, that Harry Potter is still alive?”

“I do,” said Lupin firmly. “There is no doubt at all in my mind that his death would be proclaimed as widely as possible by the Death Eaters if it had happened, because it would strike a deadly blow at the morale of those resisting the new regime. ‘The Boy Who Lived’ remains a symbol of everything for which we are fighting: the triumph of good, the power of innocence, the need to keep resisting.”

A mixture of gratitude and shame welled up in Harry. Had Lupin forgiven him, then, for the terrible things he had said when they had last met?

“And what would you say to Harry if you knew he was listening, Romulus?”

“I’d tell him we’re all with him in spirit,” said Lupin, then hesitated slightly, “And I’d tell him to follow his instincts, which are good and nearly always right.”

Harry looked at Hermione, whose eyes were full of tears.

“Nearly always right,” she repeated.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you?” said Ron in surprise. “Bill told me Lupin’s living with Tonks again! And apparently she’s getting pretty big too…”

“…and our usual update on those friends of Harry Potter’s who are suffering for their allegiance?” Lee was saying.

“Well, as regular listeners will know, several of the more outspoken supporters of Harry Potter have now been imprisoned, including Xenophilius Lovegood, erstwhile editor of The Quibbler,” said Lupin.

“At least he’s still alive!” muttered Ron.

“We have also heard within the last few hours that Rubeus Hagrid” – all three of them gasped, and so nearly missed the rest of the sentence – “well-known gamekeeper at Hogwarts School, has narrowly escaped arrest within the grounds of Hogwarts, where he is rumored to have hosted a ‘Support Harry Potter’ party in his house. However, Hagrid was not taken into custody, and is, we believe, on the run.”

“I suppose it helps, when escaping from Death Eaters, if you’ve got a sixteen-foot-high half brother?” asked Lee.

“It would tend to give you an edge,” agreed Lupin gravely. “May I just add that while we here at Potterwatch applaud Hagrid’s spirit, we would urge even the most devoted of Harry’s supporters against following Hagrid’s lead. ‘Support Harry Potter’ parties are unwise in the present climate.”

“Indeed they are, Romulus,” said Lee, “so we suggest that you continue to show your devotion to the man with the lightning scar by listening to Potterwatch! And now let’s move to news concerning the wizard who is proving just as elusive as Harry Potter. We like to refer

to him as the Chief Death Eater, and here to give his views on some of the more insane rumors circulating about him, I'd like to introduce a new correspondent. Rodent?"

"'Rodent'?" said yet another familiar voice, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione cried out together:"Fred!"

"No – is it George?"

"It's Fred, I think," said Ron, leaning in closer, as whichever twin it was said, "I'm not being 'Rodent,' no way, I told you I wanted to be 'Rapier'!"

"Oh, all right then, 'Rapier,' could you please give us your take on the various stories we've been hearing about the Chief Death Eater?"

"Yes, River, I can," said Fred. "As our listeners will know, unless they've taken refuge at the bottom of a garden pond or somewhere similar, You-Know-Who's strategy of remaining in the shadows is creating a nice little climate of panic. Mind you, if all the alleged sightings of him are genuine, we must have a good nineteen You-Know-Whos running around the place."

"Which suits him, of course," said Kingsley. "The air of mystery is creating more terror than actually showing himself."

"Agreed," said Fred. "So, people, let's try and calm down a bit. Things are bad enough without inventing stuff as well. For instance, this new idea that You-Know-Who can kill people with a single glance from his eyes. That's a basilisk, listeners. One simple test: Check whether the thing that's glaring at you has got legs. If it has, it's safe to look into its eyes, although if it really is You-Know-Who, that's still likely to be the last thing you ever do."

For the first time in weeks and weeks, Harry was laughing: He could feel the weight of tension leaving him.

“And the rumors that he keeps being sighted abroad?” asked Lee.

“Well, who wouldn’t want a nice little holiday after all the hard work he’s been putting in?” asked Fred. “Point is, people, don’t get lulled into a false sense of security, thinking he’s out of the country. Maybe he is, maybe he isn’t, but the fact remains he can move faster than Severus Snape confronted with shampoo when he wants to, so don’t count on him being a long way away if you’re planning to take any risks. I never thought I’d hear myself say it, but safety first!”

“Thank you very much for those wise words, Rapier,” said Lee. “Listeners, that brings us to the end of another Potterwatch. We don’t know when it will be possible to broadcast again, but you can be sure we shall be back. Keep twiddling those dials: The next password will be ‘Mad-Eye.’ Keep each other safe: Keep faith. Good night.”

The radio’s dial twirled and the lights behind the tuning panel went out. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were still beaming. Hearing familiar, friendly voices was an extraordinary tonic; Harry had become so used to their isolation he had nearly forgotten that other people were resisting Voldemort. It was like waking from a long sleep.

“Good, eh?” said Ron happily.

“Brilliant,” said Harry.

“It’s so brave of them,” sighed Hermione admiringly. “If they were found …”

“Well, they keep on the move, don’t they?” said Ron. “Like us.”

“But did you hear what Fred said?” asked Harry excitedly; now the broadcast was over, his thoughts turned around toward his all consuming obsession. “He’s abroad! He’s still looking for the Wand, I knew it!”

“Harry – ”

“Come on, Hermione, why are you so determined not to admit it? Vol – ”

“HARRY, NO!”

“ – demort’s after the Elder Wand!”

“The name’s Taboo!” Ron bellowed, leaping to his feet as a loud crack sounded outside the tent. “I told you, Harry, I told you, we can’t say it anymore – we’ve got to put the protection back around us – quickly – it’s how they find – ”

But Ron stopped talking, and Harry knew why. The Sneakoscope on the table had lit up and begun to spin; they could hear voices coming nearer and nearer: rough, excited voices. Ron pulled the Deluminator out of his pocket and clicked it: Their lamps went out.

“Come out of there with your hands up!” came a rasping voice through the darkness. “We know you’re in there! You’ve got half a dozen wands pointing at you and we don’t care who we curse!”

Chapter 23 Malfoy Manor

Harry looked around at the other two, now mere outlines in the darkness. He saw Hermione point her wand, set toward the outside, but into his face; there was a bang, a burst of white light, and he buckled in agony, unable to see. He could feel his face swelling rapidly under his hands as heavy footfalls surrounded him.

"Get up, vermin."

Unknown hands dragged Harry roughly off the ground, before he could stop them, someone had rummaged through his pockets and removed the blackthorn wand. Harry clutched at his excruciatingly painful face, which felt unrecognizable beneath his fingers, tight, swollen, and puffy as though he had suffered some violent allergic reaction. His eyes had been reduced to slits through which he could barely see; his glasses fell off as he was bundled out of the tent: all he could make out were the blurred shapes of four or five people wrestling Ron and Hermione outside too.

"Get – off – her!" Ron shouted. There was the unmistakable sound of knuckles hitting flesh: Ron grunted in pain and Hermione screamed, "No! Leave him alone, leave him alone!"

"Your boyfriend's going to have worse than that done to him if he's on my list," said the horribly familiar, rasping voice. "Delicious girl… what a treat… I do enjoy the softness of the skin…."

Harry's stomach turned over. He knew who this was, Fenrit Greyback, the werewolf who was permitted to wear Death Eater robes in return for his hired savagery.

"Search the tent!" said another voice.

Harry was thrown face down onto the ground. A thud told him that Ron had been cast down beside him. They could hear footsteps and

crashes; the men were pushing over chairs inside the tent as they searched.

“Now, let’s see who we’ve got,” said Greyback’s gloating voice from overhead, and Harry was rolled over onto his back. A beam of wand light fell onto his face and Greyback laughed.

“I’ll be needing butterbeer to wash this one down. What happened to you, ugly?“Harry did not answer immediately.

“I said,“ repeated Greyback, and Harry received a blow to the diaphragm that made him double over in pain. ”what happened to you?““Stung.” Harry muttered. “Been Stung.”

“Yeah, looks like it.” said a second voice.

“What’s your name?” snarled Greyback.

“Dudley.” said Harry.

“And your first name?”

“I – Vernon. Vernon Dudley.”

“Check the list, Scabior.” said Greyback, and Harry head him move sideways to look down at Ron, instead. “And what about you, ginger?”

“Stan Shunpike.” said Ron.

“Like ‘ell you are.” said the man called Scabior. “We know Stan Shunpike, ‘e’s put a bit of work our way.”

There was another thud.

“I’b Bardy,” said Ron, and Harry could tell that his mouth was full of blood. “Bardy Weasley.”

“A Weasley?“ rasped Greyback. ”So you’re related to blood traitors even if you’re not a Mudblood. And lastly, your pretty little friend…“ The relish in his voice made Harry’s flesh crawl.

“Easy, Greyback.” said Scabior over the jeering of the others.

“Oh, I’m not going to bite just yet. We’ll see if she’s a bit quicker at remembering her name than Barny. Who are you, girly?”

“Penelope Clearwater.” said Hermione. She sounded terrified, but convincing.

“What’s your blood status?”

“Half-Blood.” said Hermione.

“Easy enough to check,” said Scabior. “But the ‘ole lot of ‘em look like they could still be ‘ogwarts age – ”

“We’b lebt,” said Ron.

“Left, ‘ave you, ginger?” said Scabior. “And you decided to go camping? And you thought, just for a laugh, you’d use the Dark Lords name?”

“Nod a laugh,” said Ron. “Aggiden.”

“Accident?” There was more jeering laughter.

“You know who used to like using the Dark Lord’s name, Weasley?” growled Greyback, “The Order of the Phoenix. Mean anything to you?”

“Doh.”

“Well, they don’t show the Dark Lord proper respect, so the name’s been Tabooed. A few Order members have been tracked that way. We’ll see. Bind them up with the other two prisoners!”

Someone yanked Harry up by the hair, dragged him a short way, pushed him down into a sitting position, then started binding him back-to-back with other people. Harry was still half blind, barely able to see anything through his puffed-up eyes. When at last the man tying then had walked away, Harry whispered to the other prisoners.

"Anyone still got a wand?"

"No." Said Ron and Hermione from either side of him.

"This is all my fault. I said the name. I'm sorry – "

"Harry?"

It was a new, but familiar voice. and it came from directly behind Harry, from the person tied to Hermione's left.

"Dean?"

"It is you! If they find out who they've got -! They're Snatchers, they're only looking for truants to sell for gold – ""Not a bad little haul for one night." Greyback was saying, as a pair of hobnailed boots marched close by Harry and they heard more crashes from inside the tent. "A Mudblood, a runaway goblin, and these truants. You checked their names on the list yet, Scabior?" he roared.

"Yeah. There's no Vernon Dudley un 'ere, Greyback."

"Interesting," said Greyback. "That's interesting."

He crouched down beside Harry, who saw, through the infinitesimal gap left between his swollen eyelids, a face covered in matted gray hair and whiskers, with pointed brown teeth and sores in the corners of his mouth. Greyback smelled as he had done at the top of the tower where Dumbledore had died: of dirt, sweat, and blood.

“So you aren’t wanted, then, Vernon? Or are you on that list under a different name? What house were you in at Hogwarts?““Slytherin,” said Harry automatically.

“Funny ‘ow they all thinks we wants to ‘ear that.” leered Scabior out of the shadows. “But none of ‘em can tell us where the common room is.”

“It’s in the dungeons.” said Harry clearly. “You enter through the wall. It’s full of skulls and stuff and its under the lake, so the light’s all green,”

There was a short pause.

“Well, well, looks like we really ‘ave caught a little Slytherin.” said Scabior. “Good for you, Vernon, ‘cause there ain’t a lot of Mudblood Slytherins. Who’s your father?”

“He works at the Ministry,” Harry lied. He knew that his whole story would collapse with the smallest investigation, but on the other hand, he only had until his face regained its usual appearance before the game was up in any case. “Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes.”

“You know what, Greyback,“ said Scabior. ”I think there is a Dudley in there.“Harry could barely breathe: Could luck, sheer luck, get them safely out of this?

“Well, well.” said Greyback, and Harry could hear the tiniest note of trepidation in that callous voice, and knew that Greyback was wondering whether he had just indeed just attacked and bound the son of a Ministry Official. Harry’s heart was pounding against the ropes around his ribs; he would not have been surprised to know that Greyback could see it. “If you’re telling the truth, ugly, you’ve got nothing to fear from a trip to the Ministry. I expect your father’ll reward us just for picking you up.”

“But,” said Harry, his mouth bone dry, “if you just let us – ”

“Hey!“ came a shout from inside the tent. “Look at this. Greyback!”

A dark figure came bustling toward them, and Harry saw a glint of silver to the light of their wands. They had found Gryffindor’s sword.

“Ve-e-ery nice,” said Greyback appreciatively, taking it from his companion. “Oh, very nice indeed. Looks goblin-made, that. Where did you get something like this?”

“It’s my father’s,” Harry lied, hoping against hope that it was too dark for Greyback to see the name etched just below the hilt. “We borrowed it to cut firewood – ”

“‘ang on a minute, Greyback! Look at this, in the Prophet!“As Scabior said it, Harry’s scar, which was stretched tight across his distended forehead, burned savagely. More clearly than he could make out anything around him, he saw a towering building, a grim fortress, jet-black and forbidding: Voldemort’s thoughts had suddenly become Razor-Sharp again; he was gliding toward the gigantic building with a sense of calmly euphoric purpose…So close… So close… With a huge effort of will Harry closed his mind to Voldemort’s thoughts, pulling himself back to where he sat, tied to Ron, Hermione, Dean, and Griphook in the darkness, listening to Greyback and Scabior.

“‘Hermione Granger,“ Scabior was saying, ”the Mudblood who is known to be traveling with ‘arry Potter.“Harry’s scar burned in the silence, but he made a supreme effort to keep himself present, nor to slip into Voldemort’s mind. He heard the creak of Greyback’s boots as he crouched down, in front of Hermione.

“you know what, little girly? This picture looks a hell of a lot like you.”

“It isn’t! It isn’t me!”

Hermione’s terrified squeak was as good as a confession.

“… known to be traveling with Harry Potter,“ repeated Greyback quietly.

A stillness had settled over the scene. Harry’s scar was Exquisitely painful, but he struggled with all his strength against the pull of Voldemort’s thoughts. It had never been so important to remain in his own right mind.

“Well, this changed things, doesn’t it?” whispered Greyback. Nobody spoke: Harry sensed the gang of Snatchers watching, frozen, and felt Hermione’s arm trembling against his. Greyback got up and took a couple of steps to where Harry sat, crouching down again to stare closely at his misshapen features.

“What’s that on your forehead, Vernon?” he asked softly, his breath foul in Harry’s nostrils as he pressed a filthy finger to the taught scar.

“Don’t touch it! Harry yelled; he could not stop himself, he thought he might be sick from the pain of it.”

“I thought you wore glasses, Potter?” breathed Greyback.

“I found glasses!” yelped one of the Snatchers skulking in the background. “There was glasses in the tent, Greyback, wait – ”

And seconds later Harry’s glasses had been rammed back onto his face. The Snatchers were closing in now, peering at him.

“It Is!” rasped Greyback. “We’ve caught Potter!”

They all took several steps backward, stunned by what they had done. Harry, still fighting to remain present in his own splitting head, could think of nothing to say. Fragmented visions were breaking across the surface of his mind -

–He was hiding around the high walls of the black fortress–No, he was Harry, tied up and wandless, in grave danger—looking up, up to

the topmost window, the highest tower–He was Harry, and they were discussing his fate in low voices—Time to fly…

“… To the Ministry?”

“To hell with the Ministry.” growled Greyback. “They’ll take the credit, and we won’t get a look in. I say we take him straight to You-Know-Who.”

“Will you summon ‘im? ‘ere?“ said Scabior, sounding awed, terrified.

“No,” snarled Greyback, “I haven’t got – they say he’s using the Malfoy’s place as a base. We’ll take the boy there.”

Harry thought he knew why Greyback was not calling Voldemort. The werewolf might be allowed to wear Death Eater robes when they wanted to use him, but only Voldemort’s inner circle were branded with the Dark Mark: Greyback had not been granted this highest honor.

Harry’s scar seared again –

– and he rose into the night, flying straight up to the windows at the very top of the tower –“… completely sure it’s him? ‘Cause if it ain’t, Greyback, we’re dead.”

“Who’s in charge here?” roared Greyback, covering his moment of inadequacy. “I say that’s Potter, and him plus his wand, that’s two hundred thousand Galleons right there! But if you’re too gutless to come along, any of you, it’s all for me, and with any luck, I’ll get the girl thrown in!”

– The window was the merest slit in the black rock, not big enough for a man to enter…. A skeletal figure was just visible through it, curled beneath a blanket…. Dead, or sleeping…?

“All right!” said Scabior. “All right, we’re in! And what about the rest of ‘em, Greyback, what’ll we do with ‘em?”

“Might as well take the lot. We’ve got two Mudbloods, that’s another ten Galleons. Give me the sword as well. If they’re rubies, that’s another small fortune right there.“The prisoners were dragged to their feet. Harry could hear Hermione’s breathing, fast and terrified.

“Grab hold and make it tight. I’ll do Potter!“ said Greyback, seizing a fistful of Harry’s hair; Harry could feel his long yellow nails scratching his scalp. ”On three! One – two – three – “They Disapparated, pulling the prisoners with them. Harry struggled, trying to throw off Greyback’s hand, but it was hopeless: Ron and Hermione were squeezed tightly against him on either side; he could not separate from the group, and as the breath was squeezed out of him his scar seared more painfully still — as he forced himself through the slit of a window like a snake and landed, lightly as vapor inside the cell-like room –The prisoners lurched into one another as they landed in a country lane. Harry’s eyes, still puffy, took a moment to acclimatize, then he saw a pair of wrought-iron gates at the foot of what looked like a long drive. He experienced the tiniest trickle of relief. The worst had not happened yet: Voldemort was not here. He was, Harry knew, for he was fighting to resist the vision, in some strange, fortresslike place, at the top of a tower. How long it would take Voldemort to get to this place, once he knew that Harry was here, was another matter….

One of the Snatchers strode to the gates and shook them.

“How do we get in? They’re locked, Greyback, I can’t – blimey!”

He whipped his hands away in fright. The iron was contorting, twisting itself out of the abstract furls and coils into a frightening face, which spoke in a clanging, echoing voice. “State your purpose!”

“We’ve got Potter!“ Greyback roared triumphantly. ”We’ve captured Harry Potter!“The gates swung open.

“Come on!“ said Greyback to his men, and the prisoners were shunted through the gates and up the drive, between high hedges that muffled their footsteps. Harry saw a ghostly white shape above him, and realized it was an albino peacock. He stumbled and was dragged onto his feet by Greyback; now he was staggering along sideways, tied back-to-back to the four other prisoner. Closing his puffy eyes, he allowed the pain in his scar to overcome him for a moment, wanting to know what Voldemort was doing, whether he knew yet that Harry was caught….

The emaciated figure stirred beneath its thin blanket and rolled over toward him, eyes opening in a skull of a face…. The frail man sat up, great sunken eyes fixed upon him, upon Voldemort, and then he smiled. Most of his teeth were gone….

“So, you have come. I thought you would… one day. But your journey was pointless. I never had it.”

“You lie!”

As Voldemort’s anger throbbed inside him, Harry’s scar threatened to burst with pain, and he wrenched his mind back to his own body, fighting to remain present as the prisoners were pushed over gravel.

Light spilled out over all of them.

“What is this?” said a woman’s cold voice.

“We’re here to see He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!” rasped Greyback.

“Who are you?”

“You know me!” There was resentment in the werewolf’s voice. “Fenrit Greyback! We’ve caught Harry Potter!”

Greyback seized Harry and dragged him around to face the light, forcing the other prisoners to shuffle around too.

“I know ‘es swollen, ma’am, but it’s ‘im!” piped up Scabior. “If you look a bit closer, you’ll see ‘is scar. And this ‘ere, see the girl? The Mudblood who’s been traveling around with ‘im, ma’am. There’s no doubt it’s ‘im, and we’ve got ‘is wand as well! ‘Ere, ma’am – ”

Through his puffy eyelids Harry saw Narcissa Malfoy scrutinizing his swollen face. Scabior thrust the blackthorn wand at her. She raised her eyebrows.

“Bring them in,” she said.

Harry and the others were shoved and kicked up broad stone steps into a hallway lined with portraits.

“Follow me,” said Narcissa, leading the way across the hall. “My son, Draco, is home for his Easter holidays. If that is Harry Potter, he will know.”

The drawing room dazzled after the darkness outside; even with his eyes almost closed Harry could make out the wide proportions of the room. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, more portraits against the dark purple walls. Two figures rose from chairs in front of an ornate marble fireplace as the prisoners were forced into the room by the Snatchers.

“What is this?”

The dreadfully familiar, drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy fell on Harry’s ears. He was panicking now. He could see no way out, and it was easier, as his fear mounted, to block out Voldemort’s thoughts, though his scar was still burning.

“They say they’ve got Potter,“ said Narcissa’s cold voice. ”Draco, come here.“Harry did not dare look directly at Draco, but saw him obliquely; a figure slightly taller than he was, rising from an armchair, his face a pale and pointed blur beneath white-blond hair.

Greyback forced the prisoners to turn again so as to place Harry directly beneath the chandelier.

“Well, boy?” rasped the werewolf.

Harry was facing a mirror over the fireplace, a great gilded thing in an intricately scrolled frame. Through the slits of his eyes he saw his own reflection for the first time since leaving Grimmauld Place.

His face was huge, shiny, and pink, every feature distorted by Hermione’s jinx. His black hair reached his shoulders and there was a dark shadow around his jaw. Had he not known that it was he who stood there, he would have wondered who was wearing his glasses. He resolved not to speak, for his voice was sure to give him away; yet he still avoided eye contact with Draco as the latter approached.

“Well, Draco?” said Lucius Malfoy. He sounded avid. “Is it? Is it Harry Potter?”

“I can’t – I can’t be sure,“ said Draco. He was keeping his distance from Greyback, and seemed as scared of looking at Harry as Harry was of looking at him.

“But look at him carefully, look! Come closer!”

Harry had never heard Lucius Malfoy so excited.

“Draco, if we are the ones who hand Potter over to the Dark Lord, everything will be forgiv – ”

“Now, we won’t be forgetting who actually caught him, I hope Mr. Malfoy?” said Greyback menacingly.

“Of course not, of course not!“ said Lucius impatiently. He approached Harry himself, came so close that Harry could see the usually languid, pale face in sharp detail even through his swollen

eyes. With his face a puffy mask, Harry felt as though he was peering out from between the bars of a cage.

“What did you do to him?” Lucius asked Greyback. “How did he get into this state?”

“That wasn’t us.”

“Looks more like a Stinging Jinx to me,” said Lucius.

His gray eyes raked Harry’s forehead.

“There’s something there,” he whispered. “it could be the scar, stretched tight….”

“Draco, come here, look properly! What do you think?”

Harry saw Draco’s face up close now, right beside his father’s. They were extraordinarily alike, except that while his father looked beside himself with excitement, Draco’s expression was full of reluctance, even fear.

“I don’t know,” he said, and he walked away toward the fireplace where his mother stood watching.

“We had better be certain, Lucius,“ Narcissa called to her husband in her cold, clear voice. ”Completely sure that it is Potter, before we summon the Dark Lord… They say this is his“ – she was looking closely at the blackthorn wand – ”but it does not resemble Ollivander’s description…. If we are mistaken, if we call the Dark Lord here for nothing… Remember what he did to Rowle and Dolohov?““What about the Mudblood, then?” growled Greyback. Harry was nearly thrown off his feet as the Snatchers forced the prisoners to swivel around again, so that the light fell on Hermione instead.

“Wait,“ said Narcissa sharply. “Yes – yes, she was in Madam Malkin’s with Potter! I saw her picture in the Prophet! Look, Draco, isn’t it the Granger girl?”

“I… maybe… yeah.”

“But then, that’s the Weasley boy!” shouted Lucius, striding around the bound prisoners to face Ron. “It’s them, Potter’s friends – Draco, look at him, isn’t it Arthur Weasley’s son, what’s his name –?”

“Yeah,” said Draco again, his back to the prisoners. “It could be.”

The drawing room door opened behind Harry. A woman spoke, and the sound of the voice wound Harry’s fear to an even higher pitch.

“What is this? What’s happened, Cissy?”

Bellatrix Lestrange walked slowly around the prisoners, and stopped on Harry’s right, staring at Hermione through her heavily lidded eyes, “But surely,” she said quietly, “this is the Mudblood girl? This is Grander?”

“Yes, yes, it’s Granger!” cried Lucius, “And beside her, we think, Potter! Potter and his friends, caught at last!”

“Potter?” shrieked Bellatrix, and she backed away, the better to take in Harry.

“Are you sure? Well then, the Dark Lord must be informed at once!”

She dragged back her left sleeve: Harry saw the Dark Mark burned into the flesh of her arm, and knew that she was about to touch it, to summon her beloved master–“I was about to call him!“ said Lucius, and his hand actually closed upon Bellatrix’s wrist, preventing her from touching the Mark. ”I shall summon him, Bella. Potter has been brought to my house, and it is therefore upon my authority – ““Your authority!” she sneered, attempting to wrench her hand from his

grasp. “You lost your authority when you lost your wand, Lucius! How dare you! Take your hands off me!”

“This is nothing to do with you, you did not capture the boy – ”

“Begging your pardon, Mr. Malfoy,“ interjected Greyback, ”but it’s us that caught Potter, and it’s us that’ll be claiming the gold – ““Gold!” laughed Bellatrix, still attempting to throw off her brother-in-law, her free hand groping in her pocket for her wand. “Take your gold, filthy scavenger, what do I want with gold? I seek only the honor of his – of – ”

She stopped struggling, her dark eyes fixed upon something Harry could not see. Jubilant at her capitulation, Lucius threw her hand from him and ripped up his own sleeve –“STOP!” shrieked Bellatrix, “Do not touch it, we shall all perish if the Dark Lord comes now!”

Lucius froze, his index finger hovering over his own Mark. Bellatrix strode out of Harry’s limited line of vision.

“What is that?” he heard her say.

“Sword,” grunted an out-of-sight Snatcher.

“Give it to me.”

“It’s not yours, missus, it’s mine, I reckon I found it.”

There was a bang and a flash of red light; Harry knew that the Snatcher had been Stunned. There was a roar of anger from his fellows: Scabior drew his wand.

“What d’you think you’re playing at, woman?”

“Stupefy!“ she screamed, “Stupefy!”

They were no match for her, even thought there were four of them against one of her: She was a witch, as Harry knew, with prodigious

skill and no conscience. They fell where they stood, all except Greyback, who had been forced into a kneeling position, his arms outstretched. Out of the corners of his eyes Harry saw Bellatrix bearing down upon the werewolf, the sword of Gryffindor gripped tightly in her hand, her face waxen.

“Where did you get this sword?” she whispered to Greyback as she pulled his wand out of his unresisting grip.

“How dare you?” he snarled, his mouth the only thing that could move as he was forced to gaze up at her. He bared his pointed teeth. “Release me, woman!”

“Where did you find this sword?” she repeated, brandishing it in his face, “Snape sent it to my vault in Gringotts!”

“It was in their tent,” rasped Greyback. “Release me, I say!”

She waved her wand, and the werewolf sprang to his feet, but appeared too wary to approach her. He prowled behind an armchair, his filthy curved nails clutching its back.

“Draco, move this scum outside,” said Bellatrix, indicating the unconscious men. “If you haven’t got the guts to finish them, then leave them in the courtyard for me.”

“Don’t you dare speak to Draco like – ” said Narcissa furiously, but Bellatrix screamed.

“Be quiet! The situation is graver than you can possibly imagine, Cissy! We have a very serious problem!”

She stood, panting slightly, looking down at the sword, examining its hilt. Then she turned to look at the silent prisoners.

“If it is indeed Potter, he must not be harmed,” she muttered, more to herself than to the others. “The Dark Lord wishes to dispose of Potter

himself…. But if he finds out… I must… I must know….”

She turned back to her sister again.

“The prisoners must be placed in the cellar, while I think what to do!”

“This is my house, Bella, you don’t give orders in my – ”

“Do it! You have no idea of the danger we’re in!“ shrieked Bellatrix. She looked frightening, mad; a thin stream of fire issued from her wand and burned a hole in the carpet.

Narcissa hesitated for a moment, then addressed the werewolf.

“Take these prisoners down to the cellar, Greyback.”

“Wait,” said Bellatrix sharply. “All except…. except for the Mudblood.”

Greyback gave a grunt of pleasure.

“No!” shouted Ron. “You can have me, keep me!”

Bellatrix hit him across the face: the blow echoed around the room.

“If she dies under questioning, I’ll take you next,“ she said. ”Blood traitor is next to Mudblood in my book. Take them downstairs, Greyback, and make sure they are secure, but do nothing more to them – yet.“She threw Greyback’s wand back to him, then took a short silver knife from under her robes. She cut Hermione free from the other prisoners, then dragged her by the hair into the middle of the room, while Greyback forced the rest of them to shuffle across to another door, into a dark passageway, his wand held out in front of him, projecting an invisible and irresistible force.

“Reckon she’ll let me have a bit of the girl when she’s finished with her?” Greyback crooned as he forced them along the corridor. “I’d say I’ll get a bite or two, wouldn’t you, ginger?”

Harry could feel Ron shaking. They were forced down a steep flight of stairs, still tied back-to-back and in danger of slipping and breaking their necks at any moment. At the bottom was a heavy door. Greyback unlocked it with a tap of his wand, then forced them into a dank and musty room and left them in total darkness. The echoing bang of the slammed cellar door had not died away before there was a terrible, drawn out scream from directly above them.

“HERMIONE!“ Ron bellowed, and he started to writhe and struggle against the ropes tying them together, so that Harry staggered. “HERMIONE!”

“Be quiet!” Harry said. “Shut up. Ron, we need to work out a way – ”

“HERMIONE! HERMIONE!”

“We need a plan, stop yelling – we need to get these ropes off – ”

“Harry?” came a whisper through the darkness. “Ron? Is that you?”

Ron stopped shouting. There was a sound of movement close by them, then Harry saw a shadow moving closer.

“Harry? Ron?”

“Luna?“

“Yes, it’s me! Oh no, I didn’t want you to be caught!”

“Luna, can you help us get these ropes off?“ said Harry.

“Oh yes, I expect so…. There’s an old nail we use if we need to break anything…. Just a moment…”

Hermione screamed again from overhead, and they could hear Bellatrix screaming too, but her words were inaudible, for Ron shouted again, “HERMIONE! HERMIONE!”

“Mr. Ollivander?“ Harry could hear Luna saying. ”Mr. Ollivander, have you got the nail? If you just move over a little bit… I think it was beside the water jug.“She was back within seconds.

“You’ll need to stay still,” she said.

Harry could feel her digging at the rope’s tough fibers to work the knots free. From upstairs they heard Bellatrix’s voice.

“I’m going to ask you again! Where did you get this sword? Where?““We found it – we found it – PLEASE!” Hermione screamed again; Ron struggled harder than ever, and the rusty nail slipped onto Harry’s wrist.

“Ron, please stay still!” Luna whispered. “I can’t see what I’m doing – ”

“My pocket!” said Ron, “In my pocket, there’s a Deluminator, and it’s full of light!”

A few seconds later, there was a click, and the luminescent spheres the Deluminator had sucked from the lamps in the tent flew into the cellar: Unable to rejoin their sources, they simply hung there, like tiny suns, flooding the underground room with light. Harry saw Luna, all eyes in her white face, and the motionless figure of Ollivander the wandmaker, curled up on the floor in the corner. Craning around, he caught sight of their fellow prisoners: Dean and Griphook the goblin, who seemed barely conscious, kept standing by the ropes that bound him to the humans.

“Oh, that’s much easier, thanks, Ron,” said Luna, and she began hacking at their bindings again. “Hello, Dean!”

From above came Bellatrix’s voice.

“You’re lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it! You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth, tell the truth!“Another terrible

scream–

“HERMIONE!”

“What else did you take? What else have you got? Tell me the truth or, I swear, I shall run you through with this knife!”

“There!”

Harry felt the ropes fall away and turned, rubbing his wrists, to see Ron running around the cellar, looking up at the low ceiling, searching for a trapdoor. Dean, his face bruised and bloody, said “Thanks” to Luna and stood there, shivering, but Griphook sank onto the cellar floor, looking groggy and disoriented, many welts across his swarthy face.

Ron was now trying to Disapparate without a wand.

“There’s no way out, Ron,“ said Luna, watching his fruitless efforts. ”The cellar is completely escape-proof. I tried, at first. Mr. Ollivander has been here for a long time, he’s tried everything.“Hermione was screaming again: The sound went through Harry like physical pain. Barely conscious of the fierce prickling of his scar, he too started to run around the cellar, feeling the walls for he hardly knew what, knowing in his heart that it was useless.

“What else did you take, what else? ANSWER ME! CRUCIO!“Hermione’s screams echoed off the walls upstairs, Ron was half sobbing as he pounded the walls with his fists, and Harry in utter desperation seized Hagrid’s pouch from around his neck and groped inside it: He pulled out Dumbledore’s Snitch and shook it, hoping for he did not know what – nothing happened – he waved the broken halves of the phoenix wand, but they were lifeless – the mirror fragment fell sparkling to the floor, and he saw a gleam of brightest blue –Dumbledore’s eye was gazing at him out of the mirror.

“Help us!” he yelled at it in mad desperation. “We’re in the cellar of Malfoy Manor, help us!”

The eye blinked and was gone.

Harry was not even sure that it had really been there. He tilted the shard of mirror this way and that, and saw nothing reflected there but the walls and ceiling of their prison, and upstairs Hermione was screaming worse than ever, and next to him Ron was bellowing, “HERMIONE! HERMIONE!”

“How did you get into my vault?” they heard Bellatrix scream. “Did that dirty little goblin in the cellar help you?”

“We only met him tonight!” Hermione sobbed. “We’ve never been inside your vault…. It isn’t the real sword! It’s a copy, just a copy!”

“A copy?” screeched Bellatrix. “Oh, a likely story!”

“But we can find out easily!” came Lucius’s voice. “Draco, fetch the goblin, he can tell us whether the sword is real or not!”

Harry dashed across the cellar to where Griphook was huddled on the floor.

“Griphook,” he whispered into the goblin’s pointed ear, “you must tell them that sword’s a fake, they mustn’t know it’s the real one, Griphook, please – ”

He could hear someone scuttling own the cellar steps; next moment, Draco’s shaking voice spoke from behind the door.

“Stand back. Line up against the back wall. Don’t try anything, or I’ll kill you!”

They did as they were bidden; as the lock turned, Ron clicked the Deluminator and the lights whisked back into his pocket, restoring the

cellar's darkness. The door flew open; Malfoy marched inside, wand held out in front of him, pale and determined. He seized the little goblin by the arm and backed out again, dragging Griphook with him. The door slammed shut and at the same moment a loud crack echoed inside the cellar.

Ron clicked the Deluminator. Three balls of light flew back into the air from his pocket, revealing Dobby the house-elf, who had just Apparated into their midst.

"DOB –!"

Harry hit Ron on the arm to stop him shouting, and Ron looked terrified at his mistake. Footsteps crossed the ceiling overhead: Draco marching Griphook to Bellatrix.

Dobby's enormous, tennis-ball shaped eyes were wide; he was trembling from his feet to the tips of his ears. He was back in the home of his old masters, and it was clear that he was petrified.

"Harry Potter," he squeaked in the tiniest quiver of a voice, "Dobby has come to rescue you."

"But how did you –?"

An awful scream drowned Harry's words: Hermione was being tortured again. He cut to the essentials.

"You can Disapparate out of this cellar?" he asked Dobby, who nodded, his ears flapping.

"And you can take humans with you?"

Dobby nodded again.

"Right. Dobby, I want you to grab Luna, Dean, and Mr. Ollivander, and take them – take them to – ""Bill and Fleur's," said Ron. "Shell

Cottage on the outskirts of Tinworth!”

The elf nodded for a third time.

“And then come back,” said Harry. “Can you do that, Dobby?”

“Of course, Harry Potter,” whispered the little elf. He hurried over to Mr. Ollivander, who appeared to be barely conscious. He took one of the wandmaker’s hands in his own, then held out the other to Luna and Dean, neither of whom moved.

“Harry, we want to help you!” Luna whispered.

“We can’t leave you here,” said Dean.

“Go, both of you! We’ll see you at Bill and Fleur’s.”

As Harry spoke, his scar burned worse than ever, and for a few seconds he looked down, not upon the wandmaker, but on another man who was just as old, just as thin, but laughing scornfully.

“Kill me, then. Voldemort, I welcome death! But my death will not bring you what you seek…. There is so much you do not understand…”

He felt Voldemort’s fury, but as Hermione screamed again he shut it out, returning to the cellar and the horror of his own present.

“Go!” Harry beseeched to Luna and Dean. “Go! We’ll follow, just go!”

They caught hold of the elf’s outstretched fingers. There was another loud crack, and Dobby, Luna, Dean, and Ollivander vanished.

“What was that?” shouted Lucius Malfoy from over their heads. “Did you hear that? What was that noise in the cellar?”

Harry and Ron stared at each other.

"Draco – no, call Wormtail! Make him go and check!"

Footsteps crossed the room overhead, then there was silence. Harry knew that the people in the drawing room were listening for more noises from the cellar.

"We're going to have to try and tackle him," he whispered to Ron. They had no choice: The moment anyone entered the room and saw the absence of three prisoners, they were lost. "Leave the lights on," Harry added, and as they heard someone descending the steps outside the door, they backed against the wall on either side of it.

"Stand back," came Wormtail's voice. "Stand away from the door. I'm coming in."

The door flew open. For a split second Wormtail gazed into the apparently empty cellar, ablaze with light from the three miniature suns floating in midair. Then Harry and Ron launched themselves upon him. Ron seized Wormtail's wand arm and forced it upwards. Harry slapped a hand to his mouth, muffling his voice. Silently they struggled: Wormtail's wand emitted sparks; his silver hand closed around Harry's throat.

"What is it, Wormtail?" called Lucius Malfoy from above.

"Nothing!" Ron called back, in a passable imitation of Wormtail's wheezy voice. "All fine!"

Harry could barely breathe.

"You're going to kill me?" Harry choked, attempting to prise off the metal fingers. "After I saved your life? You owe me, Wormtail!"

The silver fingers slackened. Harry had not expected it: He wrenched himself free, astonished, keeping his hand over Wormtail's mouth. He saw the ratlike man's small watery eyes widen with fear and surprise: He seemed just as shocked as Harry at what his hand had done, at

the tiny, merciful impulse it had betrayed, and he continued to struggle more powerfully, as though to undo that moment of weakness.

“And we’ll have that,” whispered Ron, tugging Wormtail’s wand from his other hand.

Wandless, helpless, Pettigrew’s pupils dilated in terror. His eyes had slid from Harry’s face to something else. His own silver fingers were moving inexorably toward his own throat.

“No – ”

Without pausing to think, Harry tried to drag back the hand, but there was no stopping it. The silver tool that Voldemort had given his most cowardly servant had turned upon its disarmed and useless owner; Pettigrew was reaping his reward for his hesitation, his moment of pity; he was being strangled before their eyes.

“No!”

Ron had released Wormtail too, and together he and Harry tried to pull the crushing metal fingers from around Wormtail’s throat, but it was no use. Pettigrew was turning blue.

“Relashio!” said Ron, pointing the wand at the silver hand, but nothing happened; Pettigrew dropped to his knees, and at the same moment, Hermione gave a dreadful scream from overhead. Wormtail’s eyes rolled upward in his purple face; he gave a last twitch, and was still.

Harry and Ron looked at each other, then leaving Wormtail’s body on the floor behind them, ran up the stairs and back into the shadowy passageway leading to the drawing room. Cautiously they crept along it until they reached the drawing room door, which was ajar. Now they had a clear view of Bellatrix looking down at Griphook, who was

holding Gryffindor's sword in his long-fingered hands. Hermione was lying at Bellatrix's feet. She was barely stirring.

"Well?" Bellatrix said to Griphook. "Is it the true sword?"

Harry waited, holding his breath, fighting against the prickling of his scar.

"No," said Griphook. "It is a fake."

"Are you sure?" panted Bellatrix. "Quite sure?"

"Yes," said the goblin.

Relief broke across her face, all tension drained from it.

"Good," she said, and with a casual flick of her wand she slashed another deep cut into the goblin's face, and he dropped with a yell at her feet. She kicked him aside. "And now," she said in a voice that burst with triumph, "we call the Dark Lord!"

And she pushed back her sleeve and touched her forefinger to the Dark Mark.

At once, Harry's scar felt as though it had split open again. His true surroundings vanished: He was Voldemort, and the skeletal wizard before him was laughing toothlessly at him; he was enraged at the summons he felt – he had warned them, he had told them to summon him for nothing less than Potter. If they were mistaken…"Kill me, then!" demanded the old man. "You will not win, you cannot win! That wand will never, ever be yours – "

And Voldemort's fury broke: A burst of green light filled the prison room and the frail old body was lifted from its hard bed and then fell back, lifeless, and Voldemort returned to the window, his wrath barely controllable…. They would suffer his retribution if they had no good reason for calling him back….

“And I think,” said Bellatrix’s voice, “we can dispose of the Mudblood. Greyback, take her if you want her.”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Ron had burst into the drawing room; Bellatrix looked around, shocked; she turned her wand to face Ron instead –“Expelliarmus!” he roared, pointing Wormtail’s wand at Bellatrix, and hers flew into the air and was caught by Harry, who had sprinted after Ron. Lucius, Narcissa, Draco and Greyback wheeled about; Harry yelled, “Stupefy!” and Lucius Malfoy collapsed onto the hearth. Jets of light flew from Draco’s, Narcissa’s, and Greyback’s wands; Harry threw himself to the floor, rolling behind a sofa to avoid them.

“STOP OR SHE DIES!”

Panting, Harry peered around the edge of the sofa. Bellatrix was supporting Hermione, who seemed to be unconscious, and was holding her short silver knife to Hermione’s throat.

“Drop your wands,” she whispered. “Drop them, or we’ll see exactly how filthy her blood is!”

Ron stood rigid, clutching Wormtail’s wand. Harry straightened up, still holding Bellatrix’s.

“I said, drop them!” she screeched, pressing the blade into Hermione’s throat: Harry saw beads of blood appear there.

“All right!” he shouted, and he dropped Bellatrix’s wand onto the floor at his feet, Ron did the same with Wormtail’s. Both raised their hands to shoulder height.

“Good!” she leered. “Draco, pick them up! The Dark Lord is coming, Harry Potter! Your death approaches!”

Harry knew it; his scar was bursting with the pain of it, and he could feel Voldemort flying through the sky from far away, over a dark and stormy sea, and soon he would be close enough to Apparate to them, and Harry could see no way out.

"Now," said Bellatrix softly, as Draco hurried back to her with the wands. "Cissy, I think we ought to tie these little heroes up again, while Greyback takes care of Miss Mudblood. I am sure the Dark Lord will not begrudge you the girl, Greyback, after what you have done tonight."

At the last word there was a peculiar grinding noise from above. All of them looked upward in time to see the crystal chandelier tremble; then, with a creak and an ominous jingling, it began to fall. Bellatrix was directly beneath it; dropping Hermione, she threw herself aside with a scream. The chandelier crashed to the floor in an explosion of crystal and chains, falling on top of Hermione and the goblin, who still clutched the sword of Gryffindor. Glittering shards of crystal flew in all directions; Draco doubled over, his hands covering his bloody face.

As Ron ran to pull Hermione out of the wreckage, Harry took the chance: He leapt over an armchair and wrested the three wands from Draco's grip, pointed all of them at Greyback, and yelled, "Stupefy!" The werewolf was lifted off his feet by the triple spell, flew up to the ceiling and then smashed to the ground.

As Narcissa dragged Draco out of the way of further harm, Bellatrix sprang to her feet, her hair flying as she brandished the silver knife; but Narcissa had directed her wand at the doorway.

"Dobby!" she screamed and even Bellatrix froze. "You! You dropped the chandelier –?"

The tiny elf trotted into the room, his shaking finger pointing at his old mistress.

"You must not hurt Harry Potter," he squeaked.

“Kill him, Cissy!” shrieked Bellatrix, but there was another loud crack, and Narcissa’s wand too flew into the air and landed on the other side of the room.

“You dirty little monkey!” bawled Bellatrix. “How dare you take a witch’s wand, how dare you defy your masters?”

“Dobby has no master!” squealed the elf. “Dobby is a free elf, and Dobby has come to save Harry Potter and his friends!”

Harry’s scar was blinding him with pain. Dimly he knew that they had moments, seconds before Voldemort was with them.

“Ron, catch – and GO!” he yelled, throwing one of the wands to him; then he bent down to tug Griphook out from under the chandelier. Hoisting the groaning goblin, who still clung to the sword, over one shoulder, Harry seized Dobby’s hand and spun on the spot to Disapparate.

As he turned into darkness he caught one last view of the drawing room of the pale, frozen figures of Narcissa and Draco, of the streak of red that was Ron’s hair, and a blue of flying silver, as Bellatrix’s knife flew across the room at the place where he was vanishing –Bill and Fleur’s… Shell Cottage… Bill and Fleur’s…He had disappeared into the unknown; all he could do was repeat the name of the destination and hope that it would suffice to take him there. The pain in his forehead pierced him, and the weight of the goblin bore down upon him; he could feel the blade of Gryffindor’s sword bumping against his back: Dobby’s hand jerked in his; he wondered whether the elf was trying to take charge, to pull them in the right direction, and tried, by squeezing the fingers, to indicate that that was fine with them….

And then they hit solid earth and smelled salty air. Harry fell to his knees, relinquished Dobby’s hand, and attempted to lower Griphook gently to the ground.

“Are you all right?” he said as the goblin stirred, but Griphook merely whimpered.

Harry squinted around through the darkness. There seemed to be a cottage a short way away under the wide starry sky, and he thought he saw movement outside it.

“Dobby, is this Shell Cottage?” he whispered, clutching the two wands he had brought from the Malfoys’, ready to fight if he needed to. “Have we come to the right place? Dobby?”

He looked around. The little elf stood feet from him.

“DOBBY!”

The elf swayed slightly, stars reflected in his wide, shining eyes. Together, he and Harry looked down at the silver hilt of the knife protruding from the elf’s heaving chest.

“Dobby – no – HELP!” Harry bellowed toward the cottage, toward the people moving there. “HELP!”

He did not know or care whether they were wizards or Muggles, friends or foes; all he cared about was that a dark stain was spreading across Dobby’s front, and that he had stretched out his own arms to Harry with a look of supplication. Harry caught him and laid him sideways on the cool grass.

“Dobby, no, don’t die, don’t die – ”

The elf’s eyes found him, and his lips trembled with the effort to form words.

“Harry… Potter…”

And then with a little shudder the elf became quite still, and his eyes were nothing more than great glassy orbs, sprinkled with light from

the stars they could not see.

Chapter 24 The Wandmaker

It was like sinking into an old nightmare; for an instant Harry knelt again beside Dumbledore's body at the foot of the tallest tower at Hogwarts, but in reality he was staring at a tiny body curled upon the grass, pierced by Bellatrix's silver knife. Harry's voice was still saying, "Dobby…Dobby…" even though he knew that the elf had gone where he could not call him back.

After a minute or so he realized that they had, after all, come to the right place, for here were Bill and Fleur, Dean and Luna, gathering around him as he knelt over the elf. "Hermione," he said suddenly. "Where is she?"

"Ron's taken her inside," said Bill. "She'll be all right." Harry looked back down at Dobby. He stretched out a hand and pulled the sharp blade from the elf's body, then dragged off his own jacket and covered Dobby in it like a blanket.

The sea was rushing against the rock somewhere nearby; Harry listened to it while the others talked, discussing matters in which he could take no interest, making decisions, Dean carried the injured Griphook into the house, Fleur hurrying with them; now Bill was really knowing what he was saying. As he did so, he gazed down at the tiny body, and his scar prickled and burned, and in one part of his mind, viewed as if from the wrong end of a long telescope, he saw Voldemort punishing those they had left behind at the Malfoy Manor. His rage was dreadful and yet Harry's grief for Dobby seemed to diminish it, so that it became a distant storm that reached Harry from across a vast, silent ocean.

"I want to do it properly," were the first words of which Harry was fully conscious of speaking. "Not by magic. Have you got a spade?" And shortly afterward he had set to work, alone, digging the grave in the place that Bill had shown him at the end of the garden, between

bushes. He dug with a kind of fury, relishing the manual work, glorying in the non-magic of it, for every drop of his sweat and every blister felt like a gift to the elf who had saved their lives.

His scar burned, but he was master of the pain, he felt it, yet was apart from it. He had learned control at last, learned to shut his mind to Voldemort, the very thing Dumbledore had wanted him to learn from Snape. Just as Voldemort had not been able to possess Harry while Harry was consumed with grief for Sirius, so his thoughts could not penetrate Harry now while he mourned Dobby. Grief, it seemed, drove Voldemort out…though Dumbledore, of course, would have said that it was love.

On Harry dug, deeper and deeper into the hard, cold earth, subsuming his grief in sweat, denying the pain in his scar. In the darkness, with nothing but the sound of his own breath and the rushing sea to keep him company, the things that had happened at the Malfoys' returned to him, the things he had heard came back to him, and understanding blossomed in the darkness…The steady rhythm of his arms beat time with his thoughts. Hallows…Horcruxes…Hallows…Horcruxes…yet no longer burned with that weird, obsessive longing. Loss and fear had snuffed it out. He felt as though he had been slapped awake again.

Deeper and deeper Harry sank into the grave, and he knew where Voldemort had been tonight, and whom he had killed in the topmost cell of Nurmengard, and why…And he thought of Wormtail, dead because of one small unconscious impulse of mercy…Dumbledore had foreseen that…How much more had he known?

Harry lost track of time. He knew only that the darkness had lightened a few degrees when he was rejoined by Ron and Dean. "How's Hermione?"

"Better," said Ron. "Fleur's looking after her." Harry had his retort ready for when they asked him why he had not simply created a

perfect grave with his wand, but he did not need it. They jumped down into the hole he had made with spades of their own and together they worked in silence until the hole seemed deep enough.

Harry wrapped the elf more snuggly in his jacket. Ron sat on the edge of the grave and stripped off his shoes and socks, which he placed on the elf's bare feet. Dean produced a woolen hat, which Harry placed carefully upon Dobby's head, muffling his batlike ears. "We should close his eyes."

Harry had not heard the others coming through the darkness. Bill was wearing a traveling cloak, Fleur a large white apron, from the pocket of which protruded a bottle of what Harry recognized to be Skele-Gro. Hermione was wrapped in a borrowed dressing gown, pale and unsteady on her feet; Ron put an arm around her when she reached him. Luna, who was huddled in one of Fleur's coats, crouched down and placed her fingers tenderly upon each of the elf's eyelids, sliding them over his glassy stare. "There," she said softly. "Now he could be sleeping."

Harry placed the elf into the grave, arranged his tiny limbs so that he might have been resting, then climbed out and gazed for the last time upon the little body. He forced himself not to break down as he remembered Dumbledore's funeral, and the rows and rows of golden chairs, and the Minister of Magic in the front row, the recitation of Dumbledore's achievements, the stateliness of the white marble tomb. He felt that Dobby deserved just as grand a funeral, and yet here the elf lay between bushes in a roughly dug hole. "I think we ought to say something," piped up Luna. "I'll go first, shall I?"

And as everybody looked at her, she addressed the dead elf at the bottom of the grave. "Thank you so much Dobby for rescuing me from that cellar. It's so unfair that you had to die when you were so good and brave. I'll always remember what you did for us. I hope you're happy now."

She turned and looked expectingly at Ron, who cleared his throat and said in a thick voice, “yeah…thanks Dobby.”

“Thanks,” muttered Dean. Harry swallowed. “Good bye Dobby,” he said It was all he could manage, but Luna had said it all for him. Bill raised his wand, and the pile of earth beside the grave rose up into the air and fell neatly upon it, a small, reddish mound. “D’ya mind if I stay here a moment?” He asked the others.

They murmured words he did not catch; he felt gentle pats upon his back, and then they all traipsed back toward the cottage, leaving Harry alone beside the elf.

He looked around: There were a number of large white stones, smoothed by the sea, marking the edge of the flower beds. He picked up one of the largest and laid it, pillowlike, over the place where Dobby’s head now rested. He then felt in his pocket for a wand. There were two in there. He had forgotten, lost track; he could not now remember whose wands these were; he seemed to remember wrenching them out of someone’s hand. He selected the shorter of the two, which felt friendlier in his hand, and pointed it at the rock.

Slowly, under his murmured instruction, deep cuts appeared upon the rock’s surface. He knew that Hermione could have done it more neatly, and probably more quickly, but he wanted to mark the spot as he had wanted to dig the grave. When Harry stood up again, the stone read: HERE LIES DOBBY, A FREE ELF.

He looked at his handiwork for a few more seconds, then walked away, his scar still prickling a little, and his mind full of those things that had come to him in the grave, ideas that had taken shape in the darkness, ideas both fascinating and terrible.

They were all sitting in the living room when he entered the little hall, their attention focused upon Bill, who was talking. The room was light-colored, pretty, with a small fire of driftwood burning brightly in

the fireplace. Harry did not want to drop mud upon the carpet, so he stood in the doorway, listening.

"…lucky that Ginny's on holiday. If she'd been at Hogwarts they could have taken her before we reached her. Now we know she's safe too." He looked around and saw Harry standing there. "I've been getting them all out of the Burrow," he explained. "Moved them to Muriel's. The Death Eaters know Ron's with you now, they're bound to target the family – don't apologize," he added at the sight of Harry's expression. "It was always a matter of time, Dad's been saying so for months. We're the biggest blood traitor family there is."

"How are they protected?" asked Harry. "Fidelius Charm. Dad's Secret-Keeper. And we've done it on this cottage too; I'm Secret-Keeper here. None of us can go to work, but that's hardly the most important thing now. Once Ollivander and Griphook are well enough, we'll move them to Muriel's too. There isn't much room here, but she's got plenty. Griphook's legs are on the mend. Fleur's given him Skele-Growe could probably move them in an hour or – "

"No," Harry said and Bill looked startled. "I need both of them here. I need to talk to them. It's important." He heard the authority of his own voice, the conviction, the voice of purpose that had come to him as he dug Dobby's grave. All of their faces were turned toward him looking puzzled.

"I'm going to wash," Harry told Bill looking down at his hands still covered with mud and Dobby's blood. "Then I'll need to see them, straight away." He walked into the little kitchen, to the basin beneath a window overlooking the sea. Dawn was breaking over the horizon, shell pink and faintly gold, as he washed, again following the train of thought that had come to him in the dark garden…Dobby would never be able to tell them who had sent him to the cellar, but Harry knew what he had seen. A piercing blue eye had looked out of the mirror fragment, and then help had come. Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it.

Harry dried his hands, impervious to the beauty of the scene outside the window and to the murmuring of the others in the sitting room. He looked out over the ocean and felt closer, this dawn, than ever before, closer to the heart of it all.

And still his scar prickled, and he knew that Voldemort was getting there too. Harry understood and yet did not understand. His instinct was telling him one thing, his brain quite another. The Dumbledore in Harry's head smiled, surveying Harry over the tips of his fingers, pressed together as if in prayer.

You gave Ron the Deluminator…You understood him…You gave him a way back…And you understood Wormtail too…You knew there was a bit of regret there, somewhere…And if you knew them…What did you know about me, Dumbledore?

Am I meant to know but not to seek? Did you know how hard I'd feel that? Is that why you made it this difficult? So I'd have time to work that out?

Harry stood quite still, eyes glazed, watching the place where a bright gold ray of dazzling sun was rising over the horizon. Then he looked down at his clean hands and was momentarily surprised to see the cloth he was holding in them. He set it down and returned to the hall, and as he did so, he felt his scar pulse angrily, and then flashed across his mind, swift as the reflection of a dragonfly over water, the outline of a building he knew extremely well.

Bill and Fleur were standing at the foot of the stairs.

"I need to speak to Griphook and Ollivander," Harry said.

"No," said Fleur. "You will 'ave to wait, 'Arry. Zey are both too tired – "

"I'm sorry," he said without heat, "but it can't wait. I need to talk to them now. Privately – and separately. It's urgent."

“Harry, what the hell’s going on?” asked Bill. “You turn up here with a dead house-elf and a half-conscious goblin, Hermione looks as though she’s been tortured, and Ron’s just refused to tell me anything – ”

“We can’t tell you what we’re doing,” said Harry flatly. “You’re in the Order, Bill, you know Dumbledore left us a mission. We’re not supposed to talk about it to anyone else.”

Fleur made an impatient noise, but Bill did not look at her; he was staring at Harry. His deeply scarred face was hard to read. Finally, Bill said, “All right. Who do you want to talk to first?”

Harry hesitated. He knew what hung on his decision. There was hardly any time left; now was the moment to decide: Horcruxes or Hallows?

“Griphook,” Harry said. “I’ll speak to Griphook first.”

His heart was racing as if he had been sprinting and had just cleared an enormous obstacle.

“Up here, then,” said Bill, leading the way.

Harry had walked up several steps before stopping and looking back.

“I need you two as well!” he called to Ron and Hermione, who had been skulking, half concealed, in the doorway of the sitting room.

They both moved into the light, looking oddly relieved.

“How are you?” Harry asked Hermione. “You were amazing – coming up with that story when she was hurting you like that – ”

Hermione gave a weak smile as Ron gave her a one-armed squeeze.

“What are we doing now, Harry?” he asked.

“You’ll see. Come on.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed Bill up the steep stairs onto a small landing. Three doors led off it.

“In here,” said Bill, opening the door into his and Fleur’s room, it too had a view of the sea, now flecked with gold in the sunrise. Harry moved to the window, turned his back on the spectacular view, and waited, his arms folded, his scar prickling. Hermione took the chair beside the dressing table; Ron sat on the arm.

Bill reappeared, carrying the little goblin, whom he set down carefully upon the bed. Griphook grunted thanks, and Bill left, closing the door upon them all.

“I’m sorry to take you out of bed,” said Harry. “How are your legs?”

“Painful,” replied the goblin. “But mending.”

He was still clutching the sword of Gryffindor, and wore a strange look: half truculent, half intrigued. Harry noted the goblin’s sallow skin, his long thin fingers, his black eyes. Fleur had removed his shoes: His long feet were dirty. He was larger than a house-elf, but not by much. His domed head was much bigger than a human’s.

“You probably don’t remember – ” Harry began.

“ – that I was the goblin who showed you to your vault, the first time you ever visited Gringotts?” said Griphook. “I remember, Harry Potter. Even amongst goblins, you are very famous.”

Harry and the goblin looked at each other, sizing each other up. Harry’s scar was still prickling. He wanted to get through this interview with Griphook quickly, and at the same time was afraid of making a false move. While he tried to decide on the best way to approach his request, the goblin broke the silence.

"You buried the elf," he said, sounding unexpectedly rancorous. "I watched you from the window of the bedroom next door."

"Yes," said Harry.

Griphook looked at him out of the corners of his slanting black eyes.

"You are an unusual wizard, Harry Potter."

"In what way?" asked Harry, rubbing his scar absently.

"You dug the grave."

"So?"

Griphook did not answer. Harry rather thought he was being sneered at for acting like a Muggle, but it did not matter to him whether Griphook approved of Dobby's grave or not. He gathered himself for the attack.

"Griphook, I need to ask – "

"You also rescued a goblin."

"What?"

"You brought me here. Saved me."

"Well, I take it you're not sorry?" said Harry a little impatiently.

"No, Harry Potter," said Griphook, and with one finger he twisted the thin black beard upon his chin, "but you are a very odd wizard."

"Right," said Harry. "Well, I need some help, Griphook, and you can give it to me."

The goblin made no sign of encouragement, but continued to frown at Harry as though he had never seen anything like him.

“I need to break into a Gringotts vault.”

Harry had not meant to say it so badly: the words were forced from him as pain shot through his lightning scar and he saw, again, the outline of Hogwarts. He closed his mind firmly. He needed to deal with Griphook first. Ron and Hermione were staring at Harry as though he had gone mad.

“Harry – ” said Hermione, but she was cut off by Griphook.

“Break into a Gringotts vault?” repeated the goblin, wincing a little as he shifted his position upon the bed. “It is impossible.”

“No, it isn’t,” Ron contradicted him. “It’s been done.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “The same day I first met you, Griphook. My birthday, seven years ago.”

“The vault in question was empty at the time,” snapped the goblin, and Harry understood that even though Griphook had let Gringotts, he was offended at the idea of its defenses being breached. “Its protection was minimal.”

“Well, the vault we need to get into isn’t empty, and I’m guessing its protection will be pretty powerful,” said Harry. “It belongs to the Lestranges.”

He saw Hermione and Ron look at each other, astonished, but there would be time enough to explain after Griphook had given his answer.

“You have no chance,” said Griphook flatly. “No chance at all. If you seek beneath our floors, a treasure that was never yours – ”

“Thief, you have been warned, beware – yeah, I know, I remember,” said Harry. “But I’m not trying to get myself any treasure, I’m not trying to take anything for personal gain. Can you believe that?”

The goblin looked slantwise at Harry, and the lightning scar on Harry's forehead prickled, but he ignored it, refusing to acknowledge its pain or its invitation.

"If there was a wizard of whom I would believe that they did not seek personal gain," said Griphook finally, "it would be you, Harry Potter. Goblins and elves are not used to the protection or the respect that you have shown this night. Not from wand-carriers."

"Wand-carriers," repeated Harry: The phrase fell oddly upon his ears as his scar prickled, as Voldemort turned his thoughts northward, and as Harry burned to question Ollivander next door.

"The right to carry a wand," said the goblin quietly, "has long been contested between wizards and goblins."

"Well, goblins can do magic without wands," said Ron.

"That is immaterial! Wizards refuse to share the secrets of wand-lore with other magical beings, they deny us the possibility of extending our powers!"

"Well, goblins won't share any of their magic either," said Ron. "You won't tell us how to make swords and armor the way you do. Goblins know how to work metal in a way wizards have never – "

"It doesn't matter," said Harry, noting Griphook's rising color. "This isn't about wizards versus goblins or any other sort of magical creature – "

Griphook gave a nasty laugh.

"But it is, it is precisely that! As the Dark Lord becomes ever more powerful, your race is set still more firmly above mine! Gringotts falls under Wizarding rule, house-elves are slaughtered, and who amongst the wand-carriers protests?"

"We do!" said Hermione. She had sat up straight, her eyes bright. "We protest! And I'm hunted quite as much as any goblin or elf, Griphook! I'm a Mudblood!"

"Don't call yourself – " Ron muttered.

"Why shouldn't I?" said Hermione. "Mudblood, and proud of it! I've got no higher position under this new order than you have, Griphook! It was me they chose to torture, back at the Malfoys!"

As she spoke, she pulled aside the neck of the dressing gown to reveal the thin cut Bellatrix had made, scarlet against her throat.

"Did you know that it was Harry who set Dobby free?" she asked. "Did you know that we've wanted elves to be freed for years?" (Ron fidgeted uncomfortably on the arm of Hermione's chair.) "You can't want You-Know-Who defeated more than we do, Griphook!"

The goblin gazed at Hermione with the same curiousity he had shown Harry.

"What do you seek within the Lestranges' vault?" he asked abruptly. "The sword that lies inside it is a fake. This is the real one." He looked from one to the other of them. "I think that you already know this. You asked me to lie for you back there."

"But the fake sword isn't the only thing in that vault, is it?" asked Harry. "Perhaps you've seen other things in there?"

His heart was pounding harder than ever. He redoubled his efforts to ignore the pulsing of his scar.

The goblin twisted his beard around his finger again.

"It is against our code to speak of the secrets of Gringotts. We are the guardians of fabulous treasures. We have a duty to the objects placed in our care, which were, so often, wrought by our fingers."

The goblin stroked the sword, and his black eyes roved from Harry to Hermione to Ron and then back again.

“So young,” he said finally, “to be fighting so many.”

“Will you help us?” said Harry. “We haven’t got a hope of breaking in without a goblin’s help. You’re our one chance.”

“I shall… think about it,” said Griphook maddeningly.

“But – ” Ron started angrily; Hermione nudged him in the ribs.

“Thank you,” said Harry.

The goblin bowed his great domed head in acknowledgement, then flexed his short legs.

“I think,” he said, settling himself ostentatiously upon Bill and Fleur’s bed, “that the Skele-Gro has finished its work. I may be able to sleep at last. Forgive me….”

“Yeah, of course,” said Harry, but before leaving the room he leaned forward and took the sword of Gryffindor from beside the goblin. Griphook did not protest, but Harry thought he saw resentment in the goblin’s eyes as he closed the door upon him.

“Little git,” whispered Ron. “He’s enjoying keeping us hanging.”

“Harry,” whispered Hermione, pulling them both away from the door, into the middle of the still-dark landing, “are you saying what I think you’re saying? Are you saying there’s a Horcrux in the Lestranges vault?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “Bellatrix was terrified when she thought we’d been in there, she was beside herself. Why? What did she think we’d seen, what else did she think we might have taken? Something she was petrified You-Know-Who would find out about.”

“But I thought we were looking for places You-Know-Who’s been, places he’s done something important?” said Ron, looking baffled. “Was he ever inside the Lestranges’ vault?”

“I don’t know whether he was ever inside Gringotts,” said Harry. “He never had gold there when he was younger, because nobody left him anything. He would have seen the bank from the outside, though, the first time he ever went to Diagon Alley.”

Harry’s scar throbbed, but he ignored it; he wanted Ron and Hermione to understand about Gringotts before they spoke to Ollivander.

“I think he would have envied anyone who had a key to a Gringotts vault. I think he’d have seen it as a real symbol of belonging to the Wizarding world. And don’t forget, he trusted Bellatrix and her husband. They were his most devoted servants before he fell, and they went looking for him after he vanished. He said it might he came back, I heard him.”

Harry rubbed his scar.

“I don’t think he’d have told Bellatrix it was a Horcrux, though. He never told Lucius Malfoy the truth about the diary. He probably told her it was a treasured possession and asked her to place it in her vault. The safest place in the world for anything you want to hide, Hagrid told me… except for Hogwarts.”

When Harry had finished speaking, Ron shook his head.

“You really understand him.”

“Bits of him,” said Harry. “Bits… I just wish I’d understood Dumbledore as much. But we’ll see. Come on – Ollivander now.”

Ron and Hermione looked bewildered but very impressed as they followed him across the little landing and knocked upon the door

opposite Bill and Fleur's. A weak "Come in!" answered them.

The wandmaker was lying on the twin bed farthest from the window. He had been held in the cellar for more than a year, and tortured, Harry knew, on at least one occasion. He was emaciated, the bones of his face sticking out sharply against the yellowish skin. His great silver eyes seemed vast in their sunken sockets. The hands that lay upon the blanket could have belonged to a skeleton. Harry sat down on the empty bed, beside Ron and Hermione. The rising sun was not visible here. The room faced the cliff-top garden and the freshly dug grave.

"Mr. Ollivander, I'm sorry to disturb you," Harry said.

"My dear boy," Ollivander's voice was feeble. "You rescued us, I thought we would die in that place, I can never thank you… never thank you… enough."

"We were glad to do it."

Harry's scar throbbed. He knew, he was certain, that there was hardly any time left in which to beat Voldemort to his goal, or else to attempt to thwart him. He felt a flutter of panic… yet he had made his decision when he chose to speak to Griphook first. Feigning a calm he did not feel, he groped in the pouch around his neck and took out the two halves of his broken wand.

"Mr. Ollivander, I need some help."

"Anything. Anything." Said the wandmaker weakly.

"Can you mend this? Is it possible?"

Ollivander held out a trembling hand, and Harry placed the two barely connected halves in his palm.

“Holly and phoenix feather,” said Ollivander in a tremulous voice. “Eleven inches. Nice and supple.”

“Yes,” said Harry. “Can you –?”

“No,” whispered Ollivander. “I am sorry, very sorry, but a wand that has suffered this degree of damage cannot be repaired by any means that I know of.”

Harry had been braced to hear it, but it was a blow nevertheless. He took the wand halves back and replaced them in the pouch around his neck. Ollivander stared at the place where the shattered wand had vanished, and did not look away until Harry had taken from his pocket the two wands he had brought from the Malfoys’.

“Can you identify these?” Harry asked.

The wandmaker took the first of the wands and held it close to his faded eyes, rolling it between his knobble-knuckled fingers, flexing it slightly.

“Walnut and dragon heartstring,” he said. “Twelve-and-three-quarter inches. Unyielding. This wand belonged to Bellatrix Lestrange.”

“And this one?”

Ollivander performed the same examination.

“Hawthorn and unicorn hair. Ten inches precisely. Reasonably springy. This was the wand of Draco Malfoy.”

“Was?” repeated Harry. “Isn’t it still his?”

“Perhaps not. If you took it – ”

“ – I did – ”

" – then it may be yours. Of course, the manner of taking matters. Much also depends upon the wand itself. In general, however, where a wand has been won, its allegiance will change."

There was a silence in the room, except for the distant rushing of the sea.

"You talk about wands like they've got feelings," said Harry, "like they can think for themselves."

"The wand chooses the wizard," said Ollivander. "That much has always been clear to those of us who have studied wandlore."

"A person can still use a wand that hasn't chosen them, though?" asked Harry.

"Oh yes, if you are any wizard at all you will be able to channel your magic through almost any instrument. The best results, however, must always come where there is the strongest affinity between wizard and wand. These connections are complex. An initial attraction, and then a mutual quest for experience, the wand learning from the wizard, the wizard from the wand."

The sea gushed forward and backward; it was a mournful sound.

"I took this wand from Draco Malfoy by force," said Harry. "Can I use it safely?"

"I think so. Subtle laws govern wand ownership, but the conquered wand will usually bend its will to its new master."

"So I should use this one?" said Ron, pulling Wormtail's wand out of his pocket and handing it to Ollivander.

"Chestnut and dragon heartstring. Nine-and-a-quarter inches. Brittle. I was forced to make this shortly after my kidnapping, for Peter

Pettigrew. Yes, if you won it, it is more likely to do your bidding, and do it well, than another wand."

"And this holds true for all wands, does it?" asked Harry.

"I think so," replied Ollivander, his protuberant eyes upon Harry's face. "You ask deep questions, Mr. Potter. Wandlore is a complex and mysterious branch of magic."

"So, it isn't necessary to kill the previous owner to take the possession of a wand?" asked Harry.

Ollivander swallowed.

"Necessary? No, I should not say that it is necessary to kill."

"There are legends, though," said Harry, and as his heart rate quickened, the pain in his scar became more intense; he was sure that Voldemort has decided to put his idea into action. "Legends about a wand – or wands – that have been passed from hand to hand by murder."

Ollivander turned pale. Against the snowy pillow he was light gray, and his eyes were enormous, bloodshot, and bulging with what looked like fear.

"Only one wand, I think," he whispered.

"And You-Know-Who is interested in it, isn't he?" asked Harry.

"I – how?" croaked Ollivander, and he looked appealingly at Ron and Hermione for help. "How do you know this?"

"He wanted you to tell him how to overcome the connection between our wands," said Harry.

Ollivander looked terrified.

“He tortured me, you must understand that! The Cruciatus Curse, I – I had no choice but to tell him what I knew, what I guessed!”

“I understand,” said Harry. “You told him about the twin cores? You said he just had to borrow another wizard’s wand?”

Ollivander looked horrified, transfixed, by the amount that Harry knew. He nodded slowly.

“But it didn’t work,” Harry went on. “Mine still beat the borrowed wand. Do you know why that is?”

Ollivander shook his head slowly as he had just nodded.

“I had… never heard of such a thing. Your wand performed something unique that night. The connection of the twin cores is incredibly rare, yet why your wand would have snapped the borrowed wand, I do not know….”

“We were talking about the other wand, the wand that changes hands by murder. When You-Know-Who realized my wand had done something strange, he came back and asked about that other wand, didn’t he?”

“How do you know this?”

Harry did not answer.

“Yes, he asked,” whispered Ollivander. “He wanted to know everything I could tell him about the wand variously known as the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny, or the Elder Wand.”

Harry glanced sideways at Hermione. She looked flabbergasted.

“The Dark Lord,” said Ollivander in hushed and frightened tones, “had always been happy with the wand I made him – yes and phoenix feather, thirteen-and-a-half inches. – until he discovered the

connection of the twin cores. Now he seeks another, more powerful wand, as the only way to conquer yours."

"But he'll know soon, if he doesn't already, that mine's broken beyond repair," said Harry quietly.

"No!" said Hermione, sounding frightened. "He can't know that, Harry, how could he –?"

"Priori Incantatem," said Harry. "We left your wand and the blackthorn wand at the Malfoys', Hermione. If they examine them properly, make them re-create the spells they've cast lately, they'd see that yours broke mine, they'll see that you tried and failed to mend it, and they'll realize that I've been using the blackthorn one ever since."

The little color she had regained since their arrival had drained from her face. Ron gave Harry a reproachful look, and said, "Let's not worry about that now –"

But Mr. Ollivander intervened.

"The Dark Lord no longer seeks the Elder Wand only for your destruction, Mr. Potter. He is determined to possess it because he believes it will make him truly invulnerable."

"And will it?"

"The owner of the Elder Wand must always fear attack," said Ollivander, "but the idea of the Dark Lord in possession of the Deathstick is, I must admit… formidable."

Harry was suddenly reminded of how unsure, when they first met, of how much he liked Ollivander. Even now, having been tortured and imprisoned by Voldemort, the idea of the Dark Wizard in possession of this wand seemed to enthrall him as much as it repulsed him.

“You – you really think this wand exists, then, Mr. Ollivander?” asked Hermione.

“Oh yes,” said Ollivander. “Yes, it is perfectly possible to trace the wand’s course through history. There are gaps, of, course, and long ones, where it vanishes from view, temporarily lost or hidden; but always it resurfaces. It has certain identifying characteristics that those who are learned in wandlore recognize. There are written accounts, some of them obscure, that I and other wandmakers have made it our business to study. They have the ring of authenticity.”

“So you – you don’t think it can be a fairy tale or a myth?” Hermione asked hopefully.

“No,” said Ollivander. “Whether it needs to pass by murder, I do not know. Its history is bloody, but that may be simply due to the fact that it is such a desirable object, and arouses such passions in wizards. Immensely powerful, dangerous in the wrong hands, and an object of incredible fascination to all of us who study the power of wands.”

“Mr. Ollivander,” said Harry, “you told You-Know-Who that Gregorovitch had the Elder Wand, didn’t you?”

Ollivander turned, if possible, even paler. He looked ghostly as he gulped.

“But how – how do you –?”

“Never mind how I know it,” said Harry, closing his eyes momentarily as his scar burned and he saw, for mere seconds, a vision of the main street in Hogsmeade, still dark, because it was so much farther north. “You told You-Know-Who that Gregorovitch had the wand?”

“It was a rumor,” whispered Ollivander. “A rumor, years and years ago, long before you were born I believe Gregorovitch himself started it. You can see how good it would be for business; that he was studying and duplicating the qualities of the Elder Wand!”

“Yes, I can see that,” said Harry. He stood up. “Mr. Ollivander, one last thing, and then we’ll let you get some rest. What do you know about the Deathly Hallows?”

“The – the what?” asked the wandmaker, looking utterly bewildered.

“The Deathly Hallows.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about. Is this still something to do with wands?”

Harry looked into the sunken face and believed that Ollivander was not acting. He did not know about the Hallows.

“Thank you,” said Harry. “Thank you very much. We’ll leave you to get some rest now.”

Ollivander looked stricken.

“He was torturing me!” he gasped. “The Cruciatus Curse… you have no idea….”

“I do,” said Harry, “I really do. Please get some rest. Thank you for telling me all of this.”

He led Ron and Hermione down the staircase. Harry caught glimpses of Bill, Fleur, Luna, and Dean sitting at the table in the kitchen, cups of tea in front of them. They all looked up at Harry as he appeared in the doorway, but he merely nodded to them and continued into the garden, Ron and Hermione behind him. The reddish mound of earth that covered Dobby lay ahead, and Harry walked back to it, as the pain in his head built more and more powerfully. It was a huge effort now to close down the visions that were forcing themselves upon him, but he knew that he would have to resist only a little longer. He would yield very soon, because he needed to know that his theory was right. He must make only one more short effort, so that he could explain to Ron and Hermione.

“Gregorovitch had the Elder Wand a long time ago,” he said, “I saw You-Know-Who trying to find him. When he tracked him down, he found that Gregorovitch didn’t have it anymore: It was stolen from him by Grindelwald. How Grindelwald found out that Gregorovitch had it, I don’t know – but if Gregorovitch was stupid enough to spread the rumor, it can’t have been that difficult.”

Voldemort was at the gates of Hogwarts; Harry could see him standing there, and see too the lamp bobbing in the pre-dawn, coming closer and closer.

“And Grindelwald used the Elder Wand to become powerful. And at the height of his power, when Dumbledore knew he was the only one who could stop him, he dueled Grindelwald and beat him, and he took the Elder Wand.““Dumbledore had the Elder Wand?” said Ron. “But then – where is it now?”

“At Hogwarts,” said Harry, fighting to remain with them in the cliff-top garden.

“But then, let’s go!” said Ron urgently. “Harry, let’s go and get it before he does!”

“It’s too late for that,” said Harry. He could not help himself, but clutched his head, trying to help it resist. “He knows where it is. He’s there now.”

“Harry!” Ron said furiously. “How long have you known this – why have we been wasting time? Why did you talk to Griphook first? We could have gone – we could still go – ”

“No,” said Harry, and he sank to his knees in the grass. “Hermione’s right. Dumbledore didn’t want me to have it. He didn’t want me to take it. He wanted me to get the Horcruxes.”

“The unbeatable wand, Harry!” moaned Ron.

“I’m not supposed to… I’m supposed to get the Horcruxes….”

And now everything was cool and dark: The sun was barely visible over the horizon as he glided alongside Snape, up through the grounds toward the lake.

“I shall join you in the castle shortly,” he said in his high, cold voice. “Leave me now.”

Snape bowed and set off back up the path, his black cloak billowing behind him. Harry walked slowly, waiting for Snape’s figure to disappear. It would not do for Snape, or indeed anyone else, to see where he was going. But there were no lights in the castle windows, and he could conceal himself… and in a second he had cast upon himself a Disillusionment Charm that hid him even from his own eyes.

And he walked on, around the edge of the lake, taking in the outlines of the beloved castle, his first kingdom, his birthright….

And here it was, beside the lake, reflected in the dark waters. The white marble tomb, an unnecessary blot on the familiar landscape. He felt again that rush of controlled euphoria, that heady sense of purpose in destruction. He raised the old yew wand: How fitting that this would be its last great act.

The tomb split open from head to foot. The shrouded figure was as long as thin as it had been in life. He raised the wand again.

The wrappings fell open. The face was translucent, pale, sunken, yet almost perfectly preserved. They had left his spectacles on the crooked nose: He felt amused derision. Dumbledore’s hands were folded upon his chest, and there it lay, clutched beneath them, buried with him.

Had the old fool imagined that marble or death would protect the wand? Had he thought that the Dark Lord would be scared to violate his tomb? The spiderlike hand swooped and pulled the wand from

Dumbledore's grasp, and as he took it, a shower of sparks flew from its tip, sparkling over the corpse of its last owner, ready to serve a new master at last.

Chapter 25 Shell Cottage

Bill and Fleur's cottage stood alone on a cliff overlooking the sea, its walls embedded with shells and whitewashed. It was a lonely and beautiful place. Wherever Harry went inside the tiny cottage or its garden, he could hear the constant ebb and flow of the sea, like the breathing of some great, slumbering creature. He spent much of the next few days making excuses to escape the crowded cottage, craving the cliff-top view of open sky and wide, empty sea, and the feel of cold, salty wind on his face. The enormity of his decision not to race Voldemort to the wand still scared Harry. He could not remember, ever before, choosing /not/ to act. He was full of doubts, doubts that Ron could not help voicing whenever they were together.

“What if Dumbledore wanted us to work out the symbol in time to get the wand?”

“What if working out what the symbol meant made you ‘worthy’ to get the Hallows?”

“Harry, if that really is the Elder Wand, how the hell are we supposed to finish off You-Know-Who?”

Harry had no answers: There were moments when he wondered whether it had been outright madness not to try to prevent Voldemort breaking open the tomb. He could not even explain satisfactorily why he had decided against it: Every time he tried to reconstruct the internal arguments that had led to his decision, they sounded feebler to him.

The odd thing was that Hermione's support made him feel just as confused as Ron's doubts. Now forced to accept that the Elder Wand was real, she maintained that it was an evil object, and that the way Voldemort had taken possession of it was repellent, not to be considered.

"You could never have done that, Harry," she said again and again. "You couldn't have broken into Dumbledore's grave."

But the idea of Dumbledore's corpse frightened Harry much less than the possibility that he might have misunderstood the living Dumbledore's intentions. He felt that he was still groping in the dark; he had chosen his path but kept looking back, wondering whether he had misread the signs, whether he should not have taken the other way. From time to time, anger at Dumbledore crashed over him again, powerful as the waves slamming themselves against the cliff beneath the cottage, anger that Dumbledore had not explained before he died.

"But /is/ he dead?" said Ron, three days after they had arrived at the cottage. Harry had been staring out over the wall that separated the cottage garden from the cliff when Ron and Hermione had found him; he wished they had not, having no wish to join in with their argument.

"Yes, he is. Ron, please, don't start that again!"

"Look at the facts, Hermione," said Ron, speaking across Harry, who continued to gaze at the horizon. "The solve doe. The sword. The eye Harry saw in the mirror –"

"Harry admits he could have imagined the eye! Don't you, Harry?"

"I could have," said Harry without looking at her.

"But you don't thing you did, do you?" asked Ron.

"No, I don't," said Harry.

"There you go!" said Ron quickly, before Hermione could carry on. "If it wasn't Dumbledore, explain how Dobby knew we were in the cellar, Hermione?"

“I can’t – but can you explain how Dumbledore sent him to us if he’s lying in a tomb at Hogwarts?”

“I dunno, it could’ve been his ghost!”

“Dumbledore wouldn’t come back as a ghost,” said Harry. There was little about Dumbledore he was sure of now, but he knew that much. “He would have gone on.”

“What d’you mean, ‘gone on’?” asked Ron, but before Harry could say any more, a voice behind them said, “‘Arry?”

Fleur had come out of the cottage, her long silver hair flying in the breeze.

“‘Arry, Grip’ook would like to speak to you. ‘E eez in ze smallest bedroom, ‘e says ‘e does not want to be over’eard.”

Her dislike of the goblin sending her to deliver messages was clear; she looked irritable as she walked back around the house.

Griphook was waiting for them, as Fleur had said, in the tiniest of the cottage’s three bedrooms, in which Hermione and Luna slept by night. He had drawn the red cotton curtains against the bright, cloudy sky, which gave the room a fiery glow at odds with the rest of the airy, light cottage.

“I have reached my decision, Harry Potter,” said the goblin, who was sitting cross-legged in a low chair, drumming its arms with his spindly fingers. “Though the goblins of Gringotts will consider it base treachery, I have decided to help you –”

“That’s great!” said Harry, relief surging through him. “Griphook, thank you, we’re really –”

“– in return,” said the goblin firmly, “for payment.”

Slightly taken aback, Harry hesitated.

“How much do you want? I’ve got gold.”

“Not gold,” said Griphook. “I have gold.”

His black eyes glittered; there were no whites to his eyes.

“I want the sword. The sword of Godric Gryffindor.”

Harry’s spirits plummeted.

“You can’t have that,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Then,” said the goblin softly, “we have a problem.”

“We can give you something else,” said Ron eagerly. “I’ll bet the Lestranges have got loads of stuff, you can take your pick once we get into the vault.”

He had said the wrong thing. Griphook flushed angrily.

“I am not a thief, boy! I am not trying to procure treasures to which I have no right!”

“The sword’s ours –”

“it is not,” said the goblin.

“We’re Gryffindors, and it was Godric Gryffindor’s –”

“And before it was Gryffindor’s, whose was it?” demanded the goblin, sitting up straight.

“No one’s,” said Ron. “It was made for him, wasn’t it?”

“No!” cried the goblin, bristling with anger as he pointed a long finger at Ron. “Wizarding arrogance again! That sword was Ragnuk the

First's, taken from him by Godric Gryffindor! It is a –, a masterpiece of goblinwork! It belongs with the gobl–. The sword is the price of my hire, take it or leave it!"

Griphook glared at them. Harry glanced at the other –, then said, "We need to discuss this, Griphook, if that's all right. Could you give us a few minutes?"

The goblin nodded, looking sour.

Downstairs in the empty sitting room, Harry walked to the fireplace, brow furrowed, trying to think what to do. Behind him, Ron said, "He's having a laugh. We can't let him have that sword."

"It is true?" Harry asked Hermione. "Was the sword stolen by Gryffindor?"

"I don't know," she said hopelessly. "Wizarding history often skates over what the wizards have done to other magical races, but there's no account that I know of that says Gryffindor stole the sword."

"It'll be one of those goblin stories," said Ron, "about how the wizards are always trying to get one over on them. I suppose we should think ourselves lucky he hasn't asked for one of our wands."

"Goblins have got good reason to dislike wizards, Ron." said Hermione. "They've been treated brutally in the past."

"Goblins aren't exactly fluffy little bunnies, though, are they?" said Ron. "They've killed plenty of us. They've fought dirty too."

"But arguing with Griphook about whose race is most underhanded and violent isn't going to make him more likely to help us, is it?"

There was a pause while they tried to think of a way around the problem. Harry looked out of the window at Dobby's grave. Luna was arranging sea lavender in a jam jar beside the headstone.

“Okay,” said Ron, and Harry turned back to face him, “how’s this? We tell Griphook we need the sword until we get inside the – and then he can have it. There’s a fake in these, isn’t there? We switch them, and give him the fake.”

“Ron, he’d know the difference better than we would!” said Hermione. “He’s the only one who realized there had been a swap!”

“Yeah, but we could – caper before he realizes –”

He quailed beneath the look Hermione was giving him.

“That,” she said quietly, “is despicable. Ask for his help, then double-cross him? And you wonder why goblins don’t like wizards, Ron?”

Ron’s ears had turned red.

“All right, all right! It was the only thing I could think of! What’s your solution, then?”

“We need to offer him something else, something just as valuable.”

“Brilliant, I’ll go and get one of our ancient goblin-made swords and you can gift wrap it.”

Silence fell between them again. Harry was sure that the goblin would accept nothing but the sword, even if they had something as valuable to offer him. Yet the sword was their one, indispensable weapon against the Horcruxes.

He closed his eyes for a moment or two and listened to the rush of the sea. The idea that Gryffindor might have stolen the sword was unpleasant to him: He had always been proud to be a Gryffindor; Gryffindor had been the champion of Muggle-borns, the wizard who had clashed with the pureblood-loving Slytherin….

“Maybe he’s lying,” Harry said, opening his eyes again. “Griphook. Maybe Gryffindor didn’t take the sword. How do we know the goblin version of history’s right?”

“Does it make a difference?” asked Hermione.

“Changes how I feel about it,” said Harry.

He took a deep breath.

“We’ll tell him he can have the sword after he’s helped us get into that vault – but we’ll be careful to avoid telling him exactly /when/ he can have it.”

A grin spread slowly across Ron’s face. Hermione, however, looked alarmed.

“Harry, we can’t –”

“He can have it,” Harry went on, “after we’ve used it on all of the Horcruxes. I’ll make sure he gets it then. I’ll keep my word.”

“But that could be years!” said Hermione.

“I know that, but /he/ needn’t. I won’t be lying… really.”

Harry met her eyes with a mixture of defiance and shame. He remembered the words that had been engraved over the gateway to Nurmengard: FOR THE GREATER GOOD. He pushed the idea away. What choice did they have?

“I don’t like it,” said Hermione.

“Nor do I, much,” Harry admitted.

“Well, I think it’s genius,” said Ron, standing up again. “Let’s go and tell him.”

Back in the smallest bedroom, Harry made the offer, careful to phrase it so as not to give any definite time for the handover of the sword. Hermione frowned at the floor while he was speaking; he felt irritated at her, afraid that she might give the game away. However, Griphook had eyes for nobody but Harry.

"I have your word, Harry Potter, that you will give me the sword of Gryffindor if I help you?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Then shake," said the goblin, holding out his hand.

Harry took it and shook. He wondered whether those black eyes saw any misgivings in his own. Then Griphook relinquished him, clapped his hands together, and said, "So. We begin!"

It was like planning to break into the Ministry all over again. They settled to work in the smallest bedroom, which was kept, according to Griphook's preference, in semidarkness.

"I have visited the Lestranges' vault only once," Griphook told them, "on the occasion I was told to place inside it the false sword. It is one of the most ancient chambers. The oldest Wizarding families store their treasures at the deepest level, where the vaults are largest and best protected…."

They remained shut in the cupboardlike room for hours at a time. Slowly the days stretched into weeks. There was problem after problem to overcome, not least of which was that their store of Polyjuice Potion was greatly depleted.

"There's really only enough left for one of us," said Hermione, tilting the thick mudlike potion against the lamplight.

"That'll be enough," said Harry, who was examining Griphook's hand-drawn map of the deepest passageways.

The other inhabitants of Shell Cottage could hardly fail to notice that something was going on now that Harry, Ron and Hermione only emerged for mealtimes. Nobody asked questions, although Harry often felt Bill's eyes on the three of them at the table, thoughtful, concerned.

The longer they spent together, the more Harry realized that he did not much like the goblin. Griphook was unexpectedly bloodthirsty, laughed at the idea of pain in lesser creatures and seemed to relish the possibility that they might have to hurt other wizards to reach the Lestranges' vault. Harry could tell that his distaste was shared by the other two, but they did not discuss it. They needed Griphook.

The goblin ate only grudgingly with the rest of them. Even after his legs had mended, he continued to request trays of food in his room, like the still-frail Ollivander, until Bill (following an angry outburst from Fleur) went upstairs to tell him that the arrangement could not continue. Thereafter Griphook joined them at the overcrowded table, although he refused to eat the same food, insisting, instead, on lumps of raw meat, roots, and various fungi.

Harry felt responsible: It was, after all, he who had insisted that the goblin remain at Shell Cottage so that he could question him; his fault that the whole Weasley family had been driven into hiding, that Bill, Fred, George, and Mr. Weasley could no longer work.

"I'm sorry," he told Fleur, one blustery April evening as he helped her prepare dinner. "I never meant you to have to deal with all of this."

She had just set some knives to work, chipping up steaks for Griphook and Bill, who had preferred his meat bloody ever since he had been attacked by Greyback. While the knives sliced behind her, her somewhat irritable expression softened.

"'Arry, you saved my sister's life, I do not forget."

This was not, strictly speaking, true, but Harry decided against reminding her that Gabrielle had never been in real danger.

“Anyway,” Fleur went on, pointing her want at a pot of sauce on the stove, which began to bubble at once, “Mr. Ollivander leaves for Muriel’s zis evening. Zat will make zings easier. Ze goblin,” she scowled a little at the mention of him, “can move downstairs, and you, Ron, and Dean can take zat room.”

“We don’t mind sleeping in the living room,” said Harry, who knew that Griphook would thing poorly of having to sleep on the sofa; keeping Griphook happy was essential to their plans. “Don’t worry about us.” And when she tried to protest he went on, “We’ll be off your hands soon too, Ron, Hermione, and I. We won’t need to be here much longer.”

“But, what do you mean?” she said, frowning at him, her wand pointing at the casserole dish now suspended in midair. “Of course you must not leave, you are safe ‘ere!”

She looked rather like Mrs. Weasley as she said it, and he was glad that the back door opened at that moment. Luna and Dean entered, their hair damp from the rain outside and their arms full of driftwood.

“… and tiny little ears,” Luna was saying, “a bit like hippo’s, Daddy says, only purple and hairy. And if you want to call them, you have to hum; they prefer a waltz, nothing too fast….”

Looking uncomfortable, Dean shrugged at Harry as he passed, following Luna into the combined dining and sitting room where Ron and Hermione were laying the dinner table.

Seizing the chance to escape Fleur’s questions, Harry grabbed two jugs of pumpkin juice and followed them.

“… and if you ever come to our house I’ll be able to show you the horn, Daddy wrote to me about it but I haven’t seen it yet, because

the Death Eaters took me from the Hogwarts Express and I never got home for Christmas," Luna was saying, as she and Dean relit the fire.

"Luna, we told you," Hermione called over to her. "That horn exploded. It came from an Erumpent, not a Crumple-Horned Snorkack –"

"No, it was definitely a Snorkack horn," said Luna serenely, "Daddy told me. It will probably have re-formed by now, they mend themselves, you know."

Hermione shook her head and continued laying down forks as Bill appeared, leading Mr. Ollivander down the stairs. The wandmaker still looked exceptionally frail, and he clung to Bill's arm as the latter supported him, carrying a large suitcase.

"I'm going to miss you, Mr. Ollivander," said Luna, approaching the old man.

"And I you, my dear," said Ollivander, patting her on the shoulder.

"You were an inexpressible comfort to me in that terrible place."

"So, au revoir, Mr. Ollivander," said Fleur, kissing him on both cheeks. "And I wonder whezzer you could oblige me by delivering a package to Bill's Auntie Muriel? I never returned 'er tiara."

"It will be an honor," said Ollivander with a little bow, "the very least I can do in return for your generous hospitality."

Fleur drew out a worn velvet case, which she opened to show the wandmaker. The tiara sat glittering and twinkling in the light from the low-hanging lamp.

"Moonstones and diamonds," said Griphook, who had sidled into the room without Harry noticing. "Made by goblins, I think?"

“And paid for by wizards,” said Bill quietly, and the goblin shot him a look that was both furtive and challenging.

A strong wind gusted against the cottage windows as Bill and Ollivander set off into the night. The rest of them squeezed in around the table; elbow to elbow and with barely enough room to move, they started to eat. The fire crackled and popped in the grate beside them. Fleur, Harry noticed, was merely playing with her food; she glanced at the window every few minutes; however, Bill returned before they had finished their first course, his long hair tangled by the wind.

“Everything’s fine,” he told Fleur. “Ollivander settled in, Mum and Dad say hello. Ginny sends you all her love, Fred and George are driving Muriel up the wall, they’re still operating an Owl-Order business out of her back room. It cheered her up to have her tiara back, though. She said she thought we’d stolen it.”

“Ah, she eez charmant, your aunt,” said Fleur crossly, waving her wand and causing the dirty plates to rise and form a stack in midair. She caught them and marched out of the room.

“Daddy’s made a tiara,” piped up Luna, “Well, more of a crown, really.”

Ron caught Harry’s eye and grinned; Harry knew that he was remembering the ludicrous headdress they had seen on their visit to Xenophilius.

“Yes, he’s trying to re-create the lost diadem of Ravenclaw. He thinks he’s identified most of the main elements now. Adding the billywig wings really made a difference –”

There was a bang on the front door. Everyone’s head turned toward it. Fleur came running out of the kitchen, looking frightened; Bill jumped to his feed, his wand pointing at the door; Harry, Ron, and Hermione did the same. Silently Griphook slipped beneath the table, out of sight.

“Who is it?” Bill called.

“It is I, Remus John Lupin!” called a voice over the howling wind. Harry experienced a thrill of fear; what had happened? “I am a werewolf, married to Nymphadora Tonks, and you, the Secret-Keeper of Shell Cottage, told me the address and bade me come in an emergency!”

“Lupin,” muttered Bill, and he ran to the door and wrenched it open.

Lupin fell over the threshold. He was white-faced, wrapped in a traveling cloak, his graying hair windswept. He straightened up, looked around the room, making sure of who was there, then cried aloud, “It’s a boy! We’ve named him Ted, after Dora’s father!”

Hermione shrieked.

“Wha –? Tonks – Tonks has had the baby?”

“Yes, yes, she’s had the baby!” shouted Lupin. All around the table came cries of delight, sighs of relief: Hermione and Fleur both squealed, “Congratulations!” and Ron said, “Blimey, a baby!” as if he had never heard of such a thing before.

“Yes – yes – a boy,” said Lupin again, who seemed dazed by his own happiness. He strode around the table and hugged Harry; the scene in the basement of Grimmauld Place might never have happened.

“You’ll be godfather?” he said as he released Harry.

“M-me?” stammered Harry.

“You, yes, of course – Dora quite agrees, no one better –”

“I – yeah – blimey –”

Harry felt overwhelmed, astonished, delighted; now Bill was hurrying to fetch wine, and Fleur was persuading Lupin to join them for a drink.

“I can’t stay long, I must get back,” said Lupin, beaming around at them all: He looked years younger than Harry had ever seen him. “Thank you, thank you, Bill”

Bill had soon filled all of their goblets, they stood and raised them high in a toast.

“To Teddy Remus Lupin,” said Lupin, “a great wizard in the making!”

“‘Oo does ‘e look like?” Fleur inquired.

“I think he looks like Dora, but she thinks he is like me. Not much hair. It looked black when he was born, but I swear it’s turned ginger in the hour since. Probably blond by the time I get back. Andromeda says Tonks’s hair started changing color the day that she was born.” He drained his goblet. “Oh, go on then, just one more,” he added, beaming, as Bill made to fill it again.

The wind buffeted the little cottage and the fire leapt and crackled, and Bill was soon opening another bottle of wine. Lupin’s news seemed to have taken them out of themselves, removed them for a while from their state of siege: Tidings of new life were exhilarating. Only the goblin seemed untouched by the suddenly festive atmosphere, and after a while he slunk back to the bedroom he now occupied alone. Harry thought he was the only one who had noticed this, until he saw Bill’s eyes following the goblin up the stairs.

“No… no… I really must get back,” said Lupin at last, declining yet another goblet of wine. He got to his feet and pulled his traveling cloak back around himself.

“Good-bye, good-bye – I’ll try and bring some pictures in a few day’s time – they’ll all be so glad to know that I’ve seen you –”

He fastened his cloak and made his farewells, hugging the women and grasping hands with the men, then, still beaming, returned into the wild night.

“Godfather, Harry!” said Bill as they walked into the kitchen together, helping clear the table. “A real honor! Congratulations!”

As Harry set down the empty goblets he was carrying, Bill pulled the door behind him closed, shutting out the still-voluble voices of the others, who were continuing to celebrate even in Lupin’s absence.

“I wanted a private word, actually, Harry. It hasn’t been easy to get an opportunity with the cottage this full of people.”

Bill hesitated.

“Harry, you’re planning something with Griphook.”

It was a statement, not a question, and Harry did not bother to deny it. He merely looked at Bill, waiting.

“I know goblins,” said Bill. “I’ve worked for Gringotts ever since I left Hogwarts. As far as there can be friendship between wizards and goblins, I have goblin friends – or, at least, goblins I know well, and like.” Again, Bill hesitated.

“Harry, what do you want from Griphook, and what have you promised him in return?”

“I can’t tell you that,” said Harry. “Sorry, Bill.”

The kitchen door opened behind them; Fleur was trying to bring through more empty goblets.

“Wait,” Bill told her, “Just a moment.”

She backed out and he closed the door again.

“Then I have to say this,” Bill went on. “If you have struck any kind of bargain with Griphook, and most particularly if that bargain involves treasure, you must be exceptionally careful. Goblin notions of

ownership, payment, and repayment are not the same as human ones.”

Harry felt a slight squirm of discomfort, as though a small snake had stirred inside him.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“We are talking about a different breed of being,” said Bill. “Dealings between wizards and goblins have been fraught for centuries – but you’ll know all that from History of Magic. There has been fault on both sides, I would never claim that wizards have been innocent. However, there is a belief among some goblins, and those at Gringotts are perhaps most prone to it, that wizards cannot be trusted in matters of gold and treasure, that they have no respect for goblin ownership.”

“I respect –” Harry began, but Bill shook his head.

“You don’t understand, Harry, nobody could understand unless they have lived with goblins. To a goblin, the rightful and true master of any object is the maker, not the purchaser. All goblin made objects are, in goblin eyes, rightfully theirs.”

“But it was bought –”

“– then they would consider it rented by the one who had paid the money. They have, however, great difficulty with the idea of goblin-made objects passing from wizard to wizard. You saw Griphook’s face when the tiara passed under his eyes. He disapproves. I believe he thinks, as do the fiercest of his kind, that it ought to have been returned to the goblins once the original purchaser died. They consider our habit of keeping goblin-made objects, passing them from wizard to wizard without further payment, little more than theft.”

Harry had an ominous feeling now; he wondered whether Bill guessed more than he was letting on.

“All I am saying,” said Bill, setting his hand on the door back into the sitting room, “is to be very careful what you promise goblins, Harry. It would be less dangerous to break into Gringotts than to renege on a promise to a goblin.”

“Right,” said Harry as Bill opened the door, “yeah. Thanks. I’ll bear that in mind.”

As he followed Bill back to the others a wry thought came to him, born no doubt of the wine he had drunk. He seemed set on —— to become just as reckless a godfather to Teddy Lupin as Sirius Black had been to him.

Chapter 26 Gringotts

Their plans were made, their preparations complete; in the smallest bedroom a single long, coarse black hair (plucked from the sweater Hermione had been wearing at Malfoy Manor) lay curled in a small glass phial on the mantelpiece.

"And you'll be using her actual wand," said Harry, nodding toward the walnut wand, "so I reckon you'll be pretty convincing."

Hermione looked frightened that the wand might sting or bit her as she picked it up.

"I hate that thing," she said in a low voice. "I really hate it. It feels all wrong, it doesn't work properly for me… It's like a bit of her."

Harry could not help but remember how Hermione has dismissed his loathing of the blackthorn wand, insisting that he was imagining things when it did not work as well as his own, telling him to simply practice. He chose not to repeat her own advice back to her, however, the eve of their attempted assault on Gringotts felt like the wrong moment to antagonize her.

"It'll probably help you get in character, though," said Ron. "think what that wand's done!"

"But that's my point!" said Hermione. "This is the wand that tortured Neville's mum and dad, and who knows how many other people? This is the wand that killed Sirius!"

Harry had not thought of that: He looked down at the wand and was visited by a brutal urge to snap it, to slice it in half with Gryffindor's sword, which was propped against the wall beside him.

"I miss my wand," Hermione said miserably. "I wish Mr. Ollivander could have made me another one too."

Mr. Ollivander had sent Luna a new wand that morning. She was out on the back lawn at that moment, testing its capabilities in the late afternoon sun. Dean, who had lost his wand to the Snatchers, was watching rather gloomily.

Harry looked down at the hawthorn wand that had once belonged to Draco Malfoy. He had been surprised, but pleased to discover that it worked for him at least as well as Hermione's had done. Remembering what Ollivander had told them of the secret workings of wands, Harry thought he knew what Hermione's problem was: She had not won the walnut wand's allegiance by taking it personally from Bellatrix.

The door of the bedroom opened and Griphook entered. Harry reached instinctively for the hilt of the sword and drew it close to him, but regretted his action at once. He could tell that the goblin had noticed. Seeking to gloss over the sticky moment, he said, "We've just been checking the last-minute stuff, Griphook. We've told Bill and Fleur we're leaving tomorrow, and we've told them not to get up to see us off."

They had been firm on this point, because Hermione would need to transform in Bellatrix before they left, and the less that Bill and Fleur knew or suspected about what they were about to do, the better. They had also explained that they would not be returning. As they had lost Perkin's old tent on the night that the Snatcher's caught them, Bill had lent them another one. It was now packed inside the beaded bag, which, Harry was impressed to learn, Hermione had protected from the Snatchers by the simple expedient of stuffing it down her sock.

Though he would miss Bill, Fleur, Luna, and Dean, not to mention the home comforts they had enjoyed over the last few weeks, Harry was looking forward to escaping the confinement of Shell Cottage. He was tired of trying to make sure that they were not overheard, tired of being shut in the tiny, dark bedroom. Most of all, he longed to be rid of

Griphook. However, precisely how and when they were to part from the goblin without handing over Gryffindor's sword remained a question to which Harry had no answer. It had been impossible to decide how they were going to do it, because the goblin rarely left Harry, Ron, and Hermione alone together for more than five minutes at a time: "He could give my mother lessons," growled Ron, as the goblin's long fingers kept appearing around the edges of doors. With Bill's warning in mind, Harry could not help suspecting that Griphook was on the watch for possible skullduggery. Hermione disapproved so heartily of the planned double-cross that Harry had given up attempting to pick her brains on how best to do it: Ron, on the rare occasions that they had been able to snatch a few Griphook-free moments, had come up with nothing better than "We'll just have to wing it, mate."

Harry slept badly that night. Lying away in the early hours, he thought back to the way he had felt the night before they had infiltrated the Ministry of Magic and remembered a determination, almost an excitement. Now he was experiencing jolts of anxiety nagging doubts: He could not shake off the fear that it was all going to go wrong. He kept telling himself that their plan was good, that Griphook knew what they were facing, that they were well-prepared for all the difficulties they were likely to encounter, yet still he felt uneasy. Once or twice he heard Ron stir and was sure that he too was awake, but they were sharing the sitting room with Dean, so Harry did not speak.

It was a relief when six o-clock arrived and they could slip out of their sleeping bags, dress in the semidarkness, then creep out into the garden, where they were to meet Hermione and Griphook. The dawn was chilly, but there was little wind now that it was May. Harry looked up at the stars still glimmering palely in the dark sky and listened to the sea washing backward and forward against the cliff: He was going to miss the sound.

Small green shoots were forcing their way up through the red earth of Dobby's grave now, in a year's time the mound would be covered in

flowers. The white stone that bore the elf's name had already acquired a weathered look. He realized now that they could hardly have laid Dobby to rest in a more beautiful place, but Harry ached with sadness to think of leaving him behind. Looking down on the grave, he wondered yet again how the elf had known where to come to rescue them. His fingers moved absentmindedly to the little pouch still strung around his neck, thorough which he could feel the jagged mirror fragment in which he had been sure he had seen Dumbledore's eye. Then the sound of a door opening made him look around.

Bellatrix Lestrange was striding across the lawn toward them, accompanied by Griphook. As she walked, she was tucking the small, beaded bag into the inside pocket of another set of the old robes they had taken from Grimmauld Place. Though Harry knew perfectly well that it was really Hermione, he could not suppress a shiver of loathing. She was taller than he was, her long black hair rippling down her back, her heavily lidded eyes disdainful as they rested upon him; but then she spoke, and he heard Hermione through Bellatrix's low voice.

"She tasted disgusting, worse than Gurdyroots! Okay, Ron, come here so I can do you…"

"Right, but remember, I don't like the beard too long"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, this isn't about looking handsome"

"It's not that, it gets in the way! But I liked my nose a bit shorter, try and do it the way you did last time."

Hermione sighed and set to work, muttering under her breath as she transformed various aspects of Ron's appearance. He was to be given a completely fake identity, and they were trusting to the malevolent aura cast by Bellatrix to protect him. Meanwhile Harry and Griphook were to be concealed under the Invisibility Cloak.

“There,” said Hermione, “how does he look, Harry?”

It was just not possible to discern Ron under his disguise, but only, Harry thought because he knew him so well. Ron’s hair was now long and wavy; he had a thick brown beard and mustache, no freckles, a short, broad nose, and heavy eyebrows.

“Well, he’s not my type, but he’ll do,” said Harry. “Shall we go, then?”

All three of them glanced back at Shell Cottage, lying dark and silent under the fading stars, then turned and began to walk toward the point, just beyond the boundary wall, where the Fidelius Chard stopped working and they would be able to Disapparate. Once past the gate, Griphook spoke.

“I should climb up now, Harry Potter, I think?”

Harry bent down and the goblin clambered onto his back, his hands linked on front of Harry’s throat. He was not heavy, but Harry disliked the feeling of the goblin and the surprising strength with which he clung on. Hermione pulled the Invisibility Cloak out of the beaded bag and threw it over them both.

“Perfect,” she said, bending down to check Harry’s feet. “I can’t see a thing. Let’s go.”

Harry turned on the spot, with Griphook on his shoulders, concentrating with all his might on the Leaky Cauldron, the inn that was the entrance to Diagon Alley. The goblin clung even tighter as they moved into the compressing darkness, and seconds later Harry’s feet found pavement and he opened his eyes on Charing Cross Road. Muggles bustled past wearing the hangdog expressions of early morning, quite unconscious of the little inn’s existence.

The bar of the Leaky Cauldron was nearly deserted. Ton, the stooped and toothless landlord, was polishing glasses behind the bar counter;

a couple of warlocks having a muttered conversation in the far corner glanced at Hermione and drew back into the shadows.

“Madam Lestrange,” murmured Tom, and as Hermione paused he inclined his head subserviently.

“Good morning,” said Hermione, and as Harry crept past, still carrying Griphook piggyback under the Cloak, he saw Tom look surprised.

“Too polite,” Harry whispered in Hermione’s ear as they passed out of the Inn into the tiny backyard. “You need to treat people like they’re scum!”

“Okay, okay!”

Hermione drew out Bellatrix’s wand and rapped a brick in the nondescript wall in front of them. At once the bricks began to whirl and spin: A hole appeared in the middle of them, which grew wider and wider, finally forming an archway onto the narrow cobbled street that was Diagon Alley.

It was quiet, barely time for the shops to open, and there were hardly and shoppers abroad. The crooked, cobbled street was much altered now from the bustling place Harry had visited before his first team at Hogwarts so many years before. More shops than ever were boarded up, though several new establishments dedicated to the Dark Arts had been created since his last visit. Harry’s own face glared down at him from posters plastered over many windows, always captioned with the words UNDESIRABLE NUMBER ONE.

A number of ragged people sat huddled in doorways. He heard them moaning to the few passersby, pleading for gold, insisting that they were really wizards. One man had a bloody bandage over his eye.

As they set off along the street, the beggars glimpsed Hermione. they seemed to melt away before her, drawing hoods over their faces and fleeing as fast as they could. Hermione looked after them curiously,

until the man with the bloodied bandage came staggering right across her path.

“My children,” he bellowed, pointing at her. His voice was cracked, high-pitched, he sounded distraught. “Where are my children? What has he done with them? You know, you know!”

“I–I really–” stammered Hermione.

The man lunged at her, reaching for her throat. Then, with a bang and a burst of red light he was thrown backward onto the ground, unconscious. Ron stood there, his wand still outstretched and a look of shock visible behind his beard. Faces appeared at the windows on either side of the street, while a little knot of prosperous-looking passerby gathered their robes about them and broke into gentle trots, keen to vacate the scene. their entrance into Diagon Alley could hardly have been more conspicuous; for a moment Harry wondered whether it might not be better to leave now and try to think of a different plan. Before they could move or consult one another, however, they heard a cry from behind them.

“Why, Madam Lestrange!”

Harry whirled around and Griphook tightened his hold around Harry’s neck: A tall, think wizard with a crown of bushy gray hair and a long, sharp nose was striding toward them.

“It’s Travers,” hissed the goblin into Harry’s ear, but at that moment Harry could not think who Travers was. Hermione had drawn herself up to full height and said with as much contempt as she could muster:“And what do you want?”

Travers stopped in his tracks, clearly affronted.

“He’s another Death Eater!” breathed Griphook, and Harry sidled sideways to repeat the information into Hermione’s ear.

“I merely sought to greet you,” said Travers coolly, “but if my presence is not welcome…”

Harry recognized his voice now: Travers was one of the Death Eaters who had been summoned to Xenophilius’s house.

“No, no, not at all, Travers,” said Hermione quickly, trying to cover up her mistake. “How are you?”

“Well, I confess I am surprised to see you out and about, Bellatrix.”

“Really? Why?” asked Hermione.

“Well,” Travers coughed, “I heard that the Inhabitants of Malfoy Manor were confined to the house, after the… ah… escape.”

Harry willed Hermione to keep her head. If this was true, and Bellatrix was not supposed to be out in public– “The Dark Lord forgives those who have served him most faithfully in the past,” said Hermione in a magnificent imitation of Bellatrix’s most contemptuous manner. “Perhaps your credit is not as good with him as mine is, Travers.”

Though the Death Eater looked offended, he also seemed less suspicious. He glanced down at the man Ron had just Stunned.

“How did it offend you?”

“It does not matter, it will not do so again,” said Hermione coolly.

“Some of these wandless can be troublesome,” said Travers. “While they do nothing but beg I have no objection, but one of them actually asked me to plead her case in the Ministry last week. ‘I’m a witch, sir, I’m a witch, let me prove it to you!” he said in a squeaky impersonation. “As if I was going to give her my wand–but whose wand,” said Travers curiously, “are you using at the moment, Bellatrix? I heard that your own was–”

“I have my wand here,” said Hermione coldly, holding up Bellatrix’s wand. “I don’t know what rumors you have been listening to, Travers, but you seem sadly misinformed.”

Travers seemed a little taken aback at that, and he turned instead to Ron.

“Who is your friend? I do not recognize him.”

“This is Dragomir Despard,” said Hermione; they had decided that a fictional foreigner was the safest cover for Ron to assume. “He speaks very little English, but he is in sympathy with the Dark Lord’s aims. He has traveled here from Transylvania to see our new regime.”

“Indeed? How do you do, Dragomir?”

“’Ow you?” said Ron, holding out his hand.

Travers extended two fingers and shook Ron’s hand as though frightened of dirtying himself.

“So what brings you and your–ah–sympathetic friend to Diagon Alley this early?” asked Travers.

“I need to visit Gringotts,” said Hermione.

“Alas, I also,” said Travers. “Gold, filthy gold! We cannot live without it, yet I confess I deplore the necessity of consorting with our long-fingered friends.”

Harry felt Griphook’s clasped hands tighten momentarily around his neck.

“Shall we?” said Travers, gesturing Hermione forward.

Hermione had no choice but to fall into step beside him and head along the crooked, cobbled street toward the place where the snowy-

white Gringotts stood towering over the other little shops. Ron sloped along beside them, and Harry and Griphook followed.

A watchful Death Eater was the very last thing they needed, and the worst of it was, with Travers matching at what he believed to be Bellatrix's side, there was no means for Harry to communicate with Hermione or Ron. All too soon they arrived at the foot of the marble steps leading up to the great bronze doors. As Griphook had already warned them, the liveried goblins who usually flanked the entrance had been replaced by two wizards, both of whom were clutching long thin golden rods.

"Ah, Probity Probes," signed Travers theatrically, "so crude–but so effective!"

And he set off up the steps, nodding left and right to the wizards, who raised the golden rods and passed them up and down his body. The Probes, Harry knew, detected spells of concealment and hidden magical objects. Knowing that he had only seconds, Harry pointed Draco's wand at each of the guards in turn and murmured, "Confundo" twice. Unnoticed by Travers, who was looking through the bronze doors at the inner hall, each of the guards gave a little start as the spells hit them.

Hermione's long black hair rippled behind her as she climbed the steps.

"One moment, madam," said the guard, raising his Probe.

"But you've just done that!" said Hermione in Bellatrix's commanding, arrogant voice. Travers looked around, eyebrows raised. The guard was confused. He stared down at the thin golden Probe and then at his companion, who said in a slightly dazed voice, "Yeah, you've just checked them, Marius."

Hermione swept forward. Ron by her side, Harry and Griphook trotting invisibly behind them. Harry glanced back as they crossed the

threshold. The wizards were both scratching their heads.

Two goblins stood before the inner doors, which were made of silver and which carried the poem warning of dire retribution to potential thieves. Harry looked up at it, and all of a sudden a knife-sharp memory came to him: standing on this very spot on the day that he had turned eleven, the most wonderful birthday of his life, and Hagrid standing beside him saying, “Like I said, yeh’d be mad ter try an’ rob it.” Gringotts had seemed a place of wonder that day, the enchanted repository of a trove of gold he had never known he possessed, and never for an instant could he have dreamed that he would return to steal… But within seconds they were standing in the vast marble hall of the bank.

The long counter was manned by goblins sitting on high stools serving the first customers of the day. Hermione, Ron, and Travers headed toward an old goblin who was examining a thick gold coin through an eyeglass. Hermione allowed Travers to step ahead of her on the pretext of explaining features of the hall to Ron.

The goblin tossed the coin he was holding aside, said to nobody in particular, “Leprechaun,” and then greeted Travers, who passed over a tiny golden key, which was examined and given back to him.

Hermione stepped forward.

“Madam Lestrange!” said the goblin, evidently startled. “Dear me! How–how may I help you today?”

“I wish to enter my vault,” said Hermione.

The old goblin seemed to recoil a little. Harry glanced around. Not only was Travers hanging back, watching, but several other goblins had looked up from their work to stare at Hermione.

“You have… identification?” asked the goblin.

“Identification? I–I have never been asked for identification before!” said Hermione.

“They know!” whispered Griphook in Harry’s ear, “They must have been warned there might be an imposter!”

“Your wand will do, madam,” said the goblin. He held out a slightly trembling hand, and in a dreadful blast of realization Harry knew that the goblins of Gringotts were aware that Bellatrix’s wand had been stolen.

“Act now, act now,” whispered Griphook in Harry’s ear, “the Imperious Curse!”

Harry raised the hawthorn wand beneath the cloak, pointed it at the old goblin, and whispered, for the first time in his life, “Imperio!”

A curious sensation shot down Harry’s arm, a feeling of tingling, warmth that seemed to flow from his mind, down the sinews and veins connecting him to the wand and the curse it had just cast. The goblin took Bellatrix’s wand, examined it closely, and then said, “Ah, you have had a new wand made, Madam Lestrange!”

“What?” said Hermione, “No, no, that’s mine–”

“A new wand?” said Travers, approaching the counter again; still the goblins all around were watching. “But how could you have done, which wandmaker did you use?”

Harry acted without thinking. Pointing his wand at Travers, he muttered, “Imperio!” once more.

“Oh yes, I see,” said Travers, looking down at Bellatrix’s wand, “yes, very handsome. and is it working well? I always think wands require a little breaking in, don’t you?”

Hermione looked utterly bewildered, but to Harry's enormous relief she accepted the bizarre turn of events without comment.

The old goblin behind the counter clapped his hands and a younger goblin approached.

"I shall need the Clankers," he told the goblin, who dashed away and returned a moment later with a leather bag that seemed to be full of jangling metal, which he handed to his senior. "Good, good! S, if you will follow me, Madam Lestrange," said the old goblin, hopping down off his stool and vanishing from sight. "I shall take you to your vault."

He appeared around the end of the counter, jogging happily toward them, the contents of the leather bag still jingling. Travers was now standing quite still with his mouth hanging wide open. Ron was drawing attention to this odd phenomenon by regarding Travers with confusion.

"Wait – Bogrod!"

Another goblin came scurrying around the counter.

"We have instructions," he said with a bow to Hermione. "Forgive me, Madam, but there have been special orders regarding the vault of Lestrange."

He whispered urgently in Bogrod's ear, but the Imperiused goblin shook him off.

"I am aware of the instructions, Madam Lestrange wishes to visit her vault … Very old family … old clients … This way, please …"

And, still clanking, he hurried toward one of the many doors leading off the hall. Harry looked back at Travers , who was still rooted to the spot looking abnormally vacant, and made his decision. With a flick of his wand he made Travers come with them, walking meekly in their

wake as they reached the door and passed into the rough stone passageway beyond, which was lit with flaming torches.

“We’re in trouble; they suspect,” said Harry as the door slammed behind them and he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak. Griphook jumped down from his shoulders: neither Travers nor Bogrod showed the slightest surprise at the sudden appearance of Harry Potter in their midst. “They’re Imperiused,” he added, in response to Hermione and Ron’s confused queries about Travers and Bogrod, who were both now standing there looking blank. “I don’t think I did it strongly enough, I don’t know …”

And another memory darted through his mind, of the real Bellatrix Lestrange shrieking at him when he had first tried to use an Unforgivable Curse: “You need to mean them, Potter!”

“What do we do?” asked Ron. “Shall we get out now, while we can?”

“If we can,” said Hermione, looking back toward the door into the main hall, beyond which who knew what was happening.

“We’ve got this far, I say we go on,” said Harry.

“Good!” said Griphook. “So, we need Bogrod to control the cart; I no long have the authority. But there will not be room for the wizard.”

Harry pointed his wand at Travers.

“Imperio!”

The wizard turned and set off along the dark track at a smart pace.

“What are you making him do?”

“Hide,” said Harry as he pointed his wand at Bogrod, who whistled to summon a little cart that came trundling along the tracks toward them out of the darkness. Harry was sure he could hear shouting behind

them in the main hall as they all clambered into it, Bogrod in front of Griphook, Harry, Ron, and Hermione crammed together in the back.

With a jerk the cart moved off, gathering speed: They hurried past Travers, who was wriggling into a crack in the wall, then the cart began twisting and turning through the labyrinthine passages, sloping downward all the time. Harry could not hear anything over the rattling of the cart on the tracks: His hair flew behind him as they swerved between stalactites, flying ever deeper into the earth, but he kept glancing back. They might as well have left enormous footprints behind them; the more he thought about it, the more foolish it seemed to have disguised Hermione as Bellatrix, to have brought along Bellatrix's wand, when the Death Eaters knew who had stolen it – There were a deeper than Harry had ever penetrated within Gringotts; they took a hairpin bend at speed and saw ahead of them, with seconds to spare, a waterfall pounding over the track. Harry heard Griphook shout, "No!" but there was no braking. They zoomed through it. Water filled Harry's eyes and mouth: He could not see or breathe: Then, with an awful lurch, the cart flipped over and they were all thrown out of it. Harry heard the cart smash into pieces against the passage wall, heard Hermione shriek something, and felt himself glide back toward the ground as though weightless, landing painlessly on the rocky passage floor.

"C-Cushioning Charm," Hermione spluttered, as Ron pulled her to her feet, but to Harry's horror he saw that she was no longer Bellatrix; instead she stood there in overlarge robes, sopping wet and completely herself; Ron was red-haired and beardless again. They were realizing it as they looked at each other, feeling their own faces.

"The Thief's Downfall!" said Griphook, clambering to his feet and looking back the deluge onto the tracks, which, Harry knew now, had been more than water. "It washes away all enchantment, all magical concealment! They know there are imposers in Gringotts, they have set off defenses against us!"

Harry saw Hermione checking that she still had the beaded bag, and hurriedly thrust his own hand under his jacket to make sure he had not lost the Invisibility Cloak. Then he turned to see Bogrod shaking his head in bewilderment: The Thief's Downfall seemed to have lifted his Imperius Curse.

"We need him," said Griphook, "we cannot enter the vault without a Gringott's goblin. And we need the clankers!"

"Imperio!" Harry said again; his voice echoed through the stone passage as he felt again the sense of heady control that flowed from brain to wand. Bogrod submitted once more to his will, his befuddled expression changing to one of polite indifference, as Ron hurried to pick up the leather bag of metal tools.

"Harry, I think I can hear people coming!" said Hermione, and she pointed Bellatrix's wand at the waterfall and cried, "Protego!" They saw the Shield Charm break the flow of enchanted water as it flew up the passageway.

"Good thinking," said Harry. "Lead the way, Griphook!"

"How are we going to get out again?" Ron asked as they hurried on foot into the darkness after the goblin, Bogrod panting in their wake like an old dog.

"Let's worry about that when we have to," said Harry. He was trying to listen: He thought he could hear something clanking and moving around nearby. "Griphook, how much farther?"

"Not far, Harry Potter, not far …"

And they turned a corner and saw the thing for which Harry had been prepared, but which still brought all of them to a halt.

A gigantic dragon was tethered to the ground in front of them, barring access to four or five of the deepest vaults in the place. The beast's

scales had turned pale and flaky during its long incarceration under the ground, its eyes were milkily pink; both rear legs bore heavy cuffs from which chains led to enormous pegs driven deep into the rocky floor. Its great spiked wings, folded close to its body, would have filled the chamber if it spread them, and when it turned its ugly head toward them, it roared with a noise that made the rock tremble, opened its mouth, and spat a jet of fire that sent them running back up the passageway.

“It is partially blind,” panted Griphook, “but even more savage for that. However, we have the means to control it. It has learned what to expect when the Clankers come. Give them to me.”

Ron passed the bag to Griphook, and the goblin pulled out a number of small metal instruments that when shaken made a long ringing noise like miniature hammers on anvils. Griphook handed them out: Bogrod accepted his meekly.

“You know what to do,” Griphook told Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “It will expect pain when it hears the noise. It will retreat, and Bogrod must place his palm upon the door of the vault.”

They advanced around the corner again, shaking the Clankers, and the noise echoed off the rocky walls, grossly magnified, so that the inside of Harry’s skull seemed to vibrate with the den. The dragon let out another hoarse roar, then retreated. Harry could see it trembling, and as they drew nearer he saw the scars made by vicious slashes across its face, and guess that it had been taught to fear hot swords when it heard the sound of the Clankers.

“Make him press his hand to the door!” Griphook urged Harry, who turned his wand again upon Bogrod. The old goblin obeyed, pressing his palm to the wood, and the door of the vault melted away to reveal a cavelike opening crammed from floor to ceiling with golden coins and goblets, silver armor, the skins of strange creatures – some with long spines, other with drooping wings – potions in jeweled flasks,

and a skull still wearing a crown. “Search, fast!” said Harry as they all hurried inside the vault. He had described Hufflepuff’s cap to Ron and Hermione, but if it was the other, unknown Horcrux that resided in this vault, he did not know what it looked like. He barely had time to glance around, however, before there was a muffled clunk from behind them: The door had reappeared, sealing them inside the vault, and they were plunged into total darkness.

“No matter, Bogrod will be able to release us!” said Griphook as Ron gave a shout of surprise. “Light your wands, can’t you? And hurry, we have little time!”

“Lumos!”

Harry shone his lit wand around the vault: Its beam fell upon glittering jewels; he saw the fake sword of Gryffindor lying on a high shelf amongst a jumble of chains. Ron and Hermione had lit their wands too, and were now examining the piles of objects surrounding them.

“Harry, could this be –? Aargh!”

Hermione screamed in pain, and Harry turned his wand on her in time to see a jeweled goblet tumbling from her grip. But as it fell, it split, became a shower of goblets, so that a second later, with a great clatter, the floor was covered in identical cups rolling in every direction, the original impossible to discern amongst them.

“It burned me!” moaned Hermione, sucking her blistered fingers.

“They have added Germino and Flagrante Curses!” said Griphook.

“Everything you touch will burn and multiply, but the copies are worthless – and if you continue to handle the treasure, you will eventually be crushed to death by the weight of expanding gold!”

“Okay, don’t touch anything!” said Harry desperately, but even as he said it, Ron accidentally nudged one of the fallen goblets with his foot,

and twenty more exploded into being while Ron hopped on the spot, part of his shoe burned away by contact with the hot metal.

“Stand still, don’t move!” said Hermione, clutching at Ron.

“Just look around!” said Harry. “Remember, the cup’s small and gold, it’s got a badger engraved on it, two handles – otherwise see if you can spot Ravenclaw’s symbol anywhere, the eagle – ”

They directed their wands into every nook and crevice, turning cautiously on the spot. It was impossible not to brush up against anything; Harry sent a great cascade of fake Galleons onto the ground where they joined the goblets, and now there was scarcely room to place their feet, and the glowing gold blazed with heat, so that the vault felt like a furnace. Harry’s wandlight passed over shields and goblin-made helmets set on shelves rising to the ceiling; higher and higher he raised the beam, until suddenly it found an object that made his heart skip and his hand tremble.

“It’s there, it’s up there!”

Ron and Hermione pointed there wands at it too, so that the little golden cup sparkled in a three-way spotlight: the cup that had belonged to Helga Hufflepuff, which had passed into the possession of Hepzibah Smith, from whom it had been stolen by Tom Riddle.

“And how the hell are we going to get up there without touching anything?” asked Ron.

“Accio Cup!” cried Hermione, who had evidently forgotten in her desperation what Griphook had told them during their planning sessions.

“No use, no use!” snarled the goblin.

“Then what do we do?” said Harry, glaring at the goblin. “If you want the sword, Griphook, then you’ll have to help us more than – wait!

Can I touch stuff with the sword? Hermione, give it here!"

Hermione fumbled insider her robes, drew out a beaded bag, rummaged for a few seconds, then removed the shining sword. Harry seized it by its rubied hilt and touched the tip of the blade to a silver flagon nearby, which did not multiply.

"If I can just poke the sword through a handle – but how am I going to get up there?"

The shelf on which the cup reposed was out of reach for any of them, even Ron, who was tallest. The heat from the enchanted treasure rose in waves, and sweat ran down Harry's face and back as he struggled to think of a way up to the cup; and then he heard the dragon roar on the other side of the vault door, and the sound of clanking growing louder and louder.

They were truly trapped now: There was no way out except through the door, and a horde of goblins seemed to be approaching on the other side. Harry looked at Ron and Hermione and saw terror in their faces.

"Hermione," said Harry, as the clanking grew louder, "I've got to get up there, we've got to get rid of it – "

She raised her wand, pointed it at Harry, and whispered, "Levicorpus."

Hoisted into the air by his ankle, Harry hit a suit of armor and replicas burst out of it like white-hot bodies, filling the cramped space. With screams of pain, Ron, Hermione, and the two goblins were knocked aside into other objects, which also began to replicate. Half buried in a rising tide of red-hot treasure, they struggled and yelled has Harry thrust the sword through the handle of Hufflepuff's cup, hooking it onto the blade.

“Impervius!” screeched Hermione in an attempt to protect herself, Ron, and the goblins from the burning metal.

Then the worst scream yet made Harry look down: Ron and Hermione were waist deep in treasure, struggling to keep Bogrod from slipping beneath the rising tide, but Griphook had sunk out of sight; and nothing but the tips of a few long fingers were left in view.

Harry seized Griphook’s fingers and pulled. The blistered goblin emerged by degrees, howling.

“Liberatocorpus!” yelled Harry, and with a crash he and Griphook landed on the surface of the swelling treasure, and the sword flew out of Harry’s hand.

“Get it!” Harry yelled, fighting the pain of the hot metal on his skin, as Griphook clambered onto his shoulders again, determined to avoid the swelling mass of red-hot objects. “Where’s the sword? It had the cup on it!”

The clanking on the other side of the door was growing deafening – it was too late –“There!”

It was Griphook who had seen it and Griphook who lunged, and in that instant Harry knew that the goblin had never expected them to keep their word. One hand holding tightly to a fistful of Harry’s hair, to make sure he did not fall into the heaving sea of burning gold, Griphook seized the hilt of the sword and swung it high out of Harry’s reach. The tiny golden cup, skewered by the handle on the sword’s blade was flung into the air. The goblin astride him, Harry dived and caught it, and although he could feel it scalding his flesh he did not relinquish it, even while countless Hufflepuff cups burst from his fist, raining down upon him as the entrance of the vault opened up again and he found himself sliding uncontrollably on an expanding avalanche of fiery gold and silver that bore him, Ron, Hermione into the outer chamber.

Hardly aware of the pain from the burns covering his body, and still borne along the swell of replicating treasure, Harry shoved the cup into his pocket and reached up to retrieve the sword, but Griphook was gone. Sliding from Harry's shoulders the moment he could, he had sprinted for cover amongst the surrounding goblins, brandishing the sword and crying, "Thieves! Thieves! Help! Thieves!" He vanished into the midst of the advancing crowd, all of whom were holding daggers and who accepted him without question.

Slipping on the hot metal, Harry struggled to his feet and knew that the only way out was through.

"Stupefy!" he bellowed, and Ron and Hermione joined in: Jets of red light flew into the crowd of goblins, and some toppled over, but others advanced, and Harry saw several wizard guards running around the corner.

The tethered dragon let out a roar, and a gush of flame flew over the goblins; The wizards fled, doubled-up, back the way they had come, and inspiration, or madness, came to Harry. Pointing his wand at the thick cuffs chaining the beast to the floor, he yelled, "Relashio!"

The cuffs broken open with loud bangs.

"This way!" Harry yelled, and still shooting Stunning Spells at the advancing goblins, he sprinted toward the blind dragon.

"Harry – Harry – what are you doing?" cried Hermione.

"Get up, climb up, come on – "

The dragon had not realized that it was free: Harry's foot found the crook of its hind leg and he pulled himself up onto its back. The scales were hard as steel; it did not even seem to feel him. He stretched out an arm; Hermione hoisted herself up; Ron climbed on behind them, and a second later the dragon became aware that it was untethered.

With a roar it reared: Harry dug in his knees, clutching as tightly as he could to the jagged scales as the wings opened, knocking the shrieking goblins aside like skittles, and it soared into the air. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, flat on its back, scraped against the ceiling as it dived toward the passage opening, while the pursuing goblins hurled daggers that glanced off its flanks.

"We'll never get out, it's too big!" Hermione screamed, but the dragon opened its mouth and belched flame again, blasting the tunnel, whose floors and ceiling cracked and crumbled. By sheer force, the dragon clawed and fought its way through. Harry's eyes were shut tight against the heat and dust: Deafened by the crash of rock and the dragon's roars, he could only cling to its back, expecting to be shaken off at any moment; then he heard Hermione yelling, "Defodio!"

She was helping the dragon enlarge the passageway, carving out the ceiling as it struggled upward toward the fresher air, away from the shrieking and clanking goblins: Harry and Ron copied her, blasting the ceiling apart with more gouging spells. They passed the underground lake, and the great crawling, snarling beast seemed to sense freedom and space ahead of it, and behind them the passage was full of the dragon's thrashing, spiked tail, of great lumps of rock, gigantic fractured stalactites, and the clanking of the goblins seemed to be growing more muffled, while ahead, the dragon's fire kept their progress clear –And then at last, by the combined force of their spells and the dragon's brute strength, they had blasted their way out of the passage into the marble hallway. Goblins and wizards shrieked and ran for cover, and finally the dragon had room to stretch its wings: Turning its horned head toward the cool outside air it could smell beyond the entrance, it took off, and with Harry, Ron, and Hermione still clinging to its back, it forced its way through the metal doors, leaving them buckled and hanging from their hinges, as it staggered into Diagon Alley and launched itself into the sky.

Chapter 27 The Final Hiding Place

There was no means of steering; the dragon could not see where it was going, and Harry knew that if it turned sharply or rolled in midair they would find it impossible to cling onto its broad back. Nevertheless, as they climbed higher and higher, London unfurling below them like a gray-and-green map, Harry's overwhelming feeling was of gratitude for an escape that had seemed impossible. Crouching low over the beast's neck, he clung tight to the metallic scales, and the cool breeze was soothing on his burned and blistered skin, the dragon's wings beating the air like the sails of a windmill. Behind him, whether from delight or fear he could not tell. Ron kept swearing at the top of his voice, and Hermione seemed to be sobbing.

After five minutes or so, Harry lost some of his immediate dread that the dragon was going to throw them off, for it seemed intent on nothing but getting as far away from its underground prison as possible; but the question of how and when they were to dismount remained rather frightening. He had no idea how long dragons could fly without landing, nor how this particular dragon, which could barely see, would locate a good place to put down. He glanced around constantly, imagining that he could feel his seat prickling.

How long would it be before Voldemort knew that they had broken into the Lestranges' vault? How soon would the goblins of Gringotts notify Bellatrix? How quickly would they realize what had been taken? And then, when they discovered that the golden cup was missing? Voldemort would know, at last, that they were hunting Horcruxes.

The dragon seemed to crave cooler and fresher air. It climbed steadily until they were flying through wisps of chilly cloud, and Harry could no longer make out the little colored dots which were cars pouring in and out of the capital. On and on they flew, over countryside parceled out in patches of green and brown, over roads

and rivers winding through the landscape like strips of matte and glossy ribbon.

“What do you reckon it’s looking for?” Ron yelled as they flew farther and farther north.

“No idea,” Harry bellow back. His hands were numb with cold but he did not date attempt to shift his grip. He had been wondering for some time what they would do if they saw the coast sail beneath them, if the dragon headed for open seal he was cold and numb, not to mention desperately hungry and thirsty. When, he wondered, had the beast itself last eaten? Surely it would need sustenance before long? And what if, at that point, it realized it had three highly edible humans sitting on its back?

The sun slipped lower in the sky, which was turning indigo; and still the dragon flew, cities and towns gliding out of sight beneath them, its enormous shadow sliding over the earth like a giant dark cloud. Every part of Harry ached with the effort of holding on to the dragon’s back.

“Is it my imagination,” shouted Ron after a considerable stretch of silence, “or are we losing height?”

Harry looked down and saw deep green mountains and lakes, coppery in the sunset. the landscape seemed to grow larger and more detailed as he squinted over the side of the dragon, and he wondered whether it had divined the presence of fresh water by the flashes of reflected sunlight.

Lower and lower the dragon flew, in great spiraling circles, honing in, it seemed, upon one of the smaller lakes.

“I say we jump when it gets low enough!” Harry called back to the others. “Straight into the water before it realizes we’re here!”

They agreed, Hermione a little faintly, and now Harry could see the dragon’s wide yellow underbelly rippling in the surface of the water.

“NOW!”

He slithered over the side of the dragon and plummeted feetfirst toward the surface of the lake; the drop was greater than he had estimated and he hit the water hard, plunging like a stone into a freezing, green, reed-filled world. He kicked toward the surface and emerged, panting, to see enormous ripples emanating in circles from the places where Ron and Hermione had fallen. The dragon did not seem to have noticed anything; it was already fifty feet away, swooping low over the lake to scoop up water in its scarred snout. As Ron and Hermione emerged, spluttering and gasping, from the depths of the lake, the dragon flew on, its wings beating hard, and landed at last on a distant bank.

Harry, Ron and Hermione struck out for the opposite shore. The lake did not seem to be deep. Soon it was more a question of fighting their way through reeds and mud than swimming, and at last they flopped, sodden, panting, and exhausted, onto slippery grass.

Hermione collapsed, coughing and shuddering. Though Harry could have happily lain down and slept, he staggered to his feet, drew out his wand, and started casting the usual protective spells around them.

When he had finished, he joined the others. It was the first time that he had seen them properly since escaping from the vault. Both had angry red burns all over their faces and arms, and their clothing was singed away in places. They were wincing as they dabbed essence of dittany onto their many injuries. Hermione handed Harry the bottle, then pulled out three bottles of pumpkin juice she had brought from Shell Cottage and clean, dry robes for all of them. They changes and then gulped down the juice.

“Well, on the upside,” said Ron finally, who was sitting watching the skin on his hands regrow, “we got the Horcrux. On the downside-”

“– no sword,” said Harry through gritted teeth, as he dripped dittany through the singed hole in his jeans onto the angry burn beneath.

“No sword,” repeated Ron. “That double-crossing little scab…”

Harry pulled the Horcrux from the pocket of the wet jacket he had just taken off and set it down on the grass in front of them. Glinting in the sun, it drew their eyes as they swigged their bottles of juice.

“At least we can’t wear it this time, that’d look a bit weird hanging around our necks,” said Ron, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

Hermione looked across the lake to the far bank where the dragon was still drinking.

“What’ll happen to it, do you think?” she asked, “Will it be alright?”

“You sound like Hagrid,” said Ron, “It’s a dragon, Hermione, it can look after itself. It’s us we need to worry about.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well I don’t know how to break this to you,” said Ron, “but I think they might have noticed we broke into Gringotts.”

All three of them started to laugh, and once started, it was difficult to stop. Harry’s ribs ached, he felt lightheaded with hunger, but he lay back on the grass beneath the reddening sky and laughed until his throat was raw.

“What are we going to do, though?” said Hermione finally, hiccuping herself back to seriousness. “He’ll know, won’t he? You-Know-Who will know we know about his Horcruxes!”

“Maybe they’ll be too scared to tell him!” said Ron hopefully, “Maybe they’ll cover up –”

The sky, the smell of the lake water, the sound of Ron's voice were extinguished. Pain cleaved Harry's head like a sword stroke.

He was standing in a dimly lit room, and a semicircle of wizards faced him, and on the floor at his feet knelt a small, quaking figure.

"What did you say to me?" His voice was high and cold, but fury and fear burned inside him. The one thing that he had dreaded – but it could not be true, he could not see how…The goblin was trembling, unable to meet the red eyes high above his.

"Say it again!" murmured Voldemort. "Say it again!"

"M-my Lord," stammered the goblin, its black eyes wide with terror, "m-my Lord… we t-tried to st-stop them… Im-impostors, my Lord… broke -broke into the – into the Lestranges' vault…"

"Impostors? What impostors? I thought Gringotts had ways of revealing impostors? Who were they?"

"It was… it was… the P-Potter b-boy and the t-two accomplices…"

"And they took?" he said, his voice rising, a terrible fear gripping him, "Tell me! What did they take?"

"A… a s-small golden c-cup m-my Lord…"

The scream of rage, of denial left him as if it were a stranger's. He was crazed, frenzied, it could not be true, it was impossible, nobody had known. How was it possible that the boy could have discovered his secret?

The Elder Wand slashed through the air and green light erupted through the room; the kneeling goblin rolled over dead; the watching wizards scattered before him, terrified. Bellatrix and Lucius Malfoy threw others behind them in their race for the door, and again and again his wand fell, and those who were left were slain, all of them,

for bringing him this news, for hearing about the golden cup - Alone amongst the dead he stomped up and down, and they passed before him in vision: his treasures, his safeguards, his anchors to immortality – the diary was destroyed and the cup was stolen. What if, what if, the boy knew about the others? Could he know, had he already acted, had he traced more of them? Was Dumbledore at the root of this? Dumbledore, who had always suspected him; Dumbledore, dead on his orders; Dumbledore, whose wand was his now, yet who reached out from the ignominy of death through the boy, the boy -

But surely if the boy had destroyed any of his Horcruxes, he, Lord Voldemort, would have known, would have felt it? He, the greatest wizard of them all; he, the most powerful; he, the killer of Dumbledore and of how many other worthless, nameless men. How could Lord Voldemort not have known, if he, himself, most important and precious, had been attacked, mutilated?

True, he had not felt it when the diary had been destroyed, but he had thought that was because he had no body to fell, being less than ghost… No, surely, the rest were safe… The other Horcruxes must be intact…But he must know, he must be sure… He paced the room, kicking aside the goblin's corpse as he passed, and the pictures blurred and burned in his boiling brain: the lake, the shack, and Hogwarts -

A modicum of calm cooled his rage now. How could the boy know that he had hidden the ring in the Gaunt shack? No one had ever known him to be related to the Gaunts, he had hidden the connection, the killings had never been traced to him. The ring, surely, was safe.

And how could the boy, or anybody else, know about the cave or penetrate its protection? The idea of the locket being stolen was absurd…As for the school: He alone knew where in Hogwarts he had stowed the Horcrux, because he alone had plumed the deepest secrets of that place…And there was still Nagini, who must remain close now, no longer sent to do his bidding, under his protection…But

to be sure, to be utterly sure, he must return to each of his hiding places, he must redouble protection around each of his Horcruxes… A job, like the quest for the Elder Wand, that he must undertake alone…Which should he visit first, which was in most danger? An old unease flickered inside him. Dumbledore had known his middle name… Dumbledore might have made the connection with the Gaunts… Their abandoned home was, perhaps, the least secure of his hiding places, it was there that he would go first…The lake, surely impossible… though was there a slight possibility that Dumbledore might have known some of his past misdeeds, through the orphanage.

And Hogwarts… but he knew the his Horcrux there was safe; it would be impossible for Potter to enter Hogsmeade without detection, let alone the school. Nevertheless, it would be prudent to alert Snape to the fact that the boy might try to reenter the castle…. To tell Snape why the boy might return would be foolish, of course; it had been a grave mistake to trust Bellatrix and Malfoy. Didn't their stupidity and carelessness prove how unwise it was ever to trust?

He would visit the Gaunt shack first, then, and take Nagini with him. He would not be parted from the snake anymore… and he strode from the room, through the hall, and out into the dark garden where the fountain played; he called the snake in Parseltongue and it slithered out to join him like a long shadow….

Harry's eyes flew open as he wrenched himself back to the present. He was lying on the bank of the lake in the setting sun, and Ron and Hermione were looking down at him. Judging by their worried looks, and by the continued pounding of his scar, his sudden excursion into Voldemort's mind had not passed unnoticed. He struggled up, shivering, vaguely surprised that he was still wet to his skin, and saw the cup lying innocently in the grass before him, and the lake, deep blue shot with gold in the falling sun.

"He knows." His own voice sounded strange and low after Voldemort's high screams. "He knows and he's going to check where the others are, and the last one," he was already on his feet, "is at Hogwarts. I knew it. I knew it."

"What?"

Ron was gaping at him; Hermione sat up, looking worried.

"But what did you see? How do you know?"

"I saw him find out about the cup, I – I was in his head, he's" – Harry remembered the killings – "he's seriously angry, and scared too, he can't understand how we knew, and now he's going to check the others are safe, the ring first. He things the Hogwarts one is safest, because Snape's there, because it'll be so hard not to be seen getting in. I think he'll check that one last, but he could still be there within hours – "

"Did you see where in Hogwarts it is?" asked Ron, now scrambling to his feet too.

"No, he was concentrating on warning Snape, he didn't think about exactly where it is – "

"Wait, wait!" cried Hermione as Ron caught up to the Horcrux and Harry pulled out the Invisibility Cloak again. "We can't just go, we haven't got a plan, we need to – "

"We need to get going," said Harry firmly. He had been hoping to sleep, looking forward to getting into the new tent, but that was impossible now, "Can you imagine what he's going to do once he realizes the ring and the locket are gone? What if he moves the Hogwarts Horcrux, decides it isn't safe enough?"

"But how are we going to get in?"

“We’ll go to Hogsmeade,” said Harry, “and try to work something out once we see what the protection around the school’s like. Get under the Cloak, Hermione, I want to stick together this time.”

“But we don’t really fit – ”

“It’ll be dark, no one’s going to notice our feet.”

The flapping of enormous wings echoed across the black water. The dragon had drunk its fill and risen into the air. They paused in their preparations to watch it climb higher and higher, now black against the rapidly darkening sky, until it vanished over a nearby mountain. Then Hermione walked forward and took her place between the other two, Harry pulled the Cloak down as far as it would go, and together they turned on the spot into the crushing darkness.

Chapter 28 The Missing Mirror

Harry's feet touched the road. He saw the achingly familiar Hogsmeade High Street: dark shop fronts, and the mist line of black mountains beyond the village and the curve in the road ahead that led off toward Hogwarts, and light spilling from the windows of the Three Broomsticks, and with a lurch of the hear, he remembered with piercing accuracy, how he had landed here nearly a year before, supporting a desperately weak Dumbledore, all this in a second, upon landing – and then, even as he relaxed his grip upon Ron's and Hermione's arms, it happened.

The air was rent by a scream that sounded like Voldemort's when he had realized the cup had been stolen: It tore at every nerve in Harry's body, and he knew that their appearance had caused it.

Even as he looked at the other two beneath the Cloak, the door of the Three Broomsticks burst open and a dozen cloaked and hooded Death Eaters dashed into the streets, their wands aloft.

Harry seized Ron's wrist as he raised his wand; there were too many of them to run. Even attempting it would have give away their position. One of the Death Eaters raised his wand, and the scream stopped, still echoing around the distant mountains.

"Accio Cloak!" roared one of the Death Eaters Harry seized his folds, but it made no attempt to escape. The Summoning Charm had not worked on it.

"Not under your wrapper, then, Potter?" yelled the Death Eater who had tried the charm and then to his fellows. "Spread now. He's here."

Six of the Death Eaters ran toward them: Harry, Ron and Hermione backed as quickly as possible down the nearest side street, and the Death Eaters missed them by inches. They waited in the darkness,

listening to the footsteps running up and down, beams of light flying along the street from the Death Eaters' searching wands.

"Let's just leave!" Hermione whispered. "Disapparate now!"

"Great idea," said Ron, but before Harry could reply, a Death Eater shouted, "We know you are here, Potter, and there's no getting away! We'll find you!"

"They were ready for us," whispered Harry. "They set up that spell to tell them we'd come. I reckon they've done something to keep us here, trap us – "

"What about dementors?" called another Death Eater. "Let'em have free rein, they'd find him quick enough!"

"The Dark Lord wants Potter dead by no hands but his – "

" 'an dementors won't kill him! The Dark Lord wants Potter's life, nor his soul. He'll be easier to kill if he's been Kissed first!"

There were noises of agreement. Dread filled Harry: To repel dementors they would have to produce Patronuses which would give them away immediately.

"We're going to have to try to Disapparate, Harry!" Hermione whispered.

Even as she said it, he felt the unnatural cold being spread over the street. Light was sucked from the environment right up to the stars, which vanished. In the pitch blackness, he felt Hermione take hold of his arm and together, they turned on the spot.

The air through which they needed to move, seemed to have become solid: They could not Disapparate; the Death Eaters had cast their charms well. The cold was biting deeper and deeper into Harry's flesh. He, Ron and Hermione retreated down the side street, groping

their way along the wall trying not to make a sound. Then, around the corner, gliding noiselessly, came dementors, ten or more of them, visible because they were of a denser darkness than their surroundings, with their black cloaks and their scabbed and rotting hands. Could they sense fear in the vicinity? Harry was sure of it: They seemed to be coming more quickly now, taking those dragging, rattling breaths he detested, tasting despair in the air, closing in - He raised his wand: He could not, would not suffer the Dementor's Kiss, whatever happened afterward. It was of Ron and Hermione that he thought as he whispered "Expecto Patronum!"

The silver stag burst from his wand and charged: The Dementors scattered and there was a triumphant yell from somewhere out of sight"It's him, down there, down there, I saw his Patronus, it was a stag!"

The Dementors have retreated, the stars were popping out again and the footsteps of the Death Eaters were becoming louder; but before Harry in his panic could decide what to do, there was a grinding of bolts nearby, a door opened on the left-side of the narrow street, and a rough voice said: "Potter, in here, quick!"

He obeyed without hesitation, the three of them hurried through the open doorway.

"Upstairs, keep the Cloak on, keep quiet!" muttered a tall figure, passing them on his way into the street and slammed the door behind him.

Harry had had no idea where they were, but now he saw, by the stuttering light of a single candle, the grubby, sawdust bar of the Hog's Head Inn. They ran behind the counter and through a second doorway, which led to a trickery wooden staircase, that they climbed as fast as they could. The stairs opened into a sitting room with a durable carpet and a small fireplace, above which hung a single large

oil painting of a blonde girl who gazed out at the room with a kind of a vacant sweetness.

Shouts reached from the streets below. Still wearing the Invisibility Cloak on, they hurried toward the grimy window and looked down. Their savior, whom Harry now recognized as the Hog's Head's barman, was the only person not wearing a hood.

"So what?" he was bellowing into one of the hooded faces. "So what? You send dementors down my street, I'll send a Patronus back at'em! I'm not having'em near me, I've told you that. I'm not having it!"

"That wasn't your Patronus," said a Death Eater. "That was a stag. It was Potter's!"

"Stag!" roared the barman, and he pulled out a wand. "Stag! You idiot – Expecto Patronum!"

Something huge and horned erupted from the wand. Head down, it charged toward the High Street, and out of sight.

"That's not what I saw" said the Death Eater, though was less certainly "Curfew's been broken, you heard the noise," one of his companions told the barman. "Someone was out on the streets against regulations – "

"If I want to put my cat out, I will, and be damned to your curfew!"

"You set off the Caterwauling Charm?"

"What if I did? Going to cart me off to Azkaban? Kill me for sticking my nose out my own front door? Do it, then, if you want to! But I hope for your sakes you haven't pressed your little Dark Marks, and summoned him. He's not going to like being called here, for me and my old cat, is he, now?"

“Don’t worry about us.” said one of the Death Eaters, “worry about yourself, breaking curfew!”

“And where will you lot traffic potions and poisons when my pub’s closed down? What will happen to your little sidelines then?”

“Are you threatening –?”

“I keep my mouth shut, it’s why you come here, isn’t it?”

“I still say I saw a stag Patronus!” shouted the first Death Eater.

“Stag?” roared the barman. “It’s a goat, idiot!”

“All right, we made a mistake,” said the second Death Eater. “Break curfew again and we won’t be so lenient!”

The Death Eaters strode back towards the High Street. Hermione moaned with relief, wove out from under the Cloak, and sat down on a wobble-legged chair. Harry drew the curtains then pulled the Cloak off himself and Ron. They could hear the barman down below, rebolting the door of the bar, then climbing the stairs.

Harry’s attention was caught by something on the mantelpiece: a small, rectangular mirror, propped on top of it, right beneath the portrait of the girl.

The barman entered the room.

“You bloody fools,” he said gruffly, looking from one to the other of them. “What were you thinking, coming here?”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “You can’t thank you enough. You saved our lives!”

The barman grunted. Harry approached him looking up into the face: trying to see past the long, stringy, wire-gray hair beard. He wore

spectacles. Behind the dirty lenses, the eyes were a piercing, brilliant blue.

“It’s your eye I’ve been seeing in the mirror.”

There was a silence in the room. Harry and the barman looked at each other.

“You sent Dobby.”

The barman nodded and looked around for the elf.

“Thought he’d be with you. Where’ve you left him?”

“He’s dead,” said Harry, “Bellatrix Lestrange killed him.”

The barman face was impassive. After a few moments he said, “I’m sorry to hear it, I liked that elf.”

He turned away, lightning lamps with prods of his wand, not looking at any of them.

“You’re Aberforth,” said Harry to the man’s back.

He neither confirmed or denied it, but bent to light the fire.

“How did you get this?” Harry asked, walking across to Sirius’s mirror, the twin of the one he had broken nearly two years before.

“Bought it from Dung ‘bout a year ago,” said Aberforth. “Albus told me what it was. Been trying to keep an eye out for you.”

Ron gasped.

“The silver doe,” he said excitedly, “Was that you too?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Aberforth.

“Someone sent a doe Patronus to us!”

“Brains like that, you could be a Death Eater, son. Haven’t I just prove my Patronus is a goat?”

“Oh,” said Ron, “Yeah… well, I’m hungry!” he added defensively as his stomach gave an enormous rumble.

“I got food,” said Aberforth, and he sloped out of the room, reappearing moments later with a large loaf of bread, some cheese, and a pewter jug of mead, which he set upon a small table in front of the fire.

Ravenous, they ate and drank, and for a while there was sound of chewing.

“Right then,” said Aberforth when the had eaten their fill and Harry and Ron sat slumped dozily in their chairs. “We need to think of the best way to get you out of here. Can’t be done by night, you heard what happens if anyone moves outdoors during darkness: Caterwauling Charm’s set off, they’ll be onto you like bowtruckles on doxy eggs. I don’t reckon I’ll be able to pass of a stag as a goat a second time. Wait for daybreak when curfew lifts, then you can put your Cloak back on and set out on foot. Get right out of Hogsmeade, up into the mountains, and you’ll be able to Disapparate there. Might see Hagrid. He’s been hiding in a cave up there with Grawp ever since they tried to arrest him.”

“We’re not leaving,” said Harry. “We need to get into Hogwarts.”

“Don’t be stupid, boy,” said Aberforth.

“We’ve got to,” said Harry.

“What you’ve got to do,” said Aberforth, leaning forward, “is to get as far from here as from here as you can.”

"You don't understand. There isn't much time. We've got to get into the castle. Dumbledore – I mean, your brother – wanted us – "

The firelight made the grimy lenses of Aberforth's glasses momentarily opaque, a bright flat white, and Harry remembered the blind eyes of the giant spider, Aragog.

"My brother Albus wanted a lot of things," said Aberforth, "and people had a habit of getting hurt while he was carrying out his grand plans. You get away from this school, Potter, and out of the country if you can. Forget my brother and his clever schemes. He's gone where none of this can hurt him, and you don't owe him anything."

"You don't understand." said Harry again.

"Oh, don't I?" said Aberforth quietly. "You don't think I understood my own brother? Think you know Albus better than I did?"

"I didn't mean that," said Harry, whose brain felt sluggish with exhaustion and from the surfeit of food and wine. "It's… he left me a job."

"Did he now?" said Aberforth. "Nice job, I hope? Pleasant? Easy? Sort of thing you'd expect an unqualified wizard kid to be able to do without overstretching themselves?"

Ron gave a rather grim laugh. Hermione was looking strained.

"I-it's not easy, no," said Harry. "But I've got to – "

"Got to? Why got to? He's dead, isn't he?" said Aberforth roughly. "Let it go, boy, before you follow him! Save yourself!"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

“I – ” Harry felt overwhelmed; he could not explain, so he took the offensive instead. “But you’re fighting too, you’re in the Order of the Phoenix – ”

“I was,” said Aberforth. “The Order of the Phoenix is finished. You-Know-Who’s won, it’s over, and anyone who’s pretending different’s kidding themselves. It’ll never be safe for you here, Potter, he wants you too badly. So go abroad, go into hiding, save yourself. Best take these two with you.” He jerked a thumb at Ron and Hermione.

“They’ll be in danger long as they live now everyone knows they’ve been working with you.”

“I can’t leave,” said Harry. “I’ve got a job – ”

“Give it to someone else!”

“I can’t. It’s got to be me, Dumbledore explained it all – ”

“Oh, did he now? And did he tell you everything, was he honest with you?”

Harry wanted him with all his heart to say “Yes,” but somehow the simple word would not rise to his lips, Aberforth seemed to know what he was thinking.

“I knew my brother, Potter. He learned secrecy at our mother’s knee. Secrets and lies, that’s how we grew up, and Albus… he was a natural.”

The old man’s eyes traveled to the painting of the girl over the mantelpiece. It was, now Harry looked around properly, the only picture in the room. There was no photograph of Albus Dumbledore, nor of anyone else.

“Mr. Dumbledore” said Hermione rather timidly. “Is that your sister? Ariana?”

“Yes.” said Aberforth tersely. “Been reading Rita Skeeter, have you, missy?”

Even by the rosy light of the fire it was clear that Hermione had turned red.

“Elphias Doge mentioned her to us,” said Harry, trying to spare Hermione.

“That old berk,” muttered Aberforth, taking another swig of mead. “Thought the sun shone out of my brother’s every ocrifice, he did. Well, so did plenty of people, you three included, by the looks of it.”

Harry kept quiet. He did not want to express the doubts and uncertainties about Dumbledore that had riddled him for months now. He had made his choice while he dug Dobby’s grave, he had decided to continue along the winding, dangerous path indicated for him by Albus Dumbledore, to accept that he had not been told everything that he wanted to know, but simply to trust. He had no desire to doubt again; he did not want o hear anything that would deflect him from his purpose. He met Aberforth’s gaze, which was so strikingly like his brothers’: The bright blue eyes gave the same impression that they were X-raying the object of their scrutiny, and Harry thought that Aberforth knew what he was thinking and despised him for it.

“Professor Dumbledore cared about Harry, very much,” said Hermione in a low voice.

“Did he now?” said Aberforth. “Funny thing how many of the people my brother cared about very much ended up in a worse state than if he’d left ‘em well alone.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione breathlessly.

“Never you mind,” said Aberforth.

“But that’s a really serious thing to say!” said Hermione. “Are you – are you talking about your sister?”

Aberforth glared at her: His lips moved as if he were chewing the words he was holding back. Then he burst into speech.

“When my sister was six years old, she was attacked, by three Muggle boys. They’d seen her doing magic, spying through the back garden hedge: She was a kid, she couldn’t control it, no witch or wizard can at that age. What they saw, scared them, I expect. They forced their way through the hedge, and when she couldn’t show them the trick, they got a bit carried away trying to stop the little freak doing it.”

Hermione’s eyes were huge in the firelight; Ron looked slightly sick. Aberforth stood up, tall as Albus, and suddenly terrible in his anger and the intensity of his pain.

“It destroyed her, what they did: She was never right again. She wouldn’t use magic, but she couldn’t get rid of it; it turned inward and drove her mad, it exploded out of her when she couldn’t control it, and at times she was strange and dangerous. But mostly she was sweet and scared and harmless.”

“And my father went after the bastards that did it,” said Aberforth, “and attacked them. And they locked him up in Azkaban for it. He never said why he’d done it, because the Ministry had known what Ariana had become, she’d have been locked up in St. Mungo’s for good. They’d have seen her as a serious threat to the International Statute of Secrecy, unbalanced like she was, with magic exploding out of her at moments when she couldn’t keep it in any longer.”

“We had to keep her safe and quiet. We moved house, put it about she was ill, and my mother looked after her, and tried to keep her calm and happy.”

“I was her favourite,” he said, and as he said it, a grubby schoolboy seemed to look out through Aberforth’s wrinkles and wrangled beard. “Not Albus, he was always up in his bedroom when he was home, reading his books and counting his prizes, keeping up with his correspondence with the most notable magical names of the day,”

Aberforth succored. “He didn’t want to be bothered with her. She liked me best. I could get her to eat when she wouldn’t do it for my mother, I could calm her down, when she was in one of her rages, and when she was quiet, she used to help me feed the goats.”

“Then, when she was fourteen… See, I wasn’t there.” said Aberforth. “If I’d been there, I could have calmed her down. She had one of her rages, and my mother wasn’t as young as she was, and… it was an accident. Ariana couldn’t control it. But my mother was killed.”

Harry felt a horrible mixture of pity and repulsion; he did not want to hear any more, but Aberforth kept talking, and Harry wondered how long it had been since he had spoken about this; whether, in fact, he had ever spoken about it.

“So that put paid to Albus’s trip round the world with little Doge. The pair of ‘em came home for my mother’s funeral and then Doge went off on his own, and Albus settled down as head of the family. Ha!”

Aberforth spat into the fire.

“I’d have looked after her, I told him so, I didn’t care about school, I’d have stayed home and done it.

He told me I had to finish my education and he’d take over from my mother. Bit of a comedown for Mr. Brilliant, there’s no prizes for looking after your half-mad sister, stopping her blowing up the house every other day. But he did all right for a few weeks… till he came.“And now a positively dangerous look crept over Aberforth’s face.

“Grindelwald. And at last, my brother had an equal to talk to someone just as bright and talented he was. And looking after Ariana took a backseat then, while they were hatching all their plans for a new Wizarding order and looking for Hallows, and whatever else it was they were so interested in. Grand plans for the benefit of all Wizardkind, and if one young girl neglected, what did that matter, when Albus was working for the greater good?”

“But after a few weeks of it, I’d had enough, I had. It was nearly time for me to go hack to Hogwarts, so I told ‘em, both of ‘em, face-to-face, like I am to you, now,” and Aberforth looked downward Harry, and it took a little imagination to see him as a teenager, wiry and angry, confronting his elder brother. “I told him, you’d better give it up now. You can’t move her, she’s in no fit state, you can’t take her with you, wherever it is you’re planning to go, when you’re making your clever speeches, trying to whip yourselves up a following. He didn’t like that.” said Aberforth, and his eyes were briefly occluded by the fireflight on the lenses of his glasses: They turned white and blind again. “Grindelwald didn’t like that at all. He got angry. He told me what a stupid little boy I was, trying to stand in the way of him and my brilliant brother… Didn’t I understand, my poor sister wouldn’t have to be hidden once they’d changed the world, and led the wizards out of hiding, and taught the Muggles their place?”

“And there was an argument… and I pulled my wand, and he pulled out his, and I had the Cruciatus Curse used on me by my brother’s best friend – and Albus was trying to stop him, and then all three of us were dueling, and the flashing lights and the bangs set her off, she couldn’t stand it – ”

The color was draining from Aberforth’s face as though he had suffered a mortal wound.

“ – and I think she wanted to help, but she didn’t really know what she was doing, and I don’t know which of us did it, it could have been any of us – and she was dead.”

His voice broke on the last word and he dropped down into the nearest chair. Hermione's face was wet with tears, and Ron was almost as pale as Aberforth. Harry felt nothing but revulsion: He wished he had not heard it, wished he could wash is mind clean of it.

"I'm so… I'm so sorry," Hermione whispered.

"Gone," croaked Aberforth. "Gone forever."

He wiped his nose on hiss cuff and cleared his throat.

" 'Course, Grindelwald scarpered. He had a bit of a track record already, back in his own country, and he didn't want Ariana set to his account too. And Albus was free, wasn't he? Free of the burden of his sister, free to become the greatest wizard of the – "

"He was never free," said Harry.

"I beg your pardon?" said Aberforth.

"Never," said Harry. "The night that your brother died, he drank a potion that drove him out of his mind. He started screaming, pleading with someone who wasn't there. 'Don't hurt them, please… hurt me instead.' "

Ron and Hermione were staring at Harry. He had never gone into details about what had happened on the island on the lake.

The events that had taken place after he and Dumbledore had returned to Hogwarts had eclipsed it so thoroughly.

"He thought he was back there with you and Grindelwald, I know he did," said Harry, remembering Dumbledore whispering, pleading.

"He thought he was watching Grindelwald hurting you and Ariana… It was torture to him, if you'd seen him then, you wouldn't say he was free."

Aberforth seemed lost in contemplation of his own knotted and veined hands. After a long pause he said. “How can you be sure, Potter, that my brother wasn’t more interested in the greater good than in you? How can you be sure you aren’t dispensable, just like my little sister?”

A shard of ice seemed to pierce Harry’s heart.

“I don’t believe it. Dumbledore loved Harry,” said Hermione.

“Why didn’t he tell him to hide, then?” shot back Aberforth. “Why didn’t he say to him, ‘Take care of yourself, here’s how to survive’?”

“Because,” said Harry before Hermione could answer, “sometimes you’ve got to think about more than your own safety! Sometimes you’ve got to think about the greater good! This is war!”

“You’re seventeen, boy!”

“I’m of age, and I’m going to keep fighting even if you’ve given up!”

“Who says I’ve given up?”

“The Order of the Phoenix is finished,” Harry repeated, “You-Know-Who’s won, it’s over, and anyone who’s pretending different’s kidding themselves.”

“I don’t say I like it, but it’s the truth!”

“No, it isn’t.” said Harry. “Your brother knew how to finish You-Know-Who and he passed the knowledge on to me. I’m going to keep going until I succeed – or I die. Don’t think I don’t know how this might end. I’ve known it for years.”

He waited for Aberforth to jeer or to argue, but he did not. He merely moved.

“We need to get into Hogwarts,” said Harry again. “If you can’t help us, we’ll wait till daybreak, leave you in peace, and try to find a way in ourselves. If you can help us – well, now would be a great time to mention it.”

Aberforth remained fixed in his chair, gazing at Harry with the eye, that were so extraordinarily like his brother’s. At last he cleared his throat, got to his feet, walked around the little table, and approached the portrait of Ariana.

“You know what to do,” he said.

She smiled, turned, and walked away, not as people in portraits usually did, one of the sides of their frames, but along what seemed to be a long tunnel painted behind her. They watched her slight figure retreating until finally she was swallowed by the darkness.

“Er – what –?” began Ron.

“There’s only one way in now,” said Aberforth. “You must know they’ve got all the old secret passageways covered at both ends, dementors all around the boundary walls, regular patrols inside the school from what my sources tell me. The place has never been so heavily guarded.

How you expect to do anything once you get inside it, with Snape in charge and the Carrows as his deputies… well, that’s your lookout, isn’t it? You say you’re prepared to die.““But what…?” said Hermione, frowning at Ariana’s picture.

A tiny white dot reappeared at the end of the painted tunnel, and now Ariana was walking back toward them, growing bigger and bigger as she came. But there was somebody else with her now, someone taller than she was, who was limping along, looking excited. His hair was longer than Harry had ever seen. He appeared and torn. Larger and larger the two figures grew, until only their heads and shoulders filled the portrait.

Then the whole thing swang forward on the wall like a little door, and the entrance to a real tunnel was revealed. And out of it, his hair overgrown, his face cut, his robes ripped, clambered the real Neville Longbottom, who gave a roar of delight, leapt down from the mantelpiece and yelled.

“I knew you’d come! I knew it, Harry!”

Chapter 29 The Lost Diadem

Neville – what the – how –?"But Neville had spotted Ron and Hermione, and with yells of delight was hugging them too. The longer Harry looked at Neville, the worse he appeared: One of his eyes was swollen yellow and purple, there were gouge marks on his face, and his general air of unkemptness suggested that he had been living enough. Nevertheless, his battered visage shone with happiness as he let go of Hermione and said again, "I knew you'd come! Kept telling Seamus it was a matter of time!"

"Neville, what's happened to you?"

"What? This?" Neville dismissed his injuries with a shake of the head. "This is nothing, Seamus is worse. You'll see. Shall we get going then? Oh," he turned to Aberforth, "Ab, there might be a couple more people to the way."

"Couple more?" repeated Aberforth ominously. "What d'you mean, a couple more, Longbottom? There's a curfew and a Camwaulding Charm on the whole village!"

"I know, that's why they'll be Apparating directly into the bar," said Neville. "Just send them down the passage when they get here, will you? Thanks a lot."

Neville held out his hand to Hermione and helped her to climb up onto the mantelpiece and into the tunnel; Ron followed, then Neville. Harry addressed Aberforth.

"I don't know how to thank you. You've saved our lives twice."

"Look after 'em, then," said Aberforth gruffly. "I might not be able to save 'em a third time."

Harry chambered up onto the mantelpiece and through the hole behind Ariana's portrait. There were smooth stone steps on the other side: It looked as though the passageway had been there for years. Brass lamps hung from the walls and the earthy floor was worn and smooth; as they walked, their shadows rippled, fanlike, across the wall.

"How long's this been here?" Ron asked as they set off. "It isn't on the Marauder's Map, is it Harry? I thought there were only seven passages in and out of school?"

"They sealed off all of those before the start of the year," said Neville. "There's no chance of getting through any of them now, not with the curses over the entrances and Death Eaters and dementors waiting at the exits." He started walking backward, beaming, drinking them in. "Never mind that stuff … Is it true? Did you break into Gringotts? Did you escape on a dragon? It's everywhere, everyone's talking about it, Terry Boot got beaten up by Carrow for yelling about it in the Great Hall at dinner!"

"Yeah, it's true," said Harry.

Neville laughed gleefully.

"What did you do with the dragon?"

"Released it into the wild," said Ron. "Hermione was all for keeping it as a pet"

"Don't exaggerate, Ron – "

"But what have you been doing? People have been saying you've just been on the run, Harry, but I don't think so. I think you've been up to something."

"You're right," said Harry, "but tell us about Hogwarts, Neville, we haven't heard anything."

“It’s been …. Well, it’s not really like Hogwarts anymore,” said Neville, the smile fading from his face as he spoke. “Do you know about the Carrows?”

“Those two Death Eaters who teach here?”

“They do more than teach,” said Neville. “They’re in charge of all discipline. They like punishment, the Carrows.”

“Like Umbridge?”

“Nah, they make her look tame. The other teachers are all supposed to refer us to the Carrows if we do anything wrong. They don’t, though, if they can avoid it. You can tell they all hate them as much as we do.”

“Amycus, the bloke, he teaches what used to be Defense Against the Dark Arts, except now it’s just the Dark Arts. We’re supposed to practice the Cruciatus Curse on people who’ve earned detentions – ”

“What?”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione’s united voices echoed up and down the passage.

“Yeah,” said Neville. “That’s how I got this one,” he pointed at a particularly deep gash in his cheek, “I refused to do it. Some people are into it, though; Crabbe and Goyle love it. First time they’ve ever been top in anything, I expect.”

“Alecto, Amycus’s sister, teaches Muggle Studies, which is compulsory for everyone. We’ve all got to listen to her explain how Muggles are like animals, stupid and dirty, and how they drive wizards into hiding by being vicious toward them, and how the natural order is being reestablished. I got this one,” he indicated another slash to his face, “for asking her how much Muggle blood she and her brother have got.”

“Blimey, Neville,” said Ron, “there’s a time and a place for getting a smart mouth.”

“You didn’t see her,” said Neville. “You wouldn’t have stood it either. The thing is, it helps when people stand up to them, it gives everyone hope. I used to notice that when you did it, Harry.”

“But they’ve used you as a knife sharpener,” said Ron, winding slightly as they passed a lamp and Neville’s injuries were thrown into even greater relief.

Neville shrugged.

“Doesn’t matter. They don’t want to spill too much pure blood, so they’ll torture us a bit if we’re mouthy but they won’t actually kill us.”

Harry did not know what was worse, the things that Neville was saying or the matter-of-fact tone in which he said them.

“The only people in real danger are the ones whose friends and relatives on the outside are giving trouble. They get taken hostage. Old Xeno Lovegood was getting a bit too outspoken in The Quibbler, so they dragged Luna off the train on the way back for Christmas.”

“Neville, she’s all right, we’ve seen her – ”

“Yeah, I know, she managed to get a message to me.”

From his pocket he pulled a golden coin, and Harry recognized it as one of the fake Galleons that Dumbledore’s Army had used to send one another messages.

“These have been great,” said Neville, beaming at Hermione. “The Carrows never rumbled how we were communicating, it drove them mad. We used to sneak out at night and put graffiti on the walls: Dumbledore’s Army, Still Recruiting, stuff like that. Snape hated it.”

“You used to?” said Harry, who had noticed the past tense.

“Well, it got more difficult as time went on.” said Neville. “We lost Luna at Christmas, and Ginny never came back after Easter, and the three of us were sort of the leaders. The Carrows seemed to know I was behind a lot of it, so they started coming down on me hard, and then Michael Corner went and got caught releasing a first-year they’d chained up, and they tortured him pretty badly. That scared people off.”

“No kidding,” muttered Ron, as the passage began to slope upward.

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t ask people to go through what Michael did, so we dropped those kinds of stunts. But we were still fighting, doing underground stuff, right up until a couple of weeks ago. That’s when they decided there was only one way to stop me, I suppose, and they went for Gran.”

“They what?” said Harry, Ron, and Hermione together.

“Yeah,” said Neville, panting a little now, because the passage was climbing so steeply, “well, you can see their thinking. It had worked really well, kidnapping kids to force their relatives to behave. I s’pose it was only a matter of time before they did it the other way around. Thing was,” he faced them, and Harry was astonished to see that he was grinning, “they bit off a bit more than they could chew with Gran. Little old witch living alone, they probably thought hey didn’t need to send anyone particularly powerful. Anyway,” Neville laughed, “Dawlish is still in St. Mungo’s and Gran’s on the run. She sent me a letter,” he clapped a hand to the breast pocket of his robes, “telling me she was proud of me, that I’m my parent’s son, and to keep it up.”

“Cool,” said Ron.

“Yea,” said Neville happily. “Only thing was, once they realized they had no hold over me, they decided Hogwarts could do without me

after all. I don't know whether they were planning to kill me or send me to Azkaban, either way, I knew it was time to disappear."

"But," said Ron, looking thoroughly confused, "aren't – aren't we heading straight back for Hogwarts?"

"'Course," said Neville. "You'll see. We're here."

They turned a corner and there ahead of them was the end of the passage. Another short flight of steps led to a door just like the one hidden behind Ariana's portrait. Neville pushed it open and climbed through. As Harry followed, he heard Neville call out for unseen people:"Look who it is! Didn't I tell you?"

As Harry emerged into the room behind the passage, there were several screams and yells: "HARRY!"

"It's Potter, it's POTTER!"

"Ron!"

"Hermione!"

He had a confused impression of colored hangings, of lamps and many faces. The next moment, he, Ron, and Hermione were engulfed, hugged, pounded on the back, their hair ruffled, their hands shaken, by what seemed to be more than twenty people. They might have just won a Quidditch final.

"Okay, okay, calm down!" Neville called, and as the crowd backed away, Harry was able to take in their surroundings.

He did not recognize the dorm at all. It was enormous, and looked rather like the interior of a particularly sumptuous tree house, or perhaps a gigantic ship's cabin. Multicolored hammocks were strung from the ceiling and from the balcony that ran around the dark wood-paneled and windowless walls, which were covered in bright tapestry

hangings. Harry saw the gold Gryffindor lion, emblazoned on scarlet; the black badger of Hufflepuff, set against yellow; and the bronze eagle of Ravenclaw, on blue. The silver and green of Slytherin alone were absent. There were bulging bookcases, a few broomsticks propped against the walls, and in the corner, a large wood-cased wireless.

"Where are we?"

"Room of Requirement, of course!" said Neville. "Surpassed itself, hasn't it? The Carrows were chasing me, and I knew I had just one chance for a hideout: I managed to get through the door and this is what I found! Well, it wasn't exactly like this when I arrived, it was a load smaller, there was only one hammock and just Gryffindor hangings. But it's expanded as more and more of the D.A. have arrived."

"And the Carrows can't get in?" asked Harry, looking around for the door.

"No," said Seamus Finnigan, whom Harry had not recognized until he spoke: Seamus's face was bruised and puffy. "It's a proper hideout, as long as one of us stays in here, they can't get at us, the door won't open. It's all down to Neville. He really gets this room. You've got to ask for exactly what you need – like, 'I don't want any Carrow supporters to be able to get in' – and it'll do it for you! You've just got to make sure you close the loopholes. Neville's the man!"

"It's quite straightforward, really," said Neville modestly. "I'd been in here about a day and a half, and getting really hungry, and wishing I could get something to eat, and that's when the passage to Hog's Head opened up. I went through it and met Aberforth. He's been providing us with food, because for some reason, that's the one thing the room doesn't really do."

"Yeah, well, food's one of the five exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration," said Ron to general astonishment.

“So we’ve been hiding out here for nearly two weeks,” said Seamus, “and it just makes more hammocks every time we need room, and it even sprouted a pretty good bathroom once girls started turning up – ”

“ – and thought they’d quite like to wash, yes,” supplied Lavender Brown, whom Harry had not noticed until that point. Now that he looked around properly, he recognized many familiar faces. Both Patil twins were there, as were Terry Boot, Ernie Macmillan, Anthony Goldstein, and Michael Corner.

“Tell us what you’ve been up to, though,” said Ernie. “There’ve been so many rumors, we’ve been trying to keep up with you on Potterwatch.” He pointed at the wireless. “You didn’t break into Gringotts?”

“They did!” said Neville. “And the dragon’s true too!”

There was a smattering of applause and a few whoops; Ron took a bow.

“What were you after?” asked Seamus eagerly.

Before any of them could parry the question with one of their own, Harry felt a terrible, scorching pain in the lightning scar. As he turned his back hastily on the curious and delighted faces, the Room of Requirement vanished, and he was standing inside a ruined stone shack, and the rotting floorboards were ripped apart at his feet, a disinterred golden box lay open and empty beside the hole, and Voldemort’s scream of fury vibrated inside his head.

With an enormous effort he pulled out of Voldemort’s mind again, back to where he stood, swaying, in the Room of Requirement, sweat pouring from his face and Ron holding him up.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Neville was saying. “What to sit down? I expect you’re tired, aren’t –?”

“No,” said Harry. He looked at Ron and Hermione, trying to tell them without words that Voldemort had just discovered the loss of one of the other Horcruxes. Time was running out fast: If Voldemort chose to visit Hogwarts next, they would miss their chance.

“We need to get going,” he said, and their expressions told him that they understood.

“What are we going to do, then, Harry?” asked Seamus. “What’s the plan?”

“Plan?” repeated Harry. He was exercising all his willpower to prevent himself succumbing again to Voldemort’s rage: His scar was still burning. “Well, there’s something we – Ron, Hermione, and I – need to do, and then we’ll get out of here.”

Nobody was laughing or whooping anymore. Neville looked confused.

“What d’you mean, ‘get out of here’?”

“We haven’t come back to stay,” said Harry, rubbing his scar, trying to soothe the pain. “There’s something important we need to do – ”

“What is it?”

“I – I can’t tell you.”

There was a ripple of muttering at this: Neville’s brows contracted.

“Why can’t you tell us? It’s something to do with fighting You-Know-Who, right?”

“Well, yeah – ”

“Then we’ll help you.”

The other members of Dumbledore's Army were nodding, some enthusiastically, others solemnly. A couple of them rose from their chairs to demonstrate their willingness for immediate action.

"You don't understand," Harry seemed to have said that a lot in the last few hours. "We – we can't tell you. We've got to do it – alone."

"Why?" asked Neville.

"Because …" In his desperation to start looking for the missing Horcrux, or at least have a private discussion with Ron and Hermione about where they might commence their search. Harry found it difficult to gather his thoughts. His scar was still searing. "Dumbledore left the three of us a job," he said carefully, "and we weren't supposed to tell – I mean, he wanted us to do it, just the three of us."

"We're his army," said Neville. "Dumbledore's Army. We were all in it together, we've been keeping it going while you three have been off on your own – "

"It hasn't exactly been a picnic, mate," said Ron.

"I never said it had, but I don't see why you can't trust us. Everyone in this room's been fighting and they've been driven in here because the Carrows were hunting them down. Everyone in here's proven they're loyal to Dumbledore – loyal to you."

"Look," Harry began, without knowing what he was going to say, but it did not matter. The tunnel door had just opened behind him.

"We got your message, Neville! Hello you three, I thought you must be here!"

It was Luna and Dean. Seamus gave a great roar of delight and ran to hug his best friend.

"Hi, everyone!" said Luna happily. "Oh, it's great to be back!"

“Luna,” said Harry distractedly, “what are you doing here? How did you –?”

“I sent for her,” said Neville, holding up the fake Galleon. “I promised her and Ginny that if you turned up I’d let them know. We all thought that if you came back, it would mean revolution. That we were going to overthrow Snape and the Carrows.”

“Of course that’s what it means,” said Luna brightly. “Isn’t it, Harry? We’re going to fight them out of Hogwarts?”

“Listen,” said Harry with a rising sense of panic, “I’m sorry, but that’s not what we came back for. There’s something we’ve got to do, and then – ”

“You’re going to leave us in this mess?” demanded Michael Cornet.

“No!” said Ron. “What we’re doing will benefit everyone in the end, it’s all about trying to get rid of You-Know-Who – ”

“Then let us help!” said Neville angrily. “We want to be a part of it!”

There was another noise behind them, and Harry turned. His heart seemed to fall: Ginny was now climbing through the hole in the wall, closely followed by Fred, George, and Lee Jordan. Ginny gave Harry a radiant smile: He had forgotten, he had never fully appreciated, how beautiful she was, but he had never been less pleased to see her.

“Aberforth’s getting a bit annoyed,” said Fred, raising his hand in answer to several cries of greeting. “He wants a kip, and his bar’s turned into a railway station.”

Harry’s mouth fell open. Right behind Lee Jordan came Harry’s old girlfriend, Cho Chang. She smiled at him.

“I got the message,” she said, holding up her own fake Galleon and she walked over to sit beside Michael Corner.

“So what’s the plan, Harry?” said George.

“There isn’t one,” said Harry, still disoriented by the sudden appearance of all these people, unable to take everything in while his scar was still burning so fiercely.

“Just going to make it up as we go along, are we? My favorite kind,” said Fred.

“You’ve got to stop this!” Harry told Neville. “What did you call them all back for? This is insane – ”

“We’re fighting, aren’t we?” said Dean, taking out his fake Galleon. “The message said Harry was back, and we were going to fight! I’ll have to get a wand, though – ”

“You haven’t got a wand–?” began Seamus.

Ron turned suddenly to Harry.

“Why can’t they help?”

“What?”

“They can help.” He dropped his voice and said, so that none of them could hear but Hermione, who stood between them, “We don’t know where it is. We’ve got to find it fast. We don’t have to tell them it’s a Horcrux.”

Harry looked from Ron to Hermione, who murmured, “I think Ron’s right. We don’t even know what we’re looking for, we need them.” And when Harry looked unconvinced, “You don’t have to do everything alone, Harry.”

Harry thought fast, his scar still prickling, his head threatening to split again. Dumbledore had warned him against telling anyone but Ron and Hermione about the Horcruxes. Secrets and lies, that’s how we

grew up, and Albus … he was a natural … Was he turning into Dumbledore, keeping his secrets clutched to his chest, afraid to trust? But Dumbledore had trusted Snape, and where had that led? To murder at the top of the highest tower …“All right,” he said quietly to the other two. “Okay,” he called to the room at large, and all noise ceased: Fred and George, who had been cracking jokes for the benefit of those nearest, fell silent, and all of the looked alert, excited.

“There’s something we need to find,” Harry said. “Something – something that’ll help us overthrow You-Know-Who. It’s here at Hogwarts, but we don’t know where. It might have belonged to Ravenclaw. Has anyone heard of an object like that? Has anyone come across something with her eagle on it, for instance?”

He looked hopefully toward the little group of Ravenclaws, to Padma, Michael, Terry, and Cho, but it was Luna who answered, perched on the arm of Ginny’s chair.

“Well, there’s her lost diadem. I told you about it, remember, Harry? The lost diadem of Ravenclaw? Daddy’s trying to duplicate it.”

“Yeah, but the lost diadem,” said Michael Corner, rolling his eyes, “is lost, Luna. That’s sort of the point.”

“When was it lost?” asked Harry.

“Centuries ago, they say,” said Cho, and Harry’s heart sank. “Professor Flitwick says the diadem vanished with Ravenclaw herself. People have looked, but,” she appealed to her fellow Ravenclaws. “Nobody’s ever found a trace of it, have them?”

They all shook their heads.

“Sorry, but what is a diadem?” asked Ron.

“It’s a kind of crown,” said Terry Boot. “Ravenclaw’s was supposed to have magical properties, enhance the wisdom of the wearer.”

"Yes, Daddy's Wrackspurt siphons – "

But Harry cut across Luna.

"And none of you have ever seen anything that looks like it?"

They all shook their heads again. Harry looked at Ron and Hermione and his own disappointment was mirrored back at him. An object that had been lost this long, and apparently without trace, did not seem like a good candidate for the Horcrux hidden in the castle … Before he could formulate a new question, however, Cho spoke again.

"If you'd like to see what the diadem's supposed to look like, I could take you up to our common room and show you, Harry. Ravenclaw's wearing it in her statue."

Harry's scar scorched again: For a moment the Room of Requirement swam before him, and he saw instead the dark earth soaring beneath him and felt the great snake wrapped around his shoulders. Voldemort was flying again, whether to the underground lake or here, to the castle, he did not know: Either way, there was hardly any time left.

"He's on the move," he said quietly to Ron and Hermione. He glanced at Cho and then back at them. "Listen, I know it's not much of a lead, but I'm going to go look at this statue, at least find out what the diadem looks like. Wait for me here and keep, you know – the other one – safe."

Cho had got to her feet, but Ginny said rather fiercely, "No, Luna will take Harry, won't you, Luna?"

"Oooh, yes, I'd like to," said Luna happily, as Cho sat down again, looking disappointed.

"How do we get out?" Harry asked Neville.

“Over here.”

He led Harry and Luna to a corner, where a small cupboard opened onto a steep staircase. “It comes out somewhere different every day, so they’ve never been able to find it,” he said. “Only trouble is, we never know exactly where we’re going to end up when we go out. Be careful, Harry, they’re always patrolling the corridors at night.”

“No problem,” said Harry. “See you in a bit.”

He and Luna hurried up the staircase, which was long, lit by torches, and turned corners in unexpected places. At last they reached what appeared to be solid wall.

“Get under here,” Harry told Luna, pulling out the Invisibility Cloak and throwing it over both of them. He gave the wall a little push.

It melted away at his touch and they slipped outside. Harry glanced back and saw that it had resealed itself at once. They were standing in a dark corridor. Harry pulled Luna back into the shadows, fumbled in the pouch around his neck, and took out the Marauder’s Map. Holding it close to his nose he searched, and located his and Luna’s dots at last.

“We’re up on the fifth floor,” he whispered, watching filch moving away from them, a corridor ahead. “Come on, this way.”

They crept off.

Harry had prowled the castle at night many times before, but never had his heart hammered that fast, never had so much depended on his safe passage through the place. Through squares of moonlight upon the floor, past suits of armor whose helmets creaked at the sound of their soft footsteps, around corners beyond which who knew what lurked. Harry and Luna walked, checking the Marauder’s Map whenever light permitted, twice pausing to allow a ghost to pass without drawing attention to themselves. He expected to encounter

an obstacle at any moment; his worst fear was Peeves, and he strained his ears with every step to hear the first, telltale signs of the poltergeist's approach.

"The way, Harry," breathed Luna, plucking his sleeve and pulling him toward a spiral staircase.

They climbed in tight, dizzying circles; Harry had never been up here before. At last they reached a door. There was no handle and no keyhole: nothing but a plain expanse of aged wood, and a bronze knocker in the shape an eagle.

Luna reached out a pale hand, which looked eerie floating in midair, unconnected to arm or body. She knocked once, and in the silence it sounded to Harry like a cannon blast. At once the beak of the eagle opened, but instead of a bird's called, a soft, musical voice said, "Which came first, the phoenix or the flame?"

"Hmm … What do you think, Harry?" said Luna, looking thoughtful.

"What? Isn't there a password?"

"Oh no, you've got to answer a question," said Luna.

"What if you get it wrong?"

"Well, you have to wait for somebody who gets it right," said Luna. "That way you learn, you see?"

"Yeah … Trouble is, we can't really afford to wait for anyone else, Luna."

"No, I see what you mean," said Luna seriously. "Well then, I think the answer is that a circle has no beginning."

"Well reasoned," said the voice, and the door swung open.

The deserted Ravenclaw common room was a wide, circular room, airier than any Harry had ever seen at Hogwarts. Graceful arched windows punctuated the walls, which were hung with blue-and-bronze silks. By day, the Ravenclaws would have a spectacular view of the surrounding mountains. The ceiling was domed and painted with stars, which were echoed in the midnight-blue carpet. There were tables, chairs, and bookcases, and in a niche opposite the door stood a tall statue of white marble.

Harry recognized Rowena Ravenclaw from the bust he had seen at Luna's house. The statue stood beside a door that led, he guessed, to dormitories above. He strode right up to the marble woman, and she seemed to look back at him with a quizzical half smile on her face, beautiful yet slightly intimidating. A delicate-looking circlet had been reproduced in marble on top of her head. It was not unlike the tiara Fleur had worn at her wedding. There were tiny words etched into it. Harry stepped out from under the Cloak and climbed up onto Ravenclaw's plinth to read them.

"'Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure.'"

"Which makes you pretty skint, witless," said a cackling voice.

Harry whirled around, slipped off the plinth, and landed on the floor. The sloping-shouldered figure of Alecto Carrow was standing before him, and even as Harry raised his wand, she pressed a stubby forefinger to the skull and snake branded on her forearm.

Chapter 30 The Sacking of Severus Snape

The moment her finger touched the Mark, Harry's scar burned savagely, the starry room vanished from sight, and he was standing upon an outcrop of rock beneath a cliff, and the sea was washing around him and there was a triumph in his heart – They have the boy.

A loud bang brought Harry back to where he stood. Disoriented, he raised his wand, but the witch before him was already falling forward; she hit the ground so hard that the glass in the bookcases tinkled.

"I've never Stunned anyone except in our D.A. lessons," said Luna, sounding mildly interested. "That was noisier than I though it would be."

And sure enough, the ceiling had begun to tremble Scurrying, echoing footsteps were growing louder from behind the door leading to the dormitories. Luna's spell had woken Ravenclaws sleeping above.

"Luna, where are you? I need to get under the Cloak!"

Luna's feet appeared out of nowhere,; he hurried to her side and she let the Cloak fall back over them as the door opened and a stream of Ravenclaws, all in their nightclothes, flooded into the common room. there were gasps and cries of surprise as they saw Alecto lying there unconscious. Slowly they shuffled in around her, a savage beast that might wake at any moment and attack them. Then one brave little first-year darted up to her and prodded her backside with his big toe.

"I think she might be dead!" he shouted with delight.

"Oh look," whispered Luna happily, as the Ravenclaws crowded in around Alecto. "They're pleased!"

"Yeah… great…"

Harry closed his eyes, and as his scar throbbed he chose to sink again into Voldemort's mind…. He was moving along the tunnel into the first cave…. He had chosen to make sure of the locker before coming…but that would not take him long….

There was a rap on the common room door and every Ravenclaw froze. From the other side, Harry heard the soft, musical voice that issued from the eagle door knocker: "Where do Vanished objects go?"

"I dunno, do I? Shut it!" snarled an uncouth voice that Harry knew was that of the Carrow brother , Amycus, "Alecto? Alecto? Are you there? Have you got him? Open the door!"The Ravenclaws were whispering amongst themselves, terrified. Then without warning, there came a series of loud bangs, as though somebody was firing a gun into the door.

"ALECTO! If he comes, and we haven't got Potter – d'you want to go the same way as the Malfoys? ANSWER ME!" Amycus bellowed, shaking the door for all he was worth, but still it did not open. The Ravenclaws were all backing away, and some of the most frightened began scampering back up the stair case to their beds. Then, just as Harry was wondering whether he ought not to blast open the door and Stun Amycus before the Death Eater could do anything else, a second, most familiar voice rang out beyond the door.

"May I ask what you are doing, Professor Carrow?"

"Trying – to get– through this damned – door!" shouted Amycus. "Go and get Flitwick! Get him to open it, now!"

"But isn't your sister in there" asked Professor McGonagall. "Didn't Professor Flitwick let her in earlier this evening, at your urgent request? Perhaps she could open the door for you? Then you needn't wake up half the castle."

“She ain’t answering, you old besom! You open it! Darn! Do it, now!““Certainly, if you wish it,“ said Professor McGonagall, with awful coldness, There was a genteel tap of the knocker and the musical voice asked again.

“Where do Vanished objects go?”

“Into non being, which is to say, everything,” replied Professor McGonagall.

“Nicely phrased,” replied the eagle door knocker, and the door swung open.

The few Ravenclaws who had remained behind sprinted for the stairs as Amycus burst over the threshold, brandishing his wand. Hunched like his sister, he had a pallid, doughy face and tiny eyes, which fell at once on Alecto, sprawled motionless on the floor. He let out a yell of fury and fear.

“What’ve they done, the little whelps?“ he screamed. ”I’ll Cruciate the lot of ‘em till they tell me who did it – and what’s the Dark Lord going to say?“ he shrieked, standing over his sister and smacking himself on the forehead with his fist, ”We haven’t got him, and they’ve gone and killed her!““She’s only Stunned,” said Professor McGonagall impatiently, who had stooped down to examine Alecto. “She’ll be perfectly all right.”

“No she bludgering well won’t!” bellowed Amycus. “Not after the Dark Lord gets hold of her! She’s gone and sent for him, I felt me Mark burn, and he thinks we’ve got Potter!”

“‘Got Potter’?” said Professor McGonagall sharply, “What do you mean, ‘got Potter’?”

“He told us Potter might try and get inside Ravenclaw Tower, and to send for him if we caught him!”

“Why would Harry Potter try to get inside Ravenclaw Tower! Potter belongs in my House!”

Beneath the disbelief and anger, Harry heard a little strain of pride in her voice and affection for Minerva McGonagall gushed up inside him.

“We was told he might come in here!” said Carrow. “I dunno why, do I?”

Professor McGonagall stood up and her beady eyes swept the room. Twice they passed right over the place where Harry and Luna stood.

“We can push it off on the kids,” said Amycus, his pig like face suddenly crafty. “Yeah, that’s what we’ll do. We’ll say Alecto was ambushed by the kids, them kids up there” – he looked up at the starry ceiling toward the dormitories – “ and we’ll say they forced her to pres her Mark, and that’s why he got a false alarm…. He can punish them. Couple of kids more or less, what’s the difference?”

“Only the difference between truth and lie, courage and cowardice,“ said Professor McGonagall, who had turned pale, ”a difference, in short, which you and your sister seem unable to appreciate. But let me make one thing very clear. You are not going to pass off your many ineptitudes on the students of Hogwarts. I shall not permit it.““Excuse me?”

Amycus moved forward until he was offensively close to Professor McGonagall, his face within inches of hers. She refused to back away, but looked down at him as if he were something disgusting she had found stuck to the lavatory seat.

“It’s not a case of what you’ll permit, Minerva McGonagall. Your time’s over. It’s us what’s in charge here now, and you’ll back me up or you’ll pay the price.“And he spat in her face.

Harry pulled the Cloak off himself, raised his wand, and said, “You shouldn’t have done that.”

As Amycus spun around, Harry shouted, “Crucio!”

The Death Eater was lifted off his feet. He writhed through the air like a drowning man, thrashing and howling in pain, and then, with a crunch and a shattering of glass, he smashed into the front of a bookcase and crumpled, insensible, to the floor. “I see what Bellatrix meant,” said Harry, the blood thundering through his brain, “you need to really mean it.”

“Potter!“ whispered Professor McGonagall, clutching her heart. “Potter – you’re here! What–? How–?” She struggled to pull herself together. “Potter, that was foolish!”

“He spat at you,” said Harry.

“Potter, I – that was very – gallant of you – but don’t you realize –?““Yeah, I do,” Harry assured her. Somehow her panic steadied him. “Professor McGonagall, Voldemort’s on the way.”

“Oh, are we allowed to say the name now?” asked Luna with an air of interest, pulling off the Invisibility Cloak. The appearance of a second outlaw seemed to overwhelm Professor McGonagall, who staggered backward and fell into a nearby chair, clutching at the neck of her old tartan dressing gown.

“I don’t think it makes any difference what we call him,” Harry told Luna. “He already knows where I am.”

In a distant part of Harry’s brain, that part connected to the angry, burning scar, he could see Voldemort sailing fast over the dark lake in the ghostly green boat…. He had nearly reached the island where the stone basin stood….

“You must flee,” whispered Professor McGonagall, “Now Potter, as quickly as you can!”

“I can’t,” said Harry, “There’s something I need to do. Professor, so you know where the diadem of Ravenclaw is?”

“The d-diadem of Ravenclaw? Of course not – hasn’t it been lost for centuries?“ She sat up a little straighter ”Potter, it was madness, utter madness, for you to enter this castle–““I had to,“ said Harry. ”Professor, there’s something hidden here that I’m supposed to find, and it could be the diadem– if I could just speak to Professor Flitwick–“There was a sound of movement, of clinking glass. Amycus was coming round. Before Harry or Luna could act, Professor McGonagall rose to her feet, pointed her wand at the groggy Death Eater, and said, “Imperio.”

Amycus got up, walked over to his sister, picked up her wand, then shuffled obediently to Professor McGonagall and handed it over along with his own. Then he lay down on the floor beside Alecto. Professor McGonagall waved her wand again, and a length of shimmering silver rope appeared out of thin air and snaked around the Carrows, binding them tightly together.

“Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, turning to face him again with superb indifference to the Carrows’ predicament. “if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named does indeed know that you are here–”

As she said it, a wrath that was like physical pain blazed through Harry, setting his scar on fire, and for a second he looked down upon a basin whose potion had turned clear, and saw that no golden locket lay safe beneath the surface–.

“Potter, are you all right.” said a voice, and Harry came back. He was clutching Luna’s shoulder to steady himself.

“Time’s running out, Voldemort’s getting nearer, Professor, I’m acting on Dumbledore’s orders, I must find what he wanted me to find! But

we've got to get the students out while I'm searching the castle – It's me Voldemort wants, but he won't care about killing a few more or less, not now–" not now he knows I'm attacking Horcruxes, Harry finished the sentence in his head.

"You're acting on Dumbledore's orders?" she repeated with a look of dawning wonder. Then she drew herself up to her fullest height.

"We shall secure the school against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named while you search for this – this object."

"Is that possible?"

"I think so," said Professor McGonagall dryly, "we teachers are rather good at magic, you know. I am sure we will be able to hold him off for a while if we all put our best efforts into it. Of course, something will have to be done about Professor Snape–"

"Let me –"

"–and if Hogwarts is about to enter a state of siege, with the Dark Lord at the gates, it would indeed be advisable to take as many innocent people out of the way as possible. With the Floo Network under observation, and Apparition impossible within the grounds–""There's a way," said Harry quickly, and he explained about the passageway leading into the Hog's Head.

"Potter, we're talking about hundreds of students–"

"I know, Professor, but if Voldemort and the Death Eaters are concentrating on the school boundaries they won't be interested in anyone who's Disapparating out of Hog's Head."

"There's something in that," she agreed. She pointed her wand at the Carrows, and a silver net fell upon their bound bodies, tied itself around them, and hoisted them into the air, where they dangled beneath the blue-and-gold ceiling like two large, ugly sea creatures.

”Come. We must alert the other Heads of House. You’d better put that Cloak back on.“She marched toward the door, and as she did so she raised her wand. From the tip burst three silver cats with spectacle markings around their eyes. the Patronuses ran sleekly ahead, filling the spiral staircase with silvery light, as Professor McGonagall, Harry, and Luna hurried back down.

Along the corridors they raced, and one by one the Patronuses left them. Professor McGonagall’s tartan dressing gown rustled over the floor, and Harry and Luna jogged behind her under the Cloak.

They had descended two more floors when another set of quiet joined theirs. Harry, whose scar was still prickling, heard them first. He felt in the pouch around his neck for the Marauder’s Map, but before he could take it our, McGonagall too seemed to become aware of their company. She halted, raised her wand ready to duel, and said, “Who’s there?”

“It is I,” said a low voice.

From behind a suit of armor stepped Severus Snape.

Hatred boiled up in Harry at the sight of him. He had forgotten the details of Snape’s appearance in the magnitude of his crimes, forgotten how his greasy black hair hung in curtains around his thin face, how his black eyes had a dead, cold look. He was not wearing nightclothes, but was dressed in his usual black cloak, and he too was holding his wand ready for a fight.

“Where are the Carrows?” he asked quietly.

“Wherever you told them to be, I expect, Severus,” said Professor McGonagall.

Snape stepped nearer, and his eyes flitted over Professor McGonagall into the air around her, as if he knew that Harry was there. Harry held his wand up too, ready to attack.

“I was under the impression,“ said Snape, ”That Alecto had apprehended an intruder.““Really?” said Professor McGonagall. “And what gave you that impression?”

Snape mad a slight flexing movement of his left arm, where the Dark Mark was branded into his skin.

“Oh, but naturally,” said Professor McGonagall. “You Death Eaters have your own private means of communication, I forgot.”

Snape pretended not to have heard her. His eyes were still probing the air all about her, and he was moving gradually closer, with an air of hardly noticing what he was doing.

“I did not know that it was your night to patrol the corridors Minerva.““You have some objection?”

“I wonder what could have brought you out of our bed at this late hour?”

“I thought I heard a disturbance,” said Professor McGonagall.

“Really? But all seems calm.”

Snape looked into her eyes.

“Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva? Because if you have. I must insist–”

Professor McGonagall moved faster than Harry could have believed. Her wand slashed through the air and for a split second Harry thought that Snape must crumple, unconscious, but the swiftness of his Shield Charm was such that McGonagall was thrown off balance. She brandished her wand at a touch on the wall and it flew out of its bracket. Harry, about to curse Snape, was forced to pull Luna out of the way of the descending flames, which became a ring of fire that filled the corridor and flew like a lasso at Snape– Then it was no

longer fire, but a great black serpent that McGonagall blasted to smoke, which re-formed and solidified in seconds to become a swarm of pursuing daggers. Snape avoided them only by forcing the suit of armor in front of him, and with echoing clangs the daggers sank, one after another, into its breast–"Minerva!" said a squeaky voice, and looking behind him, still shielding Luna from flying spells, Harry saw Professors Flitwick and Sprout sprinting up the corridor toward them in their nightclothes, with the enormous Professor Slughorn panting along at the rear.

"No!" squealed Flitwick, raising his wand. "You'll do no more murder at Hogwarts!"

Flitwick's spell hit the suit of armor behind which Snape had taken shelter. With a clatter it came to life. Snape struggled free of the crushing arms and sent it flying back toward his attackers. Harry and Luna had to dive sideways to avoid it as it smashed into the wall and shattered. When Harry looked up again, Snape was in full flight, McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout all thundering after him. He hurtled through a classroom door and, moments later, he heard McGonagall cry, "Coward! COWARD!"

"What's happened, what's happened?" asked Luna.

Harry dragged her to her feet and they raced along the corridor, trailing the Invisibility Cloak behind them, into the deserted classroom where Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout were standing at a smashed window.

"He jumped," said Professor McGonagall as Harry and Luna ran into the room.

"You mean he's dead?" Harry sprinted to the window, ignoring Flitwick's and Sprout's yells of shock at his sudden appearance.

"No, he's not dead," said McGonagall bitterly. "Unlike Dumbledore, he was still carrying a wand… and he seems to have learned a few tricks

from his master."With a tingle of horror, Harry saw in the distance a huge, bat like shape flying through the darkness toward the perimeter wall.

There were heavy footfalls behind them, and a great deal of puffing. Slughorn had just caught up.

"Harry!" he panted, massaging his immense chest beneath his emerald-green silk pajamas. "My dear boy… what a surprise… Minerva, do please explain…Severus…what…?"

"Our headmaster is taking a short break," said Professor McGonagall, pointing at the Snape-shaped hole in the window.

"Professor!" Harry shouted his hand on his forehead, He could see the Inferi-filled lake sliding beneath him, and he felt a ghostly green boat bump into the underground shore, and Voldemort lept from it with murder in his heart–"Professor, we've got to barricade the school, he's coming now!""Very well. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is coming," she told the other teachers. Sprout and Flitwick gasped. Slughorn let out a low groan. "Potter has work to do in the castle on Dumbledore's orders. We need to put in place every protection of which we are capable while Potter does what he needs to do."

"You realize , of course, that nothing we do will be able to keep out You-Know-Who indefinitely?" squeaked Flitwick.

"But we can hold him up." said Professor Sprout.

"Thank you, Pomona," said Professor McGonagall, and between the two witches there passed a look of grim understanding.

"I suggest we establish basic protection around the place, then gather our students and meet in the Great Hall. Most must be evacuated, though if any of those who are over age wish to stay and fight, I think they ought to be given the chance.""Agreed," said Professor Sprout,

already hurrying toward the door. “I shall meet you in the Great Hall in twenty minutes with my House.”

And as she jogged out of sight, they could hear her muttering, “Tentacula, Devil’s Snare. And Snargaluff pods…yes, I’d like to see the Death Eaters fighting those.”

“I can act from here,” said Flitwick, and although he could barely see out of it, he pointed his wand through the smashed window and started muttering incantations of great complexity. Harry heard a weird rushing noise, as though Flitwick had unleashed the power of the wind into the grounds.

“Professor,” Harry said, approaching the little Charms master. “Professor, I’m sorry to interrupt, but this is important. Have you got any idea where the diadem of Ravenclaw is?”

“–Protego Horribillis – the diadem of Ravenclaw?“ squeaked Flitwick. ”A little extra wisdom never goes amiss, Potter, but I hardly think it would be much use in this situation!““I only meant – do you know where it is? Have you ever seen it?”

“Seen it! Nobody has seen it in living memory! Long since lost, boy.”

Harry felt a mixture of desperate disappointment and panic. What, then, was the Horcrux?

“We shall meet you and your Ravenclaws in the Great Hall, Filius!“ said Professor McGonagall, beckoning to Harry and Luna to follow her.

They had just reached the door when Slughorn rumbled into speech.

“My word,“ he puffed, pale and sweaty, his walrus mustache aquiver. ”What a to-do! I’m not at all sure whether this is wise, Minerva. He is bound to find a way in, you know, and anyone who has tried to delay him will be in the most grievous peril–““I shall expect you and the

Slytherins in the Great Hall in twenty minutes also." said Professor McGonagall. "If you wish to leave with your students, we shall not stop you. But if any of you attempt to sabotage our resistance or take up arms against us within this castle, then, Horace, we duel to kill."

"Minerva!" he said, aghast.

"The time has come for Slytherin House to decide upon its loyalties," interrupted Professor McGonagall. "Go and wake your students, Horace."Harry did not stay to watch Slughorn splutter. He and Luna stayed after Professor McGonagall, who had taken up a position in the middle of the corridor and raised her wand.

"Piertotum–oh, for heaven's sake, Filch, not now–"The aged caretaker had just come hobbling into view, shouting "Students out of bed! Students in the corridors!"

"They're supposed to be you blithering idiot!" shouted McGonagall. "Now go and do something constructive! Find Peeves!""P-Peeves?" stammered Filch as though he had never heard the name before.

"Yes, Peeves, you fool, Peeves! Haven't you been complaining about him for a quarter of a century? Go and fetch him, at once."Filch evidently thought Professor McGonagall had taken leave of her senses, but hobbled away, hunch-shouldered, muttering under his breath.

"And now – Piertotum Locomator!" cried Professor McGonagall. And all along the corridor the statues and suits of armor jumped down from their plinths, and from the echoing crashes from the floors above and below, Harry knew that their fellows throughout the castle had done the same.

"Hogwarts is threatened!" shouted Professor McGonagall. "Man the boundaries, protect us, do your duty to our school!"

Clattering and yelling, the horde of moving statues stampeded past Harry, some of them smaller, others larger than life. There were animals too, and the clanking suits of armor brandished swords and spiked balls on chains.

“Now, Potter,” said McGonagall. “you and Miss Lovegood had better return to your friends and bring them to the Great Hall – I shall rouse the other Gryffindors.”

They parted at the top of the next staircase, Harry and Luna turning back toward the concealed entrance to the Room of Requirement. As they ran, they met crowds of students, most wearing traveling cloaks over their pajamas, being shepherded down to the Great Hall by teachers and prefects.

“That was Potter!”

“Harry Potter!“

“It was him, I swear, I just saw him!”

But Harry did not look back, and at last they reached the entrance to the Room of Requirement, Harry leaned against the enchanted wall, which opened to admit them, and he and Luna sped back down the steep staircase.

“Wh–?”

As the room came into view, Harry slipped down a few stairs in shock. It was packed, far more crowded than when he had last been in there. Kingsley and Lupin were looking up at him, as were Oliver Wood, Katie Bell, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet, Bill and Fleur, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

“Harry, what’s happening?” said Lupin, meeting him at the foot of the stairs.

“Voldemort’s on his way, they’re barricading he school – Snape’s run for it – What are you doing here? How did you know?”

“We sent messages to the rest of Dumbledore’s Army,“ Fred explained. ”You couldn’t expect everyone to miss the fun, Harry, and the D.A. let the Order of the Phoenix know, and it all kind of snowballed.““What first, Harry?” called George. “What’s going on?”

“They’re evacuating the younger kids and everyone’s meeting in the Great Hall to get organized,” Harry said. “We’re fighting.”

There was a great roar and a surge toward the stairs, he was pressed back against he wall as they ran past hi, the mingled members of the Order of the Phoenix, Dumbledore’s Army, and Harry’s old Quidditch team, all with their wands drawn, heading up into the main castle.

“Come on, Luna,” Dean called as he passed, holding out his free hand, she took it and followed him back up the stairs.

The crowd was thinning. Only a little knot of people remained below in the Room of Requirement, and Harry joined them. Mrs. Weasley was struggling with Ginny. Around them stood Lupin, Fred, George, Bill and Fleur.

“You’re underage!” Mrs. Weasley shouted at her daughter as Harry approached “I won’t permit it! The boys, yes, but you, you’ve got to go home!”

“I won’t!”

Ginny’s hair flew as she pulled her arm out of her mother’s grip.

“I’m in Dumbledore’s Army–”

“A teenagers’ gang!”

“A teenagers’ gang that’s about to take him on, which no one else has dared to do!” said Fred.

“She’s sixteen!” shouted Mrs. Weasley. “She’s not old enough! What you two were thinking bringing her with you – – ”

Fred and George looked slightly ashamed of themselves.

“Mom’s right, Ginny,“ said Bill gently. ”You can’t do this. Everyone underage will have to leave, it’s only right.““I can’t go home!” Ginny shouted, angry tears sparkling in her eyes. “my whole family’s here, I can’t stand waiting there alone and not knowing and –”

Her eyes met Harry’s for the first time. She looked at him beseechingly, but he shook his head and she turned away bitterly.

“Fine,” she said, staring at the entrance to the tunnel back to the Hog’s Head. “I’ll say good-by now, then, and–”

There was a scuffling and a great thump. Someone else had clambered out of the tunnel, overbalanced slightly, and fallen. He pulled himself up no the nearest chair, looked around through lopsided horn-rimmed glasses, and said, “Am I too late? Has it started. I only just found out, so I – I –”

Percy spluttered into silence. Evidently he had not expected to run into most of his family. There was a long moment of astonishment, broken by Fleur turning to Lupin and saying, in a wildly transparent attempt to break the tension. “So– ‘ow eez leetle Teddy?”

Lupin blinked at her, startled. The silence between the Weasleys seemed to be solidifying, like ice.

“I – oh yes – he’s fine!” Lupin said loudly. “yes, Tonks is with him – at her mother’s –”

Percy and the other Weasleys were still staring at one another, frozen.

“Here, I’ve got a picture?” Lupin shouted, pulling a photograph from inside his jacket and showing it to Fleur and Harry, who saw a tiny baby with a tuft of bright turquoise hair, waving fat fists at the camera.

“I was a fool!” Percy roared, so loudly that Lupin nearly dropped his photograph. “I was an idiot, I was a pompous prat, I was a – a –”

“Ministry-loving, family-disowning, power-hungry moron,” said Fred.

Percy swallowed.

“Yes, I was!”

“Well, you can’t say fairer than that,” said Fred, holding his hand out to Percy.

Mrs. Weasley burst into tears. She ran forward, pushed Fred aside, and pulled Percy into a strangling hug, while he patted her on the back, his eyes on his father.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Percy said.

Mr. Weasley blinked rather rapidly, then he too hurried to hug his son.

“What made you see sense, Perce?” inquired George.

“It’s been coming on for a while,“ said Percy, mopping his eyes under his glasses with a corner of his traveling cloak. ”But I had to find a way out and it’s not so easy at the Ministry, they’re imprisoning traitors all the time. I managed to make contact with Aberforth and he tipped me off ten minutes ago that Hogwarts was going to make a fight of it, so here I am.““Well, we do look to our prefects to take a lead at times such as these,” said George in a good imitation of Percy’s

most pompous manner. “Now let’s get upstairs and fight, or all the good Death Eaters’ll be taken.”

“So, you’re my sister in-law now?” Said Percy, shaking hands with Fleur as they hurried off toward the staircase with Bill, Fred, and George.

“Ginny!” barked Mrs. Weasley.

Ginny had been attempting, under cover of the reconciliations to sneak upstairs too.

“Molly, how about this,” said Lupin. “Why doesn’t Ginny stay here , then at least she’ll be on the scene and know what’s going on, but she won’t be in the middle of the fighting?”

“I–”

“That’s a good idea,” said Mr. Weasley firmly, “Ginny, you stay in this room, you hear me?”

Ginny did not seem to like the idea much, but under her father’s unusually stern gaze, she nodded. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Lupin headed off to the stairs as well.

“Where’s Ron?” asked Harry, “Where’s Hermione?”

“They must have gone up the Great Hall already,” Mr. Weasley called over his shoulder.

“ I didn’t see them pass me,” said Harry.

“They said something about a bathroom,” said Ginny, “not long after you left.”

“A bathroom?”

Harry strode across the room to an open door leading off the Room of Requirement and checked the bathroom beyond. It was empty.

“You’re sure they said bath–?”

But then his scar seared and the Room of Req1uirement vanished. He was looking through the high wrought-iron gates with winged boats on pillars at either side, looking through the dark grounds toward the castle, which was ablaze with lights. Nagini lay draped over his shoulders. He was possessed of that cold, cruel sense of purpose that preceded murder.

Chapter 31 The Battle of Hogwarts

The enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall was dark and scattered with stars, and below it the four long House tables were lined with disheveled students, some in traveling cloaks, others in dressing gowns. Here and there shone the pearly white figures of the school ghosts. Every eye, living and dead was fixed upon Professor McGonagall, who was speaking from the raised platform at the top of the Hall. Behind her stood the remaining teaches, including the palomino centaur, Firenze, and the members of the Order of the Phoenix who had arrived to fight.

"…evacuation will be overseen by Mr. Filch and Madame Pomfrey. Prefects, when I give the word, you will organize your House and take your charges in orderly fashion to the evacuation point."

Many of the students looked petrified. However, as Harry skirted the walls, scanning the Gryffindor table for Ron and Hermione, Ernie Macmillan stood up at the Hufflepuff table and shouted; "And what if we want to stay and fight?"

There was a smattering of applause.

"If you are of age, you may stay." said Professor McGonagall.

"What about our things?" called a girl at the Ravenclaw table. "Our trunks, our owls?"

"We have no time to collect possessions." said Professor McGonagall. "The important thing is to get you out of here safely."

"Where's Professor Snape?" shouted a girl from the Slytherin table.

"He has, to use the common phrase, done a bunk." replied Professor McGonagall and a great cheer erupted from the Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws.

Harry moved up the Hall alongside the Gryffindor table, still looking for Ron and Hermione. As he passed, faces turned in his direction, and a great deal of whispering broke out in his wake.

“We have already placed protection around the castle,” Professor McGonagall was saying, “but it is unlikely to hold for very long unless we reinforce it. I must ask you, therefore, to move quickly and calmly, and do as your prefects – ”

But her final words were drowned as a different voice echoed throughout the Hall. It was high, cold, and clear. There was no telling from where it came. It seemed to issue from the walls themselves. Like the monster it had once commanded, it might have lain dormant there for centuries.

“I know that you are preparing to fight.” There were screams amongst the students, some of whom clutched each other, looking around in terror for the source of the sound. “Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood.”

There was silence in the Hall now, the kind of silence that presses against the eardrums, that seems too huge to be contained by walls.

“Give me Harry Potter,” said Voldemort’s voice, “and they shall not be harmed. Give me Harry Potter and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter and you will be rewarded.”

“You have until midnight.”

The silence swallowed them all again. Every head turned, every eye in the place seemed to have found Harry, to hold him forever in the glare of thousands of invisible beams. Then a figure rose from the Slytherin table and he recognized Pansy Parkinson as she raised a shaking arm and screamed, “But he’s there! Potter’s there. Someone grab him!”

Before Harry could speak, there was a massive movement. The Gryffindors in front of him had risen and stood facing, not Harry, but the Slytherins. Then the Hufflepuffs stood, and almost at the same moment, the Ravenclaws, all of them with their backs to Harry, all of them looking toward Pansy instead, and Harry, awestruck and overwhelmed, saw wands emerging everywhere, pulled from beneath cloaks and from under sleeves.

"Thank you, Miss Parkinson." said Professor McGonagall in a clipped voice. "You will leave the Hall first with Mr. Filch. If the rest of your House could follow."

Harry heard the grinding of the benches and then the sound of the Slytherins trooping out on the other side of the Hall.

"Ravenclaws, follow on!" cried Professor McGonagall.

Slowly the four tables emptied. The Slytherin table was completely deserted, but a number of older Ravenclaws remained seated while their fellows filed out; even more Hufflepuffs stayed behind, and half of Gryffindor remained in their seats, necessitating Professor McGonagall's descent from the teachers' platform to chivvy the underage on their way.

"Absolutely not, Creevey, go! And you, Peakes!"

Harry hurried over to the Weasleys, all sitting together at the Gryffindor table.

"Where are Ron and Hermione?"

"Haven't you found -?" began Mr. Weasley, looking worried.

But he broke off as Kingsley had stepped forward on the raised platform to address those who had remained behind.

“We’ve only got half an half an hour until midnight, so we need to act fast. A battle plan has been agreed between the teachers of Hogwarts and the Order of the Phoenix. Professors Flitwick, Sprout and McGonagall are going to take groups of fighters up to the three highest towers – Ravenclaw, Astronomy, and Gryffindor – where they’ll have good overview, excellent positions from which to work spells. Meanwhile Remus” – he indicated Lupin – “Arthur” – he pointed toward Mr. Weasley, sitting at the Gryffindor table – “and I will take groups into the grounds. We’ll need somebody to organize defense of the entrances or the passageways into the school – ”

“Sounds like a job for us.” called Fred, indicating himself and George, and Kingsley nodded his approval.

“All right, leaders up here and we’ll divide up the troops!”

“Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, hurrying up to him, as students flooded the platform, jostling for position, receiving instructions, “Aren’t you supposed to be looking for something?”

“What? Oh,” said Harry, “oh yeah!”

He had almost forgotten about the Horcrux, almost forgotten that the battle was being fought so that he could search for it: The inexplicable absence of Ron and Hermione had momentarily driven every other thought from his mind.

“Then go, Potter, go!”

“Right – yeah – ”

He sensed eyes following him as he ran out of the Great Hall again, into the entrance hall still crowded with evacuating students. He allowed himself to be swept up the marble staircase with them, but at the top he hurried off along a deserted corridor. Fear and panic were clouding his thought processes. He tried to calm himself, to concentrate on finding the Horcrux, but his thoughts buzzed as

frantically and fruitlessly as wasps trapped beneath a glass. Without Ron and Hermione to help him he could not seem to marshal his ideas. He slowed down, coming to a halt halfway along a passage, where he sat down on the plinth of a departed statue and pulled the Marauder's Map out of the pouch around his neck. He could not see Ron's of Hermione's names anywhere on it, though the density of the crowd of dots now making its way to the Room of Requirement might, he thought, be concealing them. He put the map away, pressed his hands over his face, and closed his eyes, trying to concentrate.

Voldemort thought I'd go to Ravenclaw Tower.

There it was, a solid fact, the place to start. Voldemort had stationed Alecto Carrow in the Ravenclaw common room, and there could be only one explanation; Voldemort feared that Harry already knew his Horcrux was connected to that House.

But the only object anyone seemed to associate with Ravenclaw was the lost diadem… and how could the Horcrux be the diadem? How was it possible that Voldemort, the Slytherin, had found the diadem that had eluded generations of Ravenclaws? Who could have told him where to look, when nobody had seen the diadem in living memory?

In living memory…

Beneath his fingers, Harry's eyes flew open again. He leapt up from the plinth and tore back the way he had come, now in pursuit of his one last hope. The sound of hundreds of people marching toward the Room of Requirement grew louder and louder as he returned to the marble stairs. Prefects were shouting instructions, trying to keep track of the students in their own houses, there was much pushing and shouting; Harry saw Zacharias Smith bowling over first years to get to the front of the queue, here and there younger students were in tears, while older ones called desperately for friends or siblings.

Harry caught sight of a pearly white figure drifting across the entrance hall below and yelled as loudly as he could over the clamor.

“Nick! NICK! I need to talk to you!”

He forced his way back through the tide of students, finally reaching the bottom of the stairs, where Nearly Headless Nick, ghost of Gryffindor Tower, stood waiting for him.

“Harry! My dear boy!”

Nick made to grasp Harry’s hands with both of his own; Harry felt as though they had been thrust into icy water.

“Nick, you’ve got to help me. Who’s the ghost of Ravenclaw Tower?”

Nearly Headless Nick looked surprised and a little offended.

“The Gray Lady, of course; but if it is ghostly services you require -?”

“It’s got to be her – d’you know where she is?”

“Let’s see…”

Nick’s head wobbled a little on his ruff as he turned hither and thither, peering over the heads of the swarming students.

“That’s her over there, Harry, the young woman with the long hair.”

Harry looked in the direction of Nick’s transparent, pointing finger and saw a tall ghost who caught sight of Harry looking at her, raised her eyebrows, and drifted away through a solid wall.

Harry ran after her. Once through the door of the corridor into which she had disappeared, he saw her at the very end of the passage, still gliding smoothly away from him.

“Hey – wait – come back!”

She consented to pause, floating a few inches from the ground. Harry supposed that she was beautiful, with her waist-length hair and floor-length cloak, but she also looked haughty and proud. Close in, he recognized her as a ghost he had passed several times in the corridor, but to whom he had never spoken.

"You're the Gray Lady?"

She nodded but did not speak.

"The ghost of Ravenclaw Tower?"

"That is correct."

Her tone was not encouraging.

"Please, I need some help. I need to know anything you can tell me about the lost diadem."

A cold smile curved her lips.

"I am afraid," she said, turning to leave, "that I cannot help you."

"WAIT!"

He had not meant to shout, but anger and panic were threatening to overwhelm him. He glanced at his watch as she hovered in front of him. It was a quarter to midnight.

"This is urgent." he said fiercely. "If that diadem's at Hogwarts, I've got to find it, fast."

"You are hardly the first student to covet the diadem." she said disdainfully. "Generations of students have badgered me – "

"This isn't about trying to get better marks!" Harry shouted at her, "It's about Voldemort – defeating Voldemort – or aren't you interested in that?"

She could not blush, but her transparent cheeks became more opaque, and her voice was heated as she replied, “Of course I – how dare you suggest –?”

“Well, help me then!”

Her composure was slipping.

“It – it is not a question of – ” she stammered. “My mother’s diadem – ”

“Your mother’s?”

She looked angry with herself.

“When I lived,” she said stiffly, “I was Helena Ravenclaw.”

“You’re her daughter? But then, you must know what happed to it.”

“While the diadem bestows wisdom,” she said with an obvious effort to pull herself together, “I doubt that it would greatly increase you chances of defeating the wizard who calls himself Lord – ”

“Haven’t I told you, I’m not interested in wearing it!” Harry said fiercely. “There’s no time to explain – but if you care about Hogwarts, if you want to see Voldemort finished, you’ve got to tell me anything you know about the diadem!”

She remained quite still, floating in midair, staring down at him, and a sense of hopelessness engulfed Harry. Of course, if she had known anything, she would have told Flitwick of Dumbledore, who had surely asked her the same question. He had shaken his head and made to turn away when she spoke in a low voice.

“I stole the diadem from my mother.”

“You – you did what?”

“I stole the diadem.” repeated Helena Ravenclaw in a whisper. “I sought to make myself cleverer, more important than my mother. I ran away with it.”

He did not know how he had managed to gain her confidence and did not ask, he simply listened, hard, as she went on.

“My mother, they say, never admitted that the diadem was gone, but pretended that she had it still. She concealed her loss, my dreadful betrayal, even from the other founders of Hogwarts.”

“Then my mother fell ill – fatally ill. In spite of my perfidy, she was desperate to see me one more time. She sent a man who had long loved me, though I spurned his advances, to find me. She knew that he would not rest until he had done so.”

Harry waited. She drew a deep breath and threw back her head.

“He tracked me to the forest where I was hiding. When I refused to return with him, he became violent. The baron was always a hot-tempered man. Furious at my refusal, jealous of my freedom, he stabbed me.”

“The Baron? You mean -?”

“The Bloody Baron, yes,” said the Gray Lady, and she lifted aside the cloak she wore to reveal a single dark wound in her white chest.

“When he saw what he had done, he was overcome with remorse. He took the weapon that had claimed my life, and used it to kill himself. All these centuries later, he wears his chains as an act of penitence… as he should.” she added bitterly.

“And – and the diadem?”

“It remained where I had hidden it when I heard the Baron blundering through the forest toward me. Concealed inside a hollow tree.”

“A hollow tree?” repeated Harry. “What tree? Where was this?”

“A forest in Albania. A lonely place I thought was far beyond my mother’s reach.““Albania,” repeated Harry. Sense was emerging miraculously from confusion, and now he understood why she was telling him what she had denied Dumbledore and Flitwick. “You’ve already told someone this story, haven’t you? Another student?”

She closed her eyes and nodded.

“I had… no idea… He was flattering. He seemed to… understand… to sympathize…“Yes, Harry thought. Tom Riddle would certainly have understood Helena Ravenclaw’s desire to possess fabulous objects to which she had little right.

“Well, you weren’t the first person Riddle wormed things out of.” Harry muttered. “He could be charming when he wanted…”

So, Voldemort had managed to wheedle the location of the lost diadem out of the Gray Lady. He had traveled to that far-flung forest and retrieved the diadem from its hiding place, perhaps as soon as he left Hogwarts, before he even started work at Borgin and Burkes.

And wouldn’t those secluded Albanian woods have seemed an excellent refuge when, so much later, Voldemort and needed a place to lie low, undisturbed, for ten long years?

But the diadem, once it became his precious Horcrux, had not been left in that lowly tree…. No, the diadem had been returned secretly to its true home, and Voldemort must have put it there –“– the night he asked for a job!” said Harry, finishing his thought.

“I beg your pardon?”

“He hid the diadem in the castle, the night he asked Dumbledore to let him teach!” said Harry. Saying it out loud enabled him to make sense of it all. “He must’ve hidden the diadem on his way up to, or

down from, Dumbledore's office! But it was well worth trying to get the job – then he might've got the chance to nick Gryffindor's sword as well – thank you, thanks!"

Harry left her floating there, looking utterly bewildered. As he rounded the corner back into the entrance hall, he checked his watch. It was five minutes until midnight, and though he now knew what the last Horcrux was, he was no closer to discovering where it was… Generations of students had failed to find the diadem; that suggested that it was not in Ravenclaw Tower – but if not there, where? What hiding place had Tom Riddle discovered inside Hogwarts Castle, that he believed would remain secret forever?

Lost in desperate speculation, Harry turned a corner, but he had taken only a few steps down the new corridor when the window to his left broke open with a deafening, shattering crash. As he leapt aside, a gigantic body flew in through the window and hit the opposite wall.

Something large and furry detached itself, whimpering, from the new arrival and flung itself at Harry.

"Hagrid!" Harry bellowed, fighting off Fang the boarhound's attentions as the enormous bearded figure clambered to his feet "What the –?"

"Harry, yer here! Yer here!"Hagrid stooped down, bestowed upon Harry a cursory and rib-cracking hug, then ran back to the shattered window.

"Good boy, Grawpy!" he bellowed through the hole in the window. "I'll se yer in a moment, there's a good lad!"Beyond Hagrid, out in the dark night, Harry saw bursts of light in the distance and heard a weird, keening scream. He looked down at his watch: It was midnight. The battle had begun.

"Blimey, Harry," panted Hagrid, "this is it, eh? Time ter fight?"

"Hagrid, where have you come from?"

“Heard You-Know-Who from up in our cave,“ said Hagrid grimly. ”Voice carried, didn’t it? ‘Yet got till midnight ter gimme Potter.’ Knew yeh mus’ be here, knew that mus’ be happenin’. Get down, Fang. So we come ter join in, me an’ Grawpy an’ Fang. Smashed our way through the boundary by the forest, Grawpy was carryin’ us, Fang an’ me. Told him ter let me down at the castle, so he shoved me through the window, bless him. Not exactly what I meant, bu’ – where’s Ron an’ Hermione?““That,” said Harry, “is a really good question. Come on.”

They hurried together along the corridor, Fang lolloping beside them. Harry could hear movement through the corridors all around: running footsteps, shouts; through the windows, he could see more flashes of light in the dark grounds.

“Where’re we goin’?” puffed Hagrid, pounding along at Harry’s heels, making the floorboards quake.

“I dunno exactly,” said Harry, making another random turn, “but Ron and Hermione must be around here somewhere….”

The first casualties of the battle were already strewn across the passage ahead: The two stone gargoyles that usually guarded the entrance to the staffroom had been smashed apart by a jinx that had sailed through another broken window. Their remains stirred feebly on the floor, and as Harry leapt over one of their disembodied heads, it moaned faintly. “Oh, don’t mind me… I’ll just be here and crumble….”

Its ugly stone face made Harry think suddenly of the marble bust of Rowena Ravenclaw at Xenophilius’s house, wearing that mad headdress – and then of the statue in Ravenclaw Tower, with the stone diadem upon her white curls….

And as he reached the end of the passage, the memory of a third stone effigy came back to him: that of an ugly old warlock, onto whose head Harry himself had placed a wig and a battered old hat.

The shock shot through Harry with the heat of firewhisky, and he nearly stumbled.

He knew, at least, where the Horcrux sat waiting for him….

Tom Riddle, who confided in no one and operated alone, might have been arrogant enough to assume that he, and only he, had penetrated the deepest mysteries of Hogwarts Castle. Of course, Dumbledore and Flitwick, those model pupils, had never set foot in that particular place, but he, Harry, had strayed off the beaten track in his time at school – here at least was a secret area he and Voldemort knew, that Dumbledore had never discovered –He was roused by Professor Sprout, who was thundering past followed by Neville and half a dozen others, all of them wearing earmuffs and carrying what appeared to be large potted plants.

“Mandrakes!” Neville bellowed at Harry over his shoulder as he ran. “Going to lob them over the walls – they won’t like this!”

Harry knew now where to go. He sped off, with Hagrid and Fang galloping behind him. They passed portrait after portrait, and the painted figures raced alongside them, wizards and witches in ruffs and breeches, in armor and cloaks, cramming themselves into each others’ canvases, screaming news from other parts of the castle. As they reached the end of this corridor, the whole castle shook, and Harry knew, as a gigantic vase blew off its plinth with explosive force, that it was in the grip of enchantments more sinister than those of the teachers and the Order.

“It’s all righ’, Fang – it’s all righ’!“ yelled Hagrid, but the great boarhound had taken flight as slivers of china flew like shrapnel through the air, and Hagrid pounded off after the terrified dog, leaving Harry alone.

He forged on through the trembling passages, his wand at the ready, and for the length of one corridor the little painted knight, Sir Cadrigan, rushed from painting to painting beside him, clanking along

in his armor, screaming encouragement, his fat little pony cantering behind him.

“Braggarts and rogues, dogs and scoundrels, drive them out, Harry Potter, see them off!”

Harry hurtled around a corner and found Fred and a small knot of students, including Lee Jordan and Hannah Abbott, standing beside another empty plinth, whose statue had concealed a secret passageway. Their wands were drawn and they were listening at the concealed hole.

“Nice night for it!” Fred shouted as the castle quaked again, and Harry sprinted by, elated and terrified in equal measure. Along yet another corridor he dashed, and then there were owls everywhere, and Mrs. Norris was hissing and trying to bat them with her paws, no doubt to return them to their proper place….

“Potter!”

Aberforth Dumbledore stood blocking the corridor ahead, his wand held ready.

“I’ve had hundreds of kids thundering through my pub, Potter!”

“I know, we’re evacuating,” Harry said, “Voldemort’s – ”

“– attacking because they haven’t handed you over, yeah,” said Aberforth. “I’m not deaf, the whole of Hogsmeade heard him. And it never occurred to any of you to keep a few Slytherins hostage? There are kids of Death Eaters you’ve just sent to safety. Wouldn’t it have been a bit smarter to keep ‘em here?”

“It wouldn’t stop Voldemort,” said Harry, “and your brother would never have done it.”

Aberforth grunted and tore away in the opposite direction.

Your brother would never have done it…. Well, it was the truth, Harry thought as he ran on again: Dumbledore, who had defended Snape for so long, would never have held students ransom….

And then he skidded around a final corner and with a yell of mingled relief and fury he saw them: Ron and Hermione; both with their arms full of large, curved, dirty yellow objects, Ron with a broomstick under his arms.

“Where the hell have you been?“ Harry shouted.

“Chamber of Secrets,” said Ron.

“Chamber – what?“ said Harry, coming to an unsteady halt before them.

“It was Ron, all Ron’s idea!” said Hermione breathlessly. “Wasn’t it absolutely brilliant? There we were, after we left, and I said to Ron, even if we find the other one, how are we going to get rid of it? We still hadn’t got rid of the cup! And then he thought of it! The basilisk!”

“What the –?”

“Something to get rid of Horcruxes,” said Ron simply.

Harry’s eyes dropped to the objects clutched in Ron and Hermione’s arms: great curved fangs; torn, he now realized, from the skull of a dead basilisk.

“But how did you get in there?” he asked, staring from the fangs to Ron. “You need to speak Parseltongue!”

“He did!” whispered Hermione. “Show him, Ron!”

Ron made a horrible strangled hissing noise.

“It’s what you did to open the locket,“ he told Harry apologetically. ”I had to have a few goes to get it right, but,“ he shrugged modestly, ”we

got there in the end.““He was amazing!“ said Hermione. ”Amazing!““So…” Harry was struggling to keep up. “So…”

“So we’re another Horcrux down,“ said Ron, and from under his jacket he pulled the mangled remains of Hufflepuff’s cup. ”Hermione stabbed it. Thought she should. She hasn’t had the pleasure yet.““Genius!” yelled Harry.

“It was nothing,“ said Ron, though he looked delighted with himself. ”So what’s new with you?“As he said it, there was an explosion from overhead: All three of them looked up as dust fell from the ceiling and they heard a distant scream.

“I know what the diadem looks like, and I know where it is,” said Harry, talking fast. “He hid it exactly where I had my old Potions book, where everyone’s been hiding stuff for centuries. He thought he was the only one to find it. Come on.”

As the walls trembled again, he led the other two back through the concealed entrance and down the staircase into the Room of Requirement. It was empty except for three women: Ginny, Tonks and an elderly witch wearing a moth-eaten hat, whom Harry recognized immediately as Neville’s grandmother.

“Ah, Potter,” she said crisply as if she had been waiting for him. “You can tell us what’s going on.”

“Is everyone okay?” said Ginny and Tonks together.

“‘S far as we know,” said Harry. “Are there still people in the passage to the Hog’s Head?”

He knew that the room would not be able to transform while there were still users inside it.

“I was the last to come through,” said Mrs. Longbottom. “I sealed it, I think it unwise to leave it open now Aberforth has left his pub. Have

you seen my grandson?"

"He's fighting," said Harry.

"Naturally," said the old lady proudly. "Excuse me, I must go and assist him."

With surprising speed she trotted off toward the stone steps.

Harry looked at Tonks.

"I thought you were supposed to be with Teddy at your mother's?"

"I couldn't stand not knowing – " Tonks looked anguished. "She'll look after him – have you seen Remus?"

"He was planning to lead a group of fighters into the grounds – "

Without another word, Tonks sped off.

"Ginny," said Harry, "I'm sorry, but we need you to leave too. Just for a bit. Then you can come back in."

Ginny looked simply delighted to leave her sanctuary.

"And then you can come back in!" he shouted after her as she ran up the steps after Tonks. "You've got to come back in!""Hang on a moment!" said Ron sharply. "We've forgotten someone!""Who?" asked Hermione.

"The house-elves, they'll all be down in the kitchen, won't they?"

"You mean we ought to get them fighting?" asked Harry.

"No," said Ron seriously, "I mean we should tell them to get out. We don't want anymore Dobbies, do we? We can't order them to die for us – "

There was a clatter as the basilisk fangs cascaded out of Hermione's arms. Running at Ron, she flung them around his neck and kissed him full on the mouth. Ron threw away the fangs and broomstick he was holding and responded with such enthusiasm that he lifted Hermione off her feet.

"Is this the moment?" Harry asked weakly, and when nothing happened except that Ron and Hermione gripped each other still more firmly and swayed on the spot, he raised his voice. "Oi! There's a war going on here!"

Ron and Hermione broke apart, their arms still around each other.

"I know, mate," said Ron, who looked as though he had recently been hit on the back of the head with a Bludger, "so it's now or never, isn't it?"

"Never mind that, what about the Horcrux?" Harry shouted. "D'you think you could just – just hold it in until we've got the diadem?""Yeah – right – sorry – " said Ron, and he and Hermione set about gathering up fangs, both pink in the face.

It was clear, as the three of them stepped back into the corridor upstairs, that in the minutes that they had spent in the Room of Requirement the situation within the castle had deteriorated severely: The walls and ceiling were shaking worse than ever; dust filled the air, and through the nearest window, Harry saw bursts of green and red light so close to the foot of the castle that he knew the Death Eaters must be very near to entering the place. Looking down, Harry saw Grawp the giant meandering past, swinging what looked like a stone gargoyle torn from the roof and roaring his displeasure.

"Let's hope he steps on some of them!" said Ron as more screams echoed from close by.

"As long as it's not any of our lot!" said a voice: Harry turned and saw Ginny and Tonks, both with their wands drawn at the next window,

which was missing several panes. Even as he watched, Ginny sent a well-aimed jinx into a crowd of fighters below.

“Good girl!“ roared a figure running through the dust toward them, and Harry saw Aberforth again, his gray hair flying as he led a small group of students past. ”They look like they might be breaching the north battlements, they’ve brought giants of their own.““Have you seen Remus?” Tonks called after him.

“He was dueling Dolohov,” shouted Aberforth, “haven’t seen him since!”

“Tonks,” said Ginny, “Tonks, I’m sure he’s okay – ”

But Tonks had run off into the dust after Aberforth.

Ginny turned, helpless, to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

“They’ll be all right,“ said Harry, though he knew they were empty words. ”Ginny, we’ll be back in a moment, just keep out of the way, keep safe – come on!“ he said to Ron and Hermione, and they ran back to the stretch of wall beyond which the Room of Requirement was waiting to do the bidding of the next entrant.

I need the place where everything is hidden. Harry begged of it inside his head, and the door materialized on their third run past.

The furor of the battle died the moment they crossed the threshold and closed the door behind them: All was silent. They were in a place the size of a cathedral with the appearance of a city, its towering walls built of objects hidden by thousands of long-gone students.

“And he never realized anyone could get in?” said Ron, his voice echoing in the silence.

“He thought he was the only one,” said Harry. “Too bad for him I’ve had to hide stuff in my time… this way,” he added. “I think it’s down

here…."

They sped off up adjacent aisles; Harry could hear the others' footsteps echoing through the towering piles of junk, of bottles, hats, crates, chairs, books, weapons, broomsticks, bats….

"Somewhere near here," Harry muttered to himself. "Somewhere… somewhere…"

Deeper and deeper into the labyrinth he went, looking for objects he recognized from his one previous trip into the room. His breath was loud in his ears, and then his very soul seemed to shiver. There it was, right ahead, the blistered old cupboard in which he had hidden his old Potions book, and on top of it, the pockmarked stone warlock wearing a dusty old wig and what looked like an ancient discolored tiara.

He had already stretched out his hand, though he remained few feet away, when a voice behind him said, "Hold it, Potter."

He skidded to a halt and turned around. Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him, shoulder to shoulder, wands pointing right at Harry. Through the small space between their jeering faces he saw Draco Malfoy.

"That's my wand you're holding, Potter," said Malfoy, pointing his own through the gap between Crabbe and Goyle.

"Not anymore," panted Harry, tightening his grip on the hawthorn wand. "Winners, keepers, Malfoy. Who's lent you theirs?"

"My mother," said Draco.

Harry laughed, though there was nothing very humorous about the situation. He could not hear Ron or Hermione anymore. They seemed to have run out of earshot, searching for the diadem.

“So how come you three aren’t with Voldemort?” asked Harry.

“We’re gonna be rewarded,” said Crabbe. His voice was surprisingly soft for such an enormous person: Harry had hardly ever heard him speak before. Crabbe was speaking like a small child promised a large bag of sweets. “We ‘ung back, Potter. We decided not to go. Decided to bring you to ‘im.”

“Good plan,” said Harry in mock admiration. He could not believe that he was this close, and was going to be thwarted by Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. He began edging slowly backward toward the place where the Horcrux sat lopsided upon the bust. If he could just get his hands on it before the fight broke out…“So how did you get in here?” he asked, trying to distract them.

“I virtually lived in the Room of Hidden Things all last year,” said Malfoy, his voice brittle. “I know how to get in.”

“We was hiding in the corridor outside,” grunted Goyle. “We can do Disslusion Charms now! And then,” his face split into a gormless grin, “you turned up right in front of us and said you was looking for a die-dum! What’s a die-dum?”

“Harry?” Ron’s voice echoed suddenly from the other side of the wall to Harry’s right. “Are you talking to someone?”

With a whiplike movement, Crabbe pointed his wand at the fifty foot mountain of old furniture, of broken trunks, of old books and robes and unidentifiable junk, and shouted, “Descendo!”

The wall began to totter, then the top third crumbled into the aisle next door where Ron stood.

“Ron!” Harry bellowed, as somewhere out of sight Hermione screamed, and Harry heard innumerable objects crashing to the floor on the other side of the destabilized wall: He pointed his wand at the rampart, cried, “Finite!” and it steadied.

“No!” shouted Malfoy, staying Crabbe’s arm as the latter made to repeat his spell. “If you wreck the room you might bury this diadem thing!”

“What’s that matter?” said Crabbe, tugging himself free. “It’s Potter the Dark Lord wants, who cares about a die-dum?”

“Potter came in here to get it,” said Malfoy with ill-disguised impatience at the slow-wittedness of his colleagues. “so that must mean – ”

“‘Must mean’?” Crabbe turned on Malfoy with undisguised ferocity. “Who cares what you think? I don’t take your orders no more, Draco. You an’ your dad are finished.”

“Harry?” shouted Ron again, from the other side of the junk wad. “What’s going on?”

“Harry?” mimicked Crabbe. “What’s going on – no, Potter! Crucio!”

Harry had lunged for the tiara; Crabbe’s curse missed him but hit the stone bust, which flew into the air; the diadem soared upward and then dropped out of sight in the mass of objects on which the bust had rested.

“STOP!” Malfoy shouted at Crabbe, his voice echoing through the enormous room. “The Dark Lord wants him alive – ”

“So? I’m not killing him, am I?” yelled Crabbe, throwing off Malfoy’s restraining arm. “But if I can, I will, the Dark Lord wants him dead anyway, what’s the diff –?”

A jet of scarlet light shot past Harry by inches: Hermione had run around the corner behind him and sent a Stunning Spell straight at Crabbe’s head. It only missed because Malfoy pulled him out of the way.

“It’s that Mudblood! Avada Kedavra!”

Harry saw Hermione dive aside, and his fury that Crabbe had aimed to kill wiped all else from his mind. He shot a Stunning Spell at Crabbe, who lurched out of the way, knocking Malfoy’s wand out of his hand; it rolled out of sight beneath a mountain of broken furniture and bones.

“Don’t kill him! DON’T KILL HIM!” Malfoy yelled at Crabbe and Goyle, who were both aiming at Harry: Their split second’s hesitation was all Harry needed.

“Expelliarmus!”

Goyle’s wand flew out of his hand and disappeared into the bulwark of objects beside him; Goyle leapt foolishly on the spot, trying to retrieve it; Malfoy jumped out of range of Hermione’s second Stunning Spell, and Ron, appearing suddenly at the end of the aisle, shot a full Body-Bind Curse at Crabbe, which narrowly missed.

Crabbe wheeled around and screamed, “Avada Kedavra!” again. Ron leapt out of sight to avoid the jet of green light. The wand-less Malfoy cowered behind a three-legged wardrobe as Hermione charged toward them, hitting Goyle with a Stunning Spell as she came.

“It’s somewhere here!” Harry yelled at her, pointing at the pile of junk into which the old tiara had fallen. “Look for it while I go and help R – ”

“HARRY!” she screamed.

A roaring, billowing noise behind him gave him a moment’s warning. He turned and saw both Ron and Crabbe running as hard as they could up the aisle toward them.

“Like it hot, scum?” roared Crabbe as he ran.

But he seemed to have no control over what he had done. Flames of abnormal size were pursuing them, licking up the sides of the junk bulwarks, which were crumbling to soot at their touch.

"Aguamenti!" Harry bawled, but the jet of water that soared from the tip of his wand evaporated in the air.

"RUN!"

Malfoy grabbed the Stunned Goyle and dragged him along; Crabbe outstripped all of them, now looking terrified; Harry, Ron, and Hermione pelted along in his wake, and the fire pursued them. It was not normal fire; Crabbe had used a curse of which Harry had no knowledge. As they turned a corner the flames chased them as though they were alive, sentient, intent upon killing them. Now the fire was mutating, forming a gigantic pack of fiery beasts: Flaming serpents, chimaeras, and dragons rose and fell and rose again, and the detritus of centuries on which they were feeding was thrown up into the air into their fanged mouths, tossed high on clawed feet, before being consumed by the inferno.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had vanished from view: Harry, Ron and Hermione stopped dead; the fiery monsters were circling them, drawing closer and closer, claws and horns and tails lashed, and the heat was solid as a wall around them.

"What can we do?" Hermione screamed over the deafening roars of the fire. "What can we do?"

"Here!"

Harry seized a pair of heavy-looking broomsticks from the nearest pile of junk and threw one to Ron, who pulled Hermione onto it behind him. Harry swung his leg over the second broom and, with hard kicks to the ground, they soared up in the air, missing by feet the horned beak of a flaming raptor that snapped its jaws at them. The smoke and heat were becoming overwhelming: Below them the cursed fire

was consuming the contraband of generations of hunted students, the guilty outcomes of a thousand banned experiments, the secrets of the countless souls who had sought refuge in the room. Harry could not see a trace of Malfoy, Crabbe, or Goyle anywhere. He swooped as low as he dare over the marauding monsters of flame to try to find them, but there was nothing but fire: What a terrible way to die…. He had never wanted this….

"Harry, let's get out, let's get out!" bellowed Ron, though it was impossible to see where the door was through the black smoke.

And then Harry heard a thin, piteous human scream from amidst the terrible commotion, the thunder of devouring flame.

"It's – too – dangerous –!" Ron yelled, but Harry wheeled in the air. His glasses giving his eyes some small protection from the smoke, he raked the firestorm below, seeking a sign of life, a limb or a face that was not yet charred like wood….

And he saw them: Malfoy with his arms around the unconscious Goyle, the pair of them perched on a fragile tower of charred desks, and Harry dived. Malfoy saw him coming and raised one arm, but even as Harry grasped it he knew at once that it was no good. Goyle was too heavy and Malfoy's hand, covered in sweat, slid instantly out of Harry's –"IF WE DIE FOR THEM, I'LL KILL YOU, HARRY!" roared Ron's voice, and, as a great flaming chimaera bore down upon them, he and Hermione dragged Goyle onto their broom and rose, rolling and pitching, into the air once more as Malfoy clambered up behind Harry.

"The door, get to the door, the door!" screamed Malfoy in Harry's ear, and Harry sped up, following Ron, Hermione, and Goyle through the billowing black smoke, hardly able to breathe: and all around them the last few objects unburned by the devouring flames were flung into the air, as the creatures of the cursed fire cast them high in celebration: cups and shields, a sparkling necklace, and an old,

discolored tiara –"What are you doing, what are you doing, the door's that way!" screamed Malfoy, but Harry made a hairpin swerve and dived. The diadem seemed to fall in slow motion, turning and glittering as it dropped toward the maw of a yawning serpent, and then he had it, caught it around his wrist –Harry swerved again as the serpent lunged at him; he soared upward and straight toward the place where, he prayed, the door stood open; Ron, Hermione and Goyle had vanished; Malfoy was screaming and holding Harry so tightly it hurt. Then, through the smoke, Harry saw a rectangular patch on the wall and steered the broom at it, and moments later clean air filled his lungs and they collided with the wall in the corridor beyond.

Malfoy fell off the broom and lay facedown, gasping, coughing, and retching. Harry rolled over and sat up: The door to the Room of Requirement had vanished, and Ron and Hermione sat panting on the floor beside Goyle, who was still unconscious.

"C-Crabbe," choked Malfoy as soon as he could speak. "C-Crabbe…"

"He's dead," said Ron harshly.

There was silence, apart from panting and coughing. Then a number of huge bangs shook the castle, and a great cavalcade of transparent figures galloped past on horses, their heads screaming with bloodlust under their arms. Harry staggered to his feet when the Headless Hunt had passed and looked around: The battle was still going on all around him. He could hear more scream than those of the retreating ghosts. Panic flared within him.

"Where's Ginny?" he said sharply. "She was here. She was supposed to be going back into the Room of Requirement."

"Blimey, d'you reckon it'll still work after that fire?" asked Ron, but he too got to his feet, rubbing his chest and looking left and right. "Shall we split up and look –?"

"No," said Hermione, getting to her feet too. Malfoy and Goyle remained slumped hopelessly on the corridor floor; neither of them had wands. "Let's stick together. I say we go – Harry, what's that on your arm?"

"What? Oh yeah – "

He pulled the diadem from his wrist and held it up. It was still hot, blackened with soot, but as he looked at it closely he was just able to make out the tiny words etched upon it; WIT BEYOND MEASURE IS MAN'S GREATEST TREASURE.

A bloodlike substance, dark and tarry, seemed to be leaking from the diadem. Suddenly Harry felt the thing vibrate violently, then break apart in his hands, and as it did so, he thought he heard the faintest, most distant scream of pain, echoing not from the grounds or the castle, but from the thing that had just fragmented in his fingers.

"It must have been Fiendfyre!" whimpered Hermione, her eyes on the broken piece.

"Sorry?"

"Fiendfyre – cursed fire – it's one of the substances that destroy Horcruxes, but I would never, ever have dared use it, it's so dangerous – how did Crabbe know how to –?"

"Must've learned from the Carrows," said Harry grimly.

"Shame he wasn't concentrating when they mentioned how to stop it, really," said Ron, whose hair, like Hermione's, was singed, and whose face was blackened. "If he hadn't tried to kill us all, I'd be quite sorry he was dead."

"But don't you realize?" whispered Hermione. "This means, if we can just get the snake – "

But she broke off as yells and shouts and the unmistakable noises of dueling filled the corridor. Harry looked around and his heart seemed to fail: Death Eaters had penetrated Hogwarts. Fred and Percy had just backed into view, both of them dueling masked and hooded men.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione ran forward to help: Jets of light flew in every direction and the man dueling Percy backed off, fast: Then his hood slipped and they saw a high forehead and streaked hair –"Hello, Minister!" bellowed Percy, sending a neat jinx straight at Thicknesse, who dropped his wand and clawed at the front of his robes, apparently in awful discomfort. "Did I mention I'm resigning?"

"You're joking, Perce!" shouted Fred as the Death Eater he was battling collapsed under the weight of three separate Stunning Spells. Thicknesse had fallen to the ground with tiny spikes erupting all over him; he seemed to be turning into some form of sea urchin. Fred looked at Percy with glee.

"You actually are joking, Perce…. I don't think I've heard you joke since you were – "

The air exploded. They had been grouped together, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and Percy, the two Death Eaters at their feet, one Stunned, the other Transfigured; and in that fragment of a moment, when danger seemed temporarily at bay, the world was rent apart, Harry felt himself flying through the air, and all he could do was hold as tightly as possible to that thin stick of wood that was his one and only weapon, and shield his head in his arms: He heard the screams and yells of his companions without a hope of knowing what had happened to them –And then the world resolved itself into pain and semidarkness: He was half buried in the wreckage of a corridor that had been subjected to a terrible attack. Cold air told him that the side of the castle had been blown away, and hot stickiness on his cheek told him that he was bleeding copiously. Then he heard a terrible cry that pulled at his insides, that expressed agony of a kind neither flame nor curse could cause, and he stood up, swaying, more

frightened than he had been that day, more frightened, perhaps, than he had been in his life….

And Hermione was struggling to her feet in the wreckage, and three redheaded men were grouped on the ground where the wall had blasted apart. Harry grabbed Hermione's hand as they staggered and stumbled over stone and wood.

"No – no – no!" someone was shouting. "No! Fred! No!" And Percy was shaking his brother, and Ron was kneeling beside them, and Fred's eyes stared without seeing, the ghost of his last laugh still etched upon his face.

Chapter 32 The Elder Wand

The world had ended, so why had the battle not ceased, the castle fallen silent in horror, and every combatant laid down their arms? Harry's mind was in free fall, spinning out of control, unable to grasp the impossibility, because Fred Weasley could not be dead, the evidence of all his senses must be lying–And then a body fell past the hole blown into the side of the school and curses flew in at them from the darkness, hitting the wall behind their heads.

"Get down!" Harry shouted, as more curses flew through the night: He and Ron had both grabbed Hermione and pulled her to the floor, but Percy lay across Fred's body, shielding it from further harm, and when Harry shouted "Percy, come on, we've got to move!" he shook his head.

"Percy!" Harry saw tear tracks streaking the grime coating Ron's face as he seized his elder brother's shoulders and pulled, but Percy would not budge. "Percy, you can't do anything for him! We're going to–"

Hermione screamed, and Harry, turning, did not need to ask why. A monstrous spider the size of a small car was trying to climb through the huge hole in the wall. one of Aragog's descendants had joined the fight.

Ron and Harry shouted together; their spells collided and the monster was blown backward, its legs jerking horribly, and vanished into the darkness.

"It brought friends!" Harry called to the others, glancing over the edge of the castle through the hole in the wall the curses had blasted. More giant spiders were climbing the side of the building, liberated from the Forbidden Forest, into which the Death Eaters must have penetrated. Harry fired Stunning Spells down upon them, knocking the lead

monster into its fellows, so that they rolled back down the building and out of sight. Then more curses came soaring over Harry's head, so close he felt the force of them blow his hair.

"Let's move, NOW!"

Pushing Hermione ahead of him with Ron, Harry stooped to seize Fred's body under the armpit. Percy, realizing what Harry was trying to do, stopped clinging to the body and helped: together, crouching low to avoid the curses flying at them from the grounds, they hauled Fred out of the way.

"Here," said Harry, and they placed him in a niche where a suit of armor had stood earlier. He could not bear to look at Fred a second longer than he had to, and after making sure that the body was well-hidden, he took off after Ron and Hermione. Malfoy and Goyle had vanished but at the end of the corridor, which was now full of dust and falling masonry, glass long gone from windows, he saw many people running backward and forward, whether friends or foes he could not tell. Rounding the corner, Percy let out a bull-like roar: "ROOKWOOD!" and sprinted off in the direction of a tall man, who was pursuing a couple of students. "Harry, in here!" Hermione screamed.

She had pulled Ron behind a tapestry. They seemed to be wrestling together, and for one mad second Harry thought that they were embracing again; then he saw that Hermione was trying to restrain Ron, to stop him running after Percy.

"Listen to me – LISTEN RON!"

"I wanna help – I wanna kill Death Eaters–"

His face was contorted, smeared with dust and smoke, and he was shaking with rage and grief.

“Ron, we’re the only ones who can end it! Please – Ron – we need the snake, we’ve got to kill the snake!” said Hermione.

But Harry knew how Ron felt: Pursuing another Horcrux could not bring the satisfaction of revenge; he too wanted to fight, to punish them, the people who had killed Fred, and he wanted to find the other Weasleys, and above all make sure, make quite sure, that Ginny was not – but he could not permit that idea to form in his mind – “We will fight!” Hermione said. “We’ll have to, to reach the snake! But let’s not lose sight now of what we’re supposed to be d-doing! We’re the only ones who can end it!”

She was crying too, and she wiped her face on her torn and singed sleeve as she spoke, but she took great heaving breaths to calm herself as, still keeping a tight hold on Ron, she turned to Harry.

“You need to find out where Voldemort is, because he’ll have the snake with him, won’t he? Do it, Harry – look inside him!”

Why was it so easy? Because his scar had been burning for hours, yearning to show him Voldemort’s thoughts? He closed his eyes on her command, and at once, the screams and bangs and all the discordant sounds of the battle were drowned until they became distant, as though he stood far, far away from them…He was standing in the middle of a desolate but strangely familiar room, with peeling paper on the walls and all the windows boarded up except for one. The sounds of the assault on the castle were muffled and distant. The single unblocked window revealed distant bursts of light where the castle stood, but inside the room was dark except for a solitary oil lamp.

He was rolling his wand between his fingers, watching it, his thoughts on the room in the castle, the secret room only he had ever found, the room, like the chamber, that you had to be clever and cunning and inquisitive to discover…He was confident that the boy would not find the diadem…although Dumbledore’s puppet had come much farther

than he ever expected…too far…“My Lord,” said a voice, desperate and cracked. He turned: there was Lucius Malfoy sitting in the darkest corner, ragged and still bearing the marks of the punishment he had received after the boy’s last escape. One of his eyes remained closed and puffy. “My Lord…please…my son…”

“If your son is dead, Lucius, it is not my fault. He did not come and join me, like the rest of the Slytherins. Perhaps he has decided to befriend Harry Potter?”

“No – never,” whispered Malfoy. “You must hope not.”

“Aren’t – aren’t you afraid, my Lord that Potter might die at another hand but yours?” asked Malfoy, his voice shaking. “Wouldn’t it be…forgive me…more prudent to call off this battle, enter the castle, and seek him y-yourself?”

“Do not pretend Lucius. You wish the battle to cease so that you can discover what has happened to your son. And I do not need to seek Potter. Before the night is out, Potter will have come to find me.”

Voldemort dropped his gaze once more to the wand in his fingers. It troubled him…and those things that troubled Lord Voldemort needed to be rearranged…“Go and fetch Snape.”

“Snape, m-my Lord?”

“Snape. Now. I need him. There is a – service – I require from him. Go.”

Frightened, stumbling a little through the gloom, Lucius left the room. Vodlemort continued to stand there, twirling the wand between his fingers, staring at it.

“It is the only way, Nagini,” he whispered, and he looked around, and there was the great thick snake, now suspended in midair, twisting gracefully within the enchanted, protected space he had made for

her, a starry, transparent sphere somewhere between a glittering cage and a tank.

With a gasp, Harry pulled back and opened his yees at the same moment his ears were assaulted with the screeches and cries, the smashes and bangs of battle.

“He’s in the Shrieking Shack. The snake’s with him, it’s got some sort of magical protection around it. He’s just sent Lucius Malfoy to find Snape.”

“Voldemort’s sitting in the shrieking Shack?” said Hermione, outraged. “He’s not – he’s not even FIGHTING?”

“He doesn’t think he needs to fight,” said Harry. “He thinks I’m going to go to him.”

“But why?”

“He knows I’m after Horcruxes – he’s keeping Nagini close beside him – obviously I’m going to have to go to him to get near the thing–”

“Right,” said Ron, squaring his shoulders. “So you can’t go, that’s what he wants, what he’s expecting. You stay here and look after Hermione, and I’ll go and get it–” Harry cut across Ron.

“You two stay here, I’ll go under the Cloak and I’ll be back as soon as I–”

“No,” said Hermione,, “it makes much more sense if I take the Cloak and–”

“Don’t even think about it,” Ron snarled at her. before Hermione could get farther than “Ron, I’m just as capable – The tapestry at the top of the staircase on which they stood was ripped open.

“POTTER!”

Two masked Death Eaters stood there, but even before their wands were fully raised, Hermione shouted “Glisseo!”

The stairs beneath their feet flattened into a chute and she, Harry, and Ron hurtled down it, unable to control their speed but so fast that the Death Eaters’ Stunning Spells flew far over their heads. They shot through the concealing tapestry at the bottom and spun onto the floor, hitting the opposite wall.

“Duro!” cried Hermione, pointing her wand at the tapestry, and there were two loud, sickening crunches as the tapestry turned to stone and the Death Eaters pursuing them crumpled against it.

“Get back!” shouted Ron, and he, Harry, and Hermione hurled themselves against a door as a herd of galloping desks thundered past, shepherded by a sprinting Professor McGonagall. She appeared not to notice them. Her hair had come down and there was a gash on her cheek. As she turned the corner, they heard her scream,“CHARGE!”

“Harry, you get the Cloak on,” said Hermione. “Never mind us–”

But he threw it over all three of them; large though they were he doubted anyone would see their disembodied feet through the dust that clogged the air, the falling stone, the shimmer of spells. they ran down the next staircase and found themselves in a corridor full of duelers. The portraits on either side of the fighters were crammed with figures screaming advice and encouragement, while Death Eaters, both masked and unmasked, dueled students and teachers. Dean had won himself a wand, for he was face-to-face with Dolohov, Parvati with Travers. Harry, Ron and Hermione raised their wands at once, ready to strike, but the duelers were weaving and darting so much that there was a strong likelihood of hurting on of their own side if they cast curses. Even as they stood braced, looking for the opportunity to act, there came a great “Wheeeeee!” and looking up, Harry saw Peeves zooming over them, dropping Snargaluff pods

down onto the Death Eaters, whose heads were suddenly engulfed in wriggling green tubers like fat worms.

“ARGH!”

A fistful of tubers had hit the Cloak over Ron’s head; the damp green roots were suspended improbably in midair as Ron tried to shake them loose.

“Someone’s invisible there!” shouted a masked Death Eater, pointing.

Dean made the most of the Death Eater’s momentary distraction, knocking him out with a stunning Spell; Dolohov attempted to retaliate, and Parvati shot a Body Bind Curse at him. “LET’S GO!” Harry yelled, and he, Ron, and Hermione gathered the Cloak tightly around themselves and pelted, heads down, through the midst of the fighters, slipping a little in pools of Snargaluff juice, toward the top of the marble staircase into the entrance hall.

“I’m Draco Malfoy, I’m Draco, I’m on your side!” Draco was on the upper landing, pleading with another masked Death Eater. Harry Stunned the Death Eater as they passed. Malfoy looked around, beaming, for his savior, and Ron punched him from under the Cloak. Malfoy fell backward on top of the Death Eater, his mouth bleeding, utterly bemused.

“And that’s the second time we’ve saved your life tonight, you two-faced bastard!” Ron yelled.

There were more duelers all over the stairs and in the hall. Death Eaters everywhere Harry looked: Yaxley, close to the front doors, in combat with Flitwick, a masked Death Eater dueling Kingsley right beside them. Students ran in every direction; some carrying or dragging injured friends. Harry directed a Stunning Spell toward the masked Death Eater; it missed but nearly hit Neville, who had emerged from nowhere brandishing armfuls of Venomous Tentacula,

which looped itself happily around the nearest Death Eater and began reeling him in.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sped won the marble staircase: glass shattered on the left, and the Slytherin hourglass that had recorded House points spilled its emeralds everywhere, so that people slipped and staggered as they ran. Two bodies fell from the balcony overhead as they reached the ground a gray blur that Harry took for an animal sped four-legged across the hall to sink its teeth into one of the fallen.

“NO!” shrieked Hermione, and with a deafening blast from her wand, Fenrir Greyback was thrown backward from the feebly struggling body of Lavender Brown. He hit the marble banisters and struggled to return to his feet. Then, with a bright white flash and a crack, a crystal ball fell on top of his head, and he crumpled to the ground and did not move.

“I have more!” shrieked Professor Trelawney from over the banisters. “More for any who want them! Here–” And with a move like a tennis serve, she heaved another enormous crystal sphere from her bag, waved her wand through the air, and caused the ball to speed across the hall and smash through a window. At the same moment, the heavy wooden front doors burst open, and more of the gigantic spiders forced their way into the front hall.

Screams of terror rent the air: the fighters scattered, Death Eaters and Hogwartians alike, and red and green jets of light flew into the midst of the oncoming monsters, which shuddered and reared, more terrifying than ever.

“How do we get out?” yelled Ron over all the screaming, but before either Harry or Hermione could answer they were bowled aside; Hagrid had come thundering down the stairs, brandishing his flowery pink umbrella.

“Don’t hurt ‘em, don’t hurt ‘em!” he yelled.

“HAGRID, NO!”

Harry forgot everything else: he sprinted out from under the cloak, running bent double to avoid the curses illuminating the whole hall.

“HAGRID, COME BACK!”

But he was not even halfway to Hagrid when he saw it happen: Hagrid vanished amongst the spiders, and with a great scurrying, a foul swarming movement, they retreated under the onslaught of spells, Hagrid buried in their midst.

“HAGRID!” Harry heard someone calling his own name, whether friend or foe he did not care: He was springing down the front steps into the dark grounds, and the spiders were swarming away with their prey, and he could see nothing of Hagrid at all.

“HAGRID!”

He thought he could make out an enormous arm waving from the midst of the spider swarm, but as he made to chase after them, his way was impeded by a monumental foot, which swung down out of the darkness and made the ground on which he stood shudder. He looked up: A giant stood before him, twenty feet high, its head hidden in shadow, nothing but its treelike, hairy shins illuminated by light from the castle doors. With one brutal, fluid movement, it smashed a massive fist through an upper window, and glass rained down upon Harry, forcing him back under the shelter of the doorway.

“Oh my–!” shrieked Hermione, as she and Ron caught up with Harry and gazed upward at the giant now trying to seize people through the window above.

“DON’T!” Ron yelled, grabbing Hermione’s hand as she raised her wand. “Stun him and he’ll crush half the castle–”

“HAGGER?”

Grawp came lurching around the corner of the castle; only now did Harry realize that Grawp was, indeed, an undersized giant. The gargantuan monster trying to crush people on the upper floors turned around and let out a roar. The stone steps trembled as he stomped toward his smaller kin, and Grawp's lopsided mouth fell open, showing yellow, half brick-sized teeth; and then they launched themselves at each other with the savagery of lions.

"RUN!" Harry roared; the night was full of hideous yells and blows as the giants wrestled, and he seized Hermione's hand and tore down the steps into the grounds, Ron bringing up the rear. Harry had not lost hope of finding and saving Hagrid; he ran so fast that they were halfway toward the forest before they were brought up short again.

The air around them had frozen: Harry's breath caught and solidified in his chest. Shapes moved out in the darkness, swirling figures of concentrated blackness, moving in a great wave towards the castles, their faces hooded and their breath rattling…Ron and Hermione closed in beside him as the sounds of fighting behind them grew suddenly muted, deadened, because a silence only dementors could bring was falling thickly through the night, and Fred was gone, and Hagrid was surely dying or already dead…"Come on, Harry!" said Hermione's voice from a very long way away.

"Patronuses, Harry, come on!"

He raised his wand, but a dull hopelessness was spreading throughout him: How many more lay dead that he did not yet know about? He felt as though his soul had already half left his body….

"HARRY, COME ON!" screamed Hermione.

A hundred dementors were advancing, gliding toward them, sucking their way closer to Harry's despair, which was like a promise of a feast…He saw Ron's silver terrier burst into the air, flicker feebly, and expire; he saw Hermione's otter twist in midair and fade, and his own wand trembled in his hand, and he almost welcomed the oncoming

oblivion, the promise of nothing, of no feeling…And then a silver hare, a boar, and fox soared past Harry, Ron, and Hermione's heads: the dementors fell back before the creatures' approach. Three more people had arrived out of the darkness to stand beside them, their wands outstretched, continuing to cast Patronuses: Luna, Ernie, and Seamus.

"That's right," said Luna encouragingly, as if they were back in the Room of Requirement and this was simply spell practice for the D.A. "That's right, Harry…come on think of something happy…"

"Something happy?" he said, his voice cracked.

"We're all still here," she whispered, "we're still fighting. Come on, now…."

There was a silver spark, then a wavering light, and then, with the greatest effort it had ever cost him the stag burst from the end of Harry's wand. It cantered forward, and now the dementors scattered in earnest, and immediately the night was mild again, but the sounds of the surrounding battle were loud in his ears.

"Can't thank you enough," said Ron shakily, turning to Luna, Ernie, and Seamus "you just saved–"

With a roar and an earth-quaking tremor, another giant came lurching out of the darkness from the direction of the forest, brandishing a club taller than any of them.

"RUN!" Harry shouted again, but the others needed no telling; They all scattered, and not a second too soon, for the next moment the creature's vast foot had fallen exactly where they had been standing. Harry looked round: Ron and Hermione were following him, but the other three had vanished back into the battle. "Let's get out of range!" yelled Ron as the giant swung its club again and its bellows echoed through the night, across the grounds where bursts of red and green light continued to illuminate the darkness.

“The Whomping willow,” said Harry, “go!” Somehow he walled it all up in his mind, crammed it into a small space into which he could not look now: thoughts of Fred and Hagrid, and his terror for all the people he loved, scattered in and outside the castle, must all wait, because they had to run, had to reach the snake and Voldemort, because that was, as Hermione said, the only way to end it –He sprinted, half-believing he could outdistance death itself, ignoring the jets of light flying in the darkness all around him, and the sound of the lake crashing like the sea, and the creaking of the Forbidden Forest though the night was windless; through grounds that seemed themselves to have risen in rebellion, he ran faster than he had ever moved in his life, and it was he who saw the great tree first, the Willow that protected the secret at its roots with whiplike, slashing branches. Panting and gasping, Harry slowed down, skirting the willow’s swiping branches, peering through the darkness toward its tick trunk, trying to see the single knot in the bark of the old tree that would paralyze it. Ron and Hermione caught up, Hermione so out of breath that she could not speak.

“How – how’re we going to get in?” panted Ron. “I can – see the place – if we just had – Crookshanks again –”

“Crookshanks?” wheezed Hermione, bent double, clutching her chest. “Are you a wizard, or what?”

“Oh – right – yeah –”

Ron looked around, then directed his wand at a twig on the ground and said “Winguardium Leviosa!” The twig flew up from the ground, spun through the air as if caught by a gust of wind, then zoomed directly at the trunk through the Willow’s ominously swaying branches. It jabbed at a place near the roots, and at once, the writhing tree became still. “Perfect!” panted Hermione. “Wait.”

For one teetering second, while the crashes and booms of the battle filled the air, Harry hesitated. Voldemort wanted him to do this,

wanted him to come…Was he leading Ron and Hermione into a trap? But the reality seemed to close upon him, cruel and plain: the only way forward was to kill the snake, and the snake was where Voldemort was, and Voldemort was at the end of this tunnel…“Harry, we’re coming, just get in there!” said Ron, pushing him forward.

Harry wriggled into the earthy passage hidden in the tree’s roots.

It was a much tighter squeeze than it had been the last time they had entered it. The tunnel was low-ceilinged: they had had to double up to move through it nearly four years previously; now there was nothing for it but to crawl. Harry went first, his wand illuminated, expecting at any moment to meet barriers, but none came. They moved in silence, Harry’s gaze fixed upon the swinging beam of the wand held in his fist. At last, the tunnel began to slope upward and Harry saw a sliver of light ahead. Hermione tugged at his ankle.

“The Cloak!” she whispered. “Put the Cloak on!”

He groped behind him and she forced the bundle of slippery cloth into his free hand. With difficulty he dragged it over himself, murmured, “Nox,” extinguishing his wandlight, and continued on his hands and knees, as silently as possible, all his senses straining, expecting every second to be discovered, to hear a cold clear voice, see a flash of green light.

And then he heard voices coming from the room directly ahead of them, only slightly muffled by the fact that the opening at the end of the tunnel had been blocked up by what looked like an old crate. Hardly daring to breathe, Harry edged right up tot he opening and peered through a tiny gap left between crate and wall.

The room beyond was dimly lit, but he could see Nagini, swirling and coiling like a serpent underwater, safe in her enchanted, starry sphere, which floated unsupported in midair. He could see the edge of a table, and a long-fingered white hand toying with a wand.

Then Snape spoke, and Harry's heart lurched: Snape was inches away from where he crouched, hidden.

"…my Lord, their resistance is crumbling –"

"– and it is doing so without your help," said Voldemort in his high, clear voice. "Skilled wizard though you are, Severus, I do not think you will make much difference now. We are almost there…almost."

"Let me find the boy. Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please."

Snape strode past the gap, and Harry drew back a little, keeping his eyes fixed upon Nagini, wondering whether there was any spell that might penetrate the protection surrounding her, but he could not think of anything. One failed attempt, and he would give away his position…Voldemort stood up. Harry could see him now, see the red eyes, the flattened, serpentine face, the pallor of him gleaming slightly in the semidarkness.

"I have a problem, Severus," said Voldemort softly.

"My Lord?" said Snape.

Voldemort raised the Elder Wand, holding it as delicately and precisely as a conductor's baton.

"Why doesn't it work for me, Severus?"

In the silence Harry imagined he could hear the snake hissing slightly as it coiled and uncoiled–or was it Voldemort's sibilant sigh lingering on the air?

"My – my lord?" said Snape blankly. "I do not understand. You – you have performed extraordinary magic with that wand."

“No,” said Voldemort. “I have performed my usual magic. I am extraordinary, but this wand…no. It has not revealed the wonders it has promised. I feel no difference between this wand and the one I procured from Ollivander all those years ago.”

Voldemort’s tone was musing, calm, but Harry’s scar had begun to throb and pulse: Pain was building in his forehead, and he could feel that controlled sense of fury building inside Voldemort.

“No difference,” said Voldemort again.

Snape did not speak. Harry could not see his face. He wondered whether Snape sensed danger, was trying to find the right words to reassure his master.

Voldemort started to move around the room: Harry lost sight of him for seconds as he prowled, speaking in that same measured voice, while the pain and fury mounted in Harry.

“I have thought long and hard, Severus…do you know why I have called you back from battle?”

And for a moment Harry saw Snape’s profile. His eyes were fixed upon the coiling snake in its enchanted cage.

“No, my Lord, but I beg you will let me return. Let me find Potter.”

“You sound like Lucius. Neither of you understands Potter as I do. He does not need finding. Potter will come to me. I knew his weakness you see, his one great flaw. He will hate watching the others struck down around him, knowing that it is for him that it happens. He will want to stop it at any cost. He will come.”

“But my Lord, he might be killed accidentally by someone other than yourself–”

"My instructions to the Death Eaters have been perfectly clear. Capture Potter. Kill his friends – the more, the better – but do not kill him."

"But it is of you that I wished to speak, Severus, not Harry Potter. You have been very valuable to me. Very valuable."

"My Lord knows I seek only to serve him. But – let me go and find the boy, my Lord. Let me bring him to you. I know I can –"

"I have told you, no!" said Voldemort, and Harry caught the glint of red in his eyes as he turned again, and the swishing of his cloak was like the slithering of a snake, and he felt Voldemort's impatience in his burning scar. "My concern at the moment, Severus, is what will happen when I finally meet the boy!"

"My Lord, there can be no question, surely –?"

"– but there is a question, Severus. There is."

Voldemort halted, and Harry could see him plainly again as he slid the Elder Wand through his white fingers, staring at Snape.

"Why did both the wands I have used fail when directed at Harry Potter?"

"I – I cannot answer that, my Lord."

"Can't you?"

The stab of rage felt like a spike driven through Harry's head: he forced his own fist into his mouth to stop himself from crying out in pain. He closed his eyes, and suddenly he was Voldemort, looking into Snape's pale face.

"My wand of yew did everything of which I asked it, Severus, except to kill Harry Potter. Twice it failed. Ollivander told me under torture of

the twin cores, told me to take another's wand. I did so, but Lucius's wand shattered upon meeting Potter's."

"I – I have no explanation, my Lord."

Snape was not looking at Voldemort now. His dark eyes were still fixed upon the coiling serpent in its protective sphere.

"I sought a third wand, Severus. the Elder Wand, the Wand of Destiny, the Deathstick. I took it from its previous master. I took it from the grave of Albus Dumbledore."

And now Snape looked at Voldemort, and Snape's face was like a death mask. it was marble white and so still that when he spoke, it was a shock to see that anyone lived behind the blank eyes.

"My Lord – let me go to the boy –"

"All this long night when I am on the brink of victory, I have sat here," said Voldemort, his voice barely louder than a whisper, "wondering, wondering, why the Elder Wand refuses to be what it ought to be, refuses to perform as legend says it must perform for its rightful owner…and I think I have the answer."

Snape did not speak.

"Perhaps you already know it? You are a clever man, after all, Severus. You have been a good and faithful servant, and I regret what must happen."

"My Lord–"

"The Elder Wand cannot serve me properly, Severus, because I am not its true master. The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner. You killed Albus Dumbledore. While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot truly be mine."

“My Lord!” Snape protested, raising his wand.

“It cannot be any other way,” said Voldemort. “I must master the wand, Severus. Master the wand, and I master Potter at last.”

And Voldemort swiped the air with the Elder Wand. It did nothing to Snape, who for a split second seemed to think he had been reprieved: but then Voldemort’s intention became clear. The snake’s cage was rolling through the air, and before Snape could do anything more than yell, it had encased him, head and shoulders, and Voldemort spoke in Parseltongue.

“Kill.”

There was a terrible scream. Harry saw Snape’s face losing the little color it had left; it whitened as his black eyes widened, as the snake’s fangs pierced his neck, as he failed to push the enchanted cage off himself, as his knees gave way and he fell to the floor.

“I regret it,” said Voldemort coldly.

He turned away; there was no sadness in him, no remorse. It was time to leave this shack and take charge, with a wand that would now do his full bidding. He pointed it at the starry cage holding the snake, which drifted upward, off Snape, who fell sideways onto the floor, blood gushing from the wounds in his neck. Voldemort swept from the room without a backward glance, and the great serpent floated after him in its huge protective sphere.

Back in the tunnel and his own mind, Harry opened his eyes; He had drawn blood biting down on his knuckles in an effort not to shout out. Now he was looking through the tiny crack between crate and wall, watching a foot in a black boot trembling on the floor.

“Harry!” breathed Hermione behind him, but he had already pointed his wand at the crate blocking his view. It lifted an inch into the air and

drifted sideways silently. As quietly as he could, he pulled himself up into the room.

He did not know why he was doing it, why he was approaching the dying man: he did not know what he felt as he saw Snape's white face, and the fingers trying to staunch the bloody wound at his neck. Harry took off the invisibility cloak and looked down upon the man he hated, whose widening black eyes found Harry as he cried to speak. Harry bent over him, and Snape seized the front of his robes and pulled him close.

A terrible rasping, gurgling noise issued from Snape's throat.

“Take…it…Take…it…”

Something more than blood was leaking from Snape. Silvery blue, neither gas nor liquid, it gushed form his mouth and his ears and his eyes, and Harry knew what it was, but did not know what to do – A flask, conjured from thin air, was thrust into his shaking hand by Hermione. Harry lifted the silvery substance into it with his wand. When the flask was full to the brim, and Snape looked as though there was no blood left in him, his grip on Harry's robes slackened.

“Look…at….me…” he whispered.

The green eyes found the black, but after a second, something in the depths of the dark pari seemed to vanish, leaving them fixed, blank, and empty. The hand holding Harry thudded to the floor, and Snape moved no more.

Chapter 33 The Prince's Tale

Harry remained kneeling at Snape's side, simply staring down at him, until quite suddenly a high, cold voice spoke so close to them that Harry jumped on his feet, the flask gripped tightly in his hands, thinking that Voldemort had reentered the room.

Voldemort's voice reverberated from the walls and floor, and Harry realized that he was talking to Hogwarts and to all the surrounding area, that the residents of Hogsmeade and all those still fighting in the castle would hear him as clearly as if he stood beside them, his breath on the back of their necks, a deathblow away.

"You have fought," said the high, cold voice, "valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery."

"Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste."

"Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately."

"You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured."

"I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour."

Both Ron and Hermione shook their heads frantically, looking at Harry.

“Don’t listen to him,” said Ron.

“It’ll be all right,” said Hermione wildly. “Let’s – let’s get back to the castle, if he’s gone to the forest we’ll need to think of a new plan – ”

She glanced at Snape’s body, then hurried back to the tunnel entrance. Ron followed her. Harry gathered up the Invisibility Cloak, then looked down at Snape. He did not know what to feel, except shock at the way Snape had been killed, and the reason for which it had been done…They crawled back through the tunnel, none of them talking, and Harry wondered whether Ron and Hermione could still hear Voldemort ringing in their heads as he could.

You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest…One hour…Small bundles seemed to litter the lawn at the front of the castle. It could only be an hour or so from dawn, yet it was pitch-black. The three of them hurried toward the stone steps. A lone dog, the size of a small boat, lay abandoned in front of them. There was no other sign of Grawp or of his attacker.

The castle was unnaturally silent. There were no flashes of light now, no bangs or screams or shouts. The flagstones of the deserted entrance hall were stained with blood. Emeralds were still scattered all over the floor, along with pieces of marble and splintered wood. Part of the banisters had been blown away.

“Where is everyone?” whispered Hermione.

Ron led the way to the Great Hall. Harry stopped in the doorway.

The House tables were gone and the room was crowded. The survivors stood in groups, their arms around each other’s necks. The injured were being treated upon the raised platform by Madam Pomfrey and a group of helpers. Firenze was amongst the injured; his flank poured blood and he shook where he lay, unable to stand.

The dead lay in a row in the middle of the Hall. Harry could not see Fred's body, because his family surrounded him. George was kneeling at his head; Mrs. Weasley was lying across Fred's chest, her body shaking. Mr. Weasley stroking her hair while tears cascaded down his cheeks.

Without a word to Harry, Ron and Hermione walked away. Harry saw Hermione approach Ginny, whose face was swollen and blotchy, and hug her. Ron joined Bill, Fleur, and Percy, who flung an arm around Ron's shoulders. As Ginny and Hermione moved closer to the rest of the family, Harry had a clear view of the bodies lying next to Fred. Remus and Tonks, pale and still and peaceful-looking, apparently asleep beneath the dark, enchanted ceiling.

The Great Hall seemed to fly away, become smaller, shrink, as Harry reeled backward from the doorway. He could not draw breath. He could not bear to look at any of the other bodies, to see who else had died for him. He could not bear to join the Weasleys, could not look into their eyes, when if he had given himself up in the first place, Fred might never have died…He turned away and ran up the marble staircase. Lupin, Tonks… He yearned not to feel… He wished he could rip out his heart, his innards, everything that was screaming inside him…The castle was completely empty; even the ghosts seemed to have joined the mass mourning in the Great Hall. Harry ran without stopping, clutching the crystal flask of Snape's last thoughts, and he did not slow down until he reached the stone gargoyle guarding the headmaster's office.

"Password?"

"Dumbledore!" said Harry without thinking, because it was he whom he yearned to see, and to his surprise the gargoyle slid aside revealing the spiral staircase behind.

But when Harry burst into the circular office he found a change. The portraits that hung all around the walls were empty. Not a single

headmaster or headmistress remained to see him; all, it seemed, had flitted away, charging through the paintings that lined the castle so that they could have a clear view of what was going on.

Harry glanced hopelessly at Dumbledore's deserted frame, which hung directly behind the headmaster's chair, then turned his back on it. The stone Pensieve lay in the cabinet where it had always been. Harry heaved it onto the desk and poured Snape's memories into the wide basin with its runic markings around the edge. To escape into someone else's head would be a blessed relief… Nothing that even Snape had left him could be worse than his own thoughts. The memories swirled, silver white and strange, and without hesitating, with a feeling of reckless abandonment, as though this would assuage his torturing grief, Harry dived.

He fell headlong into sunlight, and his feet found warm ground. When he straightened up, he saw that he was in a nearly deserted playground. A single huge chimney dominated the distant skyline. Two girls were swinging backward and forward, and a skinny boy was watching them from behind a clump of bushes. His black hair was overlong and his clothes were so mismatched that it looked deliberate: too short jeans, a shabby, overlarge coat that might have belonged to a grown man, an odd smocklike shirt.

Harry moved closer to the boy. Snape looked no more than nine or ten years old, sallow, small, stringy. There was undisguised greed in his thin face as he watched the younger of the two girls swinging higher and higher than her sister.

"Lily, don't do it!" shrieked the elder of the two.

But the girl had let go of the swing at the very height of its arc and flown into the air, quite literally flown, launched herself skyward with a great shout of laughter, and instead of crumpling on the playground asphalt, she soared like a trapeze artist through the air, staying up far too long, landing far too lightly.

“Mummy told you not to!”

Petunia stopped her swing by dragging the heels of her sandals on the ground, making a crunching, grinding sound, then leapt up, hands on hips.

“Mummy said you weren’t allowed, Lily!”

“But I’m fine,” said Lily, still giggling. “Tuney, look at this. Watch what I can do.”

Petunia glanced around. The playground was deserted apart from themselves and, though the girls did not know it, Snape. Lily had picked up a fallen flower from the bush behind which Snape lurked. Petunia advanced, evidently torn between curiosity and disapproval. Lily waited until Petunia was near enough to have a clear view, then held out her palm. The flower sat there, opening and closing its petals, like some bizarre, many-lipped oyster.

“Stop it!” shrieked Petunia.

“It’s not hurting you,” said Lily, but she closed her hand on the blossom and threw it back to the ground.

“It’s not right,” said Petunia, but her eyes had followed the flower’s flight to the ground and lingered upon it. “How do you do it?” she added, and there was definite longing in her voice.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Snape could no longer contain himself, but had jumped out from behind the bushes. Petunia shrieked and ran backward toward the swings, but Lily, though clearly startled, remained where she was. Snape seemed to regret his appearance. A dull flush of color mounted the sallow cheeks as he looked at Lily.

“What’s obvious?” asked Lily.

Snape had an air of nervous excitement. With a glance at the distant Petunia, now hovering beside the swings, he lowered his voice and said, “I know what you are.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re…you’re a witch,” whispered Snape.

She looked affronted.

“That’s not a very nice thing to say to somebody!”

She turned, nose in the air, and marched off toward her sister.

“No!” said Snape. He was highly colored now, and Harry wondered why he did not take off the ridiculously large coat, unless it was because he did not want to reveal the smock beneath it. He flapped after the girls, looking ludicrously batlike, like his older self.

The sisters considered him, united in disapproval, both holding on to one of the swing poles, as though it was the safe place in tag.

“You are,” said Snape to Lily. “You are a witch. I’ve been watching you for a while. But there’s nothing wrong with that. My mum’s one, and I’m a wizard.”

Petunia’s laugh was like cold water.

“Wizard!” she shrieked, her courage returned now that she had recovered from the shock of his unexpected appearance. “I know who you are. You’re that Snape boy! They live down Spinner’s End by the river,” she told Lily, and it was evident from her tone that she considered the address a poor recommendation. “Why have you been spying on us?”

“Haven’t been spying,” said Snape, hot and uncomfortable and dirty-haired in the bright sunlight. “Wouldn’t spy on you, anyway,” he added

spitefully, “you’re a Muggle.”

Though Petunia evidently did not understand the word, she could hardly mistake the tone.

“Lily, come on, we’re leaving!” she said shrilly. Lily obeyed her sister at once, glaring at Snape as she left. He stood watching them as they marched through the playground gate, and Harry, the only one left to observe him, recognized Snape’s bitter disappointment, and understood that Snape had been planning this moment for a while, and that it had all gone wrong…The scene dissolved, and before Harry knew it, re-formed around him. He was now in a small thicket of trees. He could see a sunlit river glittering through their trunks. The shadows cast by the trees made a basin of cool green shade. Two children sat facing each other, cross-legged on the ground. Snape had removed his coat now; his odd smock looked less peculiar in the half light.

“…and the Ministry can punish you if you do magic outside school, you get letters.”

“But I have done magic outside school!”

“We’re all right. We haven’t got wands yet. They let you off when you’re a kid and you can’t help it. But once you’re eleven,” he nodded importantly, “and they start training you, then you’ve got to go careful.”

There was a little silence. Lily had picked up a fallen twig and twirled it in the air, and Harry knew that she was imagining sparks trailing from it. Then she dropped the twig, leaned in toward the boy, and said, “It is real, isn’t it? It’s not a joke? Petunia says you’re lying to me. Petunia says there isn’t a Hogwarts. It is real, isn’t it?”

“It’s real for us,” said Snape. “Not for her. But we’ll get the letter, you and me.”

"Really?" whispered Lily.

"Definitely," said Snape, and even with his poorly cut hair and his odd clothes, he struck an oddly impressive figure sprawled in front of her, brimful of confidence in his destiny.

"And will it really come by owl?" Lily whispered.

"Normally," said Snape. "But you're Muggle-born, so someone from the school will have to come and explain to your parents."

"Does it make a difference, being Muggle-born?"

Snape hesitated. His black eyes, eager in the greenish gloom, moved over the pale face, the dark red hair.

"No," he said. "It doesn't make any difference."

"Good," said Lily, relaxing. It was clear that she had been worrying.

"You've got loads of magic," said Snape. "I saw that. All the time I was watching you…"

His voice trailed away; she was not listening, but had stretched out on the leafy ground and was looking up at the canopy of leaves overhead. He watched her as greedily as he had watched her in the playground.

"How are things at your house?" Lily asked.

A little crease appeared between his eyes.

"Fine," he said.

"They're not arguing anymore?"

"Oh yes, they're arguing," said Snape. He picked up a fistful of leaves and began tearing them apart, apparently unaware of what he was

doing. “But it won’t be that long and I’ll be gone.”

“Doesn’t your dad like magic?”

“He doesn’t like anything, much,” said Snape.

“Severus?”

A little smile twisted Snape’s mouth when she said his name.

“Yeah?”

“Tell me about the dementors again.”

“What d’you want to know about them for?”

“If I use magic outside school – ”

“They wouldn’t give you to the dementors for that! Dementors are for people who do really bad stuff. They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban. You’re not going to end up in Azkaban, you’re too – ”

He turned red again and shredded more leaves. Then a small rustling noise behind Harry made him turn: Petunia, hiding behind a tree, had lost her footing.

“Tuney!” said Lily, surprise and welcome in her voice, but Snape had jumped to his feet.

“Who’s spying now?” he shouted. “What d’you want?”

Petunia was breathless, alarmed at being caught. Harry could see her struggling for something hurtful to say.

“What is that you’re wearing, anyway?” she said, pointing at Snape’s chest. “Your mum’s blouse?”

There was a crack. A branch over Petunia's head had fallen. Lily screamed. The branch caught Petunia on the shoulder, and she staggered backward and burst into tears.

"Tuney!"

But Petunia was running away. Lily rounded on Snape.

"Did you make that happen?"

"No." He looked both defiant and scared.

"You did!" She was backing away from him. "You did! You hurt her!"

"No – no, I didn't!"

But the lie did not convince Lily. After one last burning look, she ran from the little thicket, off after her sister, and Snape looked miserable and confused…And the scene re-formed. Harry looked around. He was on platform nine and three quarters, and Snape stood beside him, slightly hunched, next to a thin, sallow-faced, sour-looking woman who greatly resembled him. Snape was staring at a family of four a short distance away. The two girls stood a little apart from their parents. Lily seemed to be pleading with her sister. Harry moved closer to listen.

"…I'm sorry, Tuney, I'm sorry! Listen – " She caught her sister's hand and held tight to it, even though Petunia tried to pull it away. "Maybe once I'm there – no, listen, Tuney! Maybe once I'm there, I'll be able to go to Professor Dumbledore and persuade him to change his mind!"

"I don't – want – to – go!" said Petunia, and she dragged her hand back out of her sister's grasp. "You think I want to go to some stupid castle and learn to be a – a…"

Her pale eyes roved over the platform, over the cats mewling in their owners' arms, over the owls, fluttering and hooting at each other in cages, over the students, some already in their long black robes, loading trunks onto the scarlet steam engine or else greeting one another with glad cries after a summer apart.

" – you think I want to be a – a freak?"

Lily's eyes filled with tears as Petunia succeeded in tugging her hand away.

"I'm not a freak," said Lily. "That's a horrible thing to say."

"That's where you're going," said Petunia with relish. "A special school for freaks. You and that Snape boy…weirdos, that's what you two are. It's good you're being separated from normal people. It's for our safety."

Lily glanced toward her parents, who were looking around the platform with an air of wholehearted enjoyment, drinking in the scene. Then she looked back at her sister, and her voice was low and fierce.

"You didn't think it was such a freak's school when you wrote to the headmaster and begged him to take you."

Petunia turned scarlet.

"Beg? I didn't beg!"

"I saw his reply. It was very kind."

"You shouldn't have read – " whispered Petunia, "that was my private – how could you –?"

Lily gave herself away by half-glancing toward where Snape stood nearby. Petunia gasped.

“That boy found it! You and that boy have been sneaking in my room!”

“No – not sneaking – “ Now Lily was on the defensive. ”Severus saw the envelope, and he couldn’t believe a Muggle could have contacted Hogwarts, that’s all! He says there must be wizards working undercover in the postal service who take care of – ““Apparently wizards poke their noses in everywhere!“ said Petunia, now as pale as she had been flushed. ”Freak!“ she spat at her sister, and she flounced off to where her parents stood…The scene dissolved again. Snape was hurrying along the corridor of the Hogwarts Express as it clattered through the countryside. He had already changed into his school robes, had perhaps taken the first opportunity to take off his dreadful Muggle clothes. At last he stopped, outside a compartment in which a group of rowdy boys were talking. Hunched in a corner seat beside the window was Lily, her face pressed against the windowpane.

Snape slid open the compartment door and sat down opposite Lily. She glanced at him and then looked back out of the window. She had been crying.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” she said in a constricted voice.

“Why not?”

“Tuney h-hates me. Because we saw that letter from Dumbledore.““So what?”

She threw him a look of deep dislike.

“So she’s my sister!”

“She’s only a – “ He caught himself quickly; Lily, too busy trying to wipe her eyes without being noticed, did not hear him.

"But we're going!" he said, unable to suppress the exhilaration in his voice. "This is it! We're off to Hogwarts!"

She nodded, mopping her eyes, but in spite of herself, she half smiled.

"You'd better be in Slytherin," said Snape, encouraged that she had brightened a little.

"Slytherin?"

One of the boys sharing the compartment, who had shown no interest at all in Lily or Snape until that point, looked around at the word, and Harry, whose attention had been focused entirely on the two beside the window, saw his father: slight, black-haired like Snape, but with that indefinable air of having been well-cared-for, even adored, that Snape so conspicuously lacked.

"Who wants to be in Slytherin? I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?" James asked the boy lounging on the seats opposite him, and with a jolt, Harry realized that it was Sirius. Sirius did not smile.

"My whole family have been in Slytherin," he said.

"Blimey," said James, "and I thought you seemed all right!"

Sirius grinned.

"Maybe I'll break the tradition. Where are you heading, if you've got the choice?"

James lifted an invisible sword.

"'Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart!' Like my dad."

Snape made a small, disparaging noise. James turned on him.

"Got a problem with that?"

“No,” said Snape, though his slight sneer said otherwise. “If you’d rather be brawny than brainy – ”

“Where’re you hoping to go, seeing as you’re neither?“ interjected Sirius.

James roared with laughter. Lily sat up, rather flushed, and looked from James to Sirius in dislike.

“Come on, Severus, let’s find another compartment.”

“Oooooo…”

James and Sirius imitated her lofty voice; James tried to trip Snape as he passed.

“See ya, Snivellus!” a voice called, as the compartment door slammed…And the scene dissolved once more…Harry was standing right behind Snape as they faced the candlelit House tables, lined with rapt faces. Then Professor McGonagall said, “Evans, Lily!”

He watched his mother walk forward on trembling legs and sit down upon the rickety stool. Professor McGonagall dropped the Sorting Hat onto her head, and barely a second after it had touched the dark red hair, the hat cried, “Gryffindor!”

Harry heard Snape let out a tiny groan. Lily took off the hat, handed it back to Professor McGonagall, then hurried toward the cheering Gryffindors, but as she went she glanced back at Snape, and there was a sad little smile on her face. Harry saw Sirius move up the bench to make room for her. She took one look at him, seemed to recognize him from the train, folded her arms, and firmly turned her back on him.

The roll call continued. Harry watched Lupin, Pettigrew, and his father join Lily and Sirius at the Gryffindor table. At last, when only a dozen students remained to be sorted, Professor McGonagall called Snape.

Harry walked with him to the stool, watched him place the hat upon his head. “Slytherin!” cried the Sorting Hat.

And Severus Snape moved off to the other side of the Hall, away from Lily, to where the Slytherins were cheering him, to where Lucius Malfoy, a prefect badge gleaming upon his chest, patted Snape on the back as he sat down beside him…And the scene changed…

Lily and Snape were walking across the castle courtyard, evidently arguing. Harry hurried to catch up with them, to listen in. As he reached them, he realized how much taller they both were. A few years seemed to have passed since their Sorting.

“…thought we were supposed to be friends?” Snape was saying, “Best friends?”

“We are, Sev, but I don’t like some of the people you’re hanging round with! I’m sorry, but I detest Avery and Mulciber! Mulciber! What do you see in him, Sev, he’s creepy! D’you know what he tried to do to Mary Macdonald the other day?“Lily had reached a pillar and leaned against it, looking up into the thin, sallow face.

“That was nothing,” said Snape. “It was a laugh, that’s all – ”

“It was Dark Magic, and if you think that’s funny – ”

“What about the stuff Potter and his mates get up to?” demanded Snape. His color rose again as he said it, unable, it seemed, to hold in his resentment.

“What’s Potter got to do with anything?” said Lily.

“They sneak out at night. There’s something weird about that Lupin. Where does he keep going?”

“He’s ill,” said Lily. “They say he’s ill – ”

“Every month at the full moon?” said Snape.

“I know your theory,” said Lily, and she sounded cold. “Why are you so obsessed with them anyway? Why do you care what they’re doing at night?”

“I’m just trying to show you they’re not as wonderful as everyone seems to think they are.“The intensity of his gaze made her blush.

“They don’t use Dark Magic, though.“ She dropped her voice. ”And you’re being really ungrateful. I heard what happened the other night. You went sneaking down that tunnel by the Whomping Willow, and James Potter saved you from whatever’s down there – “Snape’s whole face contorted and he spluttered, “Saved? Saved? You think he was playing the hero? He was saving his neck and his friends’ too! You’re not going to – I won’t let you – ”

“Let me? Let me?“

Lily’s bright green eyes were slits. Snape backtracked at once.

“I didn’t mean – I just don’t want to see you made a fool of – He fancies you, James Potter fancies you!” The words seemed wrenched from him against his will. “And he’s not…everyone thinks… big Quidditch hero – ” Snape’s bitterness and dislike were rendering him incoherent, and Lily’s eyebrows were traveling farther and farther up her forehead.

“I know James Potter’s an arrogant toerag,“ she said, cutting across Snape. ”I don’t need you to tell me that. But Mulciber’s and Avery’s idea of humor is just evil. Evil, Sev. I don’t understand how you can be friends with them.“Harry doubted that Snape had even heard her strictures on Mulciber and Avery. The moment she had insulted James Potter, his whole body had relaxed, and as they walked away there was a new spring in Snape’s step…And the scene dissolved…

Harry watched again as Snape left the Great Hall after sitting his O.W.L. in Defense Against the Dark Arts, watched as he wandered away from the castle and strayed inadvertently close to the place beneath the beech tree where James, Sirius, Lupin, and Pettigrew sat together. But Harry kept his distance this time, because he knew what happened after James had hoisted Severus into the air and taunted him; he knew what had been done and said, and it gave him no pleasure to hear it again… He watched as Lily joined the group and went to Snape's defense. Distantly he heard Snape shout at her in his humiliation and his fury, the unforgivable word: "Mudblood."

The scene changed…

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not interested."

"I'm sorry!"

"Save your breath"

It was nighttime. Lily, who was wearing a dressing gown, stood with her arms folded in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady, at the entrance to Gryffindor Tower.

"I only came out because Mary told me you were threatening to sleep here."

"I was. I would have done. I never meant to call you Mudblood, it just – "

"Slipped out?" There was no pity in Lily's voice. "It's too late. I've made excuses for you for years. None of my friends can understand why I even talk to you. You and your precious little Death Eater friends – you see, you don't even deny it! You don't even deny that's what you're all aiming to be! You can't wait to join You-Know-Who, can you?"He opened his mouth, but closed it without speaking.

"I can't pretend anymore. You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine."

"No – listen, I didn't mean – "

" – to call me Mudblood? But you call everyone of my birth Mudblood, Severus. Why should I be any different?"

He struggled on the verge of speech, but with a contemptuous look she turned and climbed back through the portrait hole…The corridor dissolved, and the scene took a little longer to reform: Harry seemed to fly through shifting shapes and colors until his surroundings solidified again and he stood on a hilltop, forlorn and cold in the darkness, the wind whistling through the branches of a few leafless trees. The adult Snape was panting, turning on the spot, his wand gripped tightly in his hand, waiting for something or for someone… His fear infected Harry too, even though he knew that he could not be harmed, and he looked over his shoulder, wondering what it was that Snape was waiting for – Then a blinding, jagged jet of white light flew through the air. Harry thought of lightning, but Snape had dropped to his knees and his wand had flown out of his hand.

"Don't kill me!"

"That was not my intention."

Any sound of Dumbledore Apparating had been drowned by the sound of the wind in the branches. He stood before Snape with his robes whipping around him, and his face was illuminated from below in the light cast by his wand.

"Well, Severus? What message does Lord Voldemort have for me?"

"No – no message – I'm here on my own account!"

Snape was wringing his hands. He looked a little mad, with his straggling black hair flying around him.

"I – I come with a warning – no, a request – please – "

Dumbledore flicked his wand. Though leaves and branches still flew through the night air around them, silence fell on the spot where he and Snape faced each other.

"What request could a Death Eater make of me?"

"The – the prophecy…the prediction…Trelawney…"

"Ah, yes," said Dumbledore. "How much did you relay to Lord Voldemort?"

"Everything – everything I heard!" said Snape. "That is why – it is for that reason – he thinks it means Lily Evans!"

"The prophecy did not refer to a woman," said Dumbledore. "It spoke of a boy born at the end of July – "

"You know what I mean! He thinks it means her son, he is going to hunt her down – kill them all – "

"If she means so much to you," said Dumbledore, "surely Lord Voldemort will spare her? Could you not ask for mercy for the mother, in exchange for the son?"

"I have – I have asked him – "

"You disgust me," said Dumbledore, and Harry had never heard so much contempt in his voice. Snape seemed to shrink a little, "You do not care, then, about the deaths of her husband and child? They can die, as long as you have what you want?"

Snape said nothing, but merely looked up at Dumbledore.

"Hide them all, then," he croaked. "Keep her – them – safe. Please."

"And what will you give me in return, Severus?"

“In – in return?“ Snape gaped at Dumbledore, and Harry expected him to protest, but after a long moment he said, ”Anything.“The hilltop faded, and Harry stood in Dumbledore’s office, and something was making a terrible sound, like a wounded animal. Snape was slumped forward in a chair and Dumbledore was standing over him, looking grim. After a moment or two, Snape raised his face, and he looked like a man who had lived a hundred years of misery since leaving the wild hilltop.

“I thought…you were going…to keep her…safe…”

“She and James put their faith in the wrong person,“ said Dumbledore. ”Rather like you, Severus. Weren’t you hoping that Lord Voldemort would spare her?“Snape’s breathing was shallow.

“Her boy survives,” said Dumbledore.

With a tiny jerk of the head, Snape seemed to flick off an irksome fly.

“Her son lives. He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and color of Lily Evans’s eyes, I am sure?““DON’T!” bellowed Snape. “Gone…dead…”

“Is this remorse, Severus?”

“I wish…I wish I were dead…““And what use would that be to anyone?” said Dumbledore coldly. “If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear.”

Snape seemed to peer through a haze of pain, and Dumbledore’s words appeared to take a long time to reach him.

“What – what do you mean?”

“You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily’s son.”

“He does not need protection. The Dark Lord has gone – ”

“The Dark Lord will return, and Harry Potter will be in terrible danger when he does.”

There was a long pause, and slowly Snape regained control of himself, mastered his own breathing. At last he said, “Very well. Very well. But never – never tell, Dumbledore! This must be between us! Swear it! I cannot bear…especially Potter’s son…I want your word!”

“My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you?” Dumbledore sighed, looking down into Snape’s ferocious, anguished face. “If you insist…”

The office dissolved but re-formed instantly. Snape was pacing up and down in front of Dumbledore.

“ – mediocre, arrogant as his father, a determined rule-breaker, delighted to find himself famous, attention-seeking and impertinent – ”

“You see what you expect to see, Severus,“ said Dumbledore, without raising his eyes from a copy of Transfiguration Today. ”Other teachers report that the boy is modest, likable, and reasonably talented. Personally, I find him an engaging child.“Dumbledore turned a page, and said, without looking up, “Keep an eye on Quirrell, won’t you?”

A whirl of color, and now everything darkened, and Snape and Dumbledore stood a little apart in the entrance hall, while the last stragglers from the Yule Ball passed them on their way to bed.

“Well?” murmured Dumbledore.

“Karkaroff’s Mark is becoming darker too. He is panicking, he fears retribution; you know how much help he gave the Ministry after the

Dark Lord fell.” Snape looked sideways at Dumbledore’s crooked-nosed profile. “Karkaroff intends to flee if the Mark burns.”

“Does he?” said Dumbledore softly, as Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies came giggling in from the grounds. “And are you tempted to join him?”

“No,“ said Snape, his black eyes on Fleur’s and Roger’s retreating figures. “I am not such a coward.”

“No,” agreed Dumbledore. “You are a braver man by far than Igor Karkaroff. You know, I sometimes think we Sort too soon…”

He walked away, leaving Snape looking stricken…And now Harry stood in the headmaster’s office yet again. It was nighttime, and Dumbledore sagged sideways in the thronelike chair behind the desk, apparently semiconscious. His right hand dangled over the side, blackened and burned. Snape was muttering incantations, pointing his wand at the wrist of the hand, while with his left hand he tipped a goblet full of thick golden potion down Dumbledore’s throat. After a moment or two, Dumbledore’s eyelids fluttered and opened.

“Why,“ said Snape, without preamble, “why did you put on that ring? It carries a curse, surely you realized that. Why even touch it?”

Marvolo Gaunt’s ring lay on the desk before Dumbledore. It was cracked; the sword of Gryffindor lay beside it.

Dumbledore grimaced.

“I…was a fool. Sorely tempted…”

“Tempted by what?”

Dumbledore did not answer.

“It is a miracle you managed to return here!“ Snape sounded furious. ”That ring carried a curse of extraordinary power, to contain it is all we can hope for; I have trapped the curse in one hand for the time being – “Dumbledore raised his blackened, useless hand, and examined it with the expression of one being shown an interesting curio.

“You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?”

Dumbledore’s tone was conversational; he might have been asking for a weather forecast. Snape hesitated, and then said, “I cannot tell. Maybe a year. There is no halting such a spell forever. It will spread eventually, it is the sort of curse that strengthens over time.”

Dumbledore smiled. The news that he had less than a year to live seemed a matter of little or no concern to him.

“I am fortunate, extremely fortunate, that I have you, Severus.”

“If you had only summoned me a little earlier, I might have been able to do more, buy you more time!” said Snape furiously. He looked down at the broken ring and the sword. “Did you think that breaking the ring would break the curse?”

“Something like that…I was delirious, no doubt…“ said Dumbledore. With an effort he straightened himself in his chair. ”Well, really, this makes matters much more straightforward.“Snape looked utterly perplexed. Dumbledore smiled.

“I refer to the plan Lord Voldemort is revolving around me. His plan to have the poor Malfoy boy murder me.”

Snape sat down in the chair Harry had so often occupied, across the desk from Dumbledore. Harry could tell that he wanted to say more on the subject of Dumbledore’s cursed hand, but the other held it up in polite refusal to discuss the matter further. Scowling, Snape said, “The Dark Lord does not expect Draco to succeed. This is merely

punishment for Lucius's recent failures. Slow torture for Draco's parents, while they watch him fail and pay the price."

"In short, the boy has had a death sentence pronounced upon him as surely as I have," said Dumbledore. "Now, I should have thought the natural successor to the job, once Draco fails, is yourself?"

There was a short pause.

"That, I think, is the Dark Lord's plan."

"Lord Voldemort foresees a moment in the near future when he will not need a spy at Hogwarts?"

"He believes the school will soon be in his grasp, yes."

"And if it does fall into his grasp," said Dumbledore, almost, it seemed, as an aside, "I have your word that you will do all in your power to protect the students at Hogwarts?"

Snape gave a stiff nod.

"Good. Now then. Your first priority will be to discover what Draco is up to. A frightened teenage boy is a danger to others as well as to himself. Offer him help and guidance, he ought to accept, he likes you – "

" – much less since his father has lost favor. Draco blames me, he thinks I have usurped Lucius's position."

"All the same, try. I am concerned less for myself than for accidental victims of whatever schemes might occur to the boy. Ultimately, of course, there is only one thing to be done if we are to save him from Lord Voldemort's wrath."Snape raised his eyebrows and his tone was sardonic as he asked, "Are you intending to let him kill you?"

“Certainly not. You must kill me.“There was a long silence, broken only by an odd clicking noise. Fawkes the phoenix was gnawing a bit of cuttlebone.

“Would you like me to do it now?“ asked Snape, his voice heavy with irony. ”Or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?““Oh, not quite yet,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “I daresay the moment will present itself in due course. Given what has happened tonight,” he indicated his withered hand, “we can be sure that it will happen within a year.”

“If you don’t mind dying,” said Snape roughly, “why not let Draco do it?”

“That boy’s soul is not yet so damaged,” said Dumbledore. “I would not have it ripped apart on my account.”

“And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?”

“You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation,” said Dumbledore. “I ask this one great favor of you, Severus, because death is coming for me as surely as the Chudley Cannons will finish bottom of this year’s league. I confess I should prefer a quick, painless exit to the protracted and messy affair it will be if, for instance, Greyback is involved – I hear Voldemort has recruited him? Or dear Bellatrix, who likes to play with her food before she eats it.”

His tone was light, but his blue eyes pierced Snape as they had frequently pierced Harry, as though the soul they discussed was visible to him. At last Snape gave another curt nod.

Dumbledore seemed satisfied.

“Thank you, Severus…”

The office disappeared, and now Snape and Dumbledore were strolling together in the deserted castle grounds by twilight.

“What are you doing with Potter, all these evenings you are closeted together?“ Snape asked abruptly.

Dumbledore looked weary.

“Why? You aren’t trying to give him more detentions, Severus? The boy will soon have spent more time in detention than out.““He is his father over again – ”

“In looks, perhaps, but his deepest nature is much more like his mother’s. I spend time with Harry because I have things to discuss with him, information I must give him before it is too late.”

“Information,” repeated Snape. “You trust him…you do not trust me.”

“It is not a question of trust. I have, as we both know, limited time. It is essential that I give the boy enough information for him to do what he needs to do.”

“And why may I not have the same information?”

“I prefer not to put all of my secrets in one basket, particularly not a basket that spends so much time dangling on the arm of Lord Voldemort.”

“Which I do on your orders!”

“And you do it extremely well. Do not think that I underestimate the constant danger in which you place yourself, Severus. To give Voldemort what appears to be valuable information while withholding the essentials is a job I would entrust to nobody but you.““Yet you confide much more in a boy who is incapable of Occlumency, whose magic is mediocre, and who has a direct connection into the Dark Lord’s mind!““Voldemort fears that connection,” said Dumbledore.

“Not so long ago he had one small taste of what truly sharing Harry’s mind means to him. It was pain such as he has never experienced. He will not try to possess Harry again, I am sure of it. Not in that way.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Lord Voldemort’s soul, maimed as it is, cannot bear close contact with a soul like Harry’s. Like a tongue on frozen steel, like flesh in flame – ““Souls? We were talking of minds!”

“In the case of Harry and Lord Voldemort, to speak of one is to speak of the other.”

Dumbledore glanced around to make sure that they were alone. They were close by the Forbidden Forest now, but there was no sign of anyone near them.

“After you have killed me, Severus – ”

“You refuse to tell me everything, yet you expect that small service of me!“ snarled Snape, and real anger flared in the thin face now. ”You take a great deal for granted, Dumbledore! Perhaps I have changed my mind!““You gave me your word, Severus. And while we are talking about services you owe me, I thought you agreed to keep a close eye on our young Slytherin friend?”

Snape looked angry, mutinous. Dumbledore sighed.

“Come to my office tonight, Severus, at eleven, and you shall not complain that I have no confidence in you…”

They were back in Dumbledore’s office, the windows dark, and Fawkes sat silent as Snape sat quite still, as Dumbledore walked around him, talking.

“Harry must not know, not until the last moment, not until it is necessary, otherwise how could he have the strength to do what

must be done?”

“But what must he do?”

“That is between Harry and me. Now listen closely, Severus. There will come a time – after my death – do not argue, do not interrupt! There will come a time when Lord Voldemort will seem to fear for the life of his snake.““For Nagini?” Snape looked astonished.

“Precisely. If there comes a time when Lord Voldemort stops sending that snake forth to do his bidding, but keeps it safe beside him under magical protection, then, I think, it will be safe to tell Harry.”

“Tell him what?”

Dumbledore took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“Tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the Killing Curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Voldemort’s soul was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself onto the only living soul left in that collapsed building. Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Harry, and it is that which gives him the power of speech with snakes, and a connection with Lord Voldemort’s mind that he has never understood. And while that fragment of soul, unmissed by Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die.“Harry seemed to be watching the two men from one end of a long tunnel, they were so far away from him, their voices echoing strangely in his ears.

“So the boy…the boy must die?” asked Snape quite calmly.

“And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential.”

Another long silence. Then Snape said, “I thought…all those years…that we were protecting him for her. For Lily.”

“We have protected him because it has been essential to teach him, to raise him, to let him try his strength,” said Dumbledore, his eyes still tight shut. “Meanwhile, the connection between them grows ever stronger, a parasitic growth. Sometimes I have thought he suspects it himself. If I know him, he will have arranged matters so that when he does set out to meet his death, it will truly mean the end of Voldemort.”

Dumbledore opened his eyes. Snape looked horrified.

“You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?““Don’t be shocked, Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?”

“Lately, only those whom I could not save,” said Snape. He stood up. “You have used me.”

“Meaning?”

“I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you. Everything was supposed to be to keep Lily Potter’s son safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter – ““But this is touching, Severus,” said Dumbledore seriously. “Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?”

“For him?“ shouted Snape. ”Expecto Patronum!“From the tip of his wand burst the silver doe. She landed on the office floor, bounded once across the office, and soared out of the window. Dumbledore watched her fly away, and as her silvery glow faded he turned back to Snape, and his eyes were full of tears.

“After all this time?”

“Always,” said Snape.

And the scene shifted. Now, Harry saw Snape talking to the portrait of Dumbledore behind his desk.

“You will have to give Voldemort the correct date of Harry’s departure from his aunt and uncle’s,“ said Dumbledore. ”Not to do so will raise suspicion, when Voldemort believes you so well informed. However, you must plant the idea of decoys; that, I think, ought to ensure Harry’s safety. Try Confunding Mundungus Fletcher. And Severus, if you are forced to take part in the chase, be sure to act your part convincingly…I am counting upon you to remain in Lord Voldemort’s good books as long as possible, or Hogwarts will be left to the mercy of the Carrows…“Now Snape was head to head with Mundungus in an unfamiliar tavern, Mundungus’s face looking curiously blank, Snape frowning in concentration.

“You will suggest to the Order of the Phoenix,“ Snape murmured, ”that they use decoys. Polyjuice Potion. Identical Potters. It’s the only thing that might work. You will forget that I have suggested this. You will present it as your own idea. You understand?““I understand,” murmured Mundungus, his eyes unfocused…Now Harry was flying alongside Snape on a broomstick through a clear dark night: He was accompanied by other hodded Death Eaters, and ahead were Lupin and a Harry who was really George… A Death Eater moved ahead of Snape and raised his wand, pointing it directly at Lupin’s back.

“Sectumsempra!“ shouted Snape.

But the spell, intended for the Death Eater’s wand hand, missed and hit George instead –And next, Snape was kneeling in Sirius’s old bedroom. Tears were dripping from the end of his hooked nose as he read the old letter from Lily. The second page carried only a few words: could ever have been friends with Gellert Grindelwald. I think her mind’s going, personally!

Lots of love, Lily

Snape took the page bearing Lily’s signature, and her love, and tucked it inside his robes. Then he ripped in two the photograph he was also holding, so that he kept the part from which Lily laughed,

throwing the portion showing James and Harry back onto the floor, under the chest of drawers…And now Snape stood again in the headmaster's study as Phineas Nigellus came hurrying into his portrait.

"Headmaster! They are camping in the Forest of Dean! The Mudblood – "

"Do not use that word!"

" – the Granger girl, then, mentioned the place as she opened her bag and I heard her!"

"Good. Very good!" cried the portrait of Dumbledore behind the headmaster's chair. "Now, Severus, the sword! Do not forget that it must be taken under conditions of need and valor – and he must not know that you give it! If Voldemort should read Harry's mind and see you acting for him – "

"I know," said Snape curtly. He approached the portrait of Dumbledore and pulled at its side. It swung forward, revealing a hidden cavity behind it from which he took the sword of Gryffindor.

"And you still aren't going to tell me why it's so important to give Potter the sword?" said Snape as he swung a traveling cloak over his robes.

"No, I don't think so," said Dumbledore's portrait. "He will know what to do with it. And Severus, be very careful, they may not take kindly to your appearance after George Weasley's mishap – "

Snape turned at the door.

"Don't worry, Dumbledore," he said coolly. "I have a plan…"

And Snape left the room. Harry rose up out of the Pensieve, and moments later he lay on the carpeted floor in exactly the same rooms

Snape might just have closed the door.

Chapter 34 The Forest Again

Finally, the truth. Lying with his face pressed into the dusty carpet of the office where he had once thought he was learning the secrets of victory, Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive. His job was to walk calmly into Death's welcoming arms. Along the way, he was to dispose of Voldemort's remaining links to life, so that when at last he flung himself across Voldemort's path, and did not raise a wand to defend himself, the end would be clean, and the job that ought to have been done in Godric's Hollow would be finished. Neither would live, neither could survive.

He felt his heart pounding fiercely in his chest. How strange that in his dread of death, it pumped all the harder, valiantly keeping him alive. But it would have to stop, and soon. Its beats were numbered. How many would there be time for, as he rose and walked through the castle for the last time, out into the grounds and into the forest?

Terror washed over him as he lay on the floor, with that funeral drum pounding inside him. Would it hurt to die? All those times he had thought that it was about to happen and escaped, he had never really thought of the thing itself: His will to live had always been so much stronger than his fear of death. Yet it did not occur to him now to try to escape, to outrun Voldemort. It was over, he knew it, and all that was left was the thing itself: dying.

If he could only have died on that summer's night when he had left number four, Privet Drive, for the last time, when the noble phoenix feather wand had saved him! If he could only have died like Hedwig, so quickly he would not have known it had happened! Or if he could have launched himself in front of a wand to save someone he loved… He envied even his parents' deaths now. This cold-blooded walk to his own destruction would require a different kind of bravery. He felt his fingers trembling slightly and made an effort to control them,

although no one could see him; the portraits on the walls were all empty.

Slowly, very slowly, he sat up, and as he did so he felt more alive and more aware of his own living body than ever before. Why had he never appreciated what a miracle he was, brain and nerve and bounding heart? It would all be gone… or at least, he would be gone from it. His breath came slow and deep, and his mouth and throat were completely dry, but so were his eyes.

Dumbledore's betrayal was almost nothing. Of course there had been a bigger plan: Harry had simply been too foolish to see it, he realized that now. He had never questioned his own assumption that Dumbledore wanted him alive. Now he saw that his life span had always been determined by how long it took to eliminate all the Horcruxes. Dumbledore had passed the job of destroying them to him, and obediently he had continued to chip away at the bonds tying not only Voldemort, but himself, to life! How neat, how elegant, not to waste any more lives, but to give the dangerous task to the boy who had already been marked for slaughter, and whose death would not be a calamity, but another blow against Voldemort.

And Dumbledore had known that Harry would not duck out, that he would keep going to the end, even though it was his end, because he had taken trouble to get to know him, hadn't he? Dumbledore knew, as Voldemort knew, that Harry would not let anyone else die for him now that he had discovered it was in his power to stop it. The images of Fred, Lupin, and Tonks lying dead in the Great Hall forced their way back into his mind's eye, and for a moment he could hardly breathe. Death was impatient…But Dumbledore had overestimated him. He had failed: The snake survived. One Horcrux remained to bind Voldemort to the earth, even after Harry had been killed. True, that would mean an easier job for somebody. He wondered who would do it… Ron and Hermione would know what needed to be done, of course… That would have been why Dumbledore wanted him to confide in two others… so that if he fulfilled his true destiny a

little early, they could carry on…Like rain on a cold window, these thoughts pattered against the hard surface of the incontrovertible truth, which was that he must die. I must die. It must end.

Ron and Hermione seemed a long way away, in a far-off country; he felt as though he had parted from them long ago. There would be no good-byes and no explanations, he was determined of that. This was a journey they could not take together, and the attempts they would make to stop him would waste valuable time. He looked down at the battered gold watch he had received on his seventeenth birthday. Nearly half of the hour allotted by Voldemort for his surrender had elapsed.

He stood up. His heart was leaping against his ribs like a frantic bird. Perhaps it knew it had little time left, perhaps it was determined to fulfill a lifetime's beats before the end. He did not look back as he closed the office door.

The castle was empty. He felt ghostly striding through it alone, as if he had already died. The portrait people were still missing from their frames; the whole place was eerily still, as if all its remaining lifeblood were concentrated in the Great Hall where the dead and the mourners were crammed.

Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak over himself and descended through the floors, at last walking down the marble staircase into the entrance hall. Perhaps some tiny part of him hoped to be sensed, to be seen, to be stopped, but the Cloak was, as ever, impenetrable, perfect, and he reached the front doors easily.

Then Neville nearly walked into him. He was one half of a pair that was carrying a body in from the grounds. Harry glanced down and felt another dull blow to his stomach: Colon Creevey, though underage, must have sneaked back just as Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had done. He was tiny in death.

“You know what? I can manage him alone, Neville,” said Oliver Wood, and he heaved Colin over his shoulder in a fireman’s lift and carried him into the Great Hall.

Neville leaned against the door frame for a moment and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He looked like an old man. Then he set off on the steps again into the darkness to recover more bodies.

Harry took one glance back at the entrance of the Great Hall. People were moving around, trying to comfort each other, drinking, kneeling beside the dead, but he could not see any of the people he loved, no hint of Hermione, Ron, Ginny, or any of the other Weasleys, no Luna. He felt he would have given all the time remaining to him for just one last look at them; but then, would he ever have the strength to stop looking? It was better like this.

He moved down the steps and out into the darkness. It was nearly four in the morning, and the deathly stillness of the grounds felt as though they were holding their breath, waiting to see whether he could do what he must.

Harry moved toward Neville, who was bending over another body.

“Neville.”

“Blimey, Harry, you nearly gave me heart failure!”

Harry had pulled off the Cloak: The idea had come to him out of nowhere, born out of a desire to make absolutely sure.

“Where are you going, alone?” Neville asked suspiciously.

“It’s all part of the plan,” said Harry. “There’s something I’ve got to do. Listen –Neville –”

“Harry!” Neville looked suddenly scared. “Harry, you’re not thinking of handing yourself over?”

“No,” Harry lied easily. “‘Course not… this is something else. But I might be out of sight for a while. You know Voldemort’s snake. Neville? He’s got a huge snake… Calls it Nagini…”

“I’ve heard, yeah… What about it?”

“It’s got to be killed. Ron and Hermione know that, but just in case they –”

The awfulness of that possibility smothered him for a moment, made it impossible to keep talking. But he pulled himself together again: This was crucial, he must be like Dumbledore, keep a cool head, make sure there were backups, others to carry on. Dumbledore had died knowing that three people still knew about the Horcruxes; now Neville would take Harry’s place: There would still be three in the secret.

“Just in case they’re – busy – and you get the chance –”

“Kill the snake?”

“Kill the snake,” Harry repeated.

“All right, Harry. You’re okay, are you?”

“I’m fine. Thanks, Neville.”

But Neville seized his wrist as Harry made to move on.

“We’re all going to keep fighting, Harry. You know that?”

“Yeah, I –”

The suffocating feeling extinguished the end of the sentence; he could not go on. Neville did not seem to find it strange. He patted

Harry on the shoulder, released him, and walked away to look for more bodies.

Harry swung the Cloak back over himself and walked on. Someone else was moving not far away, stooping over another prone figure on the ground. He was feet away from her when he realized it was Ginny.

He stopped in his tracks. She was crouching over a girl who was whispering for her mother.

“It’s all right,” Ginny was saying. “It’s ok. We’re going to get you inside.”

“But I want to go home,“ whispered the girl. ”I don’t want to fight anymore!““I know,” said Ginny, and her voice broke. “It’s going to be all right.”

Ripples of cold undulated over Harry’s skin. He wanted to shout out to the night, he wanted Ginny to know that he was there, he wanted her to know where he was going. He wanted to be stopped, to be dragged back, to be sent back home….

But he was home. Hogwards was the first and best home he had known. He and Voldemort and Snape, the abandoned boys, had all found home here….

Ginny was kneeling beside the injured girl now, holding her hand. With a huge effort Harry forced himself on. He thought he saw Ginny look around as he passed, and wondered whether she had sensed someone walking nearby, but he did not speak, and he did not look back.

Hagrid’s hut loomed out of the darkness. There were no lights, no sound of Fang scrabbling at the door, his bark booming in welcome. All those visits to Hagrid, and the gleam of the copper kettle on the fire, and rock cakes and giant grubs, and his great bearded face, and

Ron vomiting slugs, and Hermione helping him save Norbert…He moved on, and now he reached the edge of the forest, and he stopped.

A swarm of dementors was gliding amongst the trees; he could feel their chill, and he was not sure he would be able to pass safely through it. He had not strength left for a Patronus. He could no longer control his own trembling. It was not, after all, so easy to die. Every second he breathed, the smell of the grass, the cool air on his face, was so precious: To think that people had years and years, time to waste, so much time it dragged, and he was clinging to each second. At the same time he thought that he would not be able to go on, and knew that he must. The long game was ended, the Snitch had been caught, it was time to leave the air….

The Snitch. His nerveless fingers fumbled for a moment with the pouch at his neck and he pulled it out.

I open at the close.

Breathing fast and hard, he stared down at it. Now that he wanted time to move as slowly as possible, he seemed to have sped up, and understanding was coming so fast it seemed to have bypassed though. This was the close. This was the moment.

He pressed the golden metal to his lips and whispered, “I am about to die.”

The metal shell broke open. He lowered his shaking hand, raised Draco’s wand beneath the Cloak, and murmured, “Lumos.”

The black stone with is jagged crack running down the center sat in the two halves of the Snitch. The Resurrection Stone had cracked down the vertical line representing the Elder Wand. The triangle and circle representing the Cloak and the stone were still discernible.

And again Harry understood without having to think. It did not matter about bringing them back, for he was about to join them. He was not really fetching them: They were fetching him.

He closed his eyes and turned the stone over in his hand three times.

He knew it had happened, because he heard slight movements around him that suggested frail bodies shifting their footing on the earthy, twig-strewn ground that marked the outer edge of the forest. He opened his eyes and looked around.

They were neither ghost nor truly flesh, he could see that. They resembled most closely the Riddle that had escaped from the diary so long ago, and he had been memory made nearly solid. Less substantial than living bodies, but much more than ghosts, they moved toward him. And on each face, there was the same loving smile.

James was exactly the same height as Harry. He was wearing the clothes in which he had died, and his hair was untidy and ruffled, and his glasses were a little lopsided, like Mr. Weasley's.

Sirius was tall and handsome, and younger by far than Harry had seen him in life. He loped with an easy grace, his hands in his pockets and a grin on his face.

Lupin was younger too, and much less shabby, and his hair was thicker and darker. He looked happy to be back in this familiar place, scene of so many adolescent wanderings.

Lily's smile was widest of all. She pushed her long hair back as she drew closer to him, and her green eyes, so like his, searched his face hungrily, as though she would never be able to look at him enough.

"You've been so brave."

He could not speak. His eyes feasted on her, and he thought that he would like to stand and look at her forever, and that would be enough.

"You are nearly there," said James. "Very close. We are… so proud of you."

"Does it hurt?"

The childish question had fallen from Harry's lips before he could stop it.

"Dying? Not at all," said Sirius. "Quicker and easier than falling asleep."

"And he will want it to be quick. He wants it over," said Lupin.

"I didn't want you to die," Harry said. These words came without his volition. "Any of you. I'm sorry –"

He addressed Lupin more than any of them, beseeching him.

"– right after you'd had your son… Remus, I'm sorry –"

"I am sorry too," said Lupin. "Sorry I will never know him… but he will know why I died and I hope he will understand. I was trying to make a world in which he could live a happier life."

A chilly breeze that seemed to emanate from the heart of the forest lifted the hair at Harry's brow. He knew that they would not tell him to go, that it would have to be his decision.

"You'll stay with me?"

"Until the very end," said James.

"They won't be able to see you?" asked Harry.

"We are part of you," said Sirius. "Invisible to anyone else."

Harry looked at his mother.

“Stay close to me,” he said quietly.

And he set of. The dementors’ chill did not overcome him; he passed through it with his companions, and they acted like Patronuses to him, and together they marched through the old trees that grew closely together, their branches tangled, their roots gnarled and twisted underfoot. Harry clutched the Cloak tightly around him in the darkness, traveling deeper and deeper into the forest, with no idea where exactly Voldemort was, but sure that he would find him. Beside him, making scarcely a sound, walked James, Sirius, Lupin, and Lily, and their presence was his courage, and the reason he was able to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

His body and mind felt oddly disconnected now, his limbs working without conscious instruction, as if he were passenger, not driver, in the body he was about to leave. The dead who walked beside him through the forest were much more real to him now than the living back at the castle: Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and all the others were the ones who felt like ghosts as he stumbled and slipped toward the end of his life, toward Voldemort…A thud and a whisper: Some other living creature had stirred close by. Harry stopped under the Cloak, peering around, listening, and his mother and father, Lupin and Sirius stopped too.

“Someone there,” came a rough whisper close at hand. “He’s got an Invisibility Cloak. Could it be –?”

Two figures emerged from behind a nearby tree: Their wands flared, and Harry saw Yaxley and Dolohov peering into the darkness, directly at the place Harry, his mother and father and Sirius and Lupin stood. Apparently they could not see anything.

“Definitely heard something,“ said Yaxley. ”Animal, d’you reckon?““That head case Hagrid kept a whole bunch of stuff in here,” said Dolohov, glancing over his shoulder.

Yaxley looked down at his watch.

“Time’s nearly up. Porter’s had his hour. He’s not coming.”

“Better go back,” said Yaxley. “Find out what the plan is now.”

He and Dolohov turned and walked deeper into the forest. Harry followed them, knowing that they would lead him exactly where he wanted to go. He glanced sideways, and his mother smiled at him, and his father nodded encouragement.

They had traveled on mere minutes when Harry saw light ahead, and Yaxley and Dolohov stepped out into a clearing that Harry knew had been the place where the monstrous Aragog had once lived. The remnants of his vast web were there still, but the swarms of descendants he had spawned had been driven out by the Death Eaters, to fight for their cause.

A fire burned in the middle of the clearing, and its flickering light fell over a crowd of completely silent, watchful Death Eaters. Some of them were still masked and hooded; others showed their faces. Two giants sat on the outskirts of the group, casting massive shadows over the scene, their faces cruel, rough-hewn like rock. Harry saw Fenrir, skulking, chewing his long nails; the great blond Rowle was dabbing at his bleeding lip. He saw Lucius Malfoy, who looked defeated and terrified, and Narcissa, whose eyes were sunken and full of apprehension.

Every eye was fixed upon Voldemort, who stood with his head bowed, and his white hands folded over the Elder Wand in front of him. He might have been praying, or else counting silently in his mind, and Harry, standing still on the edge of the scene, though absurdly of a child counting in a game of hide-and-seek. Behind his head, still swirling and coiling, the great snake Nagini floated in her glittering, charmed cage, like a monstrous halo.

When Dolohov and Yaxley rejoined the circle, Voldemort looked up.

“No sign of him, my Lord,” said Dolohov.

Voldemort’s expression did not change. The red eyes seemed to burn in the firelight. Slowly he drew the Elder Wand between his long fingers.

“My Lord –”

Bellatrix had spoken: She sat closest to Voldemort, disheveled, her face a little bloody but otherwise unharmed.

Voldemort raised his hand to silence her, and she did not speak another word, but eyed him in worshipful fascination.

“I thought he would come,” said Voldemort in his high, clear voice, his eyes on the leaping flames. “I expected him to come.”

Nobody spoke. They seemed as scared as Harry, whose heart was now throwing itself against his ribs as though determined to escape the body he was about to cast aside. His hands were sweating as he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and stuffed it beneath his robes, with his wand. He did not want to be tempted to fight.

“I was, it seems… mistaken,” said Voldemort.

“You weren’t.”

Harry said it as loudly as he could, with all the force he could muster: He did not want to sound afraid. The Resurrection Stone slipped from between his numb fingers, and out of the corner of his eyes he saw his parents, Sirius, and Lupin vanish as he stepped forward into the firelight. At that moment he felt that nobody mattered but Voldemort. It was just the two of them.

The illusion was gone as soon as it had come. The giants roared as the Death Eaters rose together, and there were many cries, gasps, even laughter. Voldemort had frozen where he stood, but his red eyes

had found Harry, and he stared as Harry moved toward him, with nothing but the fire between them.

Then a voice yelled: “HARRY! NO!”

He turned: Hagrid was bound and trussed, tied to a tree nearby. His massive body shook the branches overhead as he struggled, desperate.

“NO! NO! HARRY, WHAT’RE YEH –?”

“QUIET!” shouted Rowle, and with a flick of his wand, Hagrid was silenced.

Bellatrix, who had leapt to her feet, was looking eagerly from Voldemort to Harry, her breast heaving. The only things that moved were the flames and the snake, coiling and uncoiling in the glittering cage behind Voldemort’s head.

Harry could feel his wand against his chest, but he made no attempt to draw it. He knew that the snake was too well protected, knew that if he managed to point the wand at Nagini, fifty curses would hit him first. And still, Voldemort and Harry looked at each other, and now Voldemort tilted his head a little to the side, considering the boy standing before him, and a singularly mirthless smile curled the lipless mouth.

“Harry Potter,” he said very softly. His voice might have been part of the spitting fire. “The Boy Who Lived.”

None of the Death Eaters moved. They were waiting: Everything was waiting. Hagrid was struggling, and Bellatrix was panting, and Harry thought inexplicably of Ginny, and her blazing look, and the feel of her lips on his – Voldemort had raised his wand. His head was still tilted to one side, like a curious child, wondering what would happen if he proceeded. Harry looked back into the red eyes, and wanted it to happen now, quickly, while he could still stand, before he lost control,

before he betrayed fear –He saw the mouth move and a flash of green light, and everything was gone.

Chapter 35 King's Cross

He lay facedown, listening to the silence. He was perfectly alone. Nobody was watching. Nobody else was there. He was not perfectly sure that he was there himself.

A long time later, or maybe no time at all, it came to him that he must exist, must be more than disembodied thought, because he was lying, definitely lying, on some surface. Therefore he had a sense of touch, and the thing against which he lay existed too.

Almost as soon as he had reached this conclusion, Harry became conscious that he was naked. Convinced as he was of his total solitude, this did not concern him, but it did intrigue him slightly. He wondered whether, as he could feel, he would be able to see. In opening them, he discovered that he had eyes.

He lay in a bright mist, though it was not like mist he had ever experienced before. His surroundings were not hidden by cloudy vapor; rather the cloudy vapor had not yet formed into surroundings. The floor on which he lay seemed to be white, neither warm nor cold, but simply there, a flat, blank something on which to be.

He sat up. His body appeared unscathed. He touched his face. He was not wearing glasses anymore.

Then a noise reached him through the unformed nothingness that surrounded him: the small soft thumpings of something that flapped, flailed, and struggled. It was a pitiful noise, yet also slightly indecent. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he was eavesdropping on something furtive, shameful.

For the first time, he wished he were clothed.

Barely had the wish formed in his head than robes appeared a short distance away. He took them and pulled them on. They were soft,

clean, and warm. It was extraordinary how they had appeared just like that, the moment he had wanted them….

He stood up, looking around. Was he in some great Room of Requirement? The longer he looked, the more there was to see. A great domed glass roof glittered high above him in sunlight. Perhaps it was a palace. All was hushed and still, except for those odd thumping and whimpering noises coming from somewhere close by in the mist….

Harry turned slowly on the spot, and his surroundings seemed to invent themselves before his eyes. A wide-open space, bright and clean, a hall larger by far than the Great Hall, with that clear domed glass ceiling. It was quite empty. He was the only person there, except for – He recoiled. He had spotted the thing that was making the noises. It had the form of a small, naked child, curled on the ground, its skin raw and rough, flayed-looking, and it lay shuddering under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath.

He was afraid of it. Small and fragile and wounded though it was, he did not want to approach it. Nevertheless he drew slowly nearer, ready to jump back at any moment. Soon he stood near enough to touch it, yet he could not bring himself to do it. He felt like a coward. He ought to comfort it, but it repulsed him.

“You cannot help.”

He spun around. Albus Dumbledore was walking toward him, sprightly and upright, wearing sweeping robes of midnight blue.

“Harry.” He spread his arms wide, and his hands were both whole and white and undamaged. “You wonderful boy. You brave, brave man. Let us walk.”

Stunned, Harry followed as Dumbledore strode away from where the flayed child lay whimpering, leading him to two seats that Harry had

not previously noticed, set some distance away under that high, sparkling ceiling. Dumbledore sat down in one of them, and Harry fell into the other, staring at his old headmaster's face. Dumbledore's long silver hair and beard, the piercingly blue eyes behind half-moon spectacles, the crooked nose: Everything was as he had remembered it. And yet…"But you're dead," said Harry.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore matter-of-factly.

"Then… I'm dead too?"

"Ah," said Dumbledore, smiling still more broadly. "That is the question, isn't it? On the whole, dear boy, I think not."

They looked at each other, the old man still beaming.

"Not?" repeated Harry.

"Not," said Dumbledore.

"But…" Harry raised his hand instinctively toward the lightning scar. It did not seem to be there. "But I should have died – I didn't defend myself! I meant to let him kill me!"

"And that," said Dumbledore, "will, I think, have made all the difference."

Happiness seemed to radiate from Dumbledore like light; like fire: Harry had never seen the man so utterly, so palpably content.

"Explain," said Harry.

"But you already know," said Dumbledore. He twiddled his thumbs together.

"I let him kill me," said Harry. "Didn't I?"

"You did," said Dumbledore, nodding. "Go on!"

“So the part of his soul that was in me…”

Dumbledore nodded still more enthusiastically, urging Harry onward, a broad smile of encouragement on his face.

“… has it gone?”

“Oh yes!” said Dumbledore. “Yes, he destroyed it. Your soul is whole, and completely your own, Harry.”

“But then…”

Harry trembled over his shoulder to where the small, maimed creature trembled under the chair.

“What is that, Professor?”

“Something that is beyond either of our help,” said Dumbledore.

“But if Voldemort used the Killing Curse,” Harry started again, “and nobody died for me this time – how can I be alive?”

“I think you know,” said Dumbledore. “Think back. Remember what he did, in his ignorance, in his greed and his cruelty.”

Harry thought. He let his gaze drift over his surroundings. If it was indeed a palace in which they sat, it was an odd one, with chairs set in little rows and bits of railing here and there, and still, he and Dumbledore and the stunted creatures under the chair were the only beings there. Then the answer rose to his lips easily, without effort.

“He took my blood,” said Harry.

“Precisely!” said Dumbledore. “He took your blood and rebuilt his living body with it! Your blood in his veins, Harry, Lily’s protection inside both of you! He tethered you to life while he lives!”

"I live… while he lives? But I thought… I thought it was the other way around! I thought we both had to die? Or is it the same thing?"

He was distracted by the whimpering and thumping of the agonized creature behind them and glanced back at it yet again.

"Are you sure we can't do anything?"

"There is no help possible."

"Then explain… more," said Harry, and Dumbledore smiled.

"You were the seventh Horcrux, Harry, the Horcrux he never meant to make. He had rendered his soul so unstable that it broke apart when he committed those acts of unspeakable evil, the murder of your parents, the attempted killing of a child. But what escaped from that room was even less than he knew. He left more than his body behind. He left part of himself latched to you, the would-be victim who had survived."

"And his knowledge remained woefully incomplete, Harry! That which Voldemort does not value, he takes no trouble to comprehend. Of house-elves and children's tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. Nothing. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped."

"He took your blood believing it would strengthen him. He took into his body a tiny part of the enchantment your mother laid upon you when she died for you. His body keeps her sacrifice alive, and while that enchantment survives, so do you and so does Voldemort's one last hope for himself."

Dumbledore smiled at Harry, and Harry stared at him.

"And you knew this? You knew – all along?"

“I guessed. But my guesses have usually been good,” said Dumbledore happily, and they sat in silence for what seemed like a long time, while the creature behind them continued to whimper and tremble.

“There’s more,” said Harry. “There’s more to it. Why did my wand break the wand he borrowed?”

“As to that, I cannot be sure.”

“Have a guess, then,” said Harry, and Dumbledore laughed.

“What you must understand, Harry, is that you and Lord Voldemort have journeyed together into realms of magic hitherto unknown and untested. But here is what I think happened, and it is unprecedented, and no wandmaker could, I think, ever have predicted or explained it to Voldemort.”

“Without meaning to, as you now know, Lord Voldemort doubled the bond between you when he returned to a human form. A part of his soul was still attached to yours, and, thinking to strengthen himself, he took a part of your mother’s sacrifice into himself. If he could only have understood the precise and terrible power of that sacrifice, he would not, perhaps, have dared to touch your blood…. But then, if he had been able to understand, he could not be Lord Voldemort, and might never have murdered at all.”

“Having ensured this two-fold connection, having wrapped your destinies together more securely than ever two wizards were joined in history, Voldemort proceeded to attack you with a wand that shared a core with yours. And now something very strange happened, as we know. The cores reacted in a way that Lord Voldemort, who never knew that your wand was a twin of his, had ever expected.”

“He was more afraid than you were that night, Harry. You had accepted, even embraced, the possibility of death, something Lord Voldemort has never been able to do. Your courage won, your wand

overpowered his. And in doing so, something happened between those wands, something that echoed the relationship between their masters."

"I believe that your wand imbibed some of the power and qualities of Voldemort's wand that night, which is to say that it contained a little of Voldemort himself. So your wand recognized him when he pursued you, recognized a man who was both kin and mortal enemy, and it regurgitated some of his own magic against him, magic much more powerful than anything Lucius's wand had ever performed. Your wand now contained the power of your enormous courage and of Voldemort's own deadly skill: What chance did that poor stick of Lucius Malfoy's stand?"

"But if my wand was so powerful, how come Hermione was able to break it?" asked Harry.

"My dear boy, its remarkable effects were directed only at Voldemort, who had tampered so ill-advisedly with the deepest laws of magic. Only toward him was that wand abnormally powerful. Otherwise it was a wand like any other… though a good one, I am sure," Dumbledore finished kindly.

Harry sat in thought for a long time, or perhaps seconds. It was very hard to be sure of things like time, here.

"He killed me with your wand."

"He failed to kill you with my wand," Dumbledore corrected Harry. "I think we can agree that you are not dead – though, of course," he added, as if fearing he had been discourteous, "I do not minimize your sufferings, which I am sure were severe."

"I feel great at the moment, though," said Harry, looking down at his clean, unblemished hands. "Where are we, exactly?"

“Well, I was going to ask you that,” said Dumbledore, looking around. “Where would you say that we are?”

Until Dumbledore had asked, Harry had not known. Now, however, he found that he had an answer ready to give.

“It looks,” he said slowly, “like King’s Cross station. Except a lo cleaner and empty, and there are no trains as far as I can see.”

“King’s Cross station!” Dumbledore was chuckling immoderately. “Good gracious, really?”

“Well, where do you think we are?” asked Harry, a little defensively.

“My dear boy, I have no idea. This is, as they say, your party.”

Harry had no idea what this meant; Dumbledore was being infuriating. He glared at him, then remembered a much more pressing question than that of their current location.

“The Deathly Hallows,” he said, and he was glad to see that the words wiped the smile from Dumbledore’s face.

“Ah, yes,” he said. He even looked a little worried.

“Well?”

For the first time since Harry had met Dumbledore, he looked less than an old man, much less. He looked fleetingly like a small boy caught in wrongdoing.

“Can you forgive me?” he said. “Can you forgive me for not trusting you? For not telling you? Harry, I only feared that you would fail as I had failed. I only dreaded that you would make my mistakes. I crave your pardon, Harry. I have known, for some time now, that you are the better man.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Harry, startled by Dumbledore’s tone, by the sudden tears in his eyes.

“The Hallows, the Hallows,” murmured Dumbledore. “A desperate man’s dream!”

“But they’re real!”

“Real, and dangerous, and a lure for fools,” said Dumbledore. “And I was such a fool. But you know, don’t you? I have no secrets from you anymore. You know.”

“What do I know?”

Dumbledore turned his whole body to face Harry, and tears still sparkled in the brilliantly blue eyes.

“Master of death, Harry, master of Death! Was I better, ultimately, than Voldemort?”

“Of course you were,” said Harry. “Of course – how can you ask that? You never killed if you could avoid it!”

“True, true,” said Dumbledore, and he was like a child seeking reassurance. “Yet I too sought a way to conquer death, Harry.”

“Not the way he did,” said Harry. After all his anger at Dumbledore, how odd it was to sit here, beneath the high, vaulted ceiling, and defend Dumbledore from himself. “Hallows, not Horcruxes.”

“Hallows,” murmured Dumbledore, “not Horcruxes. Precisely.”

There was a pause. The creature behind them whimpered, but Harry no longer looked around.

“Grindelwald was looking for them too?” he asked.

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment and nodded.

"It was the thing, above all, that drew us together," he said quietly. "Two clever, arrogant boys with a shared obsession. He wanted to come to Godric's Hollow, as I am sure you have guessed, because of the grave of Ignotus Peverell. He wanted to explore the place the third brother had died."

"So it's true?" asked Harry. "All of it? The Peverell brothers – "

" – were the three brothers of the tale," said Dumbledore, nodding. "Oh yes, I think so. Whether they met Death on a lonely road… I think it more likely that the Peverell brothers were simply gifted, dangerous wizards who succeeded in creating those powerful objects. The story of them being Death's own Hallows seems to me the sort of legend that might have sprung up around such creations."

"The Cloak, as you know now, traveled down through the ages, father to son, mother to daughter, right down to Ignotus's last living descendant, who was born, as Ignotus was, in the village of Godric's Hollow."

Dumbledore smiled at Harry.

"Me?"

"You. You have guessed. I know, why the Cloak was in my possession on the night your parents died. James had showed it to me just a few days previously. It explained much of his undetected wrongdoing at school! I could hardly believe what I was seeing. I asked to borrow it, to examine it. I had long since given up my dream of uniting the Hallows, but I could not resist, could not help taking a closer look…. It was a Cloak the likes of which I had never seen, immensely old, perfect in every respect… and then your father died, and I had two Hallows at last, all to myself!"

His tone was unbearably bitter.

“The Cloak wouldn’t have helped them survive, though,” Harry said quickly. “Voldemort knew where my mum and dad were. The Cloak couldn’t have made them curse-proof.”

“True,” sighed Dumbledore. “True.”

Harry waited, but Dumbledore did not speak, so he prompted him.

“So you’d given up looking for the Hallows when you saw the Cloak?”

“Oh yes,” said Dumbledore faintly. It seemed that he forced himself to meet Harry’s eyes. “You know what happened. You know. You cannot despise me more than I despise myself.”

“But I don’t despise you – ”

“Then you should,” said Dumbledore. He drew a deep breath. “You know the secret of my sister’s ill health, what those Muggles did, what she became. You know how my poor father sought revenge, and paid the price, died In Azkaban. You know how my mother gave up her own life to care for Ariana.”

“I resented it, Harry.”

Dumbledore stated it baldly, coldly. He was looking now over the top of Harry’s head, into the distance.

“I was gifted, I was brilliant. I wanted to escape. I wanted to shine. I wanted glory.”

“Do not misunderstand me,” he said, and pain crossed the face so that he looked ancient again. “I loved them, I loved my parents, I loved my brother and my sister, but I was selfish, Harry, more selfish than you, who are a remarkably selfless person, could possibly imagine.”

“So that, when my mother died, and I was left the responsibility of a damaged sister and a wayward brother, I returned to my village in anger and bitterness. Trapped and wasted, I thought! And then of course, he came….”

Dumbledore looked directly into Harry’s eyes again.

“Grindelwald. You cannot imagine how his ideas caught me, Harry, inflamed me. Muggles forced into subservience. We wizards triumphant. Grindelwald and I, the glorious young leaders of the revolution.”

“Oh, I had a few scruples. I assuaged my conscience with empty words. It would all be for the greater good, and any harm done would be repaid a hundredfold in benefits for wizards. Did I know, in my heart of hearts, what Gellert Grindelwald was? I think I did, but I closed my eyes. If the plans we were making came to fruition, all my dreams would come true.”

“And at the heart of our schemes, the Deathly Hallows! How they fascinated him, how they fascinated both of us! The unbeatable wand, the weapon that would lead us to power! The Resurrection Stone – to him, though I pretended not to know it, it meant an army of Inferi! To me, I confess, it meant the return of my parents, and the lifting of all responsibility from my shoulders.”

“And the Cloak… somehow, we never discussed the Cloak much, Harry. Both of us could conceal ourselves well enough without the Cloak, the true magic of which, of course, is that it can be used to protect and shield others as well as its owner. I thought that, if we ever found it, it might be useful in hiding Ariana, but our interest in the Cloak was mainly that it completed the trio, for the legend said that the man who had united all three objects would then be truly master of death, which we took to mean ‘invincible.’”

“Invincible masters of death, Grindelwald and Dumbledore! Two months of insanity, of cruel dreams, and neglect of the only two

members of my family left to me."

"And then… you know what happened. Reality returned in the form of my rough, unlettered, and infinitely more admirable brother. I did not want to hear the truths he shouted at me. I did not want to hear that I could not set forth and seek Hallows with a fragile and unstable sister in tow."

"The argument became a fight. Grindelwald lost control. That which I had always sensed in him, though I pretended not to, now sprang into terrible being. And Ariana… after all my mother's care and caution… lay dead upon the floor."

Dumbledore gave a little gasp and began to cry in earnest. Harry reached out and was glad to find that he could touch him: He gripped his arm tightly and Dumbledore gradually regained control.

"Well, Grindelwald fled, as anyone but I could have predicted. He vanished, with his plans for seizing power, and his schemes for Muggle torture, and his dreams of the Deathly Hallows, dreams in which I had encouraged him and helped him. He ran, while I was left to bury my sister, and learn to live with my guilt and my terrible grief, the price of my shame."

"Years passed. There were rumors about him. They said he had procured a wand of immense power. I, meanwhile, was offered the post of Minister of Magic, not once, but several times. Naturally, I refused. I had learned that I was not to be trusted with power."

"But you'd have been better, much better, than Fudge or Scimgeour!" burst out Harry.

"Would I?" asked Dumbledore heavily. "I am not so sure. I had proven, as a very young man, that power was my weakness and my temptation. It is a curious thing, Harry, but perhaps those who are best suited to power are those who have never sought it. Those who, like you, have leadership thrust upon them, and take up the mantle

because they must, and find to their own surprise that they wear it well."

"I was safer at Hogwarts. I think I was a good teacher – "

"You were the best –"

"– you are very kind, Harry. But while I busied myself with the training of young wizards, Grindelwald was raising an army. They say he feared me, and perhaps he did, but less, I think, than I feared him."

"Oh, not death," said Dumbledore, in answer to Harry's questioning look. "Not what he could do to me magically. I knew that we were evenly matched, perhaps that I was a shade more skillful. It was the truth I feared. You see, I never knew which of us, in that last, horrific fight, had actually cast the curse that killed my sister. You may call me cowardly: You would be right, Harry. I dreaded beyond all things the knowledge that it had been I who brought about her death, not merely through my arrogance and stupidity, but that I actually struck the blow that snuffed out her life."

"I think he knew it, I think he knew what frightened me. I delayed meeting him until finally, it would have been too shameful to resist any longer. People were dying and he seemed unstoppable, and I had to do what I could."

"Well, you know what happened next. I won the duel. I won the wand."

Another silence. Harry did not ask whether Dumbledore had ever found out who struck Ariana dead. He did not want to know, and even less did he want Dumbledore to have to tell him. At last he knew what Dumbledore would have seen when he looked in the mirror of Erised, and why Dumbledore had been so understanding of the fascination it had exercised over Harry.

They sat in silence for a long time, and the whipmerings of the creature behind them barely disturbed Harry anymore.

At last he said, “Grindelwald tried to stop Voldemort going after the wand. He lied, you know, pretended he had never had it.”

Dumbledore nodded, looking down at his lap, tears still glittering on the crooked nose.

“They say he showed remorse in later years, alone in his cell at Nurmengard. I hope that is true. I would like to think that he did feel the horror and shame of what he had done. Perhaps that lie to Voldemort was his attempt to make amends… to prevent Voldemort from taking the Hallow…”

“…or maybe from breaking into your tomb?” suggested Harry, and Dumbledore dabbed his eyes.

After another short pause Harry said, “You tried to use the Resurrection Stone.”

Dumbledore nodded.

“When I discovered it, after all those years, buried in the abandoned home of the Gaunts – the Hallow I had craved most of all, though in my youth I had wanted it for very different reasons – I lost my head, Harry. I quite forgot that I was not a Horcrux, that the ring was sure to carry a curse. I picked it up, and I put it on, and for a second I imagined that I was about to see Ariana, and my mother, and my father, and to tell them how very, very sorry, I was….”

“I was such a fool, Harry. After all those years I had learned nothing. I was unworthy to unite the Deathly Hallows, I had proved it time and again, and here was final proof.”

“Why?” said Harry. “It was natural! You wanted to see them again. What’s wrong with that?”

“Maybe a man in a million could unite the Hallows, Harry. I was fit only to possess the meanest of them, the least extraordinary. I was fit

to own the Elder Wand, and not boast of it, and not to kill with it. I was permitted to tame and use it, because I took it, not for gain, but to save others from it."

"But the Cloak, I took out of vain curiousity, and so it could never have worked for me as it works for you, its true owners. The stone I would have used in an attempt to drag back those who are at peace, rather than enable my self-sacrifice, as you did. You are the worthy possessor of the Hallows."

Dumbledore patted Harry's hand, and Harry looked up at the old man and smiled; he could not help himself. How could he remain angry with Dumbledore now?

"Why did you have to make it so difficult?"

Dumbledore's smile was tremulous.

"I am afraid I counted on Miss Granger to slow you up, Harry. I was afraid that your hot head might dominate your good heart. I was scared that, if presented outright with the facts about those tempting objects, you might seize the Hallows as I did, at the wrong time, for the wrong reasons. If you laid hands on them, I wanted you to possess them safely. You are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying."

"And Voldemort never knew about the Hallows?"

"I do not think so, because he did not recognize the Resurrection Stone he turned into a Horcrux. But even if he had known about them, Harry. I doubt that he would have been interested in any except the first. He would not think that he needed the Cloak, and as for the stone, whom would he want to bring back from the dead? He fears the dead. He does not love."

“But you expected him to go after the wand?”

“I have been sure that he would try, ever since your wand beat Voldemort’s in the graveyard of Little Hangleton. At first, he was afraid that you had conquered him by superior skill. Once he had kidnapped Ollivander, however, he discovered the existence of the twin cores. He thought that explained everything. Yet the borrowed wand did no better against yours! So Voldemort, instead of asking himself what quality it was in you that had made your wand so strong, what gift you possessed that he did not, naturally set out to find the one wand that, they said, would beat any other. For him, the Elder Wand has become an obsession to rival his obsession with you. He believes that the Elder Wand removes his last weakness and makes him truly invincible. Poor Severus…”

“If you planned your death with Snape, you meant him to end up with the Elder Wand, didn’t you?”

“I admit that was my intention,” said Dumbledore, “but it did not work as I intended, did it?”

“No,” said Harry. “That bit didn’t work out.”

The creature behind them jerked and moaned, and Harry and Dumbledore sate without talking for the longest time yet. The realization of what would happen next settled gradually over Harry in the long minutes, like softly falling snow.

“I’ve got to go back, haven’t I?”

“That is up to you.”

“I’ve got a choice?”

“Oh yes,” Dumbledore smiled at him. “We are in King’s Cross you say? I think that if you decided not to go back, you would be able to… let’s say… board a train.”

“And where would it take me?”

“On,” said Dumbledore simply.

Silence again.

“Voldemort’s got the Elder Wand.”

“True. Voldemort has the Elder Wand.”

“But you want me to go back?”

“I think,” said Dumbledore, “that if you choose to return, there is a chance that he may be finished for good. I cannot promise it. But I know this, Harry, that you have less to fear from returning here than he does.”

Harry glanced again at the raw looking thing that trembled and choked in the shadow beneath the distant chair.

“Do not pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living, and above all, those who live without love. By returning, you may ensure that fewer souls are maimed, fewer families are torn apart. If that seems to you a worthy goal, they we saw good-bye for the present.”

Harry nodded and sighed. Leaving this place would not be nearly as hard as walking into the forest had been, but it was warm and light and peaceful here, and he knew that he was heading back to pain and the fear of more loss. He stood up, and Dumbledore did the same, and they looked for a long moment into each other’s faces.

“Tell me one last thing,” said Harry, “Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?”

Dumbledore beamed at him, and his voice sounded loud and strong in Harry’s ears even though the bright mist was descending again, obscuring his figure.

“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean it is not real?”

Chapter 36 The Flaw In The Plan

He was flying facedown on the ground again. The smell of the forest filled his nostrils. He could feel the cold hard ground beneath his cheek, and the hinge of his glasses which have been knocked sideways by the fall cutting into his temple. Every inch of him ached, and the place where Killing Curse had hit him felt like the bruise of an iron-clad punch. He did not stir, but he remained exactly where he had fallen, with his left arm bent out at an awkward angle and his mouth gaping.

He had expected to hear cheer of triumph and jubilation at his death, but instead hurried footsteps, whispers, and solicitous murmurs filled the air.

“My Lord… my Lord…”

It was Bellatrix’s voice, and she spoke as if to a lover. Harry did not dare open his eyes, but allowed his other senses to explore his predicament. He knew that his wand was still stowed beneath his robes because he could feel it pressed between his chest and the ground. A slight cushioning effect in the area of his stomach told him that the Invisibility Cloak was also there, stuffed out of sight.

“My Lord…”

“That will do,” said Voldemort’s voice.

More footsteps. Several people were backing away from the same spot. Desperate to see what was happening and why, Harry opened his eyes by a millimeter.

Voldemort seemed to be getting to his feet. Various Death Eaters were hurrying away from him, returning to the crowd lining the clearing. Bellatrix alone remained behind, kneeling beside Voldemort.

Harry closed his eyes again and considered what he had seen. The Death Eaters have been buddled around Voldemort, who seem to have fallen to the ground. Something had happened when he had hit Harry with the Killing Curse. Had Voldemort too collapsed? It seemed like it. And both of them had briefly fallen unconscious and both of them had now returned…"My Lord, let me –"

"I do not require assistance," said Voldemort coldly, and though he could not see it, Harry pictured Bellatrix withdrawing a helpful hand. "The boy… Is he dead?"

There was a complete silence in the clearing. Nobody approached Harry, but he felt their concentrated gaze; it seemed to press him harder into the ground, and he was terrified a finger or an eyelid might twitch.

"You," said Voldemort, and there was a bang and a small shriek of pain. "Examine him. Tell me whether he is dead."

Harry did not know who had been sent to verify. He could only lie there, with his heart thumping traitorously, and wait to be examined, but at the same time nothing, small comfort through it was, that Voldemort was wary of approaching him, that Voldemort suspected that all had not gone to plan….

Hands, softer than he had been expecting, touched Harry's face, and felt his heart. He could hear the woman's fast breathing, her pounding of life against his ribs.

"Is Draco alive? Is he in the castle?"

The whisper was barely audible, her lips were an inch from his ear, her head bent so low that her long hair shielded his face from the onlookers.

"Yes," he breathed back.

He felt the hand on his chest contract: her nails pierced him. Then it was withdrawn. She had sat up.

“He is dead!” Narcissa Malfoy called to the watchers.

And now they shouted, now they yelled in triumph and stamped their feet, and through his eyelids, Harry saw bursts of red and silver light shoot into the air in celebration.

Still feigning death on the ground, he understood. Narcissa knew that the only way she would be permitted to enter Hogwarts, and find her son, was as part of the conquering army. She no longer cared whether Voldemort won.

“You see?” screeched Voldemort over the tumult. “Harry Potter is dead by my hand, and no man alive can threaten me now! Watch! Crucio!”

Harry had been expecting it, knew his body would not be allowed to remain unsullied upon the forest floor; it must be subjected to humiliation to prove Voldemort’s victory. He was lifted into the air, and it took all his determination to remain limp, yet the pain he expected did not come. He was thrown once, twice, three times into the air. His glasses flew off and he felt his wand slide a little beneath his robes, but he kept himself floppy and lifeless, and when he fell to ground for the last time, the clearing echoed with jeers and shrieks of laughter.

“Now,” said Voldemort, “we go to the castle, and show them what has become of their hero. Who shall drag the body? No – Wait – ”

There was a fresh outbreak of laughter, and after a few moments Harry felt the ground trembling beneath him.

“You carry him,” Voldemort said. “He will be nice and visible in your arms, will he not? Pick up your little friend, Hagrid. And the glasses – put on the glasses – he must be recognizable – ”

Someone slammed Harry's glasses back onto his face with deliberate force, but the enormous hands that lifted him into the air were exceedingly gentle. Harry could feel Hagrid's arms trembling with the force of his heaving sobs; great tears splashed down upon him as Hagrid cradled Harry in his arms, and Harry did not dare, by movement or word, to intimate to Hagrid that all was not, yet, lost.

"Move," said Voldemort, and Hagrid stumbled forward, forcing his way through the close-growing trees, back through the forest.

Branches caught at Harry's hair and robes, but he lay quiescent, his mouth lolling open, his eyes shut, and in the darkness, while the Death Eaters coed all around them, and while Hagrid sobbed blindly, nobody looked to see whether a pulse beat in the exposed neck of Harry Potter….

The two giants crashed along behind the Death Eaters; Harry could hear trees creaking and falling as they passed; they made so much din that birds toes shrieking into the sky, and even the jeers of the Death Eaters were drowned. The victorious procession marched on toward the open ground, and after a while Harry could tell, by the lightening of the darkness through his closed eyelids, that the trees were beginning to thin.

"BANE!"

Hagrid's unexpected bellow nearly forced Harry's eyes open. "Happy now, are yeh, that yeh didn't fight, yeh cowardly bunch o' nags? Are yeh happy Harry Potter's – d-dead…?"

Hagrid could not continue, but broke down in fresh tears. Harry wondered how many centaurs were watching their procession pass; he dared not open his eyes to look. Some of the Death Eaters called insults at the centaurs as they left them behind. A little later, Harry sensed, by a freshening of the air, that they had reached the edge of the forest.

“Stop.”

Harry thought that Hagrid must have been forced to obey Voldemort’s command, because he lurched a little. And now a chill settled over them where they stood, and Harry heard the rasping breath of the dementors that patrolled the other trees. They would not affect him now.

The fact of his own survival burned inside him, a talisman against them, as though his father’s stag kept guardian in his heart.

Someone passed close by Harry, and he knew that it was Voldemort himself because he spoke a moment later, his voice magically magnified so that it swelled through the ground, crashing upon Harry’s eardrums.

“Harry Potter is dead. He was killed as he ran away, trying to save himself while you lay down your lives for him. We bring you his body as proof that your hero is gone.”

“The battle is won. You have lost half of your fighters. My Death Eaters outnumber you, and the Boy Who Lived is finished. There must be no more war. Anyone who continues to resist, man, woman or child, will be slaughtered, as will every member of their family. Come out of the castle now, kneel before me, and you shall be spared. Your parents and children, your brothers and sisters will live and be forgiven, and you will join me in the new world we shall build together.”

There was silence in the grounds and from the castle. Voldemort was so close to him that Harry did not dare open his eyes again.

“Come,” said Voldemort, and Harry heard him move ahead, and Hagrid was forced to follow. Now Harry opened his eyes a fraction, and saw Voldemort striding in front them, wearing the great snake Nagini around his shoulders, now free of her enchanted cage. But Harry had no possibility of extracting the wand concealed under his

robes without being noticed by the Death Eaters, who marched on the either side of them through the slowly lightening darkness….

“Harry,” sobbed Hagrid. “Oh, Harry… Harry…”

Harry shut his eyes tight again. He knew that they were approaching the castle and strained his ears to distinguish, above the gleeful voices of the Death Eaters and their tramping footsteps, signs of life from those within.

“Stop.”

The Death Eaters came to a halt; Harry heard them spreading out in a line facing the open front doors of the school. He could see, even though his closed lids, the reddish glow that meant light streamed upon him from the entrance hall. He waited. Any moment, the people for whom he had tried to die would see him, lying apparently dead, in Hagrid’s arms.

“NO!”

The scream was the more terrible because he had never expected or dreamed that Professor McGonagall could make such a sound. He heard another women laughing nearby, and knew that Bellatrix gloried in McGonagall’s despair. He squinted again for a single second and saw the open doorway filling with people, as the survivors of the battle came out onto the front steps to face their vanquishers and see the truth of Harry’s death for themselves. He saw Voldemort standing a little in front of him, stroking Nagini’s head with a single white finger. He closed his eyes again.

“No!”

“No!”

“Harry! HARRY!”

Ron's, Hermione's, and Ginny's voices were worse than McGonagall's; Harry wanted nothing more than to call back, yet he made himself lie silent, and their cries acted like a trigger; the crowd of survivors took up the cause, screaming and yelling abuse at the Death Eathers, until - "SILENCE!" cried Voldemort, and there was a bang and a flash of bright light, and silence was forced upon them all. "It is over! Set him down, Hagrid, at my feet, where he belongs!"

Harry felt himself lowered onto the grass.

"You see?" said Voldemort, and Harry felt him striding backward and forward right beside the place where he lay. "Harry Potter is dead! Do you understand now, deluded ones? He was nothing, ever, but a boy who relied on others to sacrifice themselves for him!"

"He beat you!" yelled Ron, and the charm broke, and the defenders of Hogwarts were shouting and screaming again until a second, more powerful bang extinguished their voices once more.

"He was killed while trying to sneak out of the castle grounds," said Voldemort, and there was a relish in his voice for the lie. "killed while trying to save himself – "

But Voldemort broke off: Harry heard a scuffle and a shout, then another bang, a flash of light, and grunt of pain; he opened his eyes an infinitesimal amount. Someone had broken free of the crowd and charged at Voldemort: Harry saw the figure hit the ground. Disarmed, Voldemort throwing the challenger's wand aside and laughing.

"And who is this?" he said in his soft snake's hiss. "Who has volunteered to demonstrate what happens to those who continue to fight when the battle is lost?"

Bellatrix gave a delighted laugh.

"It is Neville Longbottom, my Lord! The boy who has been giving the Carrows so much trouble! The son of the Aurors, remember?"

“Ah, yes, I remember,” said Voldemort, looking down at Neville, who was struggling back to his feet, unarmed and unprotected, standing in the no-man’s-land between the survivors and the Death Eaters. “But you are a pureblood, aren’t you, my brave boy?” Voldemort asked Neville, who stood facing him, his empty hands curled in fists.

“So what if I am?” said Neville loudly.

“You show spirit and bravery, and you come of noble stock. You will make a very valuable Death Eater. We need your kind, Neville Longbottom.”

“I’ll join you when hell freezes over,” said Neville. “Dumbledore’s Army!” he shouted, and there was an answering cheer from the crowd, whom Voldemort’s Silencing Charms seemed unable to hold.

“Very well,” said Voldemort, and Harry heard more danger in the silkiness of his voice than in the most powerful curse. “If that is your choice, Longbottom, we revert to the original plan. On your head,” he said quietly, “be it.”

Still watching through his lashes, Harry saw Voldemort wave his wand. Seconds later, out of one of the castle’s shattered windows, something that looked like a misshapen bird flew through the half light and landed in Voldemort’s hand. He shook the mildewed object by its pointed end and it dangled, empty and ragged: the Sorting Hat.

“There will be no more Sorting at Hogwarts School,” said Voldemort. “There will be no more Houses. The emblem, shield and colors of my noble ancestor, Salazar Slythering, will suffice everyone. Won’t they, Neville Longbottom?”

He pointed his wand at Neville, who grew rigid and still, then forced the hat onto Neville’s head, so that it slipped down below his eyes. There were movements from the watching crowd in front of the castle, and as one, the Death Eaters raised their wands, holding the fighters of Hogwarts at bay.

“Neville here is now going to demonstrate what happens to anyone foolish enough to continue to oppose me,” said Voldemort, and with a flick of his wand, he caused the Sorting Hat to burst into flames.

Screams split the dawn, and Neville was a flame, rooted to the spot, unable to move, and Harry could not bear it: He must act - And then many things happened at the same moment.

They heard uproar from the distant boundary of the school as what sounded like hundreds of people came swarming over the out-of-sight walls and pelted toward the castle, uttering loud war cries. At the same time, Grawp came lumbering around the side of the castle and yelled, “HAGGER!” His cry was answered by roars from Voldemort’s giants: They ran at Grawp like bull elephants making the earth quake. Then came hooves and the twangs of bows, and arrows were suddenly falling amongst the Death Eaters, who broke ranks, shouting their surprise. Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak from inside his robes, swung it over himself, and sprang to his feet, as Neville moved too.

In one swift, fluid motion, Neville broke free of the Body-Bind Curse upon him; the flaming hat fell off him and he drew from its depths something silver, with a glittering, rubied handle - The slash of the silver blade could not be heard over the roar of the oncoming crowd or the sounds of the clashing giants or of the stampeding centaurs, and yet, it seemed to draw every eye. With a single stroke Neville sliced off the great snake’s head, which spun high into the air, gleaming in the light flooding from the entrance hall, and Voldemort’s mouth was open in a scream of fury that nobody could hear, and the snake’s body thudded to the ground at his feet. –Hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, Harry cast a Shield Charm between Neville and Voldemort before the latter could raise his stamps of the battling giants, Hagrid’s yell came loudest of all.

“HARRY!” Hagrid shouted. “HARRY – WHERE’S HARRY?” Chaos reigned. The charging centaurs were scattering the Death Eaters,

everyone was feeling the giants' stamping feet, and nearer and nearer thundered the reinforcements that had come from who knew where; Harry saw great winged creatures soaring the heads of Voldemort's giants, thestrals and Buckbeak the hippogriff scratching at their eyes while Grawp punched and pummeled them and now the wizards, defenders of Hogwarts and Death Eaters alike were being forced back into the castle. Harry was shooting jinxes and curses at any Death Eater he could see, and they crumpled, not knowing what or who had hit them, and their bodies were trampled by the retreating crowd. Still hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, Harry was buffered into the entrance hall: He was searching for Voldemort and saw him across the room, firing spells from his wand as he backed into the Great Hall, still screaming instructions to his followers as he sent curses flying left and right; Harry cast more Shield Charms, and Voldemort's would-be victims. Seamus Finnigan and Hannah Abbott, darted past him into the Great Hall, where they joined the fight already flourishing inside it.

And now there were more, even more people storming up the front steps, and Harry saw Charlie Weasley overtaking Horace Slughorn, who was still wearing his emerald pajamas. They seemed to have returned at the head of what looked like the families and friends of every Hogwarts student who had remained to fight along with the shopkeeps and homeowners of Hogsmeade. The centaurs Bane, Ronan and Magorian burst into the hall with a great clatter of hooves, as behind Harry the door that led to the kitchens was blasted off its hinges.

The house-elves of Hogwarts swarmed into the entrance hall, screaming and waving carving knives and cleaver, and at their head, the locker of Regulus Black bouncing on his chest, was Kreacher, his bullfrog's voice audible even above this din: “Fight! Fight! Fight for my Master, defender of house-elves! Fight the Dark Lord, in the name of brave Regulus! Fight!”

They were hacking and stabbing at the ankles and shim of Death Eaters their tiny faces alive with malice, and everywhere Harry looked Death Eaters were folding under sheer weight of numbers, overcome by spells, dragging arrows from wounds, stabbed in the leg by elves, or else simply attempting to escape, but swallowed by the oncoming horde.

But it was not over yet: Harry sped between duelers, past a struggling prisoners, and into he Great Hall.

Voldemort was in the center of the battle, and he was striking and smiting al within reach. Harry could not get a clear shot, but fought his way nearer, still invisible, and the Great Hall became more and more crowded as everyone who could walk forced their way inside.

Harry saw Yaxley slammed to the floor by George and Lee Jordan, saw Dolohov fall with a scream at Flitwick's hands, saw Walden Macnair thrown across the room by Hagrid, hit the stone wall opposite, and slide unconscious to the ground. He saw Ron and Neville bringing down Fenrir Greyback. Aberforth Stunning Rookwood, Arthur and Percy flooting Thicknesse, and Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy running through the crowd, not even attempting to fight, screaming for their son.

Voldemort was now dueling McGonagall, Slughorn, Kingsley all at once, and there was a cold hatred in his face as they wove and ducked around him, unable to finish him - Bellatrix was still fighting too, fifty yards away from Voldemort, and like her master she dueled three at once: Hermione, Ginny and Luna, all battling their hardest, but Bellatrix was equal to them, and Harry's attention was diverted as a Killing Curse shot so close to Ginny that she missed death by an inch -

He changed course, running at Bellatrix rather than Voldemort, but before he had gone a few steps he was knocked sideways.

“NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!”

Mrs. Weasley threw off her cloak as she ran, freeing her arms, Bellatrix spun on the spot, roaring with laughter at the sight of the new challenger.

“OUT OF MY WAY!” shouted Mrs. Weasley to the three girls, and with a simple swipe of her wand she began to duel. Harry watched with terror and elation as Molly Weasley’s wand slashed and twisted, and Bellatrix Lestrange’s smile faltered and became a snarl. Jets of light flew from both wands, the floor around the witches’ feet became hot and cracked; both woman were fighting to kill.

“No!” Mrs. Weasley cried as a few students ran forward, trying to come to her aid. “Get back! Get back! She is mine!”

Hundreds of people now lined the walls, watching the two fights, Voldemort and his three opponents, Bellatrix and Molly, and Harry stood, invisible, torn between both, wanting to attack and yet to protect, unable to be sure that he would not hit the innocent.

“What will happen to your children when I’ve killed you?” taunted Bellatrix, as mad as her master, capering as Molly’s curses danced around her. “When Mummy’s gone the same way as Freddie?”

“You – will – never – touch – our – children – again!” screamed Mrs. Weasley.

Bellatrix laughed the same exhilarated laugh her cousin Sirius had given as he toppled backward through the veil, and suddenly Harry knew what was going to happen before it did.

Molly’s curse soared beneath Bellatrix’s constricted arm and hit her squarely in the chest, directly over her heart.

Bellatrix’s gloating smile froze, her eyes seemed to bulge: For the tiniest space of time she knew what had happened, and then she toppled, and the watching crowd roared, and Voldemord screamed.

Harry felt as though he turned into slow motion: he saw McGonagall, Kingsley and Slughorn blasted backward, flailing and writhing through the air, as Voldemort's fury at the fall of his last, best lieutenant exploded with the force of a bomb, Voldemort raised his wand and directed it at Molly Weasley.

"Protego!" roared Harry, and the Shield Charm expanded in the middle of the Hall, and Voldemort stared around for the source as Harry pulled off the Invisibility Cloak at last.

The yell of shock, the cheers, the screams on every side of: "Harry!"

"HE'S ALIVE!" were stifled at once. The crowd was afraid, and silence fell abruptly and completely as Voldemort and Harry looked at each other, and began, at the same moment, to circle each other.

"I don't want anyone else to help," Harry said loudly, and in the total silence his voice carried like a trumpet call. "It's got to be like this. It's got to be me."

Voldemort hissed.

"Potter doesn't mean that," he said, his red eyes wide. "This isn't how he works, is it? Who are you going to use as a shield today, Potter?"

"Nobody," said Harry simply. "There are no more Horcruxes. It's just you and me. Neither can live while the other survives, and one of us is about to leave for good…."

"One of us?" jeered Voldemort, and his whole body was taut and his red eyes stared, a snake that was about to strike. "You think it will be you, do you, the boy who has survived by accident, and because Dumbledore was pulling the strings?"

"Accident, was it, when my mother died to save me?" asked Harry. They were still moving sideways, both of them, in that perfect circle, maintaining the same distance from each other, and for Harry no face

existed but Voldemort's. "Accident, when I decided to fight in that graveyard? Accident, that I didn't defend myself tonight, and still survived, and returned to fight again?"

"Accidents!" screamed Voldemort, but still he did not strike, and the watching crowd was frozen as if Petrified, and of the hundreds in the Hall, nobody seemed to breathe but they two. "Accident and chance and the fact that you crouched and sniveled behind the skirts of greater men and women, and permitted me to kill them for you!"

"You won't be killing anyone else tonight," said Harry as they circled, and stared into each other's eyes, green into red. "You won't be able to kill any of them ever again. Don't you get it? I was ready to die to stop you from hurting these people – "

"But you did not!"

" – I meant to, and that's what did it. I've done what my mother did. They're protected from you. Haven't you noticed how none of the spells you put on them are binding? You can't torture them. You can't touch them. You don't learn from your mistakes, Riddle, do you?"

"You dare – "

"Yes, I dare," said Harry. "I know things you don't know, Tom Riddle. I know lots of important things that you don't. Want to hear some, before you make another big mistake?"

Voldemort did not speak, but prowled in a circle, and Harry knew that he kept him temporarily mesmerized at bay, held back by the faintest possibility that Harry might indeed know a final secret….

"Is it love again?" said Voldemort, his snake's face jeering. "Dumbledore favorite solution, love, which he claimed conquered death, though love did not stop him falling from the tower and breaking like and old waxwork? Love, which did not prevent me stamping out your Muddblood mother like a cockroach, Potter – and

nobody seems to love you enough to run forward this time and take my curse. So what will stop you dying now when I strike?”

“Just one thing,” said Harry, and still they circled each other, wrapped in each other, held apart by nothing but the last secret.

“If it is not love that will save you this time,” said Voldemort, “you must believe that you have magic that I do not, or else a weapon more powerful than mine?”

“I believe both,” said Harry, and he saw shock flit across the snakelike face, though it was instantly dispelled; Voldemort began to laugh, and the sound was more frightening than his screams; humorless and insane, it echoed around the silent Hall.

“You think you know more magic than I do?” he said. “Than I, than Lord Voldemort, who has performed magic that Dumbledore himself never dreamed of?”

“Oh he dreamed of it,” said Harry, “but he knew more than you, knew enough not to do what you’ve done.”

“You mean he was weak!” screamed Voldemort. “Too weak to dare, too weak to take what might have been his, what will be mine!”

“No, he was cleverer than you,” said Harry, “a better wizard, a better man.”

“I brought about the death of Albus Dumbledore!”

“You thought you did,” said Harry, “but you were wrong.”

For the first time, the watching crowd stirred as the hundreds of people around the walls drew breath as one.

“Dumbledore is dead!” Voldemort hurled the words at Harry as in the marble tomb in the grounds of this castle, “I have seen it, Potter, and

he will not return!”

“Yes, Dumbledore is dead,” said Harry calmly, “but you didn’t have him killed. He chose his own manner of dying, chose it months before he died, arranged the whole thing with the man you thought was your servant.”

“What childish dream is this?” said Voldemort, but still he did not strike, and his red eyes did not waver from Harry’s.

“Severus Snape wasn’t yours,” said Harry. “Snape was Dumbledore’s. Dumbledore’s from the moment you starting hunting down my mother. And you never realized it, because of the thing you can’t understand. You never saw Snape cast a Patronus, did you, Riddle?”

Voldemort did not answer. They continued to circle each other like wolves about to tear each other apart.

“Snape’s Patronus was a doe,” said Harry, “the same as my mother’s, because he loved her for nearly all of his life, from the time when they were children. You should have realized,” he said as he saw Voldemort’s nostrils flare, “he asked you to spare her life, didn’t he?”

“He desired her, that was all,” sneered Voldemort, “but when she had gone, he agreed that there were other women, and of purer blood, worthier of him – ”

“Of course he told you that,” said Harry, “but he was Dumbledore’s spy from the moment you threatened her, and he’s been working against you ever since! Dumbledore was already dying when Snape finished him!”

“It matters not!” shrieked Voldemort, who had followed every word with rapt attention, but now let out a cackle of mad laughter. “It matters not whether Snape was mine or Dumbledore’s, or what petty obstacles they tried to put in my path! I crushed them as I crushed

your mother, Snape's supposed great love! Oh, but it all makes sense, Potter, and in ways that you do not understand!"

"Dumbledore was trying to keep the Elder Wand from me! He intended that Snape should be the true master of the wand! But I got there ahead of you, little boy – I reached the wand before you could get your hands on it, I understood the truth before you caught up. I killed Severus Snape three hours ago, and the Elder Wand, the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny is truly mine! Dumbledore's last plan went wrong, Harry Potter!"

"Yeah, it did." said Harry. "You're right. But before you try to kill me, I'd advise you think what you've done…. Think, and try for some remorse, Riddle…."

"What is this?"

Of all the things that Harry had said to him, beyond any revelation or taunt, nothing had socked Voldemort like this. Harry saw is pupils contract to thin slits, saw the skin around his eyes whiten.

"It's your one last chance," said Harry, "it's all you've got left…. I've seen what you'll be otherwise…. Be a man… try…Try for some remorse….“

"You dare –?" said Voldemort again.

"Yes, I dare," said Harry, "because Dumbledore's last plan hasn't backfired on me at all. It's backfired on you, Riddle."

Voldemort's hand was trembling on the Elder Wand, and Harry gripped Draco's very tightly. The moment, he knew, was seconds away.

"That wand still isn't working properly for you because you murdered the wrong person. Severus Snape was never the true master of the Elder Wand. He never defeated Dumbledore."

"He killed – "

"Aren't you listening? Snape never beat Dumbledore! Dumbledore's death was planned between them! Dumbledore intended to die, undefeated, the wand's last true master! If all had gone as planned, the wand's power would have died with him, because it had never been won from him!"

"But then, Potter, Dumbledore as good as gave me the wand!" Voldemort's voice shook with malicious pleasure. "I stole the wand from its last master's tomb! I removed it against the last master's wishes! Its power is mine!"

"You still don't get it, Riddle, do you? Possessing the wand isn't enough! Holding it, using it, doesn't make it really yours. Didn't you listen to Ollivander? The wand chooses the wizard… The Elder Wand recognized a new master before Dumbledore died, someone who never even laid a hand on it. The new master removed the wand from Dumbledore against his will, never realizing exactly what he had done, or that the world's most dangerous wand had given him its allegiance…"

Voldemort's chest rose and fell rapidly, and Harry could feel the curse coming, feel it building inside the wand pointed at his face.

"The true master of the Elder Wand was Draco Malfoy."

Blank shock showed in Voldemort's face for a moment, but then it was gone.

"But what does it matter?" he said softly. "Even if you are right, Potter, it makes no difference to you and me. You no longer have the phoenix wand: We duel on skill alone… and after I have killed you, I can attend to Draco Malfoy…"

"But you're too late," said Harry. "You've missed your chance. I got there first. I overpowered Draco weeks ago. I took his wand from

him."

Harry twitched the hawthorn wand, and he felt the eyes of everyone in the Hall upon it.

"So it all comes down to this, doesn't it?" whispered Harry. "Does the wand in your hand know its last master was Disarmed? Because if it does… I am the true master of the Elder Wand."

A red-glow burst suddenly across the enchanted sky above them as an edge of dazzling sun appeared over the sill of the nearest window. The light hit both of their faces at the same time, so that Voldemort's was suddenly a flaming blur. Harry heard the high voice shriek as he too yelled his best hope to the heavens, pointing Draco's wand:"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

The bang was like a cannon blast, and the golden flames that erupted between them, at the dead center of the circle they had been treading, marked the point where the spells collided. Harry saw Voldemort's green jet meet his own spell, saw the Elder Wand fly high, dark against the sunrise, spinning across the enchanted ceiling like the head of Nagini, spinning through the air toward the master it would not kill, who had come to take full possession of it at last. And Harry, with the unerring skill of the Seeker, caught the wand in his free hand as Voldemort fell backward, arms splayed, the slit pupils of the scarlet eyes rolling upward. Tom Riddle hit the floor with a mundane finality, his body feeble and shrunken, the white hands empty, the snakelike face vacant and unknowing. Voldemort was dead, killed by his own rebounding curse, and Harry stood with two wands in his hand, staring down at his enemy's shell.

One shivering second of silence, the shock of the moment suspended: and then the tumult broke around Harry as the screams and the cheers and the roars of the watchers rent the air. The fierce new sun dazzled the windows as they thundered toward him, and the

first to reach him were Ron and Hermione, and it was their arms that were wrapped around him, their incomprehensible shouts that deafened him. Then Ginny, Neville, and Luna were there, and then all the Weasleys and Hagrid, and Kingsley and McGonagall and Flitwick and Sprout, and Harry could not hear a word that anyone was shouting, not tell whose hands were seizing him, pulling him, trying to hug some part of him, hundreds of them pressing in, all of them determined to touch the Boy Who Lived, the reason it was over at last – The sun rose steadily over Hogwarts, and the Great Hall blazed with life and light. Harry was an indispensable part of the mingled outpourings of jubilation and mourning, of grief and celebration. They wanted him there with them, their leader and symbol, their savior and their guide, and that he had not slept, that he craved the company of only a few of them, seemed to occur to no one. He must speak to the bereaved, clasp their hands, witness their tears, receive their thanks, hear the news now creeping in from every quarter as the morning drew on; that the Imperiused up and down the country had come back to themselves, that Death Eaters were fleeing or else being captured, that the innocent of Azkaban were being released at that very moment, and that Kingsley Shacklebolt had been named temporary Minister of Magic.

They moved Voldemort's body and laid it in a chamber off the Hall, away form the bodies of Fred, Tonks, Lupin, Colin Creevey, and fifty others who had died fighting him. McGonagall had replaced the House tables, but nobody was sitting according to House anymore: All were jumbled together, teachers and pupils, ghosts and parents, centaurs and house-elves, and Firenze lay recovering in the corner, and Grawp peered in through a smashed window, and people were throwing food into his laughing mouth. After a while, exhausted and drained, Harry found himself sitting on a bench beside Luna.

“I'd want some peace and quiet, if it were me,” she said.

“I'd love some,” he replied.

“I’ll distract them all,” she said. “Use your cloak.”

And before he could say a word, she had cried, “Oooh, look, a Blibbering Humdinger!” and pointed out the window. Everyone who heard looked around, and Harry slid the Cloak up over himself, and got to his feet.

Now he could move through the Hall without interference. He spotted Ginny two tables away; she was sitting with her head on her mother’s shoulder: There would be time to talk later, hours and days and maybe years in which to talk. He saw Neville, the sword of Gryffindor lying beside his plate as he ate, surrounded by a knot of fervent admirers. Along the aisle between the tables he walked, and he spotted the three Malfoys, huddled together as though unsure whether or not they were supposed to be there, but nobody was paying them any attention. Everywhere he looked, he saw families reunited, and finally, he saw the two whose company he craved most.

“It’s me,” he muttered, crouching down between them. “Will you come with me?”

They stood up at once, and together he, Ron and Hermione left the Great Hall. Great chunks were missing from the marble staircase, part of the balustrade gone, and rubble and bloodstains occurred ever few steps as their climbed.

Somewhere in the distance they could hear Peeves zooming through the corridors singing a victory song of his own composition:We did it, we bashed them, wee Potter’s the one,And Voldy’s gone moldy, so now let’s have fun!

“Really gives a feeling for the scope and tragedy of the thing, doesn’t it?“ said Ron, pushing open a door to let Harry and Hermione through.

Happiness would come, Harry though, but at the moment it was muffled by exhaustion, and the pain of losing Fred and Lupin and Tonks pierced him like a physical wound every few steps. Most of all

he felt the most stupendous relief, and a longing to sleep. But first he owed an explanation to Ron and Hermione, who had stuck with him for so long, and who deserved the truth.

Painstakingly he recounted what he had seem in the Pensieve and what had happened in the forest, and they had not even begun to express all their shock and amazement, when at last they arrived at the place to which they had been walking, though none of them had mentioned their destination.

Since he had last seen it, the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the headmaster's study had been knocked aside; it stood lopsided, looking a little punch-drunk, and Harry wondered whether it would be able to distinguish passwords anymore.

"Can we go up?" he asked the gargoyle.

"Feel free," groaned the statue.

They clambered over him and onto the spiral stone staircase that moved slowly upward like an escalator. Harry pushed open the door at the top.

He had one, brief glimpse of the stone Pensieve on the desk where he had left it, and then an earsplitting noise made him cry out, thinking of curses and returning Death Eaters and the rebirth of Voldemort –But it was applause. All around the walls, the headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts were giving him a standing ovation; they waved their hats and in some cases their wigs, they reached through their frames to grip each other's hands; they danced up and down on their chairs in which they have been painted: Dilys Derwent sobbed unashamedly; Dexter Fortescue was waving his ear-trumpet; and Phineas Niggelus called, in his high, reedy voice, "And let it be noted that Slytherin House played its part! Let our contribution not be forgotten!"

But Harry had eyes only for the man who stood in the largest portrait directly behind the headmaster's chair. Tears were sliding down from behind the half-moon spectacles into the long silver beard, and the pride and the gratitude emanating from him filled Harry with the same balm as phoenix song.

At last, Harry held up his hands, and the portraits fell respectfully silent, beaming and mopping their eyes and waiting eagerly for him to speak. He directed his words at Dumbledore, however, and chose them with enormous care. Exhausted and bleary-eyed though he was, he must make one last effort, seeking one last piece of advice.

"The thing that was hidden in the Snitch," he began, "I dropped it in the forest. I don't know exactly where, but I'm not going to go looking for it again. Do you agree?"

"My dear boy, I do," said Dumbledore, while his fellow pictures looked confused and curious. "A wise and courageous decision, but no less than I would have expected of you. Does anyone know else know where it fell?"

"No one," said Harry, and Dumbledore nodded his satisfaction.

"I'm going to keep Ignotus's present, though," said Harry, and Dumbledore beamed.

"But of course, Harry, it is yours forever, until you pass it on!"

"And then there's this."

Harry held up the Elder Wand, and Ron and Hermione looked at it with a reverence that, even in his befuddled and sleep-deprived state, Harry did not like to see.

"I don't want it." said Harry.

"What?" said Ron loudly. "Are you mental?"

“I know it’s powerful,” said Harry wearily. “But I was happier with mine. So…”

He rummaged in the pouch hung around his neck, and pulled out the two halves of holly still just connected by the finest threat of phoenix feather. Hermione had said that they could not be repaired, that the damage was too severe. All he knew was that if this did not work, nothing would.

He laid the broken wand upon the headmaster’s desk, touched it with the very tip of the Elder Wand, and said, “Reparo.”

As his wand resealed, red sparks flew out of its end. Harry knew that he had succeeded. He picked up the holly and phoenix wand and felt a sudden warmth in his fingers, as though wand and hand were rejoicing at their reunion.

“I’m putting the Elder Wand,” he told Dumbledore, who was watching him with enormous affection and admiration, “back where it came from. It can stay there. If I die a natural death like Ignotus, its power will be broken, won’t it? The previous master will never have been defeated. That’ll be the end of it.”

Dumbledore nodded. They smiled at each other.

“Are you sure?” said Ron. There was the faintest trace of longing in his voice as he looked at the Elder Wand.

“I think Harry’s right,” said Hermione quietly.

“That wand’s more trouble than it’s worth.” said Harry. “And quite honestly,” he turned away from the painted portraits, thinking now only of the four-poster bed lying waiting for him in Gryffindor Tower, and wondering whether Kreacher might bring him a sandwich there, “I’ve had enough trouble for a lifetime.”

Chapter 37 Epilogue Nineteen Years Later

Autumn seemed to arrive suddenly that year. The morning of the first of September was crisp as an apple, and as the little family bobbed across the rumbling road toward the great sooty station, the fumes of car exhausts and the breath of pedestrians sparkled like cobwebs in the cold air. Two large cages tattled on top of the laden trolleys the parents were pushing; the owls inside them hooted indignantly, and the redheaded girl trailed fearfully behind here brothers, clutching her father's arm.

"It won't be long, and you'll be going too," Harry told her.

"Two years," sniffed Lily. "I want to go now!"

The commuters stared curiously at the owls as the family wove its way toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten, Albus's voice drifted back to Harry over the surrounding clamor; his sons had resumed the argument they had started in the car.

"I won't! I won't be a Slytherin!"

"James, give it a rest!" said Ginny.

"I only said he might be," said James, grinning at his younger brother. "There's nothing wrong with that. He might be in Slytherin"

But James caught his mother's eye and fell silent. The five Potters approached the barrier. With a slightly cocky look over his shoulder at his younger brother, James took the trolley from his mother and broke into a run. A moment later, he had vanished.

"You'll write to me, won't you?" Albus asked his parents immediately, capitalizing on the momentary absence of his brother.

"Every day, if you want us to," said Ginny.

"Not every day," said Albus quickly, "James says most people only get letters from home about once a month."

"We wrote to James three times a week last year," said Ginny.

"And you don't want to believe everything he tells you about Hogwarts," Harry put in. "He likes a laugh, your brother."

Side by side, they pushed the second trolley forward, gathering speed. As they reached the barrier, Albus winced, but no collision came. Instead, the family emerged onto platform nine and three-quarters, which was obscured by thick white steam that was pouring from the scarlet Hogwarts Express. Indistinct figures were swarming through the mist, into which James had already disappeared.

"Where are they?" asked Albus anxiously, peering at the hazy forms they passed as they made their way down the platform.

"We'll find them," said Ginny reassuringly.

But the vapor was dense, and it was difficult to make out anybody's faces. Detached from their owners, voices sounded unnaturally loud, Harry thought he head Percy discoursing loudly on broomstick regulations, and was quite glad of the excuse not to stop and say hello….

"I think that's them, Al," said Ginny suddenly.

A group of four people emerged from the mist, standing alongside the very last carriage. Their faces only came into focus when Harry, Ginny, Lily, and Albus had drawn right up to them.

"Hi," said Albus, sounding immensely relieved.

Rose, who was already wearing her brand-new Hogwarts robes, beamed at him.

“Parked all right, then?” Ron asked Harry. “I did. Hermione didn’t believe I could pass a Muggle driving test, did you? She thought I’d have to Confound the examiner.”

“No, I didn’t,” said Hermione, “I had complete faith in you.”

“As a matter of fact, I did Confund him,” Ron whispered to Harry, as together they lifted Albus’s trunk and owl onto the train. “I only forgot to look in the wing mirror, and let’s face it, I can use a Supersensory Charm for that.”

Back on the platform, they found Lily and Hugo, Rose’s younger brother, having an animated discussion about which House they would be sorted into when they finally went to Hogwarts.

“If you’re not in Gryffindor, we’ll disinherit you,” said Ron, “but no pressure.”

“Ron!”

Lily and Hugo laughed, but Albus and Rose looked solemn.

“He doesn’t mean it,” said Hermione and Ginny, but Ron was no longer paying attention. Catching Harry’s eye, he nodded covertly to a point some fifty yards away. The steam had thinned for a moment, and three people stood in sharp relief against the shifting mist.

“Look who it is.”

Draco Malfoy was standing there with his wife and son, a dark coat buttoned up to his throat. His hair was receding somewhat, which emphasized the pointed chin. The new boy resembled Draco as much as Albus resembled Harry. Draco caught sight of Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny staring at him, nodded curtly, and turned away again.

“So that’s little Scorpius,” said Ron under his breath. “Make sure you beat him in every test, Rosie. Thank God you inherited your mother’s brains.”

“Ron, for heaven’s sake,” said Hermione, half stern, half amused. “Don’t try to turn them against each other before they’ve even started school!”

“You’re right, sorry,” said Ron, but unable to help himself, he added, “Don’t get too friendly with him, though, Rosie. Granddad Weasley would never forgive you if you married a pureblood.”

“Hey!”

James had reappeared; he had divested himself of his trunk, owl, and trolley, and was evidently bursting with news.

“Teddy’s back there,” he said breathlessly, pointing back over his shoulder into the billowing clouds of steam. “Just seen him! And guess what he’s doing? Snogging Victoire!”

He gazed up at the adults, evidently disappointed by the lack of reaction.

“Our Teddy! Teddy Lupin! Snogging our Victoire! Our cousin! And I asked teddy what he was doing –”

“You interrupted them?” said Ginny. “You are so like Ron –”

“– and he said he’d come to see her off! And then he told me to go away. He’s snogging her!” James added as though worried he had not made himself clear.

“Oh, it would be lovely if they got married!” whispered Lily ecstatically. “Teddy would really be part of the family then!”

"He already comes round for dinner about four times a week," said Harry "Why don't we just invite him to live with us and have done with it?"

"Yeah!" said James enthusiastically. "I don't mind sharing with Al – Teddy could have my room!"

"No," said Harry firmly, "you and Al will share a room only when I want the house demolished."

He checked the battered old watch that had once been Fabian Prewett's.

"It's nearly eleven, you'd better get on board."

"Don't forget to give Neville our love!" Ginny told James as she hugged him.

"Mum! I can't give a professor love!"

"But you know Neville–"

James rolled his eyes.

"Outside, yeah, but at school he's Professor Longbottom, isn't he? I can't walk into Herbology and give him love…."

Shaking his head at his mother's foolishness, he vented his feelings by aiming a kick at Albus.

"See you later, Al. Watch out for the thestrals."

"I thought they were invisible? You said they were invisible!" but James merely laughed, permitted his mother to kiss him, gave his father a fleeting hug, then leapt onto the rapidly filling train. They saw him wave, then sprint away up the corridor to find his friends.

“Thestrals are nothing to worry about,” Harry told Albus. “They’re gentle things, there’s nothing scare about them. Anyway, you won’t be going up to school in the carriages, you’ll be going in the boats.”

Ginny kissed Albus good-bye.

“See you at Christmas.”

“Bye, Al,” said Harry as his son hugged him. “Don’t forget Hagrid’s invited you to tea next Friday. Don’t mess with Peeves. Don’t duel anyone till you’re learned how. And don’t let James wind you up.”

“What if I’m in Slytherin?”

The whisper was for his father alone, and Harry knew that only the moment of departure could have forced Albus to reveal how great and sincere that fear was.

Harry crouched down so that Albus’s face was slightly above his own. Alone of Harry’s three children, Albus had inherited Lily’s eyes.

“Albus Severus,” Harry said quietly, so that nobody but Ginny could hear, and she was tactful enough to pretend to be waving to Rose, who was now on the train, “you were named for two headmasters of Hogwarts. One of them was a Slytherin and he was probably the bravest man I ever knew.”

“But just say–”

“–then Slytherin House will have gained an excellent student, won’t it? It doesn’t matter to us, Al. But if it matter to you, you’ll be able to choose Gryffindor over Slytherin. The Sorting Hat takes your choice into account.”

“Really?”

“It did for me,” said Harry.

He had never told any of his children that before, and he saw the wonder in Albus's face when he said it. But how the doors were slamming all along the scarlet train, and the blurred outlines of parents swarming forward for final kisses, last-minute reminders, Albus jumped into the carriage and Ginny closed the door behind him. Students were hanging from the windows nearest them. A great number of faces, both on the train and off, seemed to be turned toward Harry.

"Why are they all staring?" demanded Albus as he and Rose craned around to look at the other students.

"Don't let it worry you," said Ron. "It's me, I'm extremely famous."

Albus, Rose, Hugo, and Lily laughed. The train began to more, and Harry walked alongside it, watching his son's thin face, already ablaze with excitement. Harry kept smiling and waving, even though it was like a little bereavement, watching his son glide away from him….

The last trace of steam evaporated in the autumn air. The train rounded a corner. Harry's hand was still raised in farewell.

"He'll be alright," murmured Ginny.

As Harry looked at her, he lowered his hand absentmindedly and touched the lightning scar on his forehead.

"I know he will."

The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well.

(THE END)

Table of Contents

Main Contents

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

- Chapter 1 The Boy Who Lived
- Chapter 2 The Vanishing Glass
- Chapter 3 The Letters From No One
- Chapter 4 The Keeper Of The Keys
- Chapter 5 Diagon Alley
- Chapter 6 The Journey from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters
- Chapter 7 The Sorting Hat
- Chapter 8 The Potions Master
- Chapter 9 The Midnight Duel
- Chapter 10 Halloween
- Chapter 11 Quidditch
- Chapter 12 The Mirror Of Erised
- Chapter 13 Nicholas Flamel
- Chapter 14 Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback
- Chapter 15 The Forbidden Forest

Chapter 16 Through the Trapdoor

Chapter 17 The Man With Two Faces

Harry Potter and The Chamber Of Secrets

Chapter 1 The Worst Birthday

Chapter 2 Dobby's Warning

Chapter 3 The Burrow

Chapter 4 At Flourish and Blotts

Chapter 5 The Whomping Willow

Chapter 6 Gilderoy Lockhart

Chapter 7 Mudbloods and Murmurs

Chapter 8 The Deathday Party

Chapter 9 The Writing on the Wall

Chapter 10 The Rogue Bludger

Chapter 11 The Dueling Club

Chapter 12 The Polyjuice Potion

Chapter 13 The Very Secret Diary

Chapter 14 Cornelius Fudge

Chapter 15 Aragog

Chapter 16 The Chamber of Secrets

Chapter 17 The Heir of Slytherin

Chapter 18 Dobby's Reward

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Chapter 1 Owl Post

Chapter 2 Aunt Marge's Big Mistake

Chapter 3 The Knight Bus

Chapter 4 The Leaky Cauldron

Chapter 5 The Dementor

Chapter 6 Talons and Tea Leaves

Chapter 7 The Boggart in the Wardrobe

Chapter 8 Flight of the Fat Lady

Chapter 9 Grim Defeat

Chapter 10 The Marauder's Map

Chapter 11 The Firebolt

Chapter 12 The Patronus

Chapter 13 Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw

Chapter 14 Snape's Grudge

Chapter 15 The Quidditch Final

Chapter 16 Professor Trelawney's Prediction

Chapter 17 Cat, Rat, and Dog

Chapter 18 Mooney, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs

Chapter 19 The Servant of Lord Voldemort

Chapter 20 The Dementor's Kiss

Chapter 21 Hermione's Secret

Chapter 22 Owl Post Again

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Chapter 1 The Riddle House

Chapter 2 The Scar

Chapter 3 The Invitation

Chapter 4 Back to the Burrow

Chapter 5 Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes

Chapter 6 The Portkey

Chapter 7 Bagman and Crouch

Chapter 8 The Quidditch World Cup

Chapter 9 The Dark Mark

Chapter 10 Mayhem at the Ministry

Chapter 11 Aboard the Hogwarts Express

Chapter 12 The Triwizard Tournament

Chapter 13 Mad-Eye Moody

Chapter 14 The Unforgivable Curses

Chapter 15 Beauxbatons and Durmstrang

Chapter 16 The Goblet of Fire

Chapter 17 The Four Champions

Chapter 18 The Weighing of the Wands

Chapter 19 The Hungarian Horntail

Chapter 20 The First Task

Chapter 21 The House-Elf Liberation Front

Chapter 22 The Unexpected Task

Chapter 23 The Yule Ball

Chapter 24 Rita Skeeter's Scoop

Chapter 25 The Egg and the Eye

Chapter 26 The Second Task

Chapter 27 Padfoot Returns

Chapter 28 The Madness of Mr. Crouch

Chapter 29 The Dream

Chapter 30 The Pensieve

Chapter 31 The Third Task

Chapter 32 Flesh, Blood, and Bone

Chapter 33 The Death Eaters

Chapter 34 Priori Incantatem

Chapter 35 Veritaserum

- Chapter 36 The Parting of the Ways
- Chapter 37 The Beginning

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

- Chapter 1 Dudley Demented
- Chapter 2 A Peck of Owls
- Chapter 3 The Advanced Guard
- Chapter 4 Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place
- Chapter 5 The Order of the Phoenix
- Chapter 6 The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black
- Chapter 7 The Ministry of Magic
- Chapter 8 The Hearing
- Chapter 9 The Woes of Mrs. Weasley
- Chapter 10 Luna Lovegood
- Chapter 11 The Sorting Hat's New Song
- Chapter 12 Professor Umbridge
- Chapter 13 Detention with Dolores
- Chapter 14 Percy and Padfoot
- Chapter 15 The Hogwarts High Inquisitor
- Chapter 16 In the Hog's Head
- Chapter 17 Educational Decree Number Twenty-four

Chapter 18 Dumbledore's Army

Chapter 19 The Lion and The Serpent

Chapter 20 Hagrid's Tale

Chapter 21 The Eye of the Snake

Chapter 22 St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries

Chapter 23 Christmas on the Closed Ward

Chapter 24 Occlumency

Chapter 25 The Beetle at Bay

Chapter 26 Seen and Unforeseen

Chapter 27 The Centaur and The Sneak

Chapter 28 Snape's Worst Memory

Chapter 29 Career Advice

Chapter 30 Grawp

Chapter 31 O.W.L.S

Chapter 32 Out of the Fire

Chapter 33 Fight and Flight

Chapter 34 The Department of Mysteries

Chapter 35 Beyond the Veil

Chapter 36 The Only One He Ever Feared

Chapter 37 The Lost Prophecy

Chapter 38 The Second War Begins

Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince

Chapter 1 The Other Minister

Chapter 2 Spinner's End

Chapter 3 Will And Won't

Chapter 4 Horace Slughorn

Chapter 5 An Excess Of Phlegm

Chapter 6 Draco's Detour

Chapter 7: The Slug Club

Chapter 8 Victorious Snape

Chapter 9 The Half-Blood Prince

Chapter 10 The house of count

Chapter 11 Hermione's helping hand

Chapter 12 Silver and opals

Chapter 13 The secret riddle

Chapter 14 Felix felicis

Chapter 15 The Unbreakable Vow

Chapter 16 A very frosty Christmas

Chapter 17 A sluggish memory

Chapter 18 Birthday Surprises

Chapter 19 Elf Tails

Chapter 20 Lord Voldemort's Request

Chapter 22 After the Burial

Chapter 23 Horcruxes

Chapter 24 Sectumsempra

Chapter 25 The Seer Overheard

Chapter 26 The Cave

Chapter 27 The Lightning-Struck Tower

Chapter 28 Flight of the Prince

Chapter 29 The Phoenix Lament

Chapter 30 The White Tomb

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

Chapter 1 The Dark Lord Ascending

Chapter 2 In Memorandum

Chapter 3 The Dursleys Departing

Chapter 4 The Seven Potters

Chapter 5 Fallen Warrior

Chapter 6 The Ghoul In Pajamas

Chapter 7 The Will of Albus Dumbledore

Chapter 8 The Wedding

Chapter 9 A Place To Hide

Chapter 10 Kreacher's Tale

Chapter 11 The Bribe

Chapter 12 Magic Is Might

Chapter 13 The Muggle-born Registration Commission

Chapter 14 The Thief

Chapter 15 The Goblin's Revenge

Chapter 16 Godric's Hollow

Chapter 17 Bathilda's Secret

Chapter 18 The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore

Chapter 19 The Silver Doe

Chapter 20 Xenophilius Lovegood

Chapter 21 The Tale of The Three Brothers

Chapter 22 The Deathly Hallows

Chapter 23 Malfoy Manor

Chapter 24 The Wandmaker

Chapter 25 Shell Cottage

Chapter 26 Gringotts

Chapter 27 The Final Hiding Place

Chapter 28 The Missing Mirror

Chapter 29 The Lost Diadem

Chapter 30 The Sacking of Severus Snape

Chapter 31 The Battle of Hogwarts

Chapter 32 The Elder Wand

Chapter 33 The Prince's Tale

Chapter 34 The Forest Again

Chapter 35 King's Cross

Chapter 36 The Flaw In The Plan

Chapter 37 Epilogue Nineteen Years Later